

Preface to the Second Edition

The Facts of Life on the Hyphen

I knew I was on to something when, shortly after this book's original publication, *Newsweek* used the title of one of the chapters, "The Desi Chain," for an article on the increasing impact of Latinos on Anglo-American culture. In the years since, *Life on the Hyphen* has been quoted, imitated, praised, and attacked. It is the criticisms that have interested me most of all, because I agree with some of them, particularly the objection that the book was too sanguine in its description of the dynamics of cultural contact. Playing with words, I say in the Introduction that Cuban-American culture is defined by collusion rather than collision. I know now—and I knew then—that my celebration of cultural and linguistic hybridity gave short shrift to the human costs of collusion (hyphens hurt). Although I hinted at these costs by closing the book with a somber poem whose original title had been "Bilingual Blues," at the time I was content to look the other way and keep my mind on the mambo: *abre cuta güiri mambo*, as the Cuban soneros used to say. And I still am.

Even the driest, most lifeless scholarly monograph has a personal backstory. Mine is this: *Life on the Hyphen* was a two-hundred-page valentine to Mary Anne Pérez Firmat, whom I had just married when I was beginning to research the book. The idea for the title we came up with together during an afternoon of sunbathing and brainstorming at the Duke University faculty club. I wrote the book for her and for me, to make sense of our life together. Hence the pride of place given to the *I Love Lucy* show, the great Cuban-American love story. Almost two decades later, still married to Mary Anne, I

continue to believe that the healthiest way to deal with the puzzles and adversities of a divided life is, in the words of Irving Berlin, to face the music and dance. Not as young as I used to be, there are times when my *menéito* feels more like a limp. But I am still dancing. Cuban wisdom: “A mí que me quiten lo bailao.” Which, roughly but gently translated into the words of another American songwriter, means: “They can’t take that away from me.”

This is not to say, however, that the costs of a life on the hyphen do not become more evident with the passing of time. For many Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits, the death of Celia Cruz in July 2003 signaled the end of an era, and not just musically. Before and after becoming the Queen of Salsa, Celia was La Guarachera de Oriente, probably the most recognizable Cuban exile in the world. When Celia left Cuba in 1959, she was in her mid-thirties; by the time she died in her home in Fort Lee, New Jersey, she had lived more than half of her life in exile. In one of the last songs she recorded, “Por si acaso no regreso” (In Case I Don’t Return), she spoke about the sorrow of dying far from her homeland. When she left Cuba, she says, she was certain that she would return at any moment; as the end of her life approaches, she realizes that she’s never going to.

Celia Cruz is one of several hundred thousands Cuban exiles who staked their lives on a return that didn’t take place, among them the musicians who were kind enough to share with me their knowledge of Cuban music: Rolando Laserie, René Touzet, Rosendo Rosell, Cachao. Their death—the passing of the first generation—not only has diminished those of us who remain, but has changed our place in the community of exiles. Although one tends to think of generational location as fixed—once a one-and-a-

halfer, always a one-and-a-half—this is not entirely true. When the first generation moves on, one-and-a-halfers move up; we become first generation—if not chronologically, existentially. Having spent our lives wedged between vintage Cubans and recent Americans—our parents and our children—we realize that we are now the only Cubans in the room, the only ones who remember. Having inherited our elders’ recollections of Cuba, we have now to perpetuate their memories as well as their memory. Having built a bridge to America—the hyphen—we have now the obligation to walk it back to its origins in old Cuba. A hyphen signifies connection, continuity. When I was writing this book, it seemed crucial to extend the hyphen in the direction of America. Now it seems more important to make sure it still reaches back to Cuba.

In some respects, we find ourselves in the situation of people who, in the striking phrase of poet Ricardo Pau-Llosa, have outlived their nation. Twenty years ago, it still made some sense to speak of *La Cuba de ayer*, Yesterday’s Cuba. Today it doesn’t, since the phrase refers to Cuba before 1959, a country that fewer and fewer Cubans and Cuban Americans have lived in (about two thirds of Cubans on the island were born after January 1, 1959). Hyphenation can mean different things: having American-born children; marrying an American man or woman; using the English language. But fundamentally it names a spiritual bilocation, the sense of being in two places at once, or of living in one while residing in another. That one of those places no longer exists only intensifies the desire to inhabit it; the demon of discontinuity must be exorcised.

Some time ago, when I was translating into Spanish something that I had written originally in English, I came across the phrase, “the facts of life.” After scrolling my mental thesaurus for a while and not coming up with anything that sounded like Spanish,

I googled around until I found the phrase. It turns out that in Spanish the facts of life are called *los misterios de la vida*, the mysteries of life. Think about it: the same biological drives that for the English-speaking world are plain and simple facts, for Spanish-speakers are nothing less than enigmas, conundrums, mysteries. It seems to me that for those of us who grow up and grow old straddling two cultures, those of us who regard both English and Spanish as native languages, the world often appears as an odd coupling of mystery and fact, of things that reassure us and things that rattle us, of events that make us settle and events that make us sink, of *destino*, which means destiny, and *desatino*, which means mistake. The merging of *destino* and *desatino*, of vocation and equivocation, is what *Life on the Hyphen*—book and title—attempts to convey.

