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Havana Mañana: Cuba in the American Imagination

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Those of you who have heard me speak before know that no matter what the topic, I always find a way to begin by bringing up Ricky Ricardo, the character from the 1950s TV show *I Love Lucy*, and today will be no different. In one of my favorites episodes, Lucy hires an English tutor to help Ricky improve his English pronunciation. At this point Lucy is pregnant with Little Ricky, and she is afraid that little Ricky will pick up his father's pronunciation. The English tutor, a man called Mr. Livermore, is a stuffy, bow-tied pedant with an affected pronunciation and a hysterical aversion to slang. During the first lesson, Mr. Livermore instructs his class--which of course also includes Lucy, Fred and Ethel--on the correct pronunciation of the English vowels. Unlike his classmates, who imitate Livermore's fastidious enunciation well enough, Ricky pronounces the vowels in Spanish: "ah," "eh," "ee," "oh," "oo." Mr. Livermore can't believe his ears. He goes through the vowels again, accompanying himself with hand gestures to emphasize their open or closed sounds, and asks Ricky to repeat after him. Ricky does no better the second time. Stunned, Mr. Livermore asks, "Mr. Ricardo, wherever did you acquire that odd pronunciation?" Ricky replies: "I'm Cuban, what's *your* excuse?"

Well, like some of you, I'm Cuban too, and that's *my* excuse--both for my accent and for the topic of my talk. I think I understand what Ricky means when he says, "I'm Cuban, what's your excuse," and I'll have something to say about that later on; what I'm not sure I understand very well, and thus what I would like to explore with you is how the

millions of Americans who in the 1950s watched the show every Monday night--and the tens of millions more who have watched it in reruns since then--interpreted Ricky's defiant declaration of Cubanness. When they heard him taunt Mr. Livermore, what notions went through their minds? What pictures flashed in their heads? Rum? Cigars? Charismatic comandantes? Decrepit dictators? Andy García? Gloria Estefan? Scarface?

The enduring popularity of the *I Love Lucy* show, which you can still see every night on cable TV, speaks to Americans' long-standing infatuation with things Cuban. Let me give you another example, this one from a movie made in the 1940s.



In *You'll Never Get Rich* (1941), the first of two musicals starring Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth, Fred (in the unlikely role of GI) agrees to put on a show at the base where he is stationed. During the rehearsal, he instructs the stagehands: "I want a tree right here"—and a fake palm tree appears; "Bring me a house," he says—and a Spanish-style façade slides onto the stage; "Boys, now I want an ocean"—and the boys bring in the backdrop: a large image of the entrance to Havana harbor, as viewed from the seaside avenue called El Malecón. Once the scenery is in place, Rita Hayworth appears, looking

señorita-lovely in a sheer black dress with a ruffled skirt. Leaning against the fake palm tree, Fred launches into Cole Porter's "So Near and Yet So Far," whose lyric seems to allude to both Hayworth and Havana. After Fred finishes singing, he and Rita dance the most elegant rhumba ever captured on film.



Fred's cutout Havana in a movie that otherwise has nothing to do with Cuba illustrates the centrality of Cuba to the American imagination. Indeed, perhaps no other Latin American country has left as deep and wide a footprint on the cultural landscape of the United States as that little island in the Caribbean. For nearly two centuries, Cuba and the United States have been linked by what William McKinley in 1899 termed "ties of singular intimacy," a rocky romance that has produced flirtations, marriage proposals, misunderstandings, disappointments, embargos, *embarques*, and--every once in a while--a military invasion.

Spawned by geographical proximity and nurtured by political and economic dependence, this relationship has expressed itself in diverse, sometimes contradictory ways. Ever since the awakening of national feeling in Cuba at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Cubans have regarded *los americanos* with a mixture of fascination, fear, lust, disdain, envy. Even if I don't subscribe to Lou Pérez's thesis that, before 1959,

becoming Cuban meant being American, it is undeniable that American customs and values have profoundly shaped Cubans' sense of themselves, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. For their part, Americans have also looked upon Cubans with their own brand of fascination, fear, lust, disdain, and envy. Ever since John Quincy Adams in a famous letter (1823) described Cuba as an apple ready to fall into the lap of the United States, Cuba has been the object, and sometimes the target, of American desires. For Americans, Cuba has been both mirror and mirage: a magnified reflection of domestic anxieties as well as a beckoning oasis of otherness.

