

IN RELATION: THE POETICS AND POLITICS
OF CUBA'S GENERATION-80

Roberto Tejada

In Cuba, the first generation of writers, artists and intellectuals, actually born and raised within the social standpoint of the Revolution, came into its own during the decade of the 1980s. Poet and critic Osvaldo Sánchez, in a sidelong reference to Ernesto Ché Guevara and his essay “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” addressed the defining conditions this generation would have to defy: “[T]hese ‘children of the Utopia’ discovered that it wasn’t particularly stimulating to be the ‘docile wage-workers of official thought.’ So it was that in the early 1980s, the State began to feel increasingly threatened by the critical discontent and the political distrust shared by the youngest members of the intelligentsia, whose obsession with turning Cuba’s social reality into a truly liberating enterprise was to disclose, eventually, all the moral atrophy and the ideological contradictions of a system based on simulacra, manipulation and inefficiency.” In what follows, I recall and rehearse this notion of the simulacrum as employed by Reina María Rodríguez in relation to other Cuban writers of the *Generación de los ochenta*.

Like and unlike the visual culture that was being fashioned at the time by Cuban painters, sculptors, installation-makers and performance artists—a ferociously iconoclastic project aimed at the monolithic officialdom of political and sexual attitudes that were a residue of Cuba’s “grey years” (1971-1976)—the poetry of the 1980s participated in the above general revision while faced with its own critiques to wage, specific to written discourse. By the 1980s, the stagnant rhetoric of conversationalism, then the dominant mode of poetic discourse, was seen as a vacant endeavor: one that belabored the indulgent limits of sincerity with its facile depictions of complex moral and social realities.

We can turn to the work of Reina María Rodríguez and some examples by other members of the *Generación de los ochenta* to examine how the poetic address she and her contemporaries forged was capable of countering the spent discourse of a previous generation and its claim to linguistic transparency. By re-reading the work of the

Generación de los cincuenta—that is, the group of the 1950s loosely associated with the magazine *Orígenes*, especially José Lezama Lima, one of its leading forces—I argue that Rodríguez and others reclaimed a more complex lyric self as a legitimate political construct, insofar as such as aesthetic, social and ethical “location” is argued, be it positively or negatively, at the level of language and its modulations.

••

Although his reputation in English practically rests on his massive novel *Paradiso*, the full body of work produced by Cuban mid-century modernist José Lezama Lima (1910-1976) is equally vast. The complete works span over five hundred pages of collected poetry and certainly twice as many pages of essays and assorted prose. Written from 1971 to 1976, and posthumously published in 1978, *Fragmentos a su imán* [or, as per my translation, *The Fragments Drawn By Charm*] reveals a series of final inflections in Lezama’s lifelong “poetic system.” The writing in *Fragmentos* is loaded with images of isolated enclosure and resignation: a veritable “prison baroque.” [For all intents and purposes, after 1959, and despite the critical success abroad of *Paradiso*, Lezama’s writing remained blatantly unrecognized by an oblivious cultural apparatus, and the writer essentially lived in quasi-confinement during the latter years of his life.] *The Fragments* is often generated by a sense that matter and meaning are incessantly staging apocalyptic rehearsals of “a genesial, copulative relatedness” where “Everything everywhere [is] looming.”

Lezama’s entire poetic system is structured by means of a wager on the generative yielding power of the image, the severed nature by which language and material reality are cleft as “a continuity that questions /and a rift in response.” In his lifelong corpus, but especially in *The Fragments Drawn By Charm*, bodies—often-ambiguously sexed and sexualized as subjects—are rendered meaningful by way of mirror-play; here, the difference between self and other is continually suspended or blurred (the self as same and other), only to be set into distinct motion again, now equipped with the capacity for image-making and representation:

The two bodies

elapse after smashing the intervening
 mirror, each body renders
 the one it faces, beginning
 to perspire like mirrors.
 They know there's a moment
 when a shadow will pinch them,
 something like dew, unstoppable as smoke.
 The unknown breath
 of otherness, of the sky bending
 and blinking, that eggshell
 very slowly cracking.

