

Mapping Hyphenation in Cuban-American Literature

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Do you wake up each day
with an urge for a bagel
with café con leche?
Do you flip back and forth
through the Miami Herald comparing every word
to el Nuevo Herald? [. . .]
If so my friend,
then you are the hyphenated man
and it's time you consider
Hyphens Anonymous,
where the confused straddlers find refuge [. . .]
They meet once a week,
eat [. . .] Cuban coffee with Dunkin Donuts [. . .]

"The Hyphenated Man" (23-24)

14

Through these humorous words the renowned Cuban-American poetess Carolina Hospital describes her view on cultural hyphenation, but the humour softens the struggle of living on the hyphen. The movement from one country to another is not an easy process, and the transplantation from one culture to a completely different one and subsequently, from one language to another has various consequences. Most importantly, disorientation or, what has come to be called, cultural dislocation. The younger members of the families are the ones to receive the greatest blow of the migrant or exilic experience as they are forever trapped between two cultures (the native and the adoptive ones), and thus, they fall victim to deeply rooted painful cultural identity problems for the rest of their lives.

In the same way as they are subjects in transit in-between cultures, their identities are also relentlessly mobile. Their lives in the United States evolve in the space of the borderlands of cultures and languages, where hyphens have their domain. Hyphenation is a key term regarding the understanding of the functioning of that cultural and lingual frontier. It is commonly cited and celebrated as a space of resistance and protest and, on the other hand, as a space of tolerance, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism.

For these liminal beings, either culturally mixed or "mixed up" (Firmat 24), as the Cuban-American writer and critic Pérez Firmat defines himself, the hyphen is therefore more than just a punctuation mark used to divide or compound words. It is their living space culturally and linguistically, as the Chicana poet Pat Mora openly asserts in one of her poems:

Bi-lingual, Bicultural,
able to slip from "How's life?"
to "*Me'stan volviendo loca*," [. . .]
American but hyphenated [. . .]
a handy token
sliding back and forth
between the fringes of both worlds [. . .]. (Anzaldúa 376)

However, living in in-between worlds, to borrow Gómez Peña words, is a "Sysiphean experience" (Peña 43) of no visible end and once trapped, forever trapped.

Long before the "hyphen" entered the realm of scholarly discussion to be openly scrutinized and dissected, as has happened in the last decades, at the beginning of the 20th century the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos¹ was a pioneer by already using in his work *Cosmic Race* such a term to describe the

mestizo: a race that embraced different races and cultures and, therefore, supported inclusion rather than exclusion, introducing a multiracial and multicultural being far from the concept of purity that pervaded the society of the time and later times.

Nowadays, in the 21st century, in a shifting postmodern world, where borders are constantly transgressed and the number of migrants moving from nation to nation (either in a voluntary or involuntary way) dramatically increases every year, the study of the cultural borderlands in which most of these migrants end up living becomes cornerstone to any cultural and sociological studies of our societies. Thus, among the different critics who have come forward in the analysis of these liminal spaces it is imperative to mention first the well known Chicana critic and writer Gloria E. Anzaldúa, whose critical work mainly concentrates on the abstract concept of what she calls *la frontera* (the Spanish translation of the borderlands). Her masterpiece, entitled *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, has become a masterpiece in its field. This book is a study on the consciousness of *la mestiza* (a Spanish word used by Anzaldúa to refer to a Latina hybrid being), in which she explores what living in cultural liminality implies. Her main ideas appear condensed in this famous poem:

Because I, a mestiza,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos [...]
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio,
[...] por todas las voces que me hablan
simultáneamente.² (Anzaldúa 99)

As this poem expresses, hybrid identity is not something stable and fixed; on the contrary, it is an identity in constant ebb and flow, and subsequently, in continuous restructuring. That is, in a state of perpetual transition. "Sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all [...] cultures and their value systems, la mestiza [the hybrid] undergoes [...] a struggle of borders, an inner war," which entails instability, making her "dual or multiple personality [be] plagued by psychic restlessness" (100). The hybrid being suspended between two worlds and unable to choose between them has no other option than trying to find an equilibrium out of such multiplicity by "learn[ing] to juggle cultures [...] in a pluralistic mode - nothing [being] thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned"

(101). Anzaldúa finds a plausible solution in what she calls "a third element [...] a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness" which is "greater than the sum of its severed parts" (102), which for many would echo Homi K. Bhabha's "Third Space."

