

# **Cuban Art & the Development of a National Identity**

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## Table of Contents

Introduction:.....	Page 3
A Brief History of Cuba:.....	Page 5
The Effects of Communism in the Art Community:.....	Page 14
The Vanguardia Generation:.....	Page 20
The Gradual Acceptance of Naïve Art:.....	Page 29
The Effect of the Revolution on Literature:.....	Page 33
The Growth of Cuban Film:.....	Page 37
The Chinese Contribution to Cuba’s National Identity:.....	Page 42
In Conclusion:.....	Page 48

## Introduction: Into the Melting Pot

The most infamous aspect of Cuba, one that defines its national identity to modern Americans, is its current political system as well as its notorious former leader, Fidel Castro. Without doing further research on the subject, Americans are subjected to what they learn from their parents, teachers, and people they see on TV. Living during a massive embargo on Cuban goods, travel restrictions, and fear of communism has caused many Americans to overlook the wonders that Cuba's holds within its borders. The nation has a lush climate, diverse people, a world class ballet school, a long history of art and literature, and a unique national identity that is not defined by its political system.

Some people might argue that Cuba's violent history offsets its cultural treasures. Slavery, wars of independence, revolts, and the actual revolution have not left much time for economic and political stability. However, the violence and suffering actually caused an enrichment of Cuba's culture, music, literature, and art. A popular movie quote from *The Third Man* states "In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love – they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock." The violence, struggle, and desperation of the Cuban people for centuries encouraged them to produce a disproportionate amount of cultural goods, such as books and paintings. Even in the United States, something similar has occurred. During the years of the Vietnam War (1959-1975), some of the most highly lauded music ever was produced. Bob Dylan sang songs of protest along with Jimi Hendrix, Bruce Springsteen, and many other artists. Songs of desperation and anguish made these men legends. Cuba, during its many years of discontent, produced countless works of art that captured the angst of the time period in which they were created.

Cuba has been searching for and creating its national identity since it won its independence from Spain in 1898. It's different from other former Spanish colonies in that it has far more African and Spanish influence than any others. Fernando Ortiz went so far as to characterize Cuban culture as *ajiaco*, a rich stew with a large number of different ingredients which is simmered until the broth thickens. Each ingredient represents a different part of Cuban culture: the large Spanish and African influences, the smaller Chinese, Jewish, and Moorish influences, the peppering of indigenous culture leftover from before colonization, etc. Cuban art has had the opportunity to draw on all of these backgrounds. There are different religions, different physical characteristics, different struggles, and different people. So many unique factors make up the Cuban national identity, and artists have been inspired to condense this identity into something that is "distinctly Cuban." However that's not possible, as the very essence of Cuba is its diversity and its natural beauty. To discard any part of the varied and difficult past in creating a national identity would be to lose a unique influence on culture and life in Cuba. In the *ajiaco* metaphor, not all parts of the stew are useful; there are bones that represent past cultures, but they remain in the stew to be analyzed and remembered. What is "distinctly Cuban" is to embrace the messy past and accept it as a national identity different from that of any other nation. The ideas of a limited Cuban national identity created and provided by different artists and writers, such as those in the Vanguard generation are not exactly wrong, they are simply incomplete.

A Brief History of Cuba's Political, Economic, and Social Struggles  
that Led to the Revolution

In order to fully grasp the magnitude of the changes brought on by the Cuban Revolution, it is imperative to understand the factors that brought the nation to revolution in the first place. From colonization to the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista in 1959, Cuba has always had a complex national, political, and racial landscape. The intermarriage between races added to the complexity, as 18th and 19th century Cubans found themselves mixed between two heritages that had warred with each other for years. The racial ambiguity led to the failure to adopt a national identity that was purely Cuban. Lack of a cohesive national identity, foreign domination, widespread poverty, and overwhelming corruption were the main factors that culminated in the 1959 overthrow of the government.

Prior to 1492, the indigenous population of Cuba was quite small, well under 500,000. The majority of the natives were wiped out by a combination of military power, enslavement, disease, and other factors after the arrival of the Spaniards. However, many indigenous customs survived the first few centuries, incorporating themselves into the daily lives of Cubans. Words, foods, and even physical characteristics are apparent in modern day Cuba, due to the marriage of indigenous women to Spanish men in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Although many other European colonies focused on farming and imported slaves as early as the 1500s, the Spanish used their Caribbean colonies as vital stops along their trans-Atlantic trading route. With a huge population of Spaniards mining the vast amounts of silver found in deposits in Mexico and Peru, the number of inhabitants of the Spanish Caribbean colonies remained relatively low. Ships stopped in Cuba frequently on their way to and from the New World in order to make repairs and acquire provisions. It wasn't until the introduction of the sugar export economy in the late 1700s that Spain began to use African slaves to work on their plantations.

Almost a million Africans were transported to Cuba to work as slaves on sugar cane plantations between 1790 and 1867. Slavery itself wasn't even abolished until 1886. Under rising pressure from the British to end slavery in Cuba, over 100,000 Chinese laborers were imported to work on the plantations with miniscule wages and horrid living conditions to replace the African slaves. Spaniards continued to immigrate to Cuba as well, and by the time the nation gained its independence in 1898, the island was a mixture of Spaniards, Africans, Chinese, and Haitian and Jamaican migrant workers who worked on US-owned plantations. During the next few decades, Cuba saw the arrival of more migrant workers on US plantations, as well as Spanish republicans fleeing the Spanish Civil War and Jewish refugees running from the Nazis.

A Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz coined the term *transculturation*, or the merging and converging of many different cultures, to describe the social landscape of Cuba. It was a nation full of runaways, people who had either left or been forced out of their native cultures and had to repeat the processes of deculturation from their homelands and acclimation to the new land. The United States has a similar origin, being a melting pot of cultures, albeit on a much smaller scale than Cuba. While the US slave trade stopped bringing Africans to the US around the beginning of the 1800s, Cuba freely imported slaves throughout the entire 19th century, meaning that African languages and tradition make up a much larger component of the social framework. Ortiz declares that Cuba's history "more than that of any other country in America, is an intense, complex, unbroken process of transculturation of human groups, all in a state of transition."

After independence, the popular idea that the colony would become a republic began to fade. Instead of living happy lives abound with material possessions and opportunities, most Cubans found themselves destitute. The illusion of the *patria* was shattered. By 1905, 60% of

Cuba's arable land was owned by US companies or private citizens. The US also owned most of Cuba's tobacco trade, the railroads, nickel mines, and electrical and telephone systems.<sup>1</sup> This imperialist system benefited the United States, but Cubans were plunged into turmoil whenever international sugar prices declined. One of the most damaging characteristics of the post-independence order was that the economy was largely controlled by foreign capital.

To combat the overwhelming presence of the United States, Cuban nationals began to refute the country's subordination to the United States, indirectly leading to the beginning of a Cuban national identity. By identifying a foreign enemy, Cubans could band together, united by one large factor, their distaste of the colonial policies of the US. For example, as the US imported higher numbers of migrant workers from the neighboring countries of Jamaica and Haiti, even staunchly anti-racist intellectuals found themselves arguing that the importation of these foreign blacks would ruin the racial balance of Cuba. To counter this, a new movement started that called for Cuban blacks (Afro-Cubans) to accept their new identities not as blacks, but as Cubans, and to protest the influx of foreign born blacks to the island. The basic principle was that Cuban blacks were not actually black due to their Cuban nationality. The twisted sentiment almost echoed the words of Cuba's national hero, José Martí, when he stated "To be Cuban comes before being white, before being black, before being mulatto, with all, and for the good of all."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Cuba was an export economy, with sugar cane being one of the most profitable and important goods. Even in the few healthy economic periods, peasants and lower classes were still not seeing any improvement in their standard of living. Approximately one-sixth of the Cuban population controlled 43% of Cuban wealth by the

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<sup>1</sup> Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

1950s, while almost 1.5 million people, or 20% of the population, were living in abject poverty.<sup>3</sup> There was a sickening difference in these two Cubas. The wealthy owned luxurious homes and took vacations around the world, while the poorest Cubans couldn't even feed their children. The war that gave the poor Cubans their freedom and eventually statehood in 1902 had cost them their economic stability in the process, leaving lower class Cubans worse off than they had been as a colony.

As unequal as Cuba was in times of economic stability, more often than not the export based economy was in turmoil. A 1921 crash led to the collapse of banking systems, a small scale preview of the Great Depression. Stagflation occurred with inflation soaring and unemployment numbers skyrocketing. Corruption was also rampant, as businesses that wished to stay open were forced to support crooked officials, and the same crooked officials bribed their superiors in order to keep their positions. Desperation drove many people to abandon the idyllic dream of the new Cuba, the *patria* that should emerge after independence, and do whatever it took just to survive. Resentment against the United States coalesced into artistic and intellectual movements, and many of Cuba's brightest minds began to look away from the West, seeking a solution to the nation's deep-seated structural problems.