[“The Embrace,” translated by Roberto Tejada]

The fascinating and complex question regarding Lezama’s sexual specificities, both in person and on the page, is the subject of another essay. Suffice it to say that, not unlike the shifting continuum within his work between the high Gongorism of the Spanish golden-age baroque and his own brand of tropical surrealism—where vocabulary, syntax, image and metaphor are rendered both warped and luxuriant in their otherness—so, too, is Lezama in his representation of sexual (and cultural) difference. The literary figure that might best describe his polysexuality of stasis-into-motion and back, or his nothingness-into-becoming is the anacoluthon, that figure by which a poetic statement begins with a series of initial assumptions and concludes with an altogether other set of modified terms. In two of the longer philosophical poems of *The Fragments*, Lezama continually articulates a mobile theory of the image, a constant concern in his work. In “Nacimiento del día” [Birth of Day] he writes: “The body hid inside the house of images / and later it reappeared identical and similar /to a stellar fragment, it returned.” It is this bothness of “identical and similar,” this simultaneity of likeness and representation, that allows for the third term that powers Lezama’s poetic discourse:

The mirror with its silent central
 vortex of groped water,
 unites images again with their body.
 It's the first trembling answer.
 Where did the mirror come from,
 that aerolite hurled by man?
 How did the crystal that breaks into air
 without corrupting it, grow dark inside
 detaining the image?
 There, advancing, nothing is detained
 only nothingness fixedly sways.

[“The Gods,” translated by Roberto Tejada]

•••

An anecdotal aside might serve as a segue into the influence of Lezama on a second generation of post-'59 writers, particularly in terms of strategies employed by a poet like Reina María Rodríguez. The early to mid-1970s saw a renewed but nonetheless ambivalent official interest in Lezama. For Cuba's Generation 80, Lezama wielded a certain mystique due in large part to certain scandalous receptions of his novel *Paradiso*, and to the implications and aftermath of the Padilla Affair¹. In its wake Lezama was at best ignored or held in check by the cultural apparatus; at worst he was censored and denied visas to travel.

On a certain afternoon of those years, three young aspiring poets—Reina María Rodríguez, Andrés Reynaldo, and Osvaldo Sánchez, to whom the following owes acknowledgment—found themselves adrift in the sweltering streets and passages of old downtown Havana. In an impulse there was suddenly banter about paying an unexpected call to meet the veteran poet, and in the rapid-fire give and take, Rodríguez and Reynaldo impetuously darted up the street to knock at the residence famously situated on Trocadero 162. The two upstarts were met at the door by Lezama himself, who was clearly not expecting any visitors, but perhaps not unaccustomed to this kind of intrusion. The duo unabashedly announced themselves as writers; that they were there to meet the maestro himself. Lezama—tank T-shirt snug around his corpulent body and tucked into his khaki trousers; cigar firmly brandished in hand—asked them if they had read his writings.

¹ "The story, of course, is by now well known. The board of the Unión de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos (UNEAC: Lezama was a member of that board) awarded Padilla's collection of poems, *Fuera del juego* [Outside the Game], the Julián del Casal prize for literature. When, however, certain Padilla poems were deemed critical of the Revolution, UNEAC's executive committee found it necessary to pen a letter that condemned Padilla's 'subversive' activity. All of this would eventually lead, directly and indirectly, to the jailing of Padilla, to an international outcry (especially among leftist intellectuals who had placed their faith in the Revolution) and, finally, to Padilla's famous mea culpa: a lengthy confession, delivered by Padilla in front of a meeting of Cuban intellectuals and officials (Lezama was not present), in which Padilla denounced not only his own 'anti-Revolutionary' activities, but also those of many artists." (Brett Levinson, *Secondary Moderns: Mimesis, History, and Revolution in Lezama Lima's "American Expression,"* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 1996), pp 178.

Insofar as Lezama's work was all but unavailable and scarcely distributed at the time—a veritable out-of-print suppression—no, they replied, they hadn't had the opportunity to read him much. “So if you haven't read me, why have you come? Do you take me for the Capitol Building?” he grumbled, and wasted no time in bidding the minions farewell with a slam of the door as if to punctuate the crusty objection to his negligible status as a national monument.