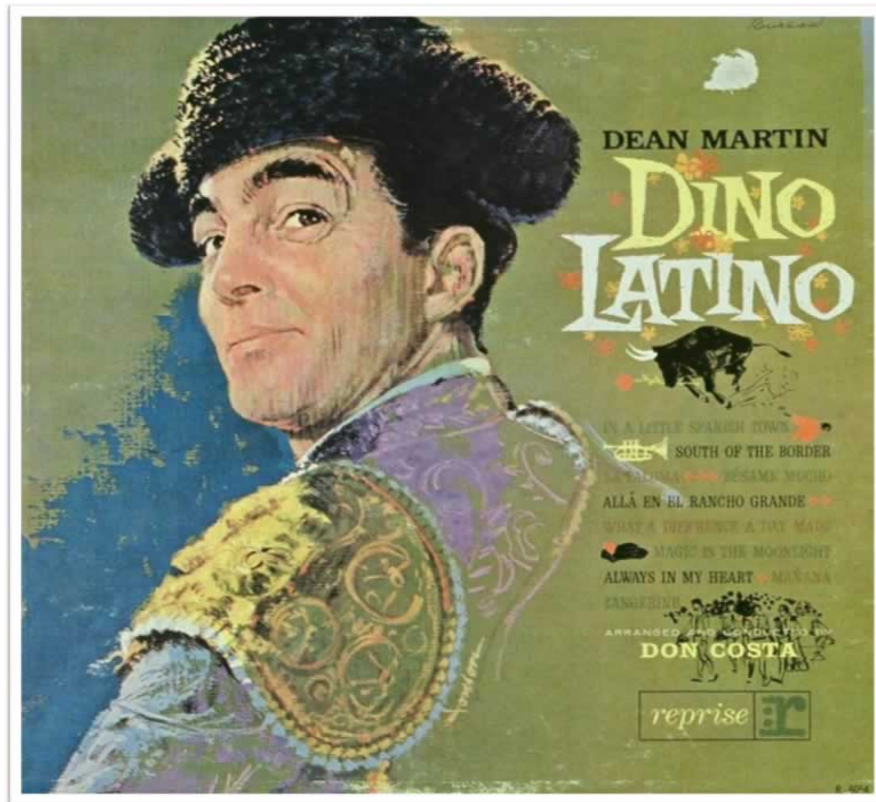
At the same time, Cuba has often served as a convenient proxy for Latin America as a whole. Because national imagery is often indistinguishable from cultural stereotypes, more than a "Cuban" Other, American culture has constructed a "Latin" Other. It is enough to watch a few of the so-called "maraca musicals" of the 1930s and 1940s to verify that, for the purposes of American popular culture, it made little difference whether the *señorita* was Cuban or Brazilian or whether the *caballero* was Mexican or Argentinian. In *Too Many Girls*, the 1940 movie where Desi Arnaz first met Lucille Ball, Arnaz had the part of Manuelito, an Argentine football star who also happens to play the conga drum. In *Weekend in Havana*, another maraca musical that came out the following year, Carmen Miranda plays a Cuban singer who of course sings in Portuguese.

Although most of you are not old enough to remember this, during the 1950s and early 1960s one of the staples of American popular music was the long-playing record filled with what were called "latunes," that is, tunes with a Latin beat and an English-language lyric. Among them were records with titles like *Bread, Love and Cha-Cha-Cha*, by Xavier Cugat; *Bagels and Bongos*, by Irving Fields (whose nickname was "the Jewish

King of Latin Music”); *Latin for Lovers* by Doris Day; *Latin a la Lee*, by Peggy Lee; *Olé Tormé* by Mel Tormé, and *Dino Latino*, by Dean Martin. *Dino Latino* contains an English-language version of the traditional song “La paloma,” whose lyric includes the following sentence:

When I left Havana nobody saw me go,
except my little gaucho maid who loved me so.

You may ask what a gaucho maid is doing in Havana. I don’t know, but if you think that’s odd, take a look at the album’s cover:



So here we have an Italian-American crooner, Dean Martin, dressed like a Spanish bullfighter singing a song about an Argentine girl who lives in Havana.

The first Cuban song to become a hit in the United States was “El manisero,” composed by Eliseo Grenet and known in English as “The Peanut Vendor.” This

happened in 1930 in a version of the song recorded by the Cuban bandleader Don Azpiazu (which you can find in the Díaz Ayala Music Collection, along with about 20 other recordings of the song). That same year, an ad in the *Washington Post* for a popular radio program, *The Lucky Strike Hour*, included the following: “Those who have visited Cuba, Mexico or other Latin American countries, will find this atmosphere faithfully portrayed in a novelty, ‘The Peanut Vendor,’ to be performed by Lew White, organist, tonight.” Other than the curious choice of instrument for the performance, what I find striking here is the use of the word “atmosphere.” According to the writer, Cuba, Mexico and other Latin American countries share the same “atmosphere.” Instead of a continent with two languages and about two dozen countries, Latin America becomes an “atmosphere” in which national differences evaporate.

The atmospheric point of view transforms Latin America into a continent of interchangeable parts. Atmospheric leads to denationalization, which has been the single most important feature in American perceptions of Latin America. Denationalization removes the indicia of nationality and replaces them with a crude version of what today we might call ethnicity; the Hollywood “Latin” of the 1930s and 1940s is a forebear of today’s “latino,” which is one reason perhaps why contemporary American culture has so easily assimilated the notion of the nationless “latino,” a politically-correct variation on the old stereotype.