By challenging Eurocentrism and United States domination, a new sense of nationalism formed in Cuba. Cubans rejected US culture and attempted to prevent it from leaking into their nation by glorifying the local and indigenous portions of Cuban culture. For example, the African musical genre *son* became wildly popular in the 1920s. Amidst the "barrage of North American merchandise, films, literature, sports events, and music that entered Cuba during these years, *son* represented an important symbol of national identity."<sup>4</sup> Drawing on the popularization

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 29



of *son* and the effects of the Harlem Renaissance, many Cuban writers and intellectuals began to critique Cuba's history of racial inequality. Afro-cubanism became its own literary movement, spurred on by the likes of authors such as Nicolás Guillén.

Aside from intellectual and artistic movements, the 1920s also proved to be a tumultuous time for politics. Citizens who were disillusioned in the aftermath of independence sought to fight the North American capitalist system. Naturally, many turned to the teachings of Marx, and his own brand of “scientific socialism”, based on the Labor Theory of Value. In 1925, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) was formed and began to associate immediately with Communism International (Comintern). While the PCC started off focused on acquiring political power via the urban labor movement, Stalin called for a radically different strategy in his “Third Period” (1928). He called for all the world's Communist parties to create militant labor unions, which would eventually play key roles in eliminating social and financial classes.

The Great Depression only encouraged more Cubans to become a part of the PCC. Agricultural workers and peasants became organized as wages fell and unemployment augmented across the board. Gerardo Machado, the president at the time, used violence as a means to quell the growing opposition to his regime. He outlawed the PCC among several other political and social organizations that posed a threat to his power. In several instances, Machado used violence against peaceful protesters, and his reputation became so bad that even the United States saw him as a liability and called for his dismissal. The US ambassador, Sumner Welles, and the Cuban military worked together to oust the president in 1933 and replaced him with Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a move that sparked the beginning of a political roller coaster for Cuba.

The new president was in control for less than a month before the military and citizens alike revolted and removed him from office. Former university professor Ramón Grau San Martín replaced de Céspedes as president. The new government was the first ever in Cuba to be completely free from foreign intervention, and its members worked extremely hard to create a vision for a new Cuba, a more egalitarian society, with pro-labor policies. First the Platt Amendment was repealed. The amendment had declared that the United States had the right “to intervene in Cuba’s internal affairs to preserve law, order, and independence.”<sup>5</sup> The repeal of this act was the first step that the new government took to distance itself from the United States. “Cuba for Cubans” was the slogan that backed the movement to slowly drive US landowners out of the country. A Ministry of Labor was created, and labor laws were installed. As the 8-hour workday became the norm and wages were raised across the board, US investors began to leave the island. The government then lowered the rates that United States energy companies could charge, and even more investors lost interest. Ambassador Welles believed that the country was rocketing towards communism too quickly, so he enlisted the help of Sergeant Batista to overthrow the new government.

Fulgencio Batista served two nonconsecutive terms as president, from 1934-1944 and from 1952-1959. He crushed the armed opposition to his takeover in 1934, but in 1935 he made peace with the Cuban Communist Party. The PCC had abandoned the “Third Period” in favor of the Popular Front, where parties participated in elections and teamed up with the bourgeoisie in order to combat fascism. President Batista constructed the Constitution of 1940, which shared many of the same ideals as the reforms in 1933 including political and economic freedoms, but he had very little power to enforce it. The Constitution remained an idealized version of what could be, but in reality it didn’t change anything. Cuba became more politically and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 35

economically stable during Batista's first presidency, due mostly to the massive increase in international sugar prices during World War II. From 1944-1952, the Auténtico party ruled, and corruption was rampant. When Batista staged a governmental overthrow yet again in 1952, he found little organized opposition.

In the years leading up to the Cuban Revolution, Batista found himself unable to provide permanent solutions for Cuba's deep structural problems, so he focused on treating the symptoms rather than the cause. Instead of working towards finding solutions for Cuba's dependence on one good (sugar), unhealthy relationship with the United States, and gross poverty and social inequality, he began to oppress Cuban citizens. He outlawed the PCC and crushed any sort of opposition to him as leader. Other national organizations that he deemed a threat were disbanded, such as Afro-Cuban clubs and labor organizations. Cuba entered a state of turmoil and violence as Batista strove to keep his presidency.

The actual Cuban Revolution began on July 26th, 1953 and ended on New Year's Day in 1959. While Fidel Castro led the overthrow of Batista's regime, Ernesto "Che" Guevara deserves credit for shaping the Revolution and the society it created. Che was a Marxist physician from Argentina who is famed for his use of violence and guerilla style fighting tactics during revolution. He led revolutions on multiple continents, and died a martyr in Bolivia in 1967, fighting for the society in which he believed. Che was a symbol of internationalism and solidarity for Cuba, and the nation felt connections to all the other countries where he had fought to overthrow injustice.

Just as Marx adopted the principles of socialism but developed a different form called "scientific socialism", so Che Guevara called for a different type. He rejected the concept of "dry economic socialism" and called for a "revolutionary way of life" that combated not just misery,

but also alienation. He called for Cuban Communism to be almost spiritual, much more than just an economic system like that of the Soviet Union. Between the philosophy of Che Guevara, and the actions and leadership of Fidel Castro, the Cuban Revolution began, a revolution unlike any other in history.

The young rebel, Fidel Castro, led a group of young men to attack the Moncada Barracks in eastern Cuba in what became known as the July 26th Movement. He, along with most of the other rebels, was members of the Ortodoxo Party, which sought to reinstate the ideals of 1933 and the 1940 Constitution. He was captured shortly after the battle and spent many months in jail. However, instead of trying to defend himself, he openly acknowledged his participation in the attack and denounced the Batista regime. He spoke of his “right to resist illegitimate authority” and even quoted the US Declaration of Independence, saying that a government’s authority “rested on the consent of the governed.”<sup>6</sup> He used his defense as a call-to-arms for the *campesinos* and the poor laborers to join him in taking their rightful place in society. Castro used his power as an orator to explain the five “revolutionary laws” that he intended to implement after the attack on Moncada: “restoration and implementation of the 1940 Constitution, an agrarian reform putting land in the hands of those who tilled it, obligation of employers to share profits with workers, guaranteed markets for small sugar farmers, and confiscation of all enterprises obtained through fraud and corruption.”<sup>7</sup> He felt the laws would solidify a new, more egalitarian Cuba. Fidel was exiled to Mexico after being imprisoned, and he didn’t return to Cuba until 1958.

The actions of Fidel Castro and other rebels in 1958 is the second phase of the Cuban Revolution. Castro returned to Cuba on a yacht with other revolutionaries, only to be greeted by

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 35

a mass slaughter. He escaped into the Sierra with Che Guevara, and their time spent planning in the mountains of Eastern Cuba was one of the focal points of the Revolution. Julie Feinsilver argues that “guerrillas’ confrontation with abject poverty and enormous health problems of the rural population” is the single most important and influential aspect of the development of post-revolutionary ideologies.<sup>8</sup> To think about poverty and feel sorry for the destitute is one thing, but to come face to face with people living in insufferable conditions, dying from hunger and lack of health care is another thing entirely. Aviva Chomsky states that two key aspects of the post-revolutionary programs were caused directly by guerrilla exposure to life in the Sierra : ”one, the need for a fundamental redistribution of resources that focused on the countryside; and two, the need for nation-building and consciousness-raising, by bringing urban Cubans face to face with the realities of rural poverty.”<sup>9</sup>

Batista’s armies were no match for the rebel forces, led by Fidel Castro. During the entire year of 1958 he captured city after city in Cuba. In March, the United States yanked its support from President Batista, and his biggest ally and pillar of support was gone. The president’s army was large but sloppy and untrained, and on New Year’s Eve, the coup was officially over. Castro rode into Havana triumphant on January 8th, 1959, ready to usher in a whole new world. The fighting was done, but the Revolution was far from over.

### The Effect of Cuban Communism in the Arts Community

Life for every Cuban changed permanently on that day in early 1959 when Fidel Castro victoriously entered the city of Havana full of fresh ideas and new notions of equality. Private

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<sup>8</sup> Julie Margot Feinsilver, *Healing the Masses: Cuban Health Politics at Home and Abroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Chomsky, 39.

property was seized by the state and became obsolete, brotherhood and altruism became new national values, and freedom of expression suddenly had the potential to become a dangerous weapon that threatened the new Communist state. Every artist, novelist, poet, and intellectual individual was faced with a choice: either to embrace the new regime even if that might require censoring artistic compulsions, or to rebel gently or forcefully against the new pressures placed on the creative world.