As I began by stating, the literary climate of the 1970s in Cuba—and for that matter, in many other parts of Latin America—was dominated by the realist mode and expository resolve of what was referred to as conversationalism, with its legitimate aim of establishing a social poetic, if albeit to insufficient effects. Roberto Fernández Retamar and other poets of the largely male *Generación del Caimán Barbudo* (Raúl Rivero, Luis Rogelio Noguera and Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera, among others) were much less reliant on the image, as they were on the rhetoric of a coherent self and the strategies of the catalogue and pamphlet, teeming with didactic parallelism and tendentious statement; “that avalanche of words,” according to Sánchez, “accredited by a militancy of facile prattle, and by an everyday reality reduced to vapid chronicle.”²

What Sánchez and other poet-critics of his generation have now identified, in point of fact, was Cuba's inevitable paradigm shift, as undergone in various degrees and kind throughout the West and Latin America, from modernism to postmodernism. In the collapse of the master narratives of modernity, dominant systems of value regarding the self, state, social relations and representative modes all underwent a comprehensive reevaluation—or a threefold disavowal of totalization, teleology and utopia, as outlined by countless observers.

This shift can be traced in part to the disillusionment with, and subsequent questioning of, the emancipatory promises made by these *révélés*: the dissection and mastery of a purportedly stable self as envisioned by Freud and psychoanalysis; the

² Osvaldo Sánchez, “Los hijos de la utopía” *Blancomovil*, No. 49, June/July 1991, p. 4 (translation mine).

resolution of class struggle by way of the Marxist-Leninist state; the lack of inclusiveness in both a political and hermeneutic sense, as representation further extended to conflate the symbolic order with the real.

In this, Jean Baudrillard identifies a series of phenomena in keeping with the increase in the technologies of communication, and their relationship with the world of events:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. [...] Conversely, simulation starts from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference.

Significantly, Baudrillard makes no claim for the simulacrum as an historically isolated emergence. He situates the tendency as an alternate current with historic antecedents: “Outside of medicine and the army, favored terrains of simulation, the affair goes back to religion and the simulacrum of divinity: ‘I forbade any simulacrum in the temples because the divinity that breathes life into nature cannot be represented.’” Despite this historical dynamic, Baudrillard’s argument barely escapes the solipsism (or outright nihilism) that allows for no generation of difference, a world where signs of the real are relentlessly substituted for the real itself, where all systems, including the social, are “an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.”

But we might make use of the simulacrum in this historical sense, and in spite of Baudrillard himself, to address how some poets from Cuba’s Generation-80 successfully deployed the literal and figurative uses of simulacra to make broader statements about the formal “transparency” of conversationalism and the supposed “transparency” of the State. In so doing, we should keep in mind that, despite its insularity and seeming cultural closure, there was a porous feature and a receptivity on the part of Cuban revolutionary culture—this insular peculiarity had been identified and championed earlier by Lezama himself—that allowed the ideas of major postmodern thinkers to reach Cuba, via editions

brought back from Europe, translations edited in Mexico and Spain, circulating from hand to hand, or through bohemian verbal exchange or at sites of alternative knowledge like the Azotea hosted by Reina María Rodríguez herself.

In this shift from the modern to the postmodern, of course, subjectivity may be alternately viewed as an effect of language (Barthes), a product of institutions (Foucault) or a result of the unconscious and its endless chain of desire (Freud and Lacan).³ For Cuba this meant, according to critic Madeline Cámara, that in order to reconstitute any valid sense of subjectivity, artists and intellectuals had “to break down the ‘traps of faith’ hidden in the books used by the educational system at all levels, including propaganda and everything written in support of official discourse;” the result being “a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion that attempts to delve deeper than the simple chains of cause and effect that dominant ideology imposes on insular teleology.”⁴

Let’s look closer at how Reina María Rodríguez employs various figures of postmodernity to resonant effect in a poem from her turning point collection *En la arena de Padua* [In the Sands of Padua, Havana: Contemporáneos]. Though not published until 1992, the poems that comprise the series were written from the mid to late 1980s. Her previous three volumes—*La gente de mi barrio* [The People in My Neighborhood, 1976], *Cuando una mujer no duerme* [When a Woman Goes Without Sleep, 1980] and *Para un cordero blanco* [For a White Lamb, 1984]—were still relatively steeped in the elegiac

³ Ben Heller: “These young poets have embraced the assimilative poetics of Lezama as no other group previously, producing a poetry startling for the density and richness of allusions. Opening up to Lezama was an opening up to world culture, which was a strong statement at a time when official Cuban culture was stagnating, bound to an ideology that was undergoing a spectacular collapse in the international arena. For these young poets, to be cosmopolitan has also meant to read literary theory, the works Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, de Man, Lacan, and Zizek—readings that have contextualized for them the crisis of the unitary subject...”