This erasure of nationality is neatly summarized in a line from another movie, *Damn Yankees* (1958), where the Latin bombshell is a character named Lola who sings a song called “Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets.” When Lola is asked where she comes from, she says that she hails from “somewhere generally in South America.” In the

American imagination, Cuba tends to blend into that fuzzy pan-Latin “somewhere,” a locale without a location, a place that could be anyplace.

But if what is specifically Cuban fades into what is generically Latin, it also happens that what is only or primarily Cuban is sometimes taken as universally Latin. Frances Aparicio and Susana Silverman call this “tropicalization,” the tendency to reduce all of Latin America to a collection of tropical topics. This is what happens with the ubiquitous Cuban music that American advertisers use to pitch the most disparate products, from “cha-cha-Charmin” toilet paper to fast-food burritos with a mambo beat. Why Cuba rather than, say, Mexico, has played this role is an interesting question. One part of the answer may have to do with the traditional North-Eastern-centrism of American culture. When distances are measured from New York rather than from Los Angeles or El Paso, Havana is a lot closer than Mexico City. Another part of the answer may have to do with the absence of an indigenous population in Cuba. As a 1946 tourist guidebook put it, “Cuba is the only Latin American country in which the North American is not constantly reminded that we killed off all our Indians.”

Lastly, Cuba is an island, and islands lend themselves to flights of fantasy more easily than mainlands. This is why the fundamental trope in Cuban national imagery is that of the island paradise. Ever since Columbus remarked that Cuba was the most beautiful land that human eyes had ever seen, the paradisaical trope has shaped external--and, to some extent, internal--perceptions of Cuba. In particular, the epithet “tropical paradise” has been applied to Cuba endlessly, as in this familiar 1940s poster put out by the Cuban Tourist Commission:



To be sure, the paradisaical trope has been used apropos of all of the Americas, North as well as South. Columbus himself, during his third voyage, famously claimed to have reached the Biblical Garden of Eden, which he placed up from the mouth of the Orinoco river and described as having the shape of a woman's breast. But in Cuba's case, the paradisaical trope seems to have survived as metaphor long past the time when anyone took it literally.

Let me give just one glaring but not untypical example. In 1854, the Boston journalist William Henry Hurlbert published an account of his Cuban journey called, *Gan-Eden: or, Pictures of Cuba*. Hurlbert's main title is Hebrew for Garden of Eden or Garden of Delight. And although his subtitle--"Pictures of Cuba"--suggests that he intends to furnish a realistic account of what he saw in Cuba, the testimonial impetus of the narrative is repeatedly undermined by his tendency to frame what he sees in other-worldly terms.

On the same page Hurlbert can condemn the persecution of escaped slaves, the Maroons or *cimarrones*, and wax poetic about the countryside around the bay of Mariel, where some of these slaves had taken refuge, but which still looks to him like “those outer realms of Paradise over which the eyes of Adam ranged.” Hurlbert sees the Cuban countryside through Adam’s innocent eyes, which somehow elide the slave master’s persecutorial gaze. Not surprisingly, his title is borrowed from an orientalist British play, for to him Cuba is every bit as fantastic as India or Persia. As he puts it, “Within three days’ sail of our southern ports, lie scenes than which India itself offers nothing more thoroughly strange to our eyes.” This orientaling gesture colors his entire narrative: the Morro Castle at the entrance to the Havana harbor is likened to Malta and Gibraltar; the architecture of the city reminds him of Baghdad; and the Countess of Merlin, herself the author of a famous travel diary about Cuba, strikes him as “an entertaining Cuban Scheherazade.” For Hurlbert, as for many other nineteenth-century travellers, Cuba was the Orient of the Americas, as if Columbus had really reached the Indies he was searching for.

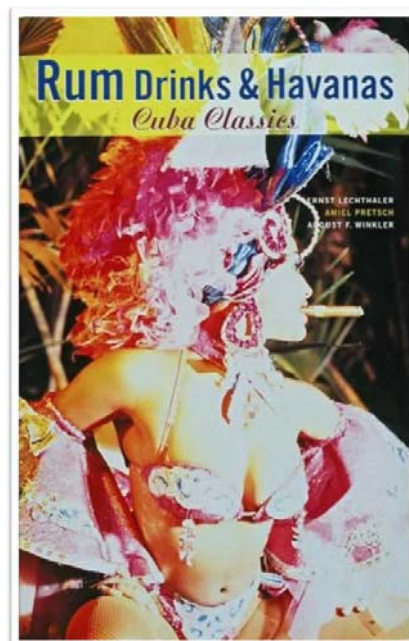
This tendency to de-historize Cuba, to see it as the Eden of the Gulf, as someone else put it, will persist into the next century. The replacement of the nineteenth-century traveller with the twentieth-century tourist perpetuates the old imagery, even as it complicates it. In the early decades of the twentieth century, and particularly in the years following World War I, Cuba remained a Garden of Delights, but with one qualification: it had now become a post-lapsarian Eden, a garden of sensual delights, an earthy as well as earthly paradise. If in the nineteenth century paradisaic imagery coexisted uneasily with the horrors of slavery, in the twentieth century the taint of slavery will give way to

the temptation of the forbidden. As one 1920s tourist guide had it, Cuba is the place where “conscience takes a holiday.” Or, as another writer says, Havana is where “bad people go to have a good time.”

