

MANDORLA

NUEVA ESCRITURA DE LAS AMÉRICAS • NEW WRITING FROM THE AMERICAS

Excerpt from / Fragmento de *Mandorla*, Issue 10

GUSTAVO PÉREZ FIRMAT

THE SPELL OF THE HYPHEN

The hyphen can play tricks on the unwary, as it did in Chattanooga when two newspapers merged—the News and the Free Press. Someone introduced a hyphen into the merger, and the paper became The Chattanooga News-Free Press, which sounds as though the paper were news-free, or devoid of news. Obviously we ask too much of a hyphen when we ask it to cast its spell over words it does not adjoin.

Strunk and White, Elements of Style¹

Years ago, in a book called *Life on the Hyphen* (1994), I attempted to do what Strunk and White warn against: I adjoined “Cuban” and “American.” Ever since, I have not managed to dispel the spell of the hyphen. Unwary by nature and nationality, by temperament and tradition, I have continued to succumb to the hyphen’s tricks, foremost among them the mirage of connectedness. For if the compound title of the Chattanooga daily turned it into a newspaper without news, in other situations a delinquent hyphen can manufacture the semblance of continuity between people or entities that, in reality, have little in common. Is there such a thing as a “Cuban-American Way,” as the subtitle of my book proclaimed? Have American-born or American-raised Cubans created a culture, that is, a distinctive mix of style and substance equally distant from the Cuban

condition and the American way? And what about the relation of Cuban America to the other Hispanic ethnicities in this country?

These are large, familiar questions, which I will address by discussing some examples of the literature that this culture, if it exists, has produced. Since its emergence in the 1980s, Cuban-American literature has occupied an ambiguous place within the canon of imaginative writing by U.S. Latinos. As the only segment of this canon produced by political exiles and their children, this literature exhibits a nostalgic streak not shared—at least, not in the same degree—by Chicano, Dominican American or U.S. Puerto Rican writers. Instead of focusing on how the García girls lost their accents, Cuban Americans seem more intent on explaining how the García girls, or the Pérez family, managed to keep theirs. The title of Isabel Álvarez Borland's book, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile* (1998), captures this ambiguity. Although hyphenated literatures tend not to be created by political exiles, with Cuban Americans the two poles seem to merge: the chronic exile meets the unmeltable ethnic.

Along with remembered or received memories of Cuba comes ideological baggage—this too is an inheritance. Although the politics of the Cuban-American community are more complex than is usually recognized, it's nonetheless true that sympathy for the Cuban revolution among Cuban Americans is—understandably, I hope—as rare as snow in Little Havana. *Gusanos*, worms, has been the label applied by the Castro regime to its opponents inside and outside the island. For the most part, Cuban-American literature has been, and continues to be, a can, a canon, of worms. Whatever their genus or genres, whatever their species or specialties, these novelists, poets, playwrights and essayists rarely blink their worm's-eye view: *gusano* rhymes with *cubano*. This too makes Cuban-American literature drift on the margins of the Latino mainstream, whose sources in the social movements of the 1960s have shaped its ideological commitments.² The fashion of “loving Che” did not begin, nor will it end, with Ana Menéndez's recent novel.

And then there is language. In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin makes the striking remark that languages are not strangers to each other.³ Although his context is unrelated to mine, the statement certainly applies to Cuban-American writing, a body of work deeply marked—some might say, scarred—by the intimate acquaintance of its two tongues, Spanish and English. Like Latino literature, which has become the monolingual expression of a bilingual community, Cuban-American literature exists predominantly in English.