⁴Be that as it may, and despite or perhaps on account of having the proximity of Lezama, Generation 80 poets never fully deployed or exploited the strategies and effects at the level of language as did a slightly older generation of writers in isolation and scattered throughout Latin America; poets primarily from the Southern Cone and Mexico like those gathered in the 1996 anthology *Medusario*, edited by Roberto Echavarren (Uruguay), José Kozer (Cuba-USA) and Jacobo Sefamí (Mexico) which includes Eduardo Milán (Uruguay-Mexico), Tamara Kamenszain (Argentina-Mexico), Néstor Perlongher (Argentina), Coral Bracho (Mexico) among others.

tones of an organized, “recognizable” self as per the conventions of conversationalism. In “The Zone,” Rodríguez literally and figuratively inscribes herself in an entirely opposite—perhaps oppositional—locus of poetic praxis. There, she manages at once to suggest an individual and political reality on the verge of outbreak or explosion, by dint of the sham surface of appearances in which a *way out* of indwelling, out of the more diminutive deliverance of the everyday, is rendered, or so it seems, impossible:

THE ZONE
Tarkovsky

I'm here in the magnetic field
the dense zone where
the grass trembles
bending toward you.
I found my way inside
thanks to the white drawing of the animal
I owned in that other death.
the oracles never come to pass
except in silence
when the magnetic
needle of the aftermath
oscillates beyond us
uncertain we've walked
under cold rain.
deactivated bombs
in the happiness room
and ephemeral flowers
over fish devoured by fame.
each form has donned its apparel
and now they resemble what they are:
a simulacrum.
but the zone is immanence
and coming back from the place
coming back into focus
the release of each hour

[Translated by Roberto Tejada]

It's in *Padua* that Rodríguez begins testing the limits of how much an image can contain and, by contrast, how much image-making can expose. Elsewhere, in response to both Lezama's gendering of the mirror as reproductive, and as she speeds the otherwise lulling tones of conversationalism to breaking point, Rodríguez sets the delirium of excess into motion in a poem that combines the resolve to assert sexual difference into the realm of the prosaic with a quasi-pastiche nod to the modern Gothic of Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's*

Baby. Together, she successfully makes a pointed statement about the female body, and writing itself, as weird zones of indetermination.

... I know that everything was very fast and that I was looking inside with a tall, round mirror, which served as a rear-view mirror, and I know I lost myself definitively that time, I was weakening from staying always on the wrong side in the mirror, clinging to my Herman Hesse book by my fingernails. I feel my face falling asleep, it makes me shudder and cramp and I sense that my legs are also cramped, strained, that I have my face and my feet planted in that mirror, and I'm searching . . . where is the devil? and the navel that used to be small, an illusion in the center of my belly, is pushing outward, pulling inward, he's responding to me . . . there he'll be born out of your tenderness and your wickedness, where the devil is always engrossed with the power of the solitude and the births. I cried out, I opened my eyes wide and looked at the clock: it's not the black clock from our ceremony, it will never be the black clock of eternity, but it's not the accidental clock either, the ephemeral one. I've seen myself in the faces of the clock, fuller, more normal, in the time behind the embrace, where everyone is running off to look at the real time, while I'm pushing, struggling, I writhe to find that other time without hour hands . . . just for the insane. but it's not your fault, or theirs, it's the fault of the devil who will also be born from my only navel, from its cavity, from its impatience without a reflection in any unilluminated mirror, in a smashed mirror with burning edges, where I can decapitate myself without desire, or look at myself with a hardened expression, less liquid, less fragile, learning those things about the devil like all of the other women.

