

## Linguistic Representations of Black Characters in Cuban Fiction of the New Millennium: A tale about continuity and subversion

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### ABSTRACT

If scholarship has focused on the return to the stereotypical portrayals of black characters during the 1990s, and that were common to the pre-revolutionary era, what had not yet been addressed is how differentiating linguistic traits (manner of speech) have been used to represent black characters in more recent Cuban fiction, a narrative strategy that goes back to colonial times. Apart from conveying “authenticity” (i.e. the details of the Havana slang) when building fictional characters, such a literary device, I contend, was also a way to emphasise the Island’s socioeconomic and cultural decadence or “involution” during this decade of economic upheaval. Since the second decade of the new millennium, other voices, namely from the Caribbean side of the Island, have emerged and imposed themselves in fiction, leading me to explore the other levels of significance of this narrative strategy. What follows is a tale about continuity and subversion.

### BIO

Catia Dignard is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. Her dissertation examines the topic of Linguistic Representations of Black Characters in Contemporary Cuban fiction, and how these reflect evolving notions of nationhood, class and race relations on the Island. Her doctoral research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2020-2022), and draws upon literary and critical theory (postcolonial, critical race and disability studies), sociolinguistics and anthropology.

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At the end of the 1990s, Cuban poet and journalist, Manuel Vázquez Portal was approached by a young Portuguese student seeking advice for writing a thesis on the topic of “Blacks in Cuban literature.” Half-jokingly, he responded categorically that she would have to read “all” of Cuban literature.<sup>1</sup> Vázquez Portal’s comment points to the long history of the representation of black characters in Cuban fiction: a cycle beginning with abolitionist novels such as *Cecilia Valdés* (1882) by Cirilo Villaverde; followed by the Cuban Revolution’s interlude of relatively “silencing” the racial question, leading to literature’s (few) black protagonists serving mostly to demonstrate the benefits of the Socialist Revolution<sup>2</sup>; before the 1990s marked the return to the stereotypical portrayals of black characters that were common to the pre-revolutionary era, such as their “sexualisation” or “criminalization”.<sup>3</sup> To go back to our anecdote, the theme of the student’s thesis and their meeting with Vázquez Portal are both related to the “new Cuban boom” - promoted largely by European publishing houses and coined Special Period Fiction by Esther Whitfield.<sup>4</sup> A genre popularized particularly by writer Pedro Juan Gutiérrez’s own brand of “dirty realism” (or “realismo sucio”), which featured emblematic depictions of Havana’s marginal and mostly black populations, namely in his notorious

*Trilogía sucia de La Habana* (1998).<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to consider that Cuban fiction published from 1990 to 2004 has been significantly influenced by the overall context of the economic crisis. Critics and authors themselves have demonstrated and commented on the pressure to reveal and depict at length the grim realities of life in this “still-socialist society”<sup>6</sup>; and thus at times catering to foreign demand’s thirst for both “authenticity” and dark tales about a Socialist Utopia gone dystopia. Beyond the facts and figures illustrating the economic impacts of the disintegrating USSR – which demonstrated Cuba’s high degree of commercial dependency on soviet subsidies and Eastern European markets – Cuba’s Special Period can also be considered a “defining category of experience” that “brings up memories of deprivation and hopelessness; of hunger and heat; of wheeling and dealing, of dreams of a life elsewhere”.<sup>7</sup> In narrative, such testimonies/depictions have also revealed “zones of silence” in which Cuban reporters had been kept away by the State controlled press. Such zones refer to specific neighbourhoods – with ground zero, Centro Habana – largely populated by the poor, marginalized and mainly black Cubans who seemingly have been left unaffected by the Revolution’s socialist agenda and its “social homogenizing forces”.

<sup>1</sup> Carlos Uxó González, *Representaciones del personaje del negro en la literatura cubana: una perspectiva desde los estudios subalternos*. (Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2010), 13.

<sup>2</sup> This perspective is shared by Casamayor Cisneros, Odette. 2002. “Études et essais: Les masques du Noir: Quelques approximations sur la présence du Noir cubain dans le récit cubain contemporain.” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 42, no. 1 (2002): 7–30 and Carlos Uxó González, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Carlos Uxó González, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Esther Kathryn Whitfield. *Cuban Currency the Dollar and Special Period Fiction*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> For a more in depth analysis, consult Odette Casamayor-Cisneros. “Blackness, Cubanness, and the End of an Era.” *Black Diaspora Review* 5, no. 2 (2016): 12-23.