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha also deals with this important concept so much *en vogue* in postcolonial theory, although he does not specifically refer to Latinos. Instead of in-betweenness, liminality or hybridity, Bhabha refers to a Third Space, an in-between hybrid space that "becomes a space of intervention and creativity [where] all cultural systems and statements in a colonial context are constructed" (Bhabha 37). This third space is to be understood as a new space resulting from the other two, being "neither the one nor the other" (36).

However, the critic Gustavo Pérez Firmat does not completely agree on envisioning cultural in-betweenness as a third element. He emerges with a theory based on his own experiences claiming that his bicultural experience can be better defined as a seesaw moving from one culture to another with relative ease and without the need of transforming either the Cuban or the American culture into a new synthetic third term. This is clearly pointed out through his assertion: "Rather than merging Cuba and America, I oscillate ceaselessly between the two. My life is less a synthesis than a seesaw" (*Next Year* 274). Therefore, it is actually the hyphen of his Cuban-American hyphenated identity that would serve as a bridge between both cultures or even, if we want to continue with the seesaw image, as a plank that tilts first one way, then the other allowing him to shift between cultures.³

On the other hand, another Cubanamerican (note without a hyphen, as she likes to define herself) writer and critic, Eliana Rivero, does not conceive that liminal existence as straddling cultures as Anzaldúa and Pérez Firmat do, on the contrary, she envisions it as "a 'hovering' stance, not poised or grounded on any particular point of reference but simultaneously being configured and rotated around several different pivots" (36). Not being anchored to any of those cultural pivots allows liminal beings "multifaceted positionalities" (36), a fluid identity while they search for a personal and cultural sense of self that fits their transcultural experience. For her, Cubanamericans are fluid entities: "[...] floating bodies in the liquid borders of the continental plates, pushed by the ebb and flow of the waves of national and migratory politics, and by [their] own conflictive identity constructions [...]" (56).⁴

Up to here, a summarised overview of some theoretical framework on hyphenation has been presented but this article has a very specific focus of attention: Cuban-American literature, an emerging body of Latino literature that has been flourishing in the last two decades within the boundaries of U.S. contemporary literature, coexisting with the

other U.S.-Latino literatures (Chicano, Puerto Rican, Dominican-American, etc.) as well as other blooming literatures labelled as "ethnic." The Cuban-American authors' cultural in-betweenness, resulting from straddling cultures and languages due to their exilic or immigrant condition (depending on the cases), determines the content and form of this type of literature, as their personal cultural hybridity pervades throughout their writings.

Within this background of hyphenation, liminality, in-betweenness and transitional continuums, Cuban-American literature evolves. Hyphenation is commonplace in the lives of the characters who abound the pages of Cuban-American literature, constantly wondering whether their cultural hyphen is a ballast or a bliss. In most cases these characters are the portrayal of the author's own existential thoughts about their hyphenated identity that once haunted them, and in some cases, still do. Born in Cuba or in the United States to Cuban parents and educated in the United States, Cuban-American authors are still closely identified with their cultural roots, which deeply mark their lives as well as their literary works. They often make hyphenation the main topic of their stories. They show the multiple aspects of the complex reality of living on the Cuban-American hyphen between the North American and Cuban cultures and two languages (English and Spanish) or, as the playwright Dolores Prida wrote, of "trying to reconcile two cultures and two languages and two visions of the world into a particular whole [...]" (Prida 182).

This essay aims at analysing the role the hyphen plays in the formation of Cuban-American identity, that is, in self definition in spaces of biculturalism. The constant presence of a lost Cuban past, a lost country, a lost life and, in some cases, the loss of the Spanish language haunt the characters, who have to face the disruption of having a Cuban past and family but a North American present demanding homogenisation. It is common to find characters struggling between cultures, asphyxiated by the pressure both cultural realms exert upon them. This study analyses representative examples both in narrative and drama so as to offer a significant insight into the Cuban-American hyphenated experience.