The author of the last statement is an interesting character who wrote under the pen name of Reverend Golightly [G.L. Morrill], and who authored a series of anti-Cuban screeds with such titles as *Sea Sodoms*, *Rotten Republics*, and *The Curse of the Caribbean*. In *Sea Sodoms* (1921), he explains: “Too often the C in Cuban character stands for cupidity, carnality, crookedness, cabals, charlatanism, cursing, and contempt for Americans.”

In spite of Reverend Golightly’s diatribe, however, Cuba continued to attract American tourists in droves. During the Roaring Twenties more than half a million Americans visited Cuba, since the passage of Prohibition in 1920 only enhanced Cuba’s appeal as a licentious paradise, a combination greenhouse, clubhouse, and whorehouse. In the Prohibition Era, a vacation in Cuba was not a holiday but an “alcohol holiday,” as *The New Republic* phrased it in 1928. Cuba was now not only “hot” but “wet.” And here is *The New Republic*’s portrait of the typical American tourist: “As he staggers on board ship, his pockets filled with those little bottles of rum which he fondly, and vainly, imagines will escape the custom’s inspector’s eye, he looks backward as Adam toward Eden.” Giving a new twist to the paradisaical metaphor, this essay gives us a hung-over Adam and a Garden of Eden transformed into a cocktail bar. In that same year, 1928, Basil Woon published a tourist guide entitled, *When It’s Cocktail Time in Cuba*; the first chapter was called, “Have one in Havana.” And, of course, it wasn’t only cocktails that could be had in Cuba.

The view of Cuba as an earthy paradise has a couple of interesting implications. The first is that the island is gendered as female. Paradisal imagery, like nature imagery more generally, has been conventionally construed as female, as Columbus makes clear when he compares his South American Eden to a woman's breast. In the case of Cuba, the feminization is underscored by the island's reputation for sensuality. In *Gan-Eden*, Hurlbert calls Cuba a "fair Odalisque" and the "luxurious daughter of the South," where the adjective "luxurious" evokes the Spanish word for lust, *lujuria*. Describing Havana in 1922, Joseph Hergesheimer called it "a vision in blanchéd satin with fireflies in her hair." A year later, someone else likened it to "a dusky Aphrodite." The female authors of a 1941 tourist guide entitled *Havana Mañana* echo these male writers: "Havana is like a woman in love. Eager to give pleasure, she will be anything you want her to be--exciting or peaceful, gay or quiet, brilliant or tranquil. What is your fancy? She is only anxious to anticipate your desires, to charm you with her beauty." Reading this passage one wonders whether Havana is a woman in love or a rather a woman for sale, for the sentences waver uncomfortably between suggestions of courtship and prostitution. Somewhat the same thing can be said of the cover of this book published not in 1941 but in 1999:



Although the book's ostensible subject is rum and cigars, two Cuban classics, the picture on the cover suggests that the real "Cuban classic" is a scantily clad woman in a rumbera outfit with her legs spread open. (And notice where photo is cropped.)

The second implication of the paradisaical imagery is equally troubling: that Cuba, like the Garden of Eden, does not really exist. In *Gan-Eden*, Hulbert proposes that the contrast between North and South, between Cuba and America is that between reality and dream. If the North stands for "life," the South stands for "gorgeous dreaming." Half-a-century later Waldo Frank repeats the same idea: "This Habana of the Cubans is not real. [...] Habana of the Cubans is a dream." For Waldo Frank, even the Cuban *peso* is "the dream-like counterfeit of money." For his part, Basil Thompson combines the erotic and the fantastic by likening Havana to a "ghostly bride." And in the 1950s, in the movie musical *Guys and Dolls* (1955), Marlon Brando says that Cuba is "a make-believe island."