<sup>6</sup> Esther Kathryn Whitfield, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Ariana Hernández-Reguant. *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

During a conversation/interview I had with him in December of 2019, seated in the lobby-bar of Hotel Sevilla, in close proximity to the emblematical neighbourhood of his novels, writer Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, still a journalist at the time while writing “a bit in secret” his *Trilogía* and *El Rey de La Habana*, commented a tad more on what he termed “zonas de silencio” (zones of silence). In his words, these referred to “zones of society in which reporters did not enter normally. No news story would take place here, in a solar, in Centro Habana. No mention was made of poverty in Havana; no mention was made of the centro-habaneros’ religiosity... Poor people did not exist. It was as if journalism made-up this fantastic world... in which we were all heroes. Then, my books started to appear in which I talked about the anti-heroes, those who have been left behind, those who have no voice. So, I do it deliberately because I lived there, right there.”<sup>8</sup>

Because Gutiérrez’s depictions dealt with marginality as well as the lived experiences of criminality, incarceration and violence all intertwined with ethnicity, poet and critic Victor Fowler Calzada considered *El Rey de La Habana* “one of the few works to give the margins a space in contemporary Cuban literature,” while writer Ena Lucía Portela insisted on

Gutiérrez’s “proximity” and “skill in remaining faithful to the details”.<sup>9</sup> In other words, he wasn’t “faking it”. Moreover, such “details” also concurred with academics from inside and outside of Cuba who documented the plight of the mainly black segment of the population who would become further disadvantaged by Cuba’s opening to tourism and foreign capital’s discriminatory policies (official tourism industry) and thus, since 1989, the “reappearance” of social re-stratification according to racial background.<sup>10</sup> However, it is noteworthy that if Portela also signals the “truthfulness” of Gutiérrez’s dialogues in *El Rey de La Habana* (1999), for their “authentic rhythm and colouring, their faithfulness to the details of the Havana slang”<sup>11</sup>, what has not been addressed are the many other levels of significance associated to this literary strategy.

While the works of Carlos Uxó and Jorge Hernández examine the literary construction of linguistic otherness as a way to signify subalternity of the black subject in the Cuban context, they focus mainly on colonial texts. This is a period in which mainly white writers would caricaturize the spoken language of their black characters, stressing in their texts the “imperfect” pronunciation of Spanish. This narrative strategy finds its precedence in the *teatro bufo*, a Cuban version of “blackface

<sup>8</sup> Pedro Juan Gutiérrez. Interview by Catia Dignard. Personal interview. Havana, 12 December 2019. Translation to English mine.

<sup>9</sup> Esther Katheryn Whitfield, 111.

<sup>10</sup> These conclusions are based on the analyses by María del Carmen Zabala Argüelles. “Cuba: la dimension raciale dans le processus de reproduction de la pauvreté.” *Alternatives Sud* 17, no. 2 (2010): 135-156, and by Alejandro de la Fuente. “Recreating Racism: Race and Discrimination in Cuba’s ‘Special Period.’” *Socialism and Democracy* 15, no. 1 (2001): 65-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300108428278>.

<sup>11</sup> Esther Katheryn Whitfield, 113.

<sup>12</sup> Christina Civantos. “Race/Class/Language: ‘El Negro’ Speaks Cuban Whiteness in the ‘Teatro Bufo.’” *Latin American Theatre Review* 39, no.1 (2005): 49. According to Civantos, the figure of the negro/negrito bozal refers to a “recently-arrived African who speaks a pidgin form of Spanish known as macúa or bozal...literally a muzzle” and thus, “the term negro bozal reflects the perception of the recently arrived slave as incapable of speech, or at least muzzled by his/her inability to speak Spanish.” (50)

comedy akin to U.S. minstrel shows” and sub-genre, negro catedrático (“black professor”) plays, by which blacks or are ridiculed “for not being able to speak properly” – such is the case of the negro/negríto bozal figure – or, rejected for speaking too “properly,” that is, with a high degree of over-correctness, in the case of the negro catedrático.<sup>12</sup> In this line of thought, Civantos signals the important role the plays, namely those by Bartolomé José Crespo y Borbón who “first established the figure of the bozal,” have had on constructing this “white vision of black speech.”<sup>13</sup> In narrative, these linguistic representations have been sustained, notably, by the foundational Cecilia Valdés (New York City, 1882 definite and extended version), in which Cirilo Villaverde offered a panorama of the linguistic varieties of his coloured characters, which in turn has served as an example for other realist genre oeuvres.<sup>14</sup> This cataloguing or imitating of black voices persists well into the first two decades of the twentieth century, for example, in the realist novels by Miguel de Carrión (1875-1929), such as *Las honradas* (1917) and *Las impuras* (1919). Another noteworthy example is the vignette “El negro viejo” in *Estampas de San Cristóbal* (1926) by Jorge Mañach (1898-1961).<sup>15</sup>

