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Encyclopedia of Hispanic-American Literature

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Dorsía Smith Silva

Cuban-American literature

Cuban-American literature has its roots in Spanish-American culture; in addition, it owes some of its images and rhythms to West African and indigenous Taino influences. It is heterogeneous in character because Cuban-American authors come from different classes, races, and geographical experiences. Cuban-American literature began with a generation of individuals advocating Cuba's independence in the 19th century. Successive waves of authors in the 20th and 21st centuries fall into two categories. Either they are part of families who went into exile after FIDEL CASTRO'S CUBAN REVOLUTION of 1959, or they are Americans of Cuban descent.

Cuban-American literature started as a literature of exile written by Cuban writers forced to flee to the island in search of political asylum from the Spanish colonial authorities. Such authors took seriously the historical factors (slavery and a sugar economy) relating to the island's turbulent

political scene. During the 19th century Cubans who lived in U.S. exile include essayist and poet JOSÉ MARTÍ, poet and journalist José María Heredia, and novelist Cirilo Villaverde. These writers published their work with an overtly political agenda (and Martí was jailed for his views), and they shared values about the abolition of slavery and support for Cuban independence from Spain, achieved in 1898.

The next major group of authors fled Cuba during and after Castro's revolution in 1959 and include Heberto Padilla, Antonio Benítez Rojo, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. These writers tend to focus on civil rights and governmental instability under Castro's regime. They write about both the hopes and disillusion of the early years of the 1959 revolution, the exodus after Castro came to power, and the experience of exile.

Writers who grew up on the island and migrated to the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s include REINALDO ARENAS, Lino Novás Calvo, Matías Montes Huidobro, and José Sánchez-Boudy. Authors such as Arenas expressed hostility toward Castro's regime. They denounce communism and what Arenas refers to as the hypocrisy of the Cuban government. Arenas also criticizes the double-speak of his fellow writers on the island. For Arenas the hypocrisy stems from the government's adoption of the platform of Martí—the equality of all citizens—yet Arenas points out that gays, artists, and intellectuals struggle with governmental persecution. In any case Cuban-American writers often are motivated by an intense nostalgia for their beautiful island and by the troubling sense of displacement in the United States. Their works, especially those of Arenas, recount the horrors of immigration, the perceived lack of truth in Castro's government record, and the challenge of acculturation in cities such as New York and Los Angeles. They are also aware that Cubans back on the island may call them *gusanos* (worms), who have abandoned their home and relatives for the capitalist and anti-Castro United States. One perspective that has become more visible as restrictions between the two countries grow is that Cubans in Cuba lament the devastating impact

of the U.S. embargo and travel restrictions. Some Cuban Americans want to maintain these restrictions as a form of retaliation against Castro's legacy; others would prefer to see more trade and more freedom of movement between the countries, the island being only 90 miles from Florida. Now that Raúl Castro is president (February 2008) some freedoms seem to be increasing for Cubans; the future of U.S.-Cuba relations is a question mark, but is almost definitely going to change.

Although contemporary Cuban-American authors often are distanced from their parents' experiences on the island (because of the last 50 years of travel restrictions and the ongoing embargo), their literature touches upon many of the same ideas. Cuban-American literature expresses the challenge of living in between two worlds, Cuba and the United States. This is a more striking phenomenon when we consider that many Cubans relocated to New York, which, unlike Miami, is nothing like Cuba. Like their Cuban exile predecessors, many Cuban-Americans authors express a need to reconcile their Cuban heritage with their identity and status as exiles or immigrants in the United States. Even authors who were born in Cuba and lived there as children, such as GUSTAVO PÉREZ FIRMAT, consider themselves in exile.

The Cuban-American experience of living in between two languages and two cultures raises concerns about self-definition and allegiance. Authors question the cultural expectations that society, whether in the Northeast, Los Angeles, or Miami, imposes on the individual. It is not surprising, therefore, that autobiographical writings and fictionalized autobiography prevail in Cuban-American literature. Since the 1990s there has been a Cuban-American literary boom, especially with works that capture the experience of living simultaneously in two cultures, such as the writings of Pérez Firmat and Lourdes Gil. Meanwhile, themes about Cuba's history of poverty and repression under Fulgencio Batista's and Castro's governments and the exile experience are found in the works of Pablo Medina, VIRGIL SUÁREZ, and Pérez Firmat. These authors consider the challenge of acculturation in the United States. Medina's *Ex-*

iled Memories: A Cuban Childhood (1990) deals with the issue of a divided family and a feeling of rootlessness as a Cuban exile. Pérez Firmat's *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America* (2000) maps out the author's childhood in Cuba, adolescence in Miami, and adulthood in North Carolina; he develops this trajectory, along with the bicultural life of his children, in his poetry collection *BILINGUAL BLUES* (1995). Pérez Firmat's *Next Year in Cuba* closely follows the Cuban exile discourse and examines the fragmentation of the family, which he attributes to Castro's dictatorship. Medina's fictional autobiography, *The Marks of Birth* (1994), describes the impact of the revolution on one Cuban family, while Suárez's *Going Under* (1996) and memoir *Spared Angola: Memories from a Cuban-American Childhood* (1997) portray the advantages and disadvantages of his Cuban childhood and his present life in the United States.