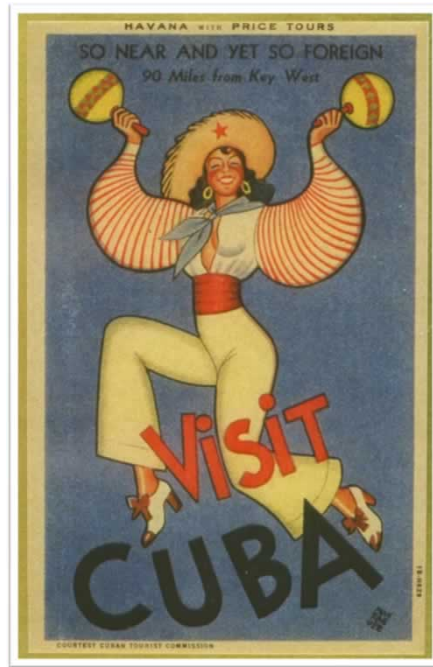
Of course, the notion that Cuba is a fairy land, a fantasy island, is not restricted to the century and a half before the Cuban Revolution. If anything, the island's inaccessibility since the early 1960s has only perpetuated this sense of unreality, isolation doing the work of distance. Although Cuba itself changed radically after 1959, the stereotypes have not. Some years ago Wendy Gimbel published a book about Nati Revuelta, the socialite who was Fidel Castro's mistress in the 1950s, with the title *Havana Dreams* (1998). Predictably, *The New York Times* review of Gimbel's book picked up on the dreamy title. Under the heading "Enchanted Island," the reviewer

discusses what she calls “Cuba’s weird destiny as a glittering illusion,” concluding, “How, after all, can one think of Cuba without dreaming about it?”

Another example: a few years ago Revlon came out with what it described as “a hypnotic new fragrance for men.” It was called “Havana.” The slogan of the promotional campaign said that Havana was “atmosphere rather than place.” But if Havana is atmosphere rather than place, if the essence of Havana is an essence, a scent, it’s everywhere in general and nowhere in particular. Atmospheric Latin Americanism not only blurs national differences, it wipes countries off the map. Those Cubans who live in present-day Havana know full well that Havana is a place, and that the scents that emanate from the rubble and decay are more likely to be noxious than hypnotic.

Cuba’s caricature as a paradise and its concomitant evaporation into perfumed air emerge from the operations of exoticism. As such, they are certainly not unique to Cuba. The Orient of the nineteenth-century British play that inspired Hurlbert’s title is as much a fiction as the Cuba of tourist guides. And the erotization of Cuba is matched by a similar erotization in Orientalist discourse, where the stereotypes of the lascivious Arab and the beguiling Odalisque play roles analogous to that of the Latin Lover and Latin Bombshell. What does make the Cuban exotic unique, from the North American perspective at least, is that--unlike the Orient for the British--this garden of earthy delights is right next door. Etymologically the exotic is what lies outside--outside our reach, outside our customs, outside the compass of our daily experience. But Cuba is not exotic in this sense. Many times over the last two centuries Cuba seemed to many Americans a near-possession or “natural appendage,” as John Quincy Adams put it. In American imagery about Cuba, the foreign and the familiar coalesce; Cuba is not outside

but beside. In the 1930s and 40s Cuba's proximity was exploited by the Cuban Tourist Commission with the slogan, "So near and yet so foreign," as in another familiar image, which was drawn by the great Cuban caricaturist Conrado Massaguer:



Cuba is foreign, but not far, or only far enough to be foreign. And notice the resemblance between this image and the rumbera of Cuba Classics. This is a General Audience version of the other one, but in its own way is just as suggestive: décolletage, legs spread open, and right under her crotch, which is placed in the exact middle of the poster, the words, "Visit Cuba." And it just so happens that the "V" in "Visit" is repeated in the shape of the woman's crotch.

If for Columbus the earthly paradise was a breast, this poster pictures it as an even more intimate part of woman's anatomy. This spread-legged pose will be used over and over in American iconography about Cuba. One more example, from the record cover of a 1950s lp by Dámaso Pérez Prado, "el rey del mambo."



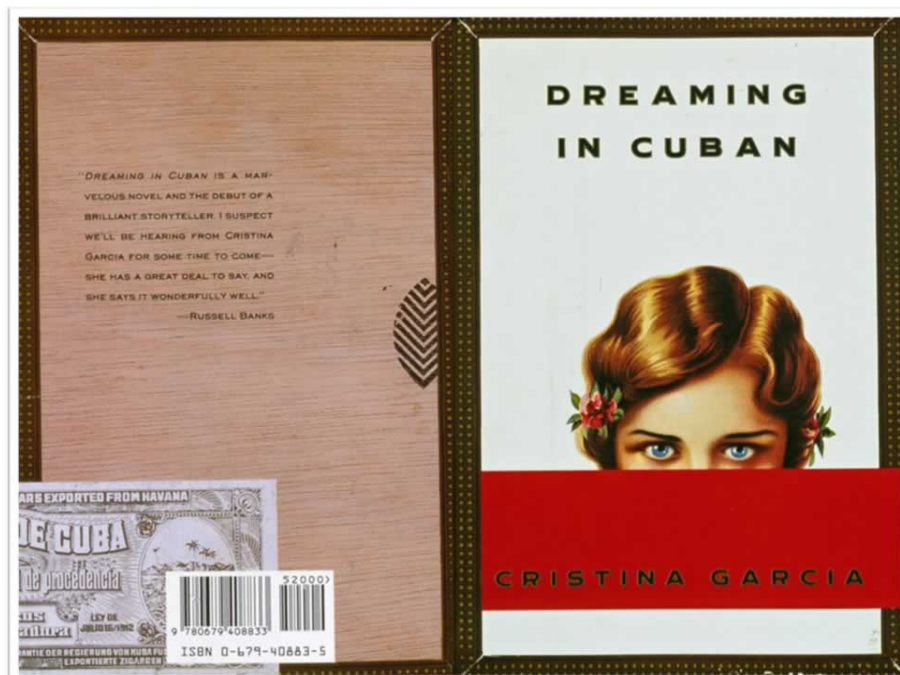
The catchy phrase “So Near Yet So Foreign” was picked up by the authors of *Havana Mañana*, who use it as the title of a chapter where, after describing all of the strange things about Cuba--from rum cocktails to Sunday cockfights—they conclude: “It seems incredible that this alien way of life has continued placidly so near our bustling American shores and yet so unchanged by them. Havana is two hours by plane from the U.S.A.; but it is so remote from the American pattern of living, it could well be on another planet.”