This research being part of a larger project, my main objective is to analyze the significance of this literary device and which translates itself by the ‘voicing out’ of historical anxieties related to race, such as the return to the primitive, Africanness, the trope of Haiti as Cuba’s radical Other<sup>16</sup> and the perils of the (re) creation of a “Black Republic”.<sup>17</sup> In other words, by establishing the link between perceived “blackness of language” and “decadence,” I wish to demonstrate that the use of such a literary device was a way to emphasise the Island’s socioeconomic and cultural “involution” during the Special Period. This is part of a broader discourse that since the nineteenth century has associated these tendencies to the “African” or “black” part of the Island’s population. If José Antonio Saco (1797-1879), who considered “the progressive blackening of Cuba [fuelled by the Plantation economy] would lead to its ‘slow decadence, its certain intellectual ruin’”,<sup>18</sup> Rojas signals the re-emergence, at the beginning of the Special Period, of discourses tainted, namely, by the ‘Haitian peril’ and overall rejection of Cuba’s “Caribbean” character.<sup>19</sup> By extension, we could add to this, the stigmatization of linguistic traits associated with Caribbean Spanish - traditionally

<sup>13</sup> Christina Civantos, 50.

<sup>14</sup> According to E. Rodríguez Herrera (1953), in his prologue to this pre-Revolution edition of Cecilia Valdés, Villaverde’s effort in integrating different types of speeches, particularly those of his black characters, and in spite of its shortcomings, was to be “celebrated”, given the novels’ realist genre: “Hay que estudiar detenidamente este lenguaje tan variado en la Cecilia Valdés de Villaverde, porque es uno de los méritos de la novela, por más que a veces falla al poner en boca de algunos esclavos palabras como Cruz, dipuè, y otras en vez de Cru y dipuè o dimpuè, como se advierte en algunos pasajes.” Cirilo Villaverde, and Esteban Rodríguez Herrera. *Cecilia Valdés*; o, *La Loma del Ángel*, novela de costumbres cubanas publicada en New York en 1882. (Habana: Editorial Lex, 1953), xlv. Emphasis in original.

<sup>15</sup> These oeuvres from the first decades of the so-called Republican (or pre-revolutionary) era will be the object of analysis in a forthcoming chapter of my doctoral dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> This topic is extensively analysed in the work by Elzbieta Sklodowska. *Espectros y espejismos: Haití en el imaginario cubano*. (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> The long standing recurrent “fear” which stems from the events in the neighbouring island and that have served to “stir white fears” in order to postpone Cuba’s independence from Spain, is discussed in Alejandro De la Fuente. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 27-28.

<sup>18</sup> Alejandro De la Fuente, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Rafael Rojas. *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History* 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 98.

attributed to the lower classes, dominated by black and mixed-race populations – and the lexicon connected to certain sectors of the Afro-Cuban population.

Given that the return of this literary strategy of integrating "black speech" (including lexicon of African origin in the notorious Havana slang), perceived as a negative marker, and thus a means to construct otherness, in contemporary Cuban fiction of the 1990s has not been studied and has persisted, to a certain degree, in oeuvres of the New Millennium that reflect, namely, on the Special Period, I will first consider briefly Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's treatment of linguistic registers in *El Rey de La Habana* (1999) for his "setting the stage". Second, I will be turning to younger narrators, more connected to the Caribbean side of the Island, and who have dealt more specifically with the racial question and integrated vernacular in their texts, leading me to explore the other levels of significance of this narrative strategy. Finally, I will offer some preliminary conclusions with regards to three levels of significance of what has been termed "linguistic experimentations,"<sup>20</sup> and the factors that may explain, after a hiatus of almost thirty years, the re-emergence of racialized voices and alternative readings of these.

In his review of *El Rey de La Habana*, Miguel García-Posada notes the most "sensationalistic" aspects of the novel ("sex and survival strategies") while drawing attention to the topic of language

varieties (the informal/colloquial registers). At this point, I will argue that apart from ascribing to the main protagonist, Rey, linguistic traits to convey "authenticity" and offer an account of language change on the Island, such a literary device can be considered a way to emphasise Cuba's socioeconomic and cultural decay or "involution" during this decade of economic upheaval, if we consider, firstly, the author's revisiting of narrative strategies proper to colonial literature – in the manner of a Cirilo Villaverde – that give the impression of the Island's reversing to "primal times," namely with the interventions of "la negra Tomasa".