How hyphenation is going to be conceived depends to a great extent on the generation which the person belongs to. Accordingly, we find, what the Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut labelled, the 1.5 or one-and-a-half generation: "an intermediate immigrant generation whose members spent their childhood or adolescence in Cuba but grew into adults in America" [...]. "born in Cuba but made in the U.S.A. [...]" (Firmat 4), a group that falls somewhere between the first and second immigrant generations. In a sense they are privileged because "although it is true enough that the 1.5 generation is marginal to both its native and its adopted cultures, the inverse may be equally accurate: only the 1.5 generation is marginal

to neither culture. The 1.5 individual is unique in that, unlike younger and older compatriots, he or she may actually find it possible to circulate within and through both the old and the new cultures" (4). On the other hand, those already born in the U.S. but of Cuban descent are to be classified as second generation. Although still connected to Cuba through the family, the island is just a mirage, a relatives' memory, a place they have never been to. Most one-and-a-halfers have learned to live on the hyphen although the process has not been easy. The most outstanding case is Pérez Firmat. Throughout his literary and theoretical works that spans from the '80s up to the present, the reader is able to get a complete picture of the evolution the author has undergone throughout two decades as regards his relation towards his hyphenated identity. We find poems in which he is still negotiating and coming to terms with his hybridity. In "Nobody Knows My Name," the poet complains about how his name is being metamorphosed by English to the extent that it ends up not resembling at all the original one and, therefore, preventing him from having a fixed identity:

I'm tired
dead anonymous tired
of getting mail addressed
to all those people I never was:
Gustazo Pérez
Gustavio Penley [...]
Nobody here knows my name [...]. (*Bilingual Blues* 31)

In another well-known poem "Bilingual Blues," he highlights the pulling forces of the two cultures and languages that cohabit in him through "Soy un ajiaco de contradicciones."⁵ / I have mixed feelings about everything [...]. He is just "un puré de impurezas" (*Bilingual Blues* 28).⁶ At a point in his life, Pérez Firmat embraces the hyphen to its full extension and starts celebrating it as a source of joy, once he manages to reconcile his Cuban and American parts, realising that the interaction of both cultures in his being should not be conceived in negative terms but rather the opposite: "the hyphen is not a minus sign but a plus, a sign of life, a vital sign" (7), that is, as a way of enriching his life. For him "hyphenation is oxygenation – a breath of fresh air into a dusty and musty casa" (7), which suggests that the hyphen is now as vital as oxygen for his life; since without either of them he could not exist. Achieving biculturalism, which he defines as "an equilibrium [...] between the two contributing cultures" (6), in which "[...] it is difficult to determine which is the dominant and which is the subordinate [one]" (6),

allows Pérez Firmat to become linguistically creative comparing and mixing English and Spanish and creating bilingual puns, an activity that he calls "cunning lingualism" (10). They are bilingual plays on words, which can be fully understood by bilingual speakers.

Moreover, there is a personal moment in his life that he pinpoints as crucial to the understanding of his hyphenated identity and that is his divorce from his Cuban wife and subsequent marriage to an American. Pérez Firmat epitomises his sentimental relation in his second marriage to an *americana* (as he likes calling her) as the perfect embodiment of the relation existing between his Cuban and American sides:

When she and I made love, I felt I was embarking on a marvellous journey of exploration and discovery...sex became a form of soul-searching. Going inside her, I was going inside myself. Getting to know her body, I was learning things about myself that I had ignored before. I felt less conflicted more whole, multiplied rather than divided...The complementary of our bodies increased with the diversity of our cultures, as if Cuba and America were complementary too [...]. (217)

However, in 2005 the reader discovers in Pérez Firmat latest's poetry book, *Scar Tissue*, a man far removed from his philosophy of "only by being two, will he ever be someone" (12). We find a Pérez Firmat who reflects on his hyphen after suffering from cancer, an experience that shakes all the foundations of his theories on hyphenation. In his poem "Afterlife on the Hyphen" he openly confesses that living on the hyphen is painful and it was wrongly idealized by him earlier in his life. Hence his words:

Hyphens hurt. A hyphen is not a charm, not an ornament, not
The one-and-a-half's *azabache*.⁷ A hyphen is a scar, a
suture—
A *bache*,⁸ not an *azabache*; a stretch mark, not a beauty mark.
[...]
For years I celebrated hyphens [...]
[...] but it wasn't fulfilling. Life on the hyphen is wound [...].
(43)

The heart is indeed in the crocodile island⁹: Cuba. The memory of it "devours [them] in the distance" (*Bilingual Blues* 51)¹⁰ and becomes a heavy burden

to be carried for the rest of their lives, which they cannot easily free themselves of. Thus, all Cuban-Americans seem to be branded by the island; hence Pérez Firmat's words "I also carry the crocodile on my back!" (*Bilingual Blues* 51).

Being near death makes Pérez Firmat realize that his exilic condition is like the cancer that has slowly and quietly eaten him alive. Subsequently, he concludes in the poem "Continence" that "Happiness is [...] a life off, not on, the hyphen" (44); an assertion that must have surprised many and which drastically challenges all his previous theories transforming the hyphen from the precious *azabache* it once was into *azbache*, a disruption people should avoid. Therefore, the hyphen is now charged with extreme negativity becoming the source of endless misery. The hyphen has transformed itself into an open wound that leaves those living on it psychologically scarred for life.

Nevertheless, there are still plenty of authors who celebrate living in border spaces and the hyphen per-se. Cuban-American playwrights Dolores Prida and Alina Troyano (artistically known as Carmelita Tropicana) have made the celebration of biculturalism, bilingualism and the search of one's roots home. Prida's *Coser y Cantar*¹² is to be considered as a fascinating literary exemplification of Cuban-American hyphenation. It represents in theatrical form that liminal space of cultural in-betweenness in an original as well as exhaustive way in the context of Cuban-American exilic experiences. Prida herself asserts that "[the play] deals with how to be a bilingual and bicultural woman in Manhattan and keep your sanity" (185).¹³

Coser y Cantar is one long bilingual monologue between a Latina named "Ella" and her Anglo inner self "She," who are two halves of the same person. They are the cultural sides of a personality - the Cuban immigrant (that is, the woman's cultural heritage) and her more acculturated, and therefore, Americanized self - which perfectly exemplify the personal struggle between two cultures that many Latinas living in that same dual condition experience. The play takes place in the apartment in which "Ella" and "She" live, divided into "two ethnic territories" (Sandoval 203), one for each character, which represents the two different cultural parts of the consciousness of any bicultural Latina. The objects they own (the props) have been thoughtfully introduced by the playwright so as to function as evident embodiments of their cultures. The presence of two different cultures within the same person gives way to the abundance of cultural dichotomies in the text which function as a "polarizing comic device" (Weiss 15). Thus, one speaks English and reads *Psychology Today*, the other speaks Spanish and reads *Vanidades*; one is on a diet and exercises to Jane Fonda's records, the other eats and dreams; one eats healthy low-calories food, the other fattening Caribbean meals, one dwells in the here and now, the other is anchored to the past. . . and the list goes on.

The split stage, the linguistic code-switching (English-Spanish) and the subsequent symmetrical images clearly represent the fractured personality of "She/Ella," a woman at constant war with her two cultural selves in search for selfhood. The audience immediately realizes that "Ella" is attached to Cuba and thereafter, to Cuban things as a child to a mother through the umbilical cord that is essential for the child to continue living within the womb and, in this case, for "Ella" to survive in New York so far away from her homeland. In the end despite many arguments between "Ella" and "She," and by making "She" state that "No one shall win!" (67) in this bicultural game, ending in a draw, the playwright is clearly in favour of what Pérez Firmat once denominated the "non-conflictive cohabitation of dissimilar cultures" (5), in which no culture dominates or subordinates the other.