According to Victor Segalen’s classic definition, exoticism is the feeling that diversity stirs in us. But Cuban exoticism deprives diversity of one of its usual conditions, distance. Hurlbert writes: “So it seems to me, that to have reached this stately panorama of Havana, we must have traversed many miles of longitude instead of a few degrees of latitude.” Another nineteenth-century American traveller, Maturin Ballou, resorts to a politically charged idiom to make the same point: “[Cuba] is but a long cannon shot off our southern coast, yet once upon its soil the stranger seems to have been transported to another part of the globe.”

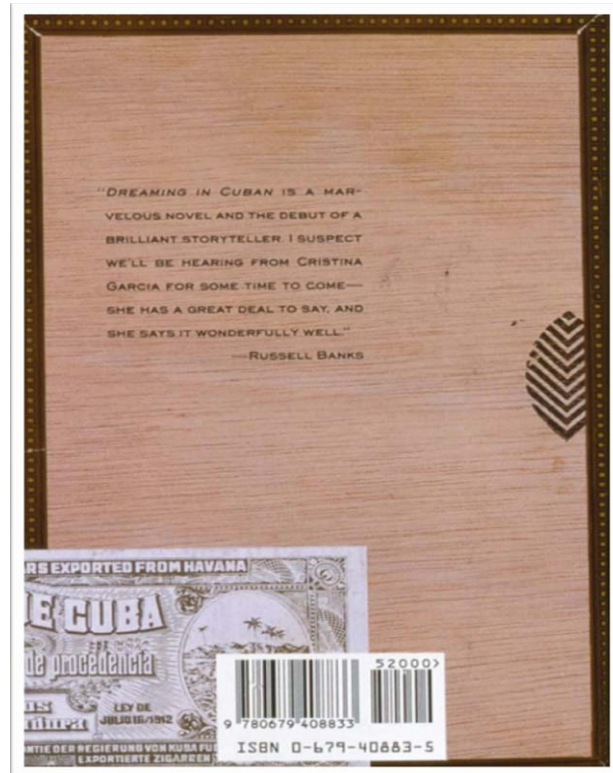
Detaching the foreign from the faraway, diversity from distance, planet Cuba embodies what one might call a soft exoticism. It offered the traveler or the tourist

pleasure without peril, adventure without surprises. The title of Basil Woon's tourist guide, *When It's Cocktail Time in Cuba*, sends two complementary messages: in Cuba you can do what you can't do in America--drink to your heart's content; and yet in Cuba intemperance comes under the aegis of an eminently American custom, cocktail time. Even as the book insists that the island's appeal lies in what it calls its "utter foreignness," it defangs this foreignness by making it follow American schedules. During the first half of the twentieth century Cuba was so familiar that its very name seemed to contain an American greeting, as in the title of one of Irving Berlin's songs: "See You in C-U-B-A." Predictably, the song began: "Not so far from here / There's a very lively atmosphere / Everybody's going there this year." Once again, Cuba is not a country, it's an atmosphere, a lively atmosphere, one familiar to many Americans, in fact, to "everybody." And yet here too familiarity is laced with foreignness, for otherwise it would not be necessary to spell out the country's name. Cuba remains close but alien, "so near and yet so foreign."

More recently, the cover of Cristina Garcia's well-known novel, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), offers another example of soft exoticism.