While the classy transvestite Sandra, a self-proclaimed 'hija de Ochún' who represents the figure of the refined mulata, when faced with the crudeness of Rey's speech acts, scolds him in this manner: "No me digas 'oye' (hey). No me gustan las vulgaridades (...) (I don't like vulgarities) No. Todos son iguales de groseros sucios, malhablados" (you are all the same, brutes, scumbags, foul-mouthed),<sup>21</sup> when Tomasa, a "black Conga" ("negra conga") takes over him/her (when Sandra is said to be "pasando un muerto"), her blackness wins over and linguistic traits proper to bozal Spanish emerge. The narrator comments that Tomasa "hablaba en español enredado y en congo, casi ininteligible" (talked in an entangled/almost unintelligible Spanish).<sup>22</sup> For example: "–Tomasa va a habla [r] pa'ti [para ti]"; "–Tomasa viene a ayuda [deletion of final /r/]"; "–Uhhmm... Tú naciste con un

<sup>20</sup> For an interesting discussion on the topic of linguistic experimentations, which presence marks a shift in Cuban fiction since the 1980s, consult Huertas, Begoña. *Ensayo de un cambio : la narrativa cubana de los '80*. (La Habana, Cuba: Casa de las Américas, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Pedro Juan Gutiérrez. *El Rey de la Habana*. (La Habana: Ediciones Unión, 2009), 30-31. Emphasis mine.

<sup>22</sup> *El Rey de la Habana*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> *El Rey de la Habana*, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Sergio Valdés Bernal, *Lengua nacional e identidad cultural del cubano*. (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1998), 75.

arrastre grande, que viene de atrás [deletion of final /s/] pero te cayó a ti. No é [instead of 'es'] un sorbo. Es un arrastre de cadena pesa, pa'toa [para toda] la vida".<sup>23</sup> To summarize, this passage is both reminiscent of colonial literature's tendency to imitate black voices, and of the Island's first lexicographers, namely Dominican E. Pichardo with his *Diccionario provincial casi razonado de voces y frases cubanas* (1849), to characterize "black speech" – at the time, of the so-called "Negros Bozales o naturales de África"- as "disfigured Castilian" ("castellano desfigurado").<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, Rey's speech acts, that is, his limited and "ruinous language", both recall the claustrophobic and ruinous space of Centro Habana in which he wanders and conditions his "limited vision of the world". If Sandra alludes to the "language issue", that is, Rey and many others' systematic use of the informal register by the term "malhablados," and which has given rise to certain anxieties concerning the perceived linguistic "impoverishment" on the Island, a debate that has also been racialized on both sides of the Florida strait,<sup>25</sup> she/he is also aware of Rey's lack of "linguistic capacities" as noted by Anke Birkenmaier. For example, when Rey asks "¿Qué es fascinado (captivated)?" Sandra responds by a "No, nada...¿quieres comer algo?" ("No,

nothing, do you want to eat something?").<sup>26</sup> Additionally, if the critic contends that the novel "needs a narrator to fill in the gaps in Rey's language" and that Rey's actions, namely to kill hunger, are what is important in the novel, "not his speech"<sup>27</sup> I posit that, au contraire, Rey's language and its deficiencies are important in several respects. First of all, his language serves as a marker of the island's social and cultural decadence. Secondly, it participates in the aesthetics of the ruins that permeates the novel. In other words, we may establish an analogy between the "gaps" in Rey's language (e.e. elision, contractions) and the ruins that surround him as an allegory of a crumbling social project. Thus, if when representing Havana's landscape "architectural ruins stand as readable figures for the decay of Cuba's socialist dream",<sup>28</sup> so do Rey's linguistic limitations.

Since the second decade of the new millennium, other voices, namely from the Caribbean and Central part of the Island, have emerged and imposed themselves in fiction, leading me to explore the other levels of significance of this narrative strategy. In fact, such "exploration" was contingent in receiving books written by authors residing outside of Havana, given the scarce attention to the topic of race in narrative written from the capital, in

<sup>25</sup> This part of my analysis is based first on Carlos Paz Pérez's 1988 study that explains the "impoverishment" of Cuban Spanish as a result of the particular slang spoken by "antisocial elements," many of them clearly identified as members of the Abakuá secret society, an AfroCuban fraternity with "marked features of decadence." *De lo popular y lo vulgar en el habla cubana*. (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1988), 19, translation mine. Second, for pointing to the explicit racialization of the debate, I refer to Luis A. Ortiz López. *Huellas etno-sociolingüísticas bozales y afrocubanas*. (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 1998), 156. Finally, for its transnational and very politically charged dimension, I refer particularly to studies based on perceptual dialectology, which investigate "nonlinguists' beliefs about their own [language] and other varieties." Gabriela G. Alfaraz "Dialect perceptions in real time: A restudy of Miami-Cuban perceptions." *Journal of Linguistic Geography*, 2.2 (2014): 74). The studies conducted by Alfaraz (2002; 2014) and by Andrew Lynch (2009a, 2009b) point to the fact that negative perceptions of Cuban Spanish spoken on the Island from the Miami side have been linked to beliefs about race and poverty.