In another Prida play, *Botánica*, Millie (a member of the second generation) struggles to come to terms with her Latina identity and often puts it aside ashamed of it. However, after a number of experiences in the play, Millie realises that a hyphenated life is possible and thus, progressively attempts to achieve a balance by starting to work in a bank and also by helping in the ancestral herbal shop *botánica* that her family owns. Millie's decision to pass the age-old information about traditional herbal remedies (kept in old notebooks and in her grandmother's memory) to a computer memory symbolizes that the cohabitation of the old and new is feasible. Furthermore, Prida plays with the motto of the play "don't let them kill your buffaloes" (165) as a reminder to Millie as well as to the audience of the fatal effects of the homogenizing process carried out by the Anglos against Native-Americans. Therefore, it is a reminder of what would happen to Latinos if they assimilated, and did not fight to defend their rich cultural heritage. This clearly anti-assimilationist motto inspires Millie's final response to the gentrifying real estate agent that wanted to buy her family house and the one of other Latino neighbours: "My buffaloes are not for sale" (180), which is an open negation of acculturation to the mainstream.

Continuing with drama, Alina Troyano wrote a witty play called *Milk of Amnesia* in which the principal character (a Cuban-American woman that left the island to live in the United States) suffers from an amnesia of Cuba and realizes one day she cannot remember Cuba anymore. In the end she is able to make Cuba part of her existence again by an act of remembering, by actually visiting the island. Forced to drink plain milk at an American school, and not the "sweet condensed milk of Cuba" (95) she was used to, her memory starts failing till it becomes amnesia. The American milk represents here the blank effects cultural homogenisation aims at, suppressing the 'other' culture. After the amnesia, she "resolve[s] to embrace America" (95) and

continue drinking the homogenising milk even if for that she had to "[close] her eyes and [hold] [her] breath [...] to suppress a lot of the flavour [she] didn't like" (95). While still a kid reflecting on both of her cultures, she identifies America with clean apples and Cuba with messy mangos but in an assimilationist attempt to become more like the apple, she is told by a mysterious shadow that "Mango stains never come off," (98) that is to say, that her Cuban heritage will always be there even if she were to try to hide it. Once the memory of the Cuban past is back, the protagonist doesn't hold back from showing off the oxymoron of her identity (fragmented but fluid):

I REMEMBER
QUE SOY DE ALLÁ¹⁴
QUE SOY DE AQUÍ
UN PIE EN NUEVA YORK (A FOOT IN NEW YORK)
UN PIE EN LA HABANA (A FOOT IN HAVANA) [...]
CULTURALLY FRAGMENTED [...]
BUT I DON'T ESPLIT
I AM FLUID AND INTERCONNECTED [...]. (108-109)

For Alina Troyano "boundaries are blurred" (Esteban 90) and that is the definition of identity she wishes to convey with her work, vindicating that asphyxiating rigid identities imposed by the mainstream are of no use. Both Dolores Prida and Alina Troyano have made use of their hyphenated experience to create theatre and accordingly, to enjoy the bliss of having a hyphen.

In fiction we can also find different examples of hyphenated beings. In the acclaimed novel *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cristina García deals with the question of the hyphen through the character of the teenage Pilar, who feels more identified with Cuba than with the U.S. because of the special connection she has always had with her grandmother Celia back in Cuba. Afraid of losing Cuba because "most days Cuba is kind of dead to me [...] everyday Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me" (García 137-138), Pilar pursues that connection at all costs, especially now, at a particularly difficult time for her. She is not only facing the typical problems of growing up but is also struggling to express herself in the United States without any knowledge of who she really is or where she comes from; exile and her mother deprived her of answers. Pilar is convinced that her Abuela is the key to all her problems as pointed out in: "Even though I've been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure Cuba is, but I want to find

out. If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged" (59). Determined to find her cultural heritage, she travels to Cuba to reconnect her life to Celia and to her Cuban past, which gives Pilar the key to solving her identity problems created by her cultural uprootedness. Now, she knows where she belongs as well as where she is heading, as she declares in: "Sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know it's where I belong—not instead of here, but more than here" (236), which gives a complete new meaning to her hyphenated identity, a sense of wholeness.