Cuban Communism was thought to be different than that of Soviet Russia or China. The leaders were youthful, handsome, and charismatic, and the joyous reaction at Batista's overthrow suggests that it was an "authentic popular movement", as opposed to a state-forced imposition.<sup>10</sup> Whereas Lenin suggested that becoming a Communist society would require force, bloodshed, and the sacrifice of millions of lives, Cuba's transition was much less violent. Many people were excited to see the regime change. Perhaps this is the reason that there wasn't much censorship in Cuba compared to other socialist states, but instead there was a thriving artistic culture that fostered modern art, dance, cinema, and even a few forms of experimental art, as long as they fell "within the revolution". "Within the Revolution, everything. Against the Revolution, nothing," was the vague command that Castro gave to the people of Cuba. It provided artists with a lot of freedom for a socialist regime directly after a revolutionary government overthrow. This "new" form of Communism created specific roles for artists in their nation; by giving every artist, through state-sponsorship, the tools and training he or she needed to succeed, artists after the revolution owed much of their success to their country, and they often felt pressured to give up their artistic vision to serve the revolution.

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Schwartz "The Padilla Affair in Retrospect," *New Criterion* 19, no. 4 (December 2004): 84-87, [doi: 07340222](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0014180113000022) (accessed April 26, 2013).

By restructuring Cuba into a Communist society, Castro and his compatriots took on the role of trying to manage Cuban culture. However, they also increased the importance of artists in Cuban society just on the basis of the egalitarian Communist government; schools of the arts considered just as important as schools of medicine or law. The artistic paradox after the Revolution caused many artists to think long and hard about their choices. On one hand, Castro's government encouraged the spread of various art forms. The literacy campaign opened the doors for many aspiring writers, as did the creation of publishing houses. State-funded art schools were free for any student who demonstrated artistic ability and desired to be trained. Artists who were favored by the government found themselves famous. Dance schools were opened for children of unusual natural talent, and equivalent sports schools were founded to increase Cuba's international athletic presence by fostering talent early. However, there were also many downsides to producing art in post-revolutionary Cuba. Artists were forced to conform to the ideals of the revolution, and the government was wary of art that was too radical. Leftists embraced the switch, but many writers found it to be little more than censorship disguised as revolutionary pride.

The government asserted that “unity had to take precedence over the artist's creative process” in times of crisis.<sup>11</sup> Since the atmosphere of Cuba after the revolution was so unstable, it appeared the island was always in crisis, meaning that writers were expected to always conform to the revolutionary guidelines. Any artists who experimented a little too much with innovative styles made the government uncomfortable. Authorities found experimentation and foreign influence in literature distasteful, and they would occasionally silence artists or writers who became too vocally and openly opposed to the new regime, either by firing them from their

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<sup>11</sup> Linda S. Howe, *Transgression and Conformity: Cuban Writers and Artists After the Revolution* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 15.

positions or not allowing their works to be published. However, this was actually quite rare; the government, for the most part, did allow subtle protests or critiques of government in paintings, works of literature, and other art forms. While the new policies of state-sponsorship arguably benefited many formerly struggling artists and writers, they also caused an unhealthy relationship between artists and the government. The fact that artists had to depend on the government for state funds “forged a symbiotic relationship” in which the writers were expected to “dutifully perform as cultural engineers of revolutionary souls.”<sup>12</sup> In exchange for funding their work, the Castro regime expected artists to be the harbingers of the revolution, creating works that denounced the capitalist system and lauded the altruistic man as the new protagonist or literary hero.

The most infuriating part of the attempted governmental control over the arts and Cuban culture was that most authorities tried to disguise their actions, hiding behind false reasoning and delusions of altruism. José Antonio Portuondo, a professor, essayist, and literary critic, spoke at the First National Congress of Writers in 1971, declaring that while officials recognized and respected artistic freedom, artists and writers were obligated to develop an “integrally formed national conscience.” He touted the idea of the “new era” and the new reality for Cuba. The most important job of the artist was to “make into his own flesh and blood the experience of this new era... that he deeply assimilate the new conception of reality, that he study and work; that he identify with his people, and that he express this new spirit in ways that cannot be given him ahead of time... but rather that he has to discover.”<sup>13</sup> Basically, Portuondo decreed that all artists were to go on a journey of self-discovery, and that journey should always lead to the realization that Communism and altruism are the most important values a man can have, and that man

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>13</sup> Enrique A. Baloyra and James A. Morris, eds., *Conflict and Change in Cuba* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 137.



should always recognize these values easily. He discarded freedom and artistic vision of being of menial importance.

The government took drastic measures to reward writers for conforming to the expected role of artists after the Revolution, including creating a set of literary awards for suitable texts, guaranteeing fame for writers who wrote about the correct subject matter, and lauding the selflessness of authors who chose to write for the Revolution instead of for themselves. The publishing houses Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) and Casa de las Américas hosted a set of competitions nicknamed the “Red Desert” Literary Awards by young, sarcastic intellectuals. The competitions favored ideologically inclined works and shunned anything experimental or influenced by foreign works. If the judges decided that none of the works submitted were good enough, they would declare the competition a “desierto”, and no one would take home the prize. The works were not judged based on their prose or their literary value, but by their allegiance to the revolution, and the nickname Red Desert represents the Cuba that became, in an artistic sense, “dehydrated during the revolutionary gush.”<sup>14</sup> Artists who accepted the role of writer as proponent of the revolution were congratulated by the government, such as Roberto Fernández Retamar, a director of the Casas de las Américas. In his essay “Calibán”, he praises the poets who “renounced their individuality in order to serve the masses”, and he favored poetry that captured a snapshot of the “collective experience.” These creative intellectuals received fame and government support.<sup>15</sup>

However wonderful or pointless the rewards for conforming writers were, the punishments for disobeying the government could be harsh, even though they were rare. The best example of this is the Padilla affair. Herberito Padilla was a poet, the author of *Las rosas audaces*,

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<sup>14</sup> Howe, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,22.

and a husband and father. He supported Fidel Castro directly after the revolution, but what he saw during the first several years after the Communists took power disgusted him so deeply that he changed his mind and began to openly criticize the new government. In 1971 he was imprisoned after writing a book of poetry, *Fuera del Juego* (“Out of the Game”) that openly criticized Castro’s regime, and it sparked an international debate. He was charged with “bourgeois decadence, excessive irreverence, insufficient enthusiasm for the revolution”, and a failure to produce the kind of literature that would encourage people to embrace the revolution.<sup>16</sup> Esteemed writers from all over the world were outraged and protested his imprisonment.

This arrest was also significant in its disillusionment. Many people outside of Cuba had pondered this new form of Communism, seemingly different from the more brutal and violent form practiced in China and Soviet Russia. After the arrest however, many notable names dropped their support for Castro, including foreigners Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, and Cuban authors Octavio Paz and Mario Vargas Llosa. Padilla was released after 28 days and what many believe to have been a “staged” confession of crimes, and he was later expelled to the United States, where he was an instant celebrity. He never wrote anything of critical acclaim again, and his fame stemmed only from his role as a political victim. He died in 1968, a professor at the University of Alabama. He was one of the only, and by far the most famous, artists imprisoned in Cuba for subversive works.

This time period of trials and tribulations in which artists and authorities sounded off against one and other actually contributed to the idea of *cubanidad*. Each side had something to offer. The government tried to direct and the iconoclast had its place. No survey of Cuban national identity could be complete without acknowledging the tension and pressure that each side experienced during the 1960s and 1970s. Seeking a utopian society, authorities were often

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<sup>16</sup> Schwartz, 8.

suspicious of “bourgeois art”, so they set out to “fabricate a national image not only with guerilla iconography but also with the rhetoric of ‘moral correctness’ based on revolutionary ideals.”<sup>17</sup> They funded a whole slew of cultural activities, but they placed special emphasis on pro-revolutionary literature and documentaries. They sought to create a national image focused on social volunteerism and the guerilla-style tactics that the rebels had used to win the revolution. Those who opposed the government, the iconoclasts, also had their own message of *cubanidad* to offer the world. They were an integral part of the culture, with their “creative edge, idiosyncratic style, and sense of honesty” that portrayed Cuba through their own lenses, not that of Fidel.<sup>18</sup> They captured what they felt and saw sincerely, and this sincerity is as much a part of Cuban national identity as harvesting sugar cane or guerilla fighters.

### The Vanguardia Generation

Decades before the revolution, alongside the augmentation of non-Western schools of thought in Cuba and the rejection of United States imperialist policies that affected the nation, one of the greatest genres of Cuban art emerged to counteract the pain of everyday life in the 1920s. Resentment towards the United States escalated quickly into an artistic movement that defied Eurocentrism and challenged Cuban subordination to the US. The artists of this generation are known as the vanguardia, sharing the same name as the sociopolitical activists. The two

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<sup>17</sup> Howe, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.,18.

groups shared a name as there were several points of contact between the attitude and the works of the vanguardia painters and the progressive ideology of their generation. The goals of the Cuban vanguardia were to usher in modern art by separating themselves from the Academy of San Alejandro and creating a symbol of a new national identity to unify all Cubans. The vanguardia artists fight against the Academy of San Alejandro was parallel to the fight of the sociopolitical vanguardistas against the old colonial system, just fought in a different arena. They used their talents to attempt to define a new *cubanidad*, one that represented all factions of life, most specifically the *guajiro*, or peasant, and *afrocubanismo*.