Although I have endeavoured to preserve the integrity of the first edition, I have updated or supplemented the text when not doing so seemed misleading. I have also included new material. In the first edition, the analysis of Cuban American literature was limited to a discussion of Oscar Hijuelos and José Kozer, who set the outer borders of the one-a-half-generation. Except in passing, I did not discuss writers whose work illustrates more directly the one-and-a-half-generation's outlook. I have corrected this omission with an additional chapter, "The Spell of the Hyphen," that discusses writers and artists who create from the hyphen, even if it sometimes resembles a scar or a stretch mark. The chapter is preceded by an additional mambo, "El mago de la ñ y el acento" (The magician of the ñ and the accent), an homage to the man who made it possible for me to keep my accent (if not lose my stress), and followed by an epilogue in bolero time.

Mambo No. 1: Lost in Translation

Take the phrase literally. Turn the commonplace into a place. Try to imagine where one ends up if one gets lost in translation. When I try to visualize such a place, I see myself, on a given Saturday afternoon, in the summer, somewhere in Miami. Since I'm thirsty, I go into a store called Love Juices, which specializes in nothing more salacious or salubrious than milk shakes made from tropical fruits. Having quenched my thirst, I head for a boutique called Mr. Trapus, whose name—*trapo*—is actually the Spanish word for an old rag. Undaunted by the consumerist frenzy that has possessed me, I enter another store called Cachi Bachi—a name that, in spite of its chichi sound, is a slang word for junk, *cachivache*. And then for dinner I go to the Versailles of Eighth Street, a restaurant where I feast on something called Tropical Soup, the American version of the traditional Cuban stew, *ajiaco*. My desert is also tropical, Tropical Snow, which is Miamian for *arroz con leche*; and to finish off the meal, of course, I sip some Cuban-American espresso (don't go home without it). In this way I spend my entire afternoon lost in translation—and loving every minute. Translation takes you to a place where cultures divide to conga. My effort in this book is to show you the way to such a place. Step lightly, and enter at your own risk. Who knows, you might just end up becoming the missing link in the Desi Chain.

Mambo No. 5: Mirror, Mirror

One of the landmarks of Cuban Miami is a restaurant called Versailles, which has been located on Eighth Street and Thirty-fifth Avenue for many years. Just about the only thing Versailles shares with its French namesake is the mirrors on the walls. One goes to the Versailles not only to be seen, but to be multiplied. This quaint, kitschy, noisy restaurant that serves basic Cuban food is a paradise for the self-absorbed: the Nirvana of Little Havana. Because of the bright lights, even the windows reflect. The Versailles is a Cuban panoptikon: you can lunch, but you can't hide. Who goes there wants to be the stuff of visions. Who goes there wants to make a spectacle of himself (or herself). All the *ajiaco* you can eat and all of the jewelry you can wear multiplied by the number of reflecting planes – and to top it off, a waitress who calls you *mi vida*.

Across the street at La Carreta, another popular restaurant, the food is the same (both establishments are owned by the same man) but the feel is different. Instead of mirrors, La Carreta has booths. There you can ensconce yourself in a booth and not be faced with multiple images of yourself. But at the Versailles there is no choice but to bask in self-reflective glory.

For years I have harbored the fantasy that those mirrors retain the blurred image of everyone who has paraded before them. I think the mirrors have a memory, as when one turns off the TV and the shadowy figures remain on the screen. Every Cuban who has lived or set foot in Miami over the last three decades has, at one time or another, seen himself reflected on those shiny surfaces. It's no coincidence that the Versailles sits only two blocks away from the Woodlawn Cemetery, which contains the remains of many Cuban notables, including Desi Arnaz's father, whose remains occupy a niche right above Gerardo Machado's. Has anybody ever counted the number of Cubans who had *died* in Miami? Miami is a Cuban city not only because of the numbers of Cubans who

live there but also because of the number who have died there. The living can always move away; it's the dead who are a city's permanent residents, for once they stop living there, they never stop living there.

The Versailles is a glistening mausoleum. The history of Little Havana – tragic, comic, tragic-comic – is written on those spectacular specular walls. This may have been why, when the mirrors came down in 1991, there was such an uproar that some of them had to be put back. When the time comes for me to pay for my last *ajiacó*, I intend to disappear into one of the mirrors (I would prefer the one on the right, just above the espresso machine). My idea of immortality is to become a mirror image at the Versailles.

Mambo No. 7: El mago de la ñ y el acento

Back in the days when typewriters ruled the world, when the Cuban-American hyphen was no more than hesitant *puntos suspensivos* (in English, ellipsis), it was impossible to find a Remington or a Smith-Corona in Miami that allowed one to generate characters and diacritics used in Spanish: inverted exclamation and question marks, the acute accent over vowels, and the tilde over the ñ. Their absence was noticed especially at New Year's, when the typical greeting, Feliz Año Nuevo, acquired a festive scatological underside: Feliz Ano Nuevo. But it wasn't long before an enterprising exile started a business that specialized in *cubano*-sizing your typewriter. He advertised himself as "El mago de la ñ y el acento" (The magician of the ñ and the accent).

At the time it did seem like an act of magic to be able to make an ñ or put an accent on your last name. Today, half a century later, macros and number key pads have removed the foreignness of diacritics, those naturalized citizens of the American keyboard.

Somewhat the same thing has happened to one-and-a-halfers. Magicians of the ñ and the accent, they quickly learned how to reproduce Cuban characters in America, and they have bequeathed the trick to their children and grandchildren, who may or may not know where to put the accents, but who can certainly spot an Ano Nuevo when they see one.