[from "Mirrors." translated by Kristin A. Dykstra]

Somewhere in between these two limits, Rodríguez points over and over again to a lifelessness, a weariness, a standstill, a lassitude. In torques that explore how subjectivity is rendered operative by language-trace, another poem, "Paradise. Storefront. Monte Street," enunciates—presumably at a drowsy, half-barren *tiendita* or five-and-dime—a ghost economy caught between a kind of stadium triumphalism with the manic droning of the everyday.

.... nothing specific definable: nothing costly
 the point being not to die not to see
 a boredom that once pertained to light
 stains here and there
 no one knows what of.
 spent timeworn nothing costly
 waiting for a buyer to come: useless garment
 my left breast out from under my blouse
 there's a whetstone.
 the rats watch us, distrust us, watch us
 their reddish eyes behind a cardboard box.
 items that meant something once
 simulation. ovation.
 the melody is mediocre a music blending

droning
to complaints from the fan

[Translated by Roberto Tejada]

•••

This droning brings me full circle to Baudrillard and to the simulacrum, which we might read in relation to Lezama's theory of the image. As I've suggested, in Lezama language and material reality are separated as "a continuity that questions /and a rift in response," as creative oscillations between the "identical and similar," between likeness and representation, where "all things are inclined to a birth, not to repetition." It is by way of this third-term imaging that many of Reina's younger contemporaries were able to posit their dense or encoded critiques as to the "moral atrophy" and the ideological contradictions of contemporary Cuban reality. (Incidentally, we might even consider the material counterpart of this third term in Reina's *Azotea*, or the alternative space that she continues to run on an intermittent basis from her rooftop apartment in downtown Havana.) Some writers of Cuba's Generation-80 deployed the literal and figurative uses of the simulacrum to make broader statements, as I've already mentioned, about the formal clarity of conversationalism as the supposed window between the social subject the State. Clearly, the most evident figures are those of a failed utopia, regardless of its ideological guise. In "Un hombre sin élite" from his collection *Algo de lo sagrado* (1982-1988), Omar Pérez (1964) investigates how the revolutionary subject (or New Man) had been reduced to an effect of official institutions (or, in his words, "functional seasons") oblivious to the pending storm of social relations, be it in the old despotic bourgeoisie or the new bureaucracy of the totalizing State.

A MAN WITHOUT AN ELITE

A swelling, a subject drunk on functional seasons
a vertigo that trembles the branches of trees,
that's the conclusion of a vagrancy
along the smoldering side of a paradise devoid of intimates
a paradise that offers no other certification
except for a storm of ashes and white hands.
No one knows the exact taste of a face
no one knows and the puffing of cheeks
will spoil any lavish reincarnation,
two faces or a hundred are easy to love

but a single face is unattainable, a fistful of earth.
 The blood of those shedding their otter pelts
 emphasizes the zealotry of a sun
 weakening without the force of its solar spots,
 lacking skill, the elites, who corrupt everything,
 crack the edge of the stars
 on the notch of someone's back, imperfect and unpunished.

[Translated by Roberto Tejada]

If Reina María Rodríguez and others have deployed the motif of detonation, a poet like Marilyn Bobes explores the dilemma of silence by way of censorship and erasure. Neo-baroque in reference and procedure, this poem stems from a project begun in the 1990s in which the sonnet forms of the Spanish Golden-Age poet Francisco de Quevedo are submitted to the surveillance and expurgations of an outside inspector that is the poet herself:

DANGERS OF SPEAKING AND STAYING QUIET. LANGUAGE OF SILENCE
 by Marilyn Bobes

Since it is fierce
 if I say
 what excuse
 if I stay quiet, who will be able to

But without speaking to you
 sight semblance
 in the silence
 they say

and whoever makes them happen
 and whoever orders silences, understands them

[Translated by Ruth Behar]

As with Lezama, the open, the fluid, the multiple and figurative sense of sexuality and its differences were explored, albeit diffidently, by certain representatives of Cuba's Generation-80. In this context—that is, in a political reality where social surveillance and sexual paranoia have often been interchangeable—Baudrillard's "death sentence of every reference" smacks of the absurd, if not the grotesque. Suggestive of this "unlikely