The vanguard painters were more than just a group of people; they were a generation. All of the most famous painters of the movement were born between 1890 and 1905. They were born into a time of turmoil, with the construction of a new nation happening all around them, and they matured as Cubans were engaged in discovering or developing a national identity. There was only one school of art on the island at the time, San Alejandro Academy, and its practices were antiquated and conservative. Eduardo Abela, Antonio Gattorno, Victor Manuel García, and Amelia Peláez de Casal are the four major vanguard players who graduated from San Alejandro. Aristedes Fernández and Fidelio Ponce de León attended for only brief periods of time, and the other two notable vanguard painters, Carlos Enríquez Gómez and Marcelo Pogolotti, did not attend the Academy at all. Luckily, in spite of the conservatism of the institute, Leopoldo Romañach, a teacher at San Alejandro, encouraged his students to follow their instincts and natural inclinations. To finish up their education, all of the vanguardia studied in Paris, where they picked up the avant-garde style that would come to identify their work upon their returns to Cuba.

The artistic stylings of the painters in the vanguardia were adaptations, not imitations, of the European avant-garde styles that they had come across in Paris. Fauvism, cubism, futurism, surrealism, and expressionism are just some of the theories that slowly made their way from Europe to Latin America, more specifically Cuba, in the 1920s. The Cuban vanguardia were influenced by two of the pioneer Latin American modern art schools: the Mexican mural movement and the Brazilian modernist movement. The Mexican mural movement, which promoted an art for the people that emphasized sociopolitical concerns over artistic innovation, had an impact on the vanguardia, due to Cuba's sense of solidarity with Mexico. However, the Brazilian modernist movement, which attempted to create a complex national identity expressed by avant-garde art had an even bigger impact on the Cuban vanguardia. The Cubans admired the achievements of the Mexican mural painters, and it encouraged them to explore national themes and to make art more accessible to the average Cuban, but it was Brazilian modernism that drove them to find or create a national identity and express it through cutting edge styles of art.

The first proponent of vanguard art was *Revista de Avance*, and the magazine used the metaphor of a ship to describe the artistic mission of the vanguardia. By sailing out into the open ocean, the artists would have an open-ended agenda, love of adventure, and a strong desire to communicate with the rest of world. They wanted to bring to life the true *cubanidad*, or essence of being Cuban. The concept of *cubanidad* is, to Ortiz, "a condition of the soul, a complexity of sentiments, ideas, and attitudes."<sup>19</sup> The term is reminiscent of Martí's words, as it implies bonds that are based on birthplaces and national identity. There is a sense of duty, confidence, pride, and mother love for all that is Cuban, be it Spanish, African, Indian, or any combination of the three.

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<sup>19</sup> Juan A. Martínez, *Cuban Art and National Identity: the Vanguardia Painters, 1927-1950* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 38.

The most common figure in vanguardia paintings was the *guajiro*. The interpretation of the simple Cuban country peasant may have been positive or negative depending on the artistic rendering, but it was one of the two most common subjects of the era. Both the artistic and the sociopolitical vanguardia associated peasants with “exploitation, struggle, and survival.”<sup>20</sup> Guajiros lived in the countryside in small huts with thatched roofs called *bohíos*. They lived simple, if not demanding, lives based on agriculture and raising animals. Poverty was widespread, yet the notion of guajiros was often romanticized, especially by foreigners who had never even lived in Cuba. The idea of living an honest life close to nature, working the land under the hot tropical sun with few material possessions appealed to the sentimental side of many people at the time. Many Europeans’ only view of the Americas was the depiction of the Cuban countryside on the bands of imported cigar boxes, images that had been created by anonymous artists and often edited out the harsher realities of rural living in Cuba.

Vanguardia painters used the guajiro as a symbol of national identity. He was the common man, not the aristocrat, a representation of the true nature of Cuba. Victor Manuel, for example, used primitivism to create many of his works, one of which is particularly famous. In *Paisaje con figuras*, Manuel sketched country folk of Spanish and African descent relaxing in a shady glen. Through this painting, he conveyed a sense of “sensitivity, passivity, and sensuality.”<sup>21</sup> Life appears serene and uncomplicated in his portraits. Perhaps the most romanticized portrait of Cuban country living is *Guajiros* by Eduardo Abela. Even the title has its own simplicity, nothing fancy nor complicated. Abela used a simplified form of realism, similar to that of Diego Rivera in his later years, to depict a group of peasants enjoying the small things in life, such as sunshine and good company. The men in the painting look dignified, about

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.,51.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.,62.

to engage in their pastime of choice (cockfighting), and the guajiro with the flower is looking into the face of the one woman in the painting. The work shows a simple life unfettered by modernity, a day of friends, relaxation, sport, and perhaps even a little romance. It is no wonder the life of the guajiro was often romanticized, and the actual struggle of the peasants forgotten in many circumstances.

Other vanguardia painters took it upon themselves to make sure that the daily hardships of the guajiros would not be overlooked in the world of art. Aristides Fernández created a work entitled *La familia se retrata* in 1933, and the four female subjects look shockingly inferior to their middle class counterparts. Their faces are blurry, their frames are bulky, and the impoverished environment is clearly visible. However, the family is a metaphor for the nation, a display of normal Cuban citizens, albeit poor ones. Another painting that demonstrates the harsh realities of everyday life as a guajiro is *Campesinos felices* which was painted by Carlos Enríquez in 1938. It has an extremely misleading title. Enriquez used an impressionistic style to portray an emaciated mother, her child, and her skeletal husband in their dilapidated hut in order to recognize the misery that most rural peasants had undergone in the years between sugar harvests and during times of high unemployment. By choosing to represent the guajiro and the countryside as symbols of national identity, the vanguardia generation painters managed to create a manmade vision of Cuba based upon a more traditional subject matter as well as adaptations of international points of view. The artists wanted Cubans to see their nation through the eyes of foreigners and foreigners to see Cuba through the eyes of Cubans.

The desire to discover significant artistic themes in order to develop a new national identity also led the vanguardia painters to one other common subject - the Afrocuban. Like the guajiro, the vanguardia saw Afrocubans as a symbol of national identity due to the extensive

exploitation they had suffered and their humility as a social and economic class. Black Cubans had also contributed monumentally in creating their nation's culture. Slaves brought their traditions, music, language, and even cuisine to Cuba until the very end of the 19th century. They maintained many of their African cultural traditions during their enslavement by creating *cabildos*, or societies where Africans of the same ethnicity or from the same geographical region could gather and honor their past. Religious celebrations, song, and dance were all part of these cabildos, and the vanguardia artists were able to incorporate many Afro-Cuban themes into not only paintings, but music and literature as well. This recognition of the cultural contributions of Afro-Cubans expressed through different artistic mediums was known as *afrocubanismo*.

One of the best known proponents of afrocubanismo was Nicolás Guillén, a writer who has become recognized as the voice of Cuba. His poetry was a microcosm of the macrocosm of Cuba's hasty search for its national identity. As a man of mixed Spanish and African descent, Guillén "urged recognition of Cuba's Afro-Spanish identity as a unifying force", even though he is frequently categorized as a *negrista* poet.<sup>22 23</sup> His portrayal of black Cubans is often bleak, and slavery is a constant theme in his works. However, he faces an identity crisis, just as Cuba does. He is descended from both the slave and the slave master who whipped the slave, and he tries to reconcile the two sides of his lineage in many of his works. The most blatant example is 'Balada de los dos abuelos' in which Guillén describes the backgrounds of his white Spanish grandfather and his black African grandfather. He paints a vivid description of the parallels that neither elder knows lies between them.

*África de selvas húmedas  
y de gordos gongos sordos...*

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<sup>22</sup> Keith Ellis, *Cuba's Nicolás Guillén: Poetry and Ideology (University of Toronto Romance Series)* (Toronto: Univ of Toronto Pr, 1985), 201.

<sup>23</sup> Stanislas Adoteri, *Négritude et négrologues* (Paris:Union Generale D'Editions, 1972)



*--¡Me muero!*  
*(Dice mi abuelo negro.)*  
*Aguaprieta de caimanes,*  
*verdes mañanas de cocos...*  
*--¡Me canso!*  
*(Dice mi abuelo blanco.)*

The similarities in his description of the life of each grandfather are structurally significant as well as contextually important. Although Guillén's black African grandfather suffers at the hands of his white Spanish grandfather, both men are portrayed as the same man, separated only by the cultures and institutions they were born into.