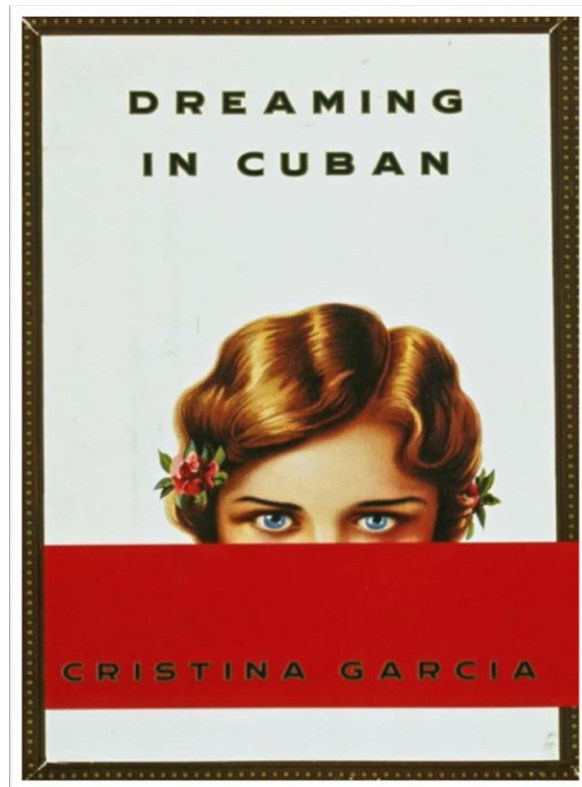
As you can see, the novel's dust jacket simulates a box of cigars. Look more closely at the back cover:



The seal on the back of the box says, in large letters, “De Cuba,” and in smaller print, “Cigars Exported from Havana.” Taking the book in hand, the potential reader harbors the illusion that he or she is holding a genuinely Cuban product, a box of Havanas--atmosphere rather than place. Moreover, this product’s value is enhanced by the discreet charm of the illegal, for this box of Havanas somehow managed to slip the US embargo, and did it in the Fall of 1992, when the novel was first published, which happened to be a few months after the United States Congress passed the Cuban Democracy Act tightening the American boycott on Cuban goods. In order to get around

the embargo all you have to do is walk into your neighborhood Barnes & Noble and purchase García's book-box, another "Cuban classic."

And look at the girl that appears on the front cover:



With softly curled hair and flowers behind her ears, her retro look suggests that she is part of the *marquilla* or label that cigar makers use to identify their brand, which often featured pretty female faces. Like this one:



With eyes wide open, this girl stares at the reader with an equivocal expression: is it surprise, apprehension, desire? What's on her mind? What does this young woman want? The red flowers in her hair--a recurring motif in cigar labels--introduce a note of coquetry or flirtatiousness, a suggestion underscored by the red stripe that covers her face, somewhat like a veil. Echoing the feminized Havana of the guidebooks, the girl on the cover is another "fair Odalisque" who addresses an invitation to the novel's consumer perhaps not essentially different from that of other illustrations I have shown you.

Or consider, to give one last example, the promotional campaign for a rum-based drink called "Martí Mojito," a concoction that was born in Cuba but is made in the USA.



Although this ad claims that Martí Mojito embodies "the soul of Cuba," it focuses not on the soul but on the bodies of Cuba, for most of the images display young, attractive, semi-naked Cuban bodies, male and female--an obvious reference to the sexual tourism that has become so prevalent in Cuba. Martí Mojito offers a vicarious erotic thrill, sexual tourism in a bottle. In the slogan "The Revolution will start at Happy Hour" there is a pun on the word "Revolution," which here refers to sexual rather than political

liberation. A different ad for the same product performed the same depoliticizing operation, but more offensively: “The leaders of this Revolution are behind bars.” And yet, under José Martí’s mug, the label says “auténtico,” accent and all.

When considering these images--the Martí Mojito, the book cover, the tourist posters--it becomes obvious that exoticism says as much about the exoticizing subject as about the exoticized object. As René Wellek remarked years ago, national images are mostly national illusions: one country’s exercise in wishful thinking about another. National imagery implicates two nations, the beholder nation and the nation beheld. In other words, exoticism is a mode of appropriation that arises as much from the context in which the object is placed as from the attributes of the object. In this respect, the “outsideness” of the exoticism applies to the exoticized object, which becomes alienated from itself.

In 1940 the great Cuban polymath Fernando Ortiz coined the term *cubanía* to name the essence of being Cuban. What I have been discussing is not *cubanía* but *cubanismo*, not Cubanness but Cubanism. Unlike *cubanía*, *cubanismo* emerges from the witting or unwitting collaboration between the exoticizing subject and exoticized object. North-American Cubanism is a screen onto which American culture projects its fears and fantasies: the anxieties about miscegenation, the chafing at the legacy of puritanism, its expansive libido.

It must be said, however, that Cubans inside and outside the island have sometimes been complicit in this process. Witness Ricky Ricardo, with his touseled hair, loose tongue and happy feet. Or witness the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon of the 1990s, one of whose byproducts was a CD of Cuban music called *Cubanismo*. In this

instance, exoticization entails self-exotization, as American perceptions of Cuba feed into the *ombliguismo* or Cuban exceptionalism that scholars and pundits have talked about, and of which my talk may be another example.

