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The Onus of Seeing Cuba: Nilo Cruz's *Cubanía*

Old Cubans say that if you walk to the very end of Key West you will be able to see Cuba. I myself don't know any Cubans, young or old, who have actually seen the island from this point, but there is a plaque at that spot that marks it as "officially" ninety miles from the island of Cuba. Of course, a lot more separates Cuba from Key West than those piddling ninety miles. There is a haze that obscures any view, ensuring that one will indeed never see Cuba from that or another vantage point. That haze is comprised of certain ideological mists that we might understand as the United States's endless propaganda war against the island, the rage and melancholic romanticism of the Cubans outside the island, and the North American Left's precritical celebration of the revolution. Cuban exile art thus needs to respond to the onus of breaking through the distorting cloud that keeps us all from actually seeing Cuba. In this way Nilo Cruz's work is both admirable and necessary, insofar as it not only understands the onus of "seeing Cuba" but in fact tries to do something about it. Cruz's writing practice attempts to cast a picture of *cubanía*, of Cubanness as a way of being in the

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world; this picture not only helps us begin to achieve a historical materialist understanding of Cuba, but it also encourages us to access *cubanía* as a structure of feeling that supercedes national boundaries and pedagogies.

If this play, *Two Sisters and a Piano*, were to be addressed on the level of plot, such an explication would dwell on the way in which the work attempts to interrogate a difficult and pivotal moment in Cuban history. The play is set in Cuba of 1992, at the moment of perestroika. Through the lives of four characters (two sisters—one a writer and the other a musician—a lieutenant in the nation's military, and a piano tuner) a charged moment of historical transition and entrenchment is described with dense nuance. The two sisters are political prisoners who have been upgraded from penitentiary incarceration to house arrest. The house they are sent to is their now dilapidated family home, and they settle among its ruins. Maria Celia, the older sister, is forbidden her vocation as a writer. The other sister, Sofia, is allowed to play her out-of-tune piano for a time, until that, too, is taken away from her. Throughout the play she trembles with desire for the outside world and the bodies of men, while Maria Celia longs for her husband, a political activist who has escaped Cuba, denounces it from the outside, and labors to get his wife and sister-in-law out through diplomatic mechanisms. Maria Celia is desired by Lieutenant Portuondo, the military representative who is in charge of her detainment and enforces her restriction against writing. His great conflict is this assigned duty and his love of Maria Celia's writing and body. The play's other major character is Victor Manuel, the piano tuner. Maria Celia treats him with suspicion as he is desired by Sofia. His major concern is the state of the family piano.

A reading that focused primarily on plot would miss some of the important cultural work that Cruz is doing. The play is about *cubanía* as a *manera de ser* (a way of being), and it attempts to provide an affective understanding of the world. These characters, anchored in the Cuba of 1991, are witness to a moment of world historical turmoil. They face this moment with manifold desires and longings: some desire social change, while others desire sexual and psychic liberation. Still others are invested in the state and strive for the survival of the existing system. These feelings speak to the emotional life world of *cubanía*. The sisters are full of desire for another place and time, one in which their desires will be realized, a then and a there. They dream through their writing and music of a moment when longing will be fulfilled. These men stand in for a certain aspect of nation. They themselves are not

without ambivalence, yet they nonetheless represent an established order, a here and a now. The women represent something that we might understand as a melancholic attachment to a lost Cuba and, at the same time, a utopian longing for a reformulated evolution that perestroika promised to some on the island. (We know now that perestroika and the end of Soviet economic aid did not bring a new golden age to Cuba, but instead made the island even more susceptible to the U.S. government's savage embargo and brought on an especially hellish "special period" of scarcity.) The sisters dream of another temporality while the men are anchored to a notion of presentness.

Throughout Cruz's oeuvre we encounter women who dream and desire different times and places. The world they represent is familiar to anyone who has lived inside or outside of a Cuban community here or there. The playwright deploys female characters as melancholics whose affective relationship to the world is a critique of its current conditions. They are personages outside of a national order whose desire exceeds the bounds of the national here and now. This strategy echoes what we can today understand as Tennessee Williams's queer ventriloquism. Through his memorable and often tortured heroines (a partial list would include Laura and Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche and Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Maggie from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, or *Suddenly Last Summer*'s Catherine), Williams was able to represent the affective reality of homosexual desire. While Williams was never able to (and perhaps never desired to) write what we would reductively call an "out" gay play, the affective landscape of pre-Stonewall homosexuality was certainly represented in his work through these powerful dramatic female conjurings. Maria Celia and Sofia seem like a tribute and intertextual reverberation of this particular mode of rendering emotional realities through analogy and allegory. The fact that Maria Celia and Sofia's desires are suppressed and literally under house arrest certainly speak to the revolution's problematic relationship to public displays of queer desire and ontology.