*Yo los junto.*  
*--¡Federico!*  
*¡Facundo! Los dos se abrazan.*  
*Los dos suspiran. Los dos*  
*las fuertes cabezas alzan;*  
*los dos del mismo tamaño,*  
*bajo las estrellas altas;*  
*los dos del mismo tamaño,*  
*ansia negra y ansia blanca,*  
*los dos del mismo tamaño,*  
*gritan, sueñan, lloran, cantan.*  
*Sueñan, lloran, cantan.*  
*Lloran, cantan.*  
*¡Cantan!*

At the end of the poem, Guillén himself appears in the action, bringing both of the men together, and they truly become one. It is a metaphor for the unification of the Spanish lineage and the African lineage in one man, Nicolás Guillén. He describes them no more as “mi abuelo negro” or “mi abuelo blanco”, but instead they are one unit, “los dos”. They scream, they dream, they cry, and they sing together, no separation between them anymore. The idea of “los dos”

represents Guillén as a Cuban, no longer a white Spaniard or a black African, but a consolidation of the two into something different that contains only parts of each.

That is not to say that Guillén forgave the Spanish for what they did. To the contrary, the idea of *négritude* is a “new spirit of rejection of cultural assimilation and the pursuit of authentic black cultural expression.”<sup>24</sup> Guillén clearly related more to his African heritage, and he delved into harder topics such as slavery and imperialism; he even advocated for all types of opposition against racial discrimination, including violence in some circumstances. However, as a man of mixed descent, he recognizes both captive and captor in himself and seeks to expose the wrongs of his Spanish ancestors.

Aside from literature, music was another arena in which *afrocubanismo* shone brightly during the vanguard era. The African musical genre *son* became extremely popular as a sign of Cuban nationalism, and the strong presence of drums (a staple of Afro-Cuban music) was incorporated into other styles as well. A more interesting example of Afro-Cuban music in a new style was the work of Amadeo Roldán, a member of the Grupo Minorista. His best known composition is a ballet called *La Rebambaramba* (1928), based on street festivals in Havana. The ballet begins slowly with classical music, but it slowly incorporates more and more African beats until there is a full-blown street festival being portrayed on the stage. In addition to introducing Afro-Cuban music to other genres, African music by itself became more popular as well during this time period. The rumba became a common thing to hear in the streets and homes of Havana, despite the massive influx of all North American music styles that came pouring in around the same time.

*Afrocubanismo* usually refers to musical and literary stylings, but the vanguardia painters were not to be outdone in their quest to identify a national symbol. With the *marquillas*, or the

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<sup>24</sup> Martínez, 94.

bands on cigar boxes, depicting often vulgar scenes of black Cubans, the stereotypes about AfroCubans persisted in popular culture until the mid-1900s. While many vanguard artists didn't copy the *marquillas*, they often borrowed themes, such as dance and music. They highlighted African contributions to Cuban society and brought about a new, positive view of AfroCubans. While several of the most famous vanguardia painters (Abela, Enríquez, and Gattorno) liked to portray AfroCubans as “noble savages” who worked close to the land and lived lives of simplicity that were filled with dance and music, lesser known Alberto Peña criticized the poor economic conditions of Cuban blacks in his paintings. In *Sin trabajo* (1937), he depicts an unemployed woman sitting in front of a landscape of factories with a look of quiet, almost regal desperation on her face. AfroCubans were hit hardest during the great depression, and Peña used the painting as a symbol of the suffering and pain that they went through in the 1930s.

The combination of the *guajiro* and the AfroCuban as symbols of Cuban national identity indicate that the vanguardia generation's artistic and cultural expression of said identity was diversified and more cosmopolitan than provincial. They explored the paradox that surrounded Cuban culture: Cuba was at the same time the most Spanish and the most African of all Spain's former colonies. Since the nation did not declare independence or abolish slavery until so late in the 19th century, massive numbers of Spanish immigrants and African slaves arrived in Cuba until much later than other former colonies. That is probably a reason for the two symbols of national identity - the white *guajiro* and the AfroCuban; they each represent a side of Cuba's multifaceted culture. And with the countryside playing a huge role in many of the paintings, it represents an equal duality of the native Cuban scenery and the imported *guajiro* or AfroCuban subjects.

The contribution of the artists of the vanguard generation to the ongoing process of building or discovering a national Cuban identity was not unhelpful. The painters managed to give “concrete visual expression or symbolic form” to their generation’s concept of Cuban identity and culture, while the other artists infiltrated every crack of Cuban society to spread their message of unity and cubanidad.<sup>25</sup> Their contributions are still appreciated today, as their views of national identity being a melting pot of the old and the new, the Spanish and the African, and the traditional and the modern are still quite valid even today.

### The Gradual Acceptance of Naïve Art

The Cuban Revolution affected all parts of life, including parts in the artistic sphere. When Fidel Castro gained power in 1959, he introduced a paradox to the artistic communities. The numerous artistic achievements to leave Cuba after the Revolution made it apparent that

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.,15.

Cuba “fostered the creation and dissemination of art” while at the same time it “frowned on cultural production ‘outside the revolution’”.<sup>26</sup> This concept of ‘outside the revolution’ was proposed by Fidel Castro in his speech “Words to Intellectuals”, and it referred to those artists and writers originally opposed to revolution finding a niche within the revolution, a place to produce work for the revolution which would not threaten the revolution’s right to existence. This paradox mirrors the dilemma that many artists found themselves in. There were two possible roads that they could take after the revolution: exile or state-sponsorship.

State-sponsorship increased the availability of art to Cubans from all walks of life, including the lower classes. In 1961, the new government sponsored a literacy campaign, as part of its mission to create a communist society. Education is an integral part to an equal society, and the first step to achieving any sort of equality was ensuring 100% literacy in Cuba. Many of the equalizing efforts were focused in rural areas, and urban Cubans even travelled to the countryside to experience life away from the city. It was an effort to enact cultural transformation, and both rural and urban parties benefited from the campaign, each group learning about the lives and struggles of the other to which they had been previously ignorant. In 1959, Cuba was publishing less than one million books per year, and in 1980 they published over fifty million.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the literary campaign, Castro’s government also created many publishing houses, such as the famous Casas de las Américas to promote Cuba’s historic literary tradition.

Due to high tourist traffic during the 1950s prior to the Revolution, a new art form emerged that was immediately looked down upon by many esteemed artists. *Naïve* art was extremely childish and primitive, and most academic artists refused to acknowledge it as real art,

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<sup>26</sup> Chomsky, 106.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

due to the lack of perception in the paintings. The colors were bright and vivid, and the scenes were often folkloric and picturesque as to satiate the desires of American tourists for a souvenir of Cuban art. The painters of these portraits were self-taught with little to no real training, and the paintings became known as “tourist art.” Even after the opening of the nation’s free-access art schools, naïve painters preferred to steer clear of professional training and refer to themselves as “popular artists.” They were lauded as a joke by “professional artists” until the 1990s, when critics began to recognize naivety as a valid form of art, simply a different stylistic choice. The naïve artists managed to shrug the derogatory and demeaning connotations of the word, and naivety has been recognized as an official art form, one that is distinctly Cuban.

The *Grupo Bayate* began the movement to national acceptance of naïve art as a legitimate Cuban art form in the 1990s. A group of eight artists banded together with the goal of increasing the appreciation of naïve art in their home village of Mella on the southeastern part of the island. Interestingly enough, the group was an ideal small scale model of the Communist society in which they lived. They shared gasoline, supplies, and other resources in order to achieve their collective goal. The presence of a group instead of individual artists also made it easier to receive recognition for their efforts, and slowly the acceptance of naïve art began in Cuba. The motto of the Grupo Bayate expresses its simple objectives, “To stimulate and maintain values of naïve art in the region as well as to recapture its artistic traditions, and to facilitate an exchange with all who are interested in working in and promoting this art.”<sup>28</sup> The beauty of naïve art is that its practitioners forgo the academic training that most painters go through, and therefore what flows from within each artist is unfettered by rules, regulations, or technical details. The art is in its purest form, transferred directly from mind to easel, and the Grupo Bayate sought to open the

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<sup>28</sup> Joan Crystal Pearlman, “Grupo Bayate: Folk Art in a Cuban Collective,” Cuban Art Space, <http://cubanartspace.net/old/exhibitions/LuisRodriguez/ArtMessenger.htm> (accessed February 6, 2013).

eyes of stuffy art critics and less knowledgeable Cubans alike to the rarity of such untainted expression. One of the most well-known and highly lauded painters of the Grupo, *el estudiante*, conveyed a similar thought. When asked if he felt that he was at a disadvantage to his lack of formal training and artistic educational background, he replied that he was actually at an advantage, “because the spontaneous, natural flow of naïve art allows one to express sentiments freely without worrying about technical knowledge that could limit ways of reflecting feelings.”<sup>29</sup> The general disregard of technique allowed for complete freedom of expression, and as a result each work of naïve art is completely unique to the artist who produced said piece.