<sup>26</sup> Anke Birkenmaier. "Más allá del realismo sucio: 'El Rey de La Habana' de Pedro Juan Gutiérrez." *Cuban studies* 32 (2001):

<sup>27</sup> Anke Birkenmaier, 46.

<sup>28</sup> Esther Katheryn Whitfield, 100-101.

particular by the Novísimos and then, Generación Cero authors.<sup>29</sup>

Hence, in order to compare the “Special Period” linguistic characterizations to those of newer generations of Cuban authors, I analyzed Cuban fiction of the second decade of the “new millennium,” namely “Virgen en la pradera” in *El crimen de san Jorge* (2012) by Michel Encinosa Fú (*La Habana*, 1974), short stories “25” and “32” in *Apuntes de Josué* 1994 (2015) by Nelton Pérez Martínez (*Manatí, Las Tunas, Oriente*, 1970) and *La catedral de los negros* (2015) by Marcial Gala (*Havana* 1965). These authors are, amongst the newer generations of narrators, those who, from the Island, have dealt more directly with the racial theme and its socio-historical basis, and also because of their use of vernacular language or other “linguistic experimentations” that to varying degrees revisit the narrative strategies of their predecessors. I also have included works by Nelton Pérez and Marcial Gala, whose voices are more connected to the Caribbean and Central part of the Island along with its specificities and literary traditions; “spaces” that are seemingly more inclined to experiment with language, may it be for aesthetic reasons or for the sake of realism, such as the remarkable example of Guillermo Cabrera Infante (*Gibara*, 1929 - *London*, 2005), as well as two writers that have pursued in this tradition: José Soler Puig (*Santiago de Cuba*, 1916-1996) and Guillermo Vidal (*Las Tunas*, 1952-2004).

Before presenting my preliminary findings with regards to the different levels of this narrative strategy, what emerges from these three texts is that they not only integrate vernacular language (to stress the orality of their black characters) for the sake of “realism” – how people really speak in certain regions or sectors of Cuban society (including their lexicon) -, but their characters themselves allude to the “language issue” or this tendency to use manner of speech as a marker of origin (geographical-cultural) or of group identity (youth, marginality). If Ashcroft reminds us that voice differences, which include language, dialect or accent, along with body differences, are the “most common and superficial features by which the subject is the most directly and immediately othered,”<sup>30</sup> these “voice differences,” I will argue in a more positive way, point to the coexistence of diverse cultural identities and how these are negotiated on an individual and collective basis in the Caribbean, conceived as a multi-linguistic space.

Furthermore, I contend that the way language is inscribed in these works both reinforce and flow from Cuba’s “Multiculturalidad,” that is, its “redefinition” since the 1990s as an “ethnic and cultural community”<sup>31</sup> This viewpoint not only contrasts with the prior stress on “homogeneity of experience” within the Revolution’s socialist cosmology/agenda,<sup>32</sup> but also permits counter narratives to discourses such as Ortiz’s Cubanidad,

<sup>29</sup> I am greatly indebted to Havana-based Generación Cero writer Raúl Flores Iriarte for receiving these books, for my Fiction of the New Millennium corpus of study, and for facilitating my interview with one of its author, Nelton Pérez. For a thorough discussion on these two younger generations of authors and their tendency to steer away from “Special Period” topics, including the topic of race, consult the works of Uxó (2010; 2015) for the Novísimos and the introduction to the dossier on the Generación Cero by Monica Simal and Walfrido Dorta. “Literatura cubana contemporánea: lecturas sobre la Generación Cero (introducción).” *Letral: revista electrónica de Estudios Transatlánticos* 18 (2017): 1-8.

<sup>30</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006),

<sup>31</sup> Ariana Hernández-Reguant, 72.