Racism and the cultural clash between Cuban and American values drive Roberto Fernandez's *Raining Backwards* (1988) and *Holy Radishes* (1995). He satirizes a Cuban community that has been changed by the materialism and popular culture of the United States. In the same vein ELÍAS MIGUEL MUÑOZ and ACHY OBEJAS explore the impact of immigration and exile in gay communities. The search for identity and the self is also a common denominator in the poetry of Ricardo Alonso, Lourdes Casal, Octavio Armand, Ricardo Pau-Llosa, and José Kozzer. Their writing explores how to negotiate two cultures and two languages.

Perhaps the best-known Cuban-American novelists are OSCAR HIJUELOS (*The MAMBO KINGS PLAY SONGS OF LOVE* [1989], *A SIMPLE HABANA MELODY: FROM WHEN THE WORLD WAS GOOD* [2002]) and CRISTINA GARCÍA (*DREAMING IN CUBAN* [1992], *The AGÜERO SISTERS* [1997], and *MONKEY HUNTING* [2003]). Hijuelos was born in New York but is preoccupied with the postrevolution politics of 1959 and the impact the U.S. embargo has on family ties, as in *EMPRESS OF THE SPLENDID SEASON* (1999). García's *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters* engage with Cuban history, mysticism, and the reconstruction of identity in New York and Miami. Taken together, Hijuelos and García collect the

memories of their Cuban communities in exile to reconstruct in literary form a U.S. identity without the loss of Cuban heritage.

The heterogeneity of Cuban-American literature is not just generational; it is also linguistic and gender specific. Depending on their view of the United States and their background, Cuban-American authors will publish in English, Spanish, or both languages. Writers in exile, such as Hilda Pereira, MARIA IRENE FORNES, Montes Huidobro, and Benítez Rojo, Padilla, Kozer, and Gil, write in Spanish as a mean of preserving their Cuban cultural roots. Cuban-American literature produced in English is common with writers such as Medina, Hijuelos, García, and Suárez as they move between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking cultures.

Cuban-American women writers such as Dolores Prida, Achy Obejas, Raquel Puig Zaldívar, Ruth Behar, and Eliana Rivero address the challenge of being Cuban American as a form of minority politics. Their literature differs at times from that of their male counterparts in the expression of their most intimate emotions and their particular position as women living in often sexist and consumerist societies. Lesbian writer Obejas, for instance, brings to her writings issues of tolerance, (sexual) identity, and self-definition in such novels as *Memory Mambo* (1996). The narratives and essays of Rivero and Behar, meanwhile, speak of the alienation of women in the United States and also refer to the crucial task of identity construction. Furthermore, they celebrate their heritage and ethnicity since this provides them with a variety of perspectives to rediscover the self.

Cuban-American literature describes the problems that affect the Cuban-American community in its entirety; nevertheless, it is the individual experiences of immigrants and their children and the different levels of assimilation within the United States that shape the diversity of Cuban-American literature. The memories of a past life (whether their own or that of their relatives) on the island and the defining of the self on the mainland vary depending on generation, class, race, gender, and education. These similarities and differences shape the identities of Cuban Americans, build bridges

among Cuban communities in the United States, and propel a literature that continues to establish itself as a significant contribution to American ethnic literature and the U.S. canon.

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Yolanda Pampin Martinez

Cuban Revolution (1959)

The Cuban Revolution has its origins in the 19th-century conflicts between the Caribbean island and Spain. After hundreds of years of colonial rule, Cubans waged ongoing warfare from 1868 to 1889 against Spanish authorities to gain their independence. Their struggle was unsuccessful, but in 1895 the poet and revolutionary JOSÉ MARTÍ led a finally successful campaign to end Spanish colonial rule. Ironically, though, as soon as the island was free from Spanish control it faced U.S. domination.

The Spanish-American War involved the United States, Spain, and Cuba, as well as other Spanish colonies. Cubans fought for independence from Spain in the 1890s and, by 1898, the United States launched an invasion of the island after the USS *Maine* exploded and sank in Havana Harbor—an event that heated tensions between Spain and the