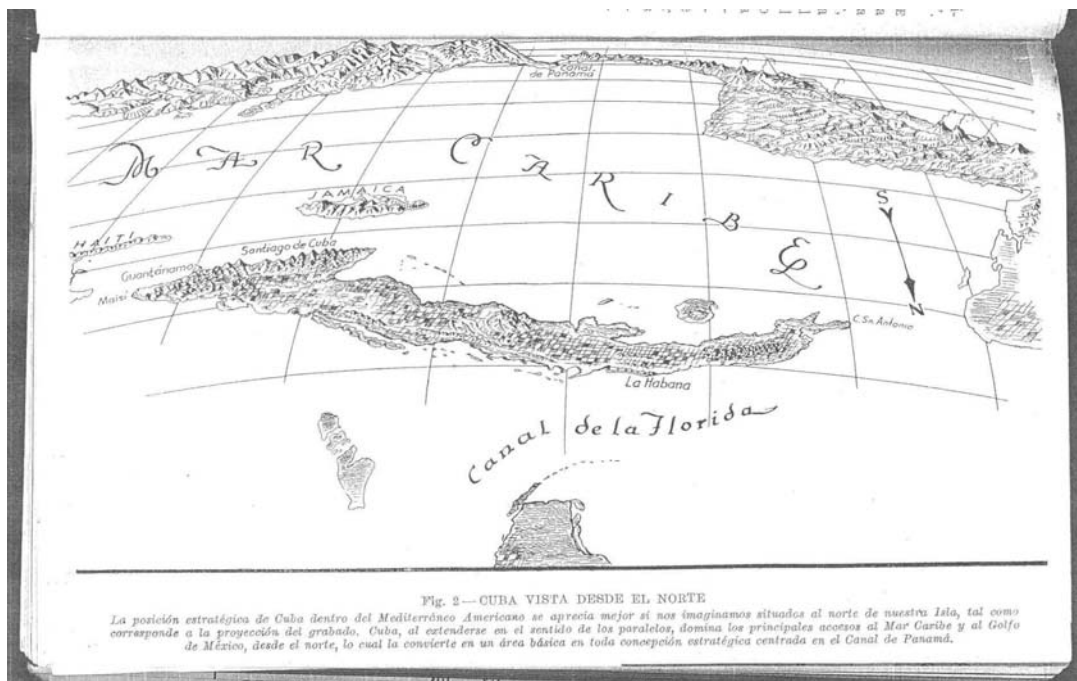
Back in the 1950s, Cuban children used to learn geography from a textbook by Leví Marrero. This is the first illustration in Marrero's *Geografía de Cuba*:



As you can see, the illustration shows a map of the world with Cuba at its center. The caption reads, “El mundo alrededor de Cuba,” the world around Cuba. And that is what Cubans sometimes tend to think, that the world revolves around us. This is what lies behind Ricky Ricardo’s smart-alecky comeback to Mr. Livermore, “I’m Cuban, what your excuse?” Being Cuban is Ricky’s all-purpose excuse, his unflinching if not infallible

explanation for whatever eccentricities or willfulness he might display. A line from a song by Willie Chirino sums up Cuban exceptionalism in four words: *Como Cuba, ni Cuba*. Like Cuba, not even Cuba. That is, Cuba is exceptional even with regard to itself. If islands are exceptions to the rule of continents, Cuba is an exception to an exception, an incontinent rule unto itself.

Interestingly, the second illustration in the Leví Marrero's geography textbook is the following:



The caption says: “Cuba vista desde el norte.” “Cuban seen from the North.” Of course, in Cuban slang “el norte,” “the North,” is the United States. So that the caption could be translated: “Cuba Seen From the United States.”

There is something a little ominous in the perspective of this map, which views Cuba from an elevated point somewhere in the middle of the United States as if the island were not only being watched but watched over. Prophetically, this map (which dates from

the 1950s) includes the southern tip of Florida, as if that part of the United States did not belong to “the North”—a harbinger of things and people to come. A harbinger of us.

What I have done in the course of my remarks is to survey, as this map surveys, what “el norte” sees when it looks south. After almost fifty years of looking away from Cuba, the United States may soon be forced to turn its gaze toward the south once again. That centuries-long love-hate relationship to which I alluded at the beginning may soon begin a new chapter. When this happens, the question is whether Cuba will continue to be imagined as a paradise next-door, or whether the temptation to dream in Cuban will yield to a sober, clear-eyed perception of the island’s history, its people and its culture.

Let me finish by telling you what happens in the *I Love Lucy* episode with which I opened. After a few more funny scenes where Mr. Livermore attempts to improve Ricky’s English, the lessons come to an unexpected conclusion. Instead of correcting Ricky’s accent, Mr. Livermore ends up speaking English like Ricky, with a thick Cuban accent, and in the last scene of the episode he breaks into a spirited rendition of “Babalú,” Ricky’s signature song.



Accepting the inevitable, Lucy is graceful in defeat: “Ok, ok,” she says, interrupting Livermore’s awful singing, “it was a battle of the accents and Mr. Livermore lost.”

Let’s hope that in the future the only battles between Cubans and Americans, and between Cubans and Cubans, will be a battle of the accents. If that happens, everybody wins.

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