Cruz uses emotion as an instrument to see Cuba beyond a certain ideological fog. To better understand this strategy we might then compare his work to two other important Cuban American theater artists. Maria Irene Fornes is a Cuban American playwright who seems to eschew identity labels like *Latina*. This refusal or reluctance to embrace an uncritical model of Latina identity is a critical and theoretical act. The playwright is instead

interested in rendering an affective landscape that speaks to the quotidian reality of Cubans, U.S. Latinos, and Latin Americans. Only a few of Fornes's plays actually feature Latino/a characters. *Conduct of Life* is staged in a generalized Latin American nation, and *Sarita* features characters who are clearly marked as Latina/o. Even though most of her plays do not directly index Latino names and lives, all of her dramatic personages represent Latina/o affective reality. Their way of being, their modes of negotiating the interpersonal and the social, stand as thick descriptions of ethnic feeling within a hegemonic order. Fornes's oeuvre stands out from the mainstream of American theater insofar as one is not able to easily assign motivation to her characters. Traditional narrative arcs of character development are all but absent in her work. This difference is often understood as the avant-garde nature of her plays. Such a reading is only half right. This particular mode of avant-gardism can be characterized as representative of specifically trans-cultural avant-garde. Her plays appear mysterious to North American eyes because they represent a specifically Latina/o *manera de ser*. This mystery is not accidental or some problem of translation, but strategic, measured, and interventionist. The short play *Mud*, for instance, is set in an economically impoverished U.S. locale. Mae, the play's female protagonist, finds herself trapped in a life where she is unable to actualize her emotional and intellectual potential. This boundness is similar to the chains that keep the two sisters from achieving their own liberation in *Two Sisters and a Piano*. Mae's plight is meant to be felt by anyone who is sensitized to the transnational gendering of poverty, yet it speaks to a Latina/o cognoscenti in powerful and culturally specific ways. The mysteriousness of Fornes is akin to a mysteriousness that saturates Cruz's work. His characters do not conform to the strictures of character development that dominate North American theater. The motivations of his characters are not available to North American viewers who are unable to "see" psychology and feeling outside of their own emotional confines.

It is also useful to compare the playwright's work to that of a younger Cuban American dramatist. Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas's *Maleta Mulata*, like much of Cruz's work, challenges the affective protocols that U.S. culture routinely prescribes. The play is set in a Miami household in the eighties. Family members struggle with the literal ghost of their Cuban past as well as contemporary imperatives to become American. *Maleta Mulata*, like *Two Sisters and a Piano*, offers valuable insight on what I call melancholia of cuba-

nía. This complex affective formation, in the case of Cortiñas's excellent play, focuses on Miami-based Cubans' inability to accept the reality of a socialist present on the island. A similar melancholia characterizes Maria Celia and Sofia's struggle with the island's present. Furthermore, Cruz's play foregrounds the Cuban state's own melancholic longing for a pre-perestroika universe. In this fashion, Maria Celia's writing and Sofia's music threaten to wake Cuba up from its willful melancholic slumber, forcing the country into a post-Cold War temporality.

Cruz, like Fornes and Cortiñas, and, for that matter, a host of Cuban American cultural workers that would include and not be limited to Coco Fusco, Carmelita Tropicana, Marga Gomez, Ela Troyano, Delores Prida, Raul Ferrera Balanquet, Ernesto Pujol, Achy Obejas, Caridad Svitch, Tony LaBat, Marcos Bequer, and the late Felix Gonzalez-Torres, all negotiate the onus of seeing Cuba, which is again the almost impossible project of looking beyond this vision-obscuring haze to a rich life world of affective particularity. Cuba and Cuban America are both obscured by this haze and, at the same moment, constructed as monolithic. If we ever hope to understand Cuba, it seems especially important to really see it at this particular moment, as multinational capital encroaches on the island and the U.S. embargo shows no sign of abating. Cruz's drama functions as an elegant and penetrating optic that may well be indispensable to the task at hand.