<sup>32</sup> Ariana Hernández-Reguant, 3.

based on the ajiaco metaphor (melt-ing-pot/mestizo nation), by celebrating black's "otherness" and cultural differences even within Afro-Cubans. In other words, a position that claims "not the essential integration of African elements into national culture, but the impossibility of such an occurrence" and which implicitly link culture and its varied manifestations with race, also emerges within this space of debate. Rogelio Martínez Furé (Matanzas, 1937)<sup>34</sup> the leading proponent of this viewpoint, illustrated it in this way, alluding also to diversity versus homogeneity in manner of speech (extract): *A mulatto Cuban from Baracoa, the descendant of Haitian émigrés in a coffee-growing area, is not the same as a black Cuban descendant of Arará from the province of Matanzas, a sugar-growing area, or a fair-skinned Cuban from Pinar del Rio, a tobacco-growing area, the descendant of Canary islanders. They are all Cuban, but there are differences in food, speech, psychology, religious beliefs, and phenotypes. I believe it is important to accept plurality and free ourselves from the monomania, according to which we are all the same.*<sup>35</sup>

These works of fiction also enter in dialogue with other "Caribbean-centric" texts, whether intertextually, by referring to foundational oeuvres that vindicated

Afro-Cuban culture and Caribbeaness. If these texts vindicate in many ways their "Caribbeaness" and, by extension, what Benítez Rojo would qualify of "la afirmación de su propia Otridad, su asimetría periférica con respecto a Occidente,"<sup>36</sup> nonetheless the specter of Haiti persists as the uncanny neighbour that stirs up anxieties about this place where we don't want to go back to or become.<sup>37</sup> This is particularly relevant in *Apuntes de Josué* 1994 by Pérez and *La catedral de los negros* by Gala, in which the re-emerging tropes of radical alterity, "Haiti" and "Oriente," are also bound up with the linguistic factor.

Thus, to make sense of all that precedes I have summarized the significance of this narrative strategy of integrating black speech in three instances: 1) As a signifier of socioeconomic, cultural, moral decay; 2) As a marker of group identity, codes of conducts in poor and marginal neighbourhoods, and Cubanness; 3) As a pretext/way to revisit the nation's history (colonial transaction and the society it fostered, migrations, national symbols, archetypes and stereotypes).

<sup>34</sup> Rogelio Martínez Furé is an Afro-Cuban writer, scholar of folklore and religion and founder of the National Folkloric Ballet of Cuba (Conjunto Folklórico Nacional). Consistent with his stress on Cuba's multicultural nature, State sponsored EcuRed mentions Martínez Furé's "rich and diverse ancestry" that includes: "mandingas, franceses, lucumies, españoles, chinos y, muy probable, de algún indio en lontananza". Very recently, on Feb. 8, 2021, the documentary film on his life: "Rogelio Martínez Furé: A Cuban Griot" (Juanamaría Cordones-Cook, 2014), was presented at the University of Missouri, College of Arts and Science- Black Studies in which he is portrayed as "a contemporary griot, a repository of oral tradition who recovers and guards Afro-Cuban and Caribbean silenced memories and true identity (blackstudies.missouri.edu).

<sup>35</sup> Ariana Hernández-Reguant, 83-84. Emphasis mine.

<sup>36</sup> Benítez Rojo, Antonio. *La isla que se repite: el Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna*. (Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1989)

<sup>37</sup> Rafael Rojas explains the persistence of Cuba's uneasiness (read "rejection") when facing its Caribbean identity and this, in spite of revolutionary rhetoric on racial equality and African cultural legacy, by the fact that according to the imaginary of the Revolution and of the left in general, Cuba was considered a "leading country in the Third World," but also "not so very Third World, underdeveloped or Latin American, due to its belonging to the Soviet bloc and its social advances" (97). Given such discourse, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico came to represent "negative archetypes" for the nationalistic rhetoric, given their "common element of Hispanic-African mestizaje" (emphasis in original, "Essays in Cuban", 98).

First, and as presented in my analysis of Gutiérrez's *El Rey de La Habana*, the linguistic characterization of the black subject is used mostly as a signifier of socio-economic, cultural and moral decay by which the protagonist's speech acts mirrors the ruinous city of Havana, which in turn stands as an allegory of a crumbling social project. In addition to the use of narrative strategies reminiscent of colonial literature, namely the example of the "negra Tomasa", which I have argued served to emphasize the Island's historical involution, the incursion of lexicon derived from Afro-Cuban popular religiosity also adds another layer of "otherness", by relegating spatially the black protagonist to Africa rather than Cuba, a narrative strategy also reminiscent of colonial literature.