The infamous painter, *el estudiante*, was actually named Luis Rodríguez Ricardo (he used the nickname both to honor his father (*el maestro*) and to differentiate himself from the man), and he became a leader in the naïve art movement, popularizing the form and holding several gallery showings, either independently or with the Grupo Bayate, many times over his career. He contributes to Cuba’s national identity by the very nature of his unique style. He draws the inspiration for his “riotously colorful” paintings from various aspects of Cuban daily life. In his various works, he portrays the struggles of the Haitian-Cuban people who spend their whole lives working on the sugarcane plantations simply to stay alive. He painted vivid scenes of religious rituals, especially focusing on scenes from Haitian voodoo which he witnessed growing up in a neighborhood full of immigrants from Haiti. Everything Cuban inspired him, from the landscape of Mella, to his former job as a construction worker, to the excitement surrounding baseball games; *el estudiante* breathed his own life into his work and provided a very different perspective than many other artists who strived to define a Cuban identity. He didn’t concern himself with such things, but rather painted to share his experiences through bright colors and

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.,5.

strong brush strokes. And as he was an integral part of the recognition of this historically marginalized form of art, his very existence is a part of *cubanidad*.

The international acceptance of Cuban naïve art was spearheaded by Sandra Levinson, after she brought fourteen independent Cuban artists and all of the eight artists from the *Grupo Bayate* to the Metropolitan Arts Center in New York City. She was the executive director of the Center for Cuban Studies Art Space at the time and had discovered the twenty-two naïve artists on one of her trips across Cuba in 1996. The leader of the Grupo Bayate was a man named Luis Rodríguez Árias, known as *el maestro* and the father of the aforementioned Luis Rodríguez Ricardo. A baker by trade, he was elected leader of the Grupo Bayate and contributed to the group's rise to success. He demonstrated his deep love and respect for his home country through his paintings and felt that the lack of artistic training of naïve artists shouldn't be cause enough to disregard the art form as a valid style of painting. He is quoted as saying "I was born here and have loved here. I don't know if there is anything that distinguishes Cuban art from others except that what I paint I do with my soul, and because of that I consider it sincerely Cuban."<sup>30</sup> This was the Cuba that was introduced to the world during the 1997 exhibition of naïve art at the Metropolitan Arts Center in New York: a Cuba of passion and patriotism, a Cuba that celebrated the lives of all types of citizens, from displaced Haitian immigrants to simple farmers and townspeople, a Cuba that overflowed with natural beauty and a ripeness of soil and flora, a Cuba that was created by Cubans.

### The Effect of the Revolution on Literature

In addition to having a rich and varied background of painters and artists, Cuba's literary history is quite impressive for such a tiny country, and since the revolution they have produced a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.,6.



disproportionately high number of books thanks to the island's various publishing houses. From the very first abolitionist novels that appeared in the early 18th century, to the brand new genre of *lo real maravilloso* that was created in the tiny nation, Cuba's literature was oftentimes affected by the country's instability in the political and social arenas. The revolution had an enormously positive effect on literature, with the literacy movement, the creation of publishing houses, and the program of state-sponsorship. The revolution's effect on the subject matter of the island's literature is more subjective. Just as with artists, the novelists, poets, and essayists after the revolution had to balance their own creative expression with the government's expectations of authors. The stages of literature directly after the revolution demonstrate the different worries and thoughts of the average Cuban, and in that way, literature remains a lens through which it is possible to view the evolution of the notion of cubanidad.

The criollo literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries was neither noteworthy for its style nor its prose, but rather for its documentary value. It was not as interesting as later literary styles, but it did provide a picture of day to day life during the late 1800s. A main genre of criollo literature was the picaresque novel, which depicts realistic adventures of a rogue protagonist. An example of such a novel is the Cuban classic, *Juan Criollo*, written by Carlos Loveira. This almost crude sub-genre of fiction was adopted from Spain by Cuban authors to document their own experiences during the last years of the colony and the first years of the Republic. More often than not, the main character is a dashing, trouble-making young man who writes in first person. It is possible that each Cuban author who wrote in this style poured a little bit of himself into the main character, and through each of his adventures, a picture of early island life is painted for the reader.

The most purely Cuban form of literature is *lo real maravilloso*, or magic realism, a style that was originated by Alejo Carpentier, arguably Cuba's most influential writer. Magic realism is a genre in which magical or fantastical elements are interspersed throughout stories about the otherwise mundane realities of life. Carpentier was inspired to create name this genre before the release of his novel, The Kingdom of this World (1949). He coined the term , “lo real maravilloso americano”, or the marvelous real of the Americas. In response to European writers and artists, who had to make up fantastical elements, those fortunate writers in the Americas were surrounded by the fantastic and the marvelous at all times. He lauded the “tropical vegetation, the unbridled creativity of our natural forms with all their metamorphoses and symbioses.” The Americas were a world of “monarchs crowned with the plumes of green birds, vegetation dating back to the origins of the earth, foods never before tasted, drinks extracted from cacti and palm trees... In such a world, events tend to develop their own style, their own unique trajectories.”<sup>31</sup> This infatuation with the landscape of his native Cuba led Carpentier to create one of the most famous literary genres ever produced in America. Instead of copying European art forms such as romanticism and neoclassicism as Cubans had done for years, Europeans were copying this brilliant and entertaining new style of writing that came from a tiny tropical rock in the Caribbean Sea. The tables had turned.

After the revolution, the literacy rate of Cuba skyrocketed, eventually making it the most literate country in the world. Nancy Morejón was a poet and essayist who lived through this remarkable time period in history and documented it all through her works. She tackled such themes as the Cuban Revolution, Caribbean history, and race and gender issues. As a writer who had a four decade long career, Morejón is the perfect example of an artist forced to react to the changes the revolution brought about, and she was able to document her experiences through

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<sup>31</sup> Chomsky, 111.

“exteriorism.” Exteriorism was a post-avant-garde genre of poetry from Nicaragua that was documentary in nature. It was popular in countries where political strife and rebellion were rampant, and the “objective descriptions of events” in the realms of political, social, and economic realities were crucial for “the perpetuation of the Cuban Revolution.”<sup>32</sup> Raising historical consciousness was a goal of this type of poetry, and common themes included the exaltation of the guerrilla fighter against Batista and criticism of the capitalist system, just to name a few. Morejón adapted the style and themes of her writing after the Cuban revolution, switching from “hermetic poetry of ambiguity” to an “invocation of revolutionary imagery” creating a bridge between the exteriorist musings of the day and her own styles.<sup>33</sup> Her themes transitioned from romantic and musical prose about love and maternity to manifestations of significant Cuban historical phases and major events that followed the excitement and bewilderment during the rise of the revolution in the early 1960s and gentle decline of the Cuban society after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, even glorifying the revolution in her poetry was not enough to keep Morejón from getting into trouble with the new government. After the Padilla Affair, she expressed her disgust with the entire situation, and was therefore subsequently shunned by the state-funded publishing houses that resulted in a 12-year gap between books.

Morejón’s themes, but also the reality in which she lived, are key aspects of cubanidad. Her semi-exteriorist style after the revolution is documentation of the Cuban way of life, and her poems are a reflection of the world in which she lived, much like the works of Loveira and Carpentier, to a lesser extent. These three authors, along with Nicolás Guillén, comprise perhaps the most influential literary artists in Cuban history. The diversity of their works include feminist

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<sup>32</sup> Howe, 99

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 100

issues, afrocubanism, reflections of daily life, and celebrations of all that is Cuban. They were an integral part of shaping the national identity of Cuba by virtue of their trade, simply seeking to capture the memories of the world they inhabited.

### The Growth of Cuban Film

Outside of literature and painting, one of the most interesting and influential artistic mediums on Cuba is film. In the United States, movies are viewed as little more than entertainment. Occasionally documentaries become mainstream, such as Supersize Me and Waiting for Superman, but the most popular and talked-about movies are often filled with explosions and stupid humor. In Cuba, movies have the ability to start a national dialogue, and there is a track record of films bringing to light social issues and internal problems in Cuba. After the Revolution, cinema became a highly esteemed art form, and was deemed “the most powerful and provocative form of artistic expression, and the most direct and widespread vehicle for education and bringing ideas to the public” according to the very first culture law of the revolution.

Prior to the Revolution, only 80 full length feature films had been produced in Cuba ever. The founding of the *Instituto Cubano del Arte y la Industria Cinematográficos* (ICAIC) brought about the “Golden Age” of Cuban cinema. The state-funded institution existed to promote Cuban nationality and production, distribution, and screening of films that “recorded the ongoing revolutionary process from the perspectives of ordinary people.”<sup>34</sup> To achieve these objectives, the most common and dominant form of film used in Cuba from 1968-1988 was Imperfect Cinema, a term coined by Julio Garcia Espinosa.