For the protagonists of Elías Miguel Muñoz's *The Greatest Performance*, Rosa and Mario, the hyphen acquires new meanings as it is charged with cultural as well as sexual identity. The Cuban cultural space (both on the island and in exile) shapes rigid and limiting gender constructs (the domineering macho-man and the submissive-woman) in contrast to the Anglo-American space (in which they feel relieved due to their homosexuality). Once in the U.S., Mario and Rosa, openly take a defiant stand against the Cuban authoritative discourses that have regulated their performances of gender forcing them to act 'straight.' They fully embrace Anglo-American gay culture hiding their ethnicity although, for the sake of their families, they cross the hyphen to try to perform in front of Cubans the identity mandated in the Cuban space hiding their homosexual tendencies. But dissimulation through prescribed performances of masculinity and femininity is stressful leading them to avoid the Cuban community so as to be able to live their supposedly "transgressive sexualities." As the critic Karen Christian realizes when analyzing the character of Mario, "[...] embracing American gay culture liberates Mario from the pain and oppression of his past, but this freedom is gained by suppressing outwards signs of his cultural heritage" (62). So Mario ends up trading his ethnicity for the possibility of living his homosexuality. In this way the hyphen is just used as a sort of backstage and bridge for Rosa and Mario in their endless life performance while they get ready to perform in whichever cultural realm they are supposed to enter. Rosa and Mario are therefore unable to appreciate their Cuban part as it prevents them from living their sexuality and ethnicity in the same cultural space. For them the memories of Cuba and anything Cuban are truly a ballast they have to get rid of along the way in order to be able to get on with their lives.

Finally, another striking case in which the Cuban part acquires a negative connotation in a hyphenated being is in Pulitzer-winner Oscar Hijuelos's *Our House in the Last World*. The novel describes the material and inner struggles of a Cuban family after having migrated to the U.S. in the 1940s. In it Hijuelos, among others issues, tackles the question of Cuban identity outside Cuba and the loss of the language by the second generation. The character in which all these issues gather together is

Hector, who while on a trip to Cuba with his mother gets a kidney infection that confines him to a hospital for months. The illness he suffers will kill his Cuban part of the hyphen. Accordingly, in his head "Cuba became a place of disease and death" (44), Hijuelos even makes Hector's kidneys "[be] shaped like the island of Cuba on maps" (104) so that the identification between Hector's illness and Cuba cannot be clearer. Hector grows up believing that there is something wrong with Cuba: "Cuba gave the disease. Cuba gave the drunk father [...] the crazy mother. Years later all these would entwine to make Hector think that Cuba had something against him [...]" (102). Besides this, Hector also suffers from the loss of his mother tongue (Spanish) after being isolated in hospital for a long time and having an Anglo nurse that forced him to speak in English. Therefore, Hector suffers a "radical Cubasectomy" (79), using Pérez Firmat's coined neologism, as if the hyphen were a carcinogenic tissue to be removed. The disastrous result is the complete death of the Cuban part in favour of the American one. Consequently, for Hector his Cuban part of the hyphen had disappeared and had "become the mysterious and cruel phantasm standing behind the door" (106). Consequently, it seems that the society of the '40s and '50s when this story takes place had no space for hyphenation but rather assimilation.

Summarizing, this article has tried to map a cartography with some examples of Cuban-American literature of that contact zone called hyphen, where cultural and spatial negotiations are inevitable and cultural and linguistic battles take place revealing asymmetrical relations of power. The relation bicultural beings have towards their hyphen has revealed complex and unique in every case. They often end up creating a love/hate relationship that develops differently over time. Accordingly, some manage to make the hyphen home, coming to terms with themselves and their multiplicity, and thus, conceiving it as an advantage rather than a disadvantage, a bliss that converts them into privileged bicultural beings. For others the hyphen is an unbearable burden, which, as if it were a sword, severs the Cuban and American parts, making the cultural reconciliation impossible and leaving them wounded for the rest of their lives. They see Cuba and the memories associated to it as a ballast they will have to drag for the rest of their lives in the United States regardless of their attempts to get rid of them: they feel branded for life by the cultural dislocation they have been through. It has been shown that the Cuban-American hyphen is a transnational space where gender and sexuality are often explored, and terms like memory, trauma, reinvention, ethnic passing and national identity have made their home. Such an amalgamation of multiple issues shows the complexity of living on the hyphen and therefore of sketching a map of the formation of Cuban-American identity and its intricacies.

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