In "Virgen en la pradera" by Encinosa Fú, apart from restaging an "African space" there is a commentary on the degradation of education, culture and morality in this microcosm of Cuban society; the animalization and hyper-virility of the black subject, the incursion of a disabled character when touching upon the children's depravity, referred to as "the tribe", and the linguistic codes/manner of speech that emphasizes this barrio's marginal status. In Gala's *La catedral*, the idea of the ruinous city of Havana is displaced to the fictitious mostly black and marginal neighbourhood of Punta Gotica, Cienfuegos, and by which the most stigmatized linguistic traits and swearing are ascribed to the mothers of certain characters, all part-time prostitutes (as was the case of

Rey's mother), giving way to their son's comments such as Barbarito's "my mother spoke that way".<sup>38</sup>

Relative to the second instance of this narrative strategy, given that both "Virgen en la pradera" and *La catedral de los negros* are set in poor and marginal neighbourhoods, the informal register is stressed, namely with the many incursions of the colloquial and street talk/lexicon proper to marginal sectors, including those derived from Afro-Cuban popular religiosity, integrally part of the cultural setting. However, not only manner of speech serves as a marker of group identity and codes of conduct proper to these spaces, but also of cultural identity and Cuban-ness. What Gala termed "ese especial modo que tenemos los cubanos de hablar," ("this special way we Cubans speak"),<sup>39</sup> includes the use by the people of particular narrative strategies. Set in the Special Period, Gala's novel also includes expressions and the lexicon that emerged at that time. According to Jorge Hernández, these years of crisis gave way to an "abundante repertorio de frases y vocablos, marcados en su mayoría, por la interpretación irónica, paródica o poética," a repertoire not yet collated, but nonetheless, dispersed in chronicles, articles and works of authors.<sup>40</sup> One of these "literary strategies" used by Cubans in reaction to their daily hardships and State censorship, demonstrating both creativity and resilience, has been to engage in a great deal of 'metaphorizing'. Consequently, to allude to the mothers' dealings in prostitution, they are said to be "en la lucha," (instead of

<sup>38</sup> Marcial Gala. *La catedral de los negros* 2ª ed.. (La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2015), 17.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Frígoli, Leandro. "La catedral de los Negros: una mirada sobre la obra del poeta, narrador y ensayista, Marcial Gala." *Marcha*. [marcha.org.ar](http://marcha.org.ar). 14 de junio de 2017. [www.marcha.org.ar/la-catedral-de-los-negros/](http://www.marcha.org.ar/la-catedral-de-los-negros/)

<sup>40</sup> Jorge A. Hernández. *Hablar entre cubanos*. (Santa Clara, Cuba: Editorial Capiro, 2013), 103.

<sup>41</sup> Jorge Mañach. *Indagación del choteo* (1928). Tercera edición revisada. (La Habana: Editorial Libro Cubano, 1955), 60.

“prostituirse”). Gala also exploits culinary metaphors, which go back to Jorge Mañach’s seminal text *Indagación del choteo* who “serves us” an example of this Cuban tendency to equate bodies to meat,<sup>41</sup> with the serial killer El Gringo’s mastering of this type of choteo, and which variations go beyond the realm of metaphor, which in turn leads us to the objectification of the white body. Interestingly, this particular use of language or wordplay (choteo) also becomes a way to subvert the traditional power dynamics between Blacks and Whites.

In a third instance, manner of speech or the “language issue” serves to anchor other discussions or becomes a pretext to revisit Cuba’s particular history, Afro-Caribbean legacy, and social dynamics, which in turn inform current conflicts that the economic crisis of the 1990s permitted to unleash. The use of this narrative strategy is particularly emphasized in *Apuntes de Josué* 1994 by Nelton Pérez, in which the nation and the re-emergence of specific social conflicts during the Special Period are also reflected upon and worked out at sea in the balsas/rafts in the context of the Balsero crisis.<sup>42</sup> In fact, it is in his vignettes or apuntes “25” and “32” in which the Cuban “holy trinity” of nation, identity and race figure, that Perez’s linguistic experimentations are more clearly racialized, racial stereotypes are voiced out, and in which the specter of the

Haitian as Cuba’s radical other invites itself. For example, the incursion of Yorqi Dubois Lescay, a black character which surname clearly denotes his Haitian ancestry, not only permits to allude to Cuba’s neo-colonial context by which Haitian and Jamaican braceros migrated to work on US owned sugar plants at the beginning of the twentieth century, but discuss the “language issue,” by which the protagonist’s manner of speech with supposedly “French creole influences” confers him radical alterity.<sup>43</sup>

Nonetheless, it is important to specify that if black characters are singled out by their speech acts in these two vignettes by a mainly “white” crew, the incursion of the “Haitian” character is also met with suspicion by its black Cuban counterpart, which adds layers and nuances when touching upon discrimination and otherness in the Caribbean region. In *La catedral de los negros*, El Gringo mistakenly takes a certain “Pierre Giscard” for an Haitian, and this, mostly for his “linguistic” features, namely, for his voice “cargada de erres” (“full of R’s”) that he “did not like from the very beginning” (“que no me gustó desde el principio”).<sup>44</sup> This last example underlines once more the Haitian’s “radical alterity” in the Cuban imaginary at large.