Imperfect Cinema was the embodiment of Cubanidad via film. It captured the hearts and minds of Cuban citizens, due to its relatable subject matter. What audiences saw on the big screen was a mirror image of things that they were experiencing in their own lives. Imperfect Cinema was creative and incredibly distinctive, the opposite of Hollywood-style perfect cinema, which was shot with high technology cameras and filled with simple storylines and beautiful

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<sup>34</sup> Catherine Davies, *Modernity, Masculinity, and Imperfect Cinema in Cuba* (Houston: Questia Media America, 1997), 345.

scenery. In Imperfect Cinema, the camera quality was often skewed purposefully, due to incorrect exposure, giving films a grainy quality. Movies were not supposed to look perfect, even though technical perfection was within reach of Cuban filmmakers, as “beautifully controlled surface becomes a way of lulling the audience into passive consumption.”<sup>35</sup> When the purpose of the films was to engage the audience with depictions of the social reality, it was necessary to have a reactive audience. The films were often politically motivated, such as *Tercer mundo, tercera guerra mundial* (Third world, third world war), which followed the Vietnam War. Filmed on location in Vietnam during a ceasefire in 1968, the purpose was to expose the “North American war machine” and the way “simple but very real humanity of the Vietnamese peasants forced to take up armed struggle to survive.”<sup>36</sup> The most poignant shot was actually directed and filmed by a local Vietnamese girl to highlight the brutality and inhumanity of the war. Imperfect Cinema peaked during the early 1970s, and it slowly declined until it became obsolete in the late 1980s. The Hollywood style of technical perfection had finally taken over.

Whether part of Imperfect Cinema or not, there is no end to the list of movies that tackle different subjects valid to the lives of Cuban citizens after the Revolution. Many movies played a particular role in the years following the regime change, and some even started national dialogues. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea is one of the most famous and reputable Cuban filmmakers of all time. His most famous film, *Memorias de Subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment) depicted a semi-intellectual member of the bourgeoisie who remained in Cuba after the Revolution. He refuses to take a political stance, but his hatred for the new Cuba seeps out as time passes. The main character is not the hero, but rather “a kind of intellectual antihero” who is useless in Communist Cuba, unable to make up his mind about how to proceed with his new

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Channon, *Cuban Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 305.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

life.<sup>37</sup> The end of the movie shows the main character paralyzed with uncertainty while the rest of Havana scrambles around during the Cuban missile crisis, demonstrating the Cuban spirit from the eyes of one who is too frightened to actually participate.

Alea was actually a supporter of Castro's brand of Communism, contrary to what he portrayed in his films. He depicted the new society after the revolution quite negatively but he justified it by saying that cinema is a tool through which it is possible to provide a "mobilizing element", which encourages participation in the process of the revolution; "it is not sufficient to have a moralizing cinema based on harangue and exhortation. We need a cinema that promotes and develops a critical attitude. But how to criticize and at the same time strengthen the reality in which we are immersed?"<sup>38</sup> This critical attitude would not have gone over well under many dictators, but the Cuban government not only allowed the film to be produced, but it welcomed the international acclaim that the film received. It allowed spectators to take a critical look at a flawed political system and engage with each other to change said flaws. Alea's stance is an example of the government's willingness to appreciate its flaws and attempt to fix them.

Another movie by Alea that garnered international fame was his 1994 film *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate). The movie centers around the unlikely friendship between David, a young militant Communist, and Diego, an older gay man becoming disillusioned with the revolution, although he supports the ideals. It is set in 1979 Havana, a time period when homosexuals faced horrendous prejudices due to their sexual orientation. After the revolution, homophobia became institutionalized, and Fidel Castro denounced homosexuality as

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.,289.

<sup>38</sup> Mel Gussow, "Tomas Gutierrez Alea, Cuban Film Maker, 69," *New York Times*, April 17, 1996. <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/17/arts/tomas-gutierrez-alea-cuban-film-maker-69.html> (accessed April 26, 2013).

a decadence of the urban bourgeoisie, stating “in the country, there are no homosexuals.”<sup>39</sup> Suspected gay men faced public and private ridicule, limited career opportunities, and even imprisonment in labor camps known as Military Units to Aid Production (UMAPs). Homophobia pervaded Cuba through the 1980s, and only around 1990 did the prejudice start to subside. *Strawberry and Chocolate* was a breakthrough film, the first to showcase a homosexual male as a main character, and its reception inspired a national dialogue on the treatment of gays. Diego, forced to leave his beloved homeland due to prejudice, was an eye opener for many Cubans. Alea used this film as a medium to combat the intolerance of Communist Cuba. He intended to create a dialogue pertaining to intolerance in general, not just against homosexuals. However the theme of discrimination against gays was portrayed so magnificently in the award-winning film that it overshadowed Alea’s primary theme of intolerance.

Even if a film did not inspire a national dialogue, or a modification of legislation, it was still possible for it to highlight a problem in the Cuban society in a more subtle way. In Juan Carlos Tabío’s 1985 comedy, *Se Permuta*, he depicts a young woman obsessed with obtaining her dream apartment. However, he also cleverly calls attention to Cuba’s housing crisis with his film. The main character Gloria tries to find the perfect place to live, but problems arise when her daughter’s plans keep changing. At this point, Cubans did not own their homes, and the only way to move was to swap apartments. Therefore Gloria must go on a wild goose chase and interfere in the lives of the characters in order to orchestrate her housing swap. It’s very funny and the characters are likable, but there remains the problem with Cuban housing. Juan Carlos Tabío gently called attention to the problem, poking fun at the government’s expense. While there were no legislative changes about house ownership immediately, the movie did highlight

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Tatchell, “Gay Rights and Wrongs in Cuba,” Pink Triangle, <http://www.pinktriangle.org.uk/glh/213/cuba.html> (accessed February 24, 2013).



an issue that needed to be fixed, and over the next three decades major changes developed in the housing market. Cubans are now officially allowed to own and sell their homes.

Film was a more political medium of production than painting or literature, but that's not to say that artists didn't sometimes go too far by way of critiques of the contemporary realities in which they lived. In the 1989 movie *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas* (Alice in Wondertown) by Daniel Díaz Torres, the main character is a "culture instructor" who is sent to a small town where she encounters some crazy adventures. The film was a parody of the bureaucracy and inefficiencies that plagued the Cuban government, but unfortunately the movie had an extremely ill-timed release date that coincided with the fall of Cuba's biggest ally, the Soviet Union. The movie was banned only hours after its release, and the Cuban Film Institute fell victim to the ongoing economic crisis. It was eventually restored, but the film remained banned, "a victim as much of the historical moment in which it appears as of the longstanding contradiction between the liberatory and the repressive strains in Cuban cultural policy."<sup>40</sup>

The freedom of expression that filmmakers experienced in Cuba after the revolution allowed them to highlight all different areas of the population, not just the eager young communists, but also those who were unsure or frightened of the changes. All different groups of people were immortalized on film during those years, not just the politicians or the rebels. This allowed movies to highlight the diverse and varied ethnic and political landscape of Cuba for decades, not creating any sort of national identity, per se, but instead reflecting the national identity in which the filmmakers lived.

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<sup>40</sup> Chomsky, 119.

## The Chinese Contribution to Cuba's National Identity

While separating cultural contributions into different artistic mediums may be an effective way to categorize the painters, filmmakers, and prominent literary figures of Cuban history, it is not possible to do so to understand the contributions of Chinese-Cubans to Cuban culture. Chinese immigrants all over the world are often some of the most underappreciated and marginalized parts of their respective societies, and Cuba is no different. While their population declined substantially after the revolution, the Chinese in Cuba left behind a rich legacy that is apparent in both the current revitalization of Chinatown in Havana and also the way Chinese are portrayed in Cuban art and literature.

The Chinese contribution to Cuba is often overlooked, as their population is not as large as that of their Spanish and African counterparts; however, Chinese laborers helped build the nation both through physical labor and through literary and artistic works. In 1847, many hundreds of thousands of Chinese immigrated to Cuba to work in the sugar fields as contract workers. Many either replaced or worked alongside African slaves, but they were separated as the Chinese worked to fulfill eight year contracts, after which they embraced their freedom. Most of the Chinese immigrants hoped to return to their native homeland, but many stayed in Cuba and became citizens, intermingling with the melting pot. The free Chinese men had a tendency to purchase slave woman for company and for marriage, and they effectively became a part of the Cuban identity. While there were not many pure Chinese left on the island after a few generations of interracial marriage, the Chinese nevertheless made a sizeable contribution to the Cuban national identity with many prominent Cuban artists being partially of Chinese descent. The modern Cuban Chinatown in Havana is the largest in Latin America, and the paintings of Wilfredo Lam are still internationally renowned, decades after his death.

The Chinese immigrants who worked the sugar fields had much in common with the African slaves, even though they were considered white colonists in legal terms. Most of the planters and the general population did not view them as wage earners, but rather as a “continuation of the slave trade.”<sup>41</sup> Most of the Chinese immigrants came to Cuba “willingly”, but it was often a matter of deception on the parts of the hirers. They would go to the southern provinces in China and convince men to migrate to the islands of the Spanish Empire with the promises of riches and glory. However, when the Chinese workers, known as coolies, would arrive in Cuba, they wouldn’t find riches but rather twelve hour workdays for eight straight years on sugar plantations. After serving out their sentences, most coolies were forced to sign non-negotiable contracts with the same planters, and they continued working like slaves on the same sugar plantations where they had originally been promised riches.