<sup>42</sup> The Balsero crisis refers to the massive migrations of Cubans on rafts of fortune during the summer of 1994, at the height of the Special Period of the 1990s. However, this type of migration had already started since 1991. According to Ackerman, already between 1991 and 1994, “a total of 45,575 Cuban balseros (rafters) were rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard. Of those, 16,778 entered the United States immediately. The remainder were sent to “safe haven” camps located at U.S. military bases in Guantánamo, Cuba, or Panama” (169). In Holly Ackerman. “The Balsero Phenomenon, 1991–1994.” *Cuban Studies* (1996): 169-200.

<sup>43</sup> Sklodowska also discusses the Haitian’s already “linguistic otherness” for his “uso preferido del créole” and for being associated with the French heritage of this part of the Island, at a time when Cuba’s Republic of Letters voice their “preocupación por el «afrancesamiento» de la lengua española”. Worthy of note is to what extent White creole anxieties towards racial mixing are transposed at the linguistic level when considering this concern for maintaining the purity of the Spanish language, free of foreign contaminants (French and Créole). In Elzbieta Sklodowska. *Espectros y espejismos: Haití en el imaginario cubano*. (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2009), 68; 69 note 6.

<sup>44</sup> *La catedral de los negros*, 169.

Furthermore, these linguistic portrayals of black characters in narrative are conditioned by three main factors. First, by their temporal proximity with the Revolution's cosmology and its social modernizing and homogenizing effect when writing on the Special Period. Second, the shift brought by the discourse of "multi-cubanidad" – i.e. "we are all Cuban, but we are not the same" – that opened narrative to multiple voices and regional linguistic differences. Finally, the particular literary traditions of the Caribbean and Central region of the Island, more open to linguistic experiments and reflections on the topics of race relations within the Caribbean region.

#### **A tale about continuity and subversion...**

Given that the backdrop of these three texts is Cuba's Special Period, or have been written partly during that time (Pérez's *Apuntes de Josué* 1994), they do retake, to varying degrees, the more sociological angle of documenting the plight of Blacks who had been hardest hit by the rise of inequalities, and the narrative strategies established in fiction of the 1990s to add "authenticity", including at the linguistic level, and thus, the integration of the notorious Havana slang. Corollary to the realization that if "we are all Cubans, we are not all equal," is the re-emergence of integrating discriminating linguistic features pointing to race. In addition, the sense of "end of the worldness" expressed by certain authors, namely Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, also accounts for the trope of the ruin and by which the black body becomes a metaphor for a crumbling social project.<sup>45</sup>

In "Virgen en la pradera", Encinosa Fú picks up many of the topics, archetypes and stylistic codes proper to Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's *realismo sucio*. However, if language still serves as a signifier of socioeconomic, cultural, moral decay, there is a shift in perspective insofar as the author-narrator leaves a certain space for other voices to emerge and point to the perils that lie within this black community for those who do not conform to its particular codes of conduct. In other terms, whites are "other" and acting "like whites"/"wearing white masks" is stigmatized in these mainly Afro-Cuban spaces. Gala pushes this even farther in *La catedral de los negros* by eliminating completely the omniscient narrator and by giving voice to those who live in the margins of the city. Given this change of perspective, the rich whites from the upscale Punta Gorda (Cienfuegos) and the white guajiros from neighbouring provinces become the "other". As mentioned previously, language does not serve explicitly to stigmatise the black subject in these settings, but rather to point to the people's resilience and the degree in which language use can serve to subvert traditional power dynamics, if we refer, for example, to El Gringo's special brand of "metaphorizing".

Ultimately, what we may perceive as an "evolution" in the way language is used to reflect Cuba's Afro-Caribbean legacy, that is, from a narrative strategy serving to construct otherness, to one conveying Cuba's multicultural/regional and socio-economic realities, neither is it a process devoid of tensions, nor is it generalized in more recent works of fiction. My main

<sup>45</sup> This additional insight draws on long enduring discourses by which Blacks in Cuba have historically been associated with "crumbling" political regimes. See Alejandro de la Fuente. "Recreating Racism: Race and Discrimination in Cuba's 'Special Period.'" *Socialism and Democracy* 15, no. 1 (2001): 65–91, p. 90.

objective in this part of my current research was to dismantle this “last frontier” in which the topics of race, language and the Island’s Caribbeaness are intertwined and discussed, and this, taking into account these “spaces” and literary traditions that permit such linguistic experimentations/reflections.

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