A main difference between the coolies and the African slaves is that, while the African slaves were uprooted from their native land and forced to travel thousands of miles to work on sugar plantations, the Chinese were able to keep in contact with their families in their homeland of China. Former coolies sometimes even managed to make their way back to China to give money to their families or to marry. Strong ties between the two nations existed even after the banning of the coolie trade in 1883, and the “Chinese diaspora in Cuba was the largest” in the entire Western Hemisphere.

The Chinese who stayed in Cuba after serving their terms became a new lower class, only slightly elevated above the African slaves on the social pyramid. The Cubans of other races looked down upon them, and the former coolies had to deal with many prejudices, both social and institutional. As a result the Chinese Cubans became more insular and connected, especially

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<sup>41</sup> Ignacio Lopez-Calvo, *Imaging the Chinese in Cuban Literature and Culture* (publication place: University Press of Florida, 2009), 7.

during the anti-immigration wave of the 1920s and 1930s when they formed Chinese societies.<sup>42</sup> However, many Chinese immigrants who came via the United States after the Gold Rush and after the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1880 were wealthy and contributed positively to the Cuban economy by opening small businesses. Those few wealthy Chinese were the beginning of the *barrio chino* in Havana, a cultural hub of activity for Chinese Cubans that still thrives today.

Obviously Chinese businesses were a cause for concern after the Cuban Revolution and Fidel took power. Entrepreneurship of any kind is an anathema to a socialist or communist society, and given the existing prejudices against the Chinese in Cuba, the government naturally saw them as threats to the utopic society they envisioned. Castro's government monitored the activity of the Sino-Cubans, and with the banishment of private enterprise as well as the outlawing of certain practices (such as sending remittances back to China), Castro created such a hostile environment for the Chinese that most immigrated to the United States. The population shrank dramatically, and soon only elderly Chinese remained.

In the past few decades, revitalization of the *barrio chino* and Chinatown have been priorities of the government in order to increase tourism, but also to build relations between Cuba and the People's Republic of China, Cuba's second largest trading partner behind Venezuela. Without the original importation of laborers or the extensive ties between the Sino-Cuban community and their native homeland, it is a slim possibility that Cuba would not have the same type of partnership with China. Today that relationship is a major part of Cuban identity, but it is not proven whether the business partnership between the two nations is a result of coolies; it is much more likely that similar political and economic views led the two countries to have such a relationship.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.,13.

In addition to the coolies' contributions to the Cuban economy, Sino-Cubans have also given much to Cuba in the arts world as well. Wilfredo Lam, of Chinese descent, is one of the most famous Cuban artists of all time. His paintings helped shape the world's perspective on Cuba in the 1940s and 1950s. This one artist is an example of one single Sino-Cuban who was able to benefit Cuban culture on an individual basis, as opposed to the entire race, such as Sino-Cuban women contributing to Cuban society by inspiring an archetype of female beauty based on the exotic. This new archetype fetishized both Chinese women and their mixed race offspring, stereotyping them as sexually charged and introducing a new type of woman in to Cuban culture.

Wilfredo Lam was a surrealist painter during the mid-1900s. His father was a Chinese immigrant, and his mother was of Congolese descent, making Wilfredo a typical Cuban with a hybrid heritage. He is one of the most highly regarded painters in Cuban history, and his typical subject matter highlighted the plight of the Afrocubans, whom he associated with strongly despite his mostly Chinese features and complexion. Lam began his career slightly after the Vanguard generation, and his work stands alone, although he portrayed the same subject as a symbol of national identity. He differed from the previous generation in that he did not set out with a goal of defining Cuba's national identity; instead he worked on raising awareness of the "degradation and misery of the population" under the rule of Sergeant Battista.<sup>43</sup>

Lam studied art in Madrid in 1923 under Fernando Alvarez de Sotomeyer, Salvador Dali's teacher and the curator of the Prado Museum. Later he moved on to Paris where he studied under Pablo Picasso and discovered the technique of primitivism. In 1941 he returned to Havana, and that is where he found his calling. What he witnessed absolutely disgusted him, the treatment of black Cubans and the lack of Afrocuban influence in the arts. He saw poetry as

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Linsley, "Wilfredo Lam: Painter of Negritude," *Art History* 11, no. 4 (December 1988): 527-50, [doi: 7355772](https://doi.org/10.1017/S001371050000772) (accessed April 1, 2013).

having two distinctions: one type was political and the other was for tourists, and he swore to never pander to either of them. He wanted to “paint the drama of [his] country, but by thoroughly expressing the Negro spirit, the beauty of the plastic art of the Blacks.”<sup>44</sup> He wanted to use his art as a weapon to rebel against the people that held his ancestors captive for so long; painting was the sword that he used to fight against colonialism.

While Wilfredo Lam’s contributions to Négritude and the Afrocuban culture are extremely obvious, more subtle is the way that he exalted Sino-Cuban culture. Simply by existing, as a half-Chinese, half-Congolese Cuban, Lam added to the mixed Cuban society. His paintings and ideas were made famous on an international scale, and it was in this way that Lam contributed as Sino-Cuban to Cuba’s national identity. His anger and emotion was expressed in his paintings, and he left a legacy both as a Chinese-Cuban painter and as an Afrocuban citizen.

The last large Sino-Cuban contribution to Cuba’s national identity is more abstract than Wilfredo Lam and Chinese immigrants as a whole. Many would argue against the validity of the fetishization Sino-Chinese woman as a factor in national identity, but nevertheless the creation of a sex symbol is reflective of the culture that produced it. “Chinese exoticism” made immigrant women popular for the very same reason that immigrant men were unpopular - their race. Mayra Montero wrote about the phenomenon from the point of view of a mixed race girl, half Chinese and half mulatta in her book *Como un mensajero tuyo* in 1998. The fact that she is of mixed blood keeps her from being accepted by either Afrocubans or Sino-Cubans, but also make her an irresistible exotic beauty and “the living proof of the legendary beauty of the *chinas mulatas*.”<sup>45</sup> In novel after novel, Chinese women are sexualized and regarded as porcelain dolls. Perhaps the Cuban infatuation with the East was just simply a projection of their own mystification; the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>45</sup> Lopez-Calvo, 75.

foreign is exotic, and Chinese women look radically different than stereotypical Spanish and African women.

The Chinese contributions to Cuba's culture and history are often overlooked, as the entire race has been marginalized for centuries. Nicolás Guillén's artistic rebellion that focused on the Afro-Cuban is one of the factors that changed the Eurocentric view of cubanidad, but the Chinese did not have an advocate like him. As a result, the mestizaje of Cuba has always been black and white, Africans versus Europeans, with the descendants of Chinese immigrants not even worth a page in history textbooks. However, their contributions are extremely valuable to the nation. Both individuals and the race as a whole have benefited Cuban society. Wilfredo Lam put Cuba on the map in terms of painting, which was not a small feat, and the general ties that coolies and other Chinese immigrants had with their homeland opened up a doorway for communication between the two nations, with China eventually becoming one of Cuba's main trading partners. Chinese women, or daughters of Chinese men and black or Hispanic women basically became a new national sex symbol, a definite Sino-Chinese contribution to Cuban culture. Discounting the accomplishments of the Sino-Cubans when describing the nation's national identity is delusional, misinformative, and detrimental, as they have contributed much to Cuban culture, especially for such a relatively small component of the whole population.

### In Conclusion:

In a way, defining Cuba's national identity would be similar to trying to define the national identity of the United States. Apple pie and baseball are American, but so is the street in Chinatown, New York City where baby turtles are sold next to knock-off Yankees hats. To nail down a national identity for so diverse a country is next to impossible, because limiting *cubanidad* to a few specific figures, as the artists of the vanguardia generation attempted to do, discounts the struggle and historical contributions of other populations, essentially marginalizing them. This is a difficult paradox to rectify, especially for a country so culturally and ethnically diverse as Cuba, where the concept of *lo cubano* can apply to the drum heavy music of *son* or the elegance and precision of a ballet dancer.

In conclusion, *cubanidad* is everything Cuban, from the guajiro and the Afro-Cuban, to the concept of the exotic foreign Chinese girl or the beautiful mulatta, to the guerrilla warrior hiding in the countryside, to the countryside itself, a landscape rich with vegetation and tropical fruits. Beauty is Cuban, but so is struggle and hardship. Equality is Cuban, but so is the history of inequality leftover from colonial times. There truly is no better metaphor than that of Fernando Ortiz, the ajiaco stew. Cuba is a land of many ingredients, some more prominent than others, but each and every ingredient is vital to the success of the dish. And so each part of Cuban culture, from the smaller contributions of the Chinese to the immense contributions of the Africans and Spaniards, is necessary for the accuracy of the national identity for this melting pot of a country.



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