EXILE IN GLOBAL LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Homes Found and Lost

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DREAMERS AND LIFERS

Exile Terminable and Interminable

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In *An Affair to Remember*, the 1957 movie starring Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr, Nickie Ferrante (Grant) invites Terry McKay (Kerr) to accompany him to visit his grandmother Janou (Cathleen Nesbitt), who lives in a hilltop villa in a seaside town in the Mediterranean. Janou, a widow, is 82 years old. Her husband is buried behind the chapel where she spends part of her days. Her only company is a collie named Fidéle and André, a lively gardener with seven daughters.

Years have gone by since she has seen her grandson and when he appears she melts with gratitude. During the visit, which takes up about 20 minutes of running time, the three characters interact with one another in different combinations. After Nickie introduces Terry to his grandmother, Terry goes into the chapel while Janou and Nickie talk by themselves; then Janou goes inside to make tea and Nickie and Terry kneel together in the chapel; when Nickie goes over to see the gardener's family, Terry and Janou have a *tête-à-tête* over tea. Finally, the three of them get back together in the living room, furnished with objects that Janou's husband collected. This cinematic equivalent of musical chairs provides a more nuanced view of the protagonists. Nickie is not only the notorious "big dame hunter" of the gossip columnists, but also a loving and artistically gifted grandson. Terry is not only the fast-living fiancée of an American millionaire, but also someone who longs for a quiet, domestic life. When she sings along as Janou plays the movie's theme on the piano, we understand that underneath the high-fashion gowns and glamorous lifestyle, she is not unlike Janou. When Nickie gives Janou the portrait he painted of his grandfather, we understand that there is more to him than champagne cocktails.

The title of the movie refers to the shipboard romance and its aftermath, but what happens during the five-hour stopover at Villefranche-sur-Mer is also an affair to remember. Terry says that the visit was "the most memorable day of my

life"; for his part, Nickie returns to the villa after Janou's death and relives the visit, and at the end of the movie, he gives Janou's shawl to Terry with the words, "She wanted you to have it, remember?" Peter Bogdanovich has remarked that *An Affair to Remember* divides into two parts: the first is funny, the second is sad (Bogdanovich). What joins the two parts, the bridge between the silly and the serious, is the visit. Only after they return from seeing Janou do Nickie and Terry realize that their lives have "changed course." When Nickie says this, he does not mean simply that they intend to drop their current partners; their way of life has also changed. He will try to make a living as a painter; she will break her engagement and move out of the Park Avenue penthouse. If the pink champagne they drink on the ship represents a life that is "bright and bubbly" (as Nickie says), the tea at Janou's stands for the alternative: less bubbly, less bright, but less vapid. As Nickie and Terry are leaving, Janou takes a few steps outside and stops. She says: "This is as far as I go. This is the boundary of my small world." A final scene in the script that did not make the finished film confirms that the change of course leads back to Villefranche-sur-Mer: after their wedding, Nickie carries Terry across the threshold into his grandmother's house (Hayes). Portrayed or implied, the couple's final destination is Janou's small world.

I'm not 82 years old, can't play the piano, and I live in a chapel-less two-story transitional in the suburbs of the New South, not in a villa on a *hill* (even if my town is called Chapel Hill), but I can't help identifying with Janou. Not only identifying but, unlikely as it may seem, looking up to, trying to learn from her how to meet the twin challenges of old age and long exile. I envy Janou's settled acceptance of finality. I envy that she has no desire to be elsewhere. I envy the stability of her small world. Looking out from my porch, I would like to be able to say, without anger or regret, "This is as far as I go."

The life of an exile, or at least of this exile—I should make clear at the outset that, even if at times I speak impersonally, it's the arc of my own life that I trace—spans three roughly proportional phases. The early phase is defined by what Philip Larkin in a well-known poem called "habits of expectancy" (Larkin 53), which for the exile focus on return to the homeland. Larkin terms such habits "bad," but the exile's expectation of going home mitigates the pain and confusion of displacement. The recent exile not only expects to return, he expects to return right away. Then the time in exile will have seemed a mirage and his life will resume its normal course. The second stage is marked by a surge in nostalgia and a dip in expectancy. Return may still be possible, but it no longer appears imminent. As compensation, exile has come to seem normal: a way of life rather than a way station. You are no longer an exiled Cuban, you are a Cuban exile; the qualifier is now the substantive. Not only have you changed, your homeland has also changed. As a result, nostalgia—the evocation of life before exile—becomes your principal mode of access to the place you left behind. When this happens, exile turns into a chronic condition: a way of being in the world inseparable from the experience of temporality. The impossibility of return, on the one hand, and the

exhaustion of nostalgia, on the other, introduce the last stage. It is here that Janou's example becomes relevant.

I arrived in the United States with my parents and siblings in October 1960. I was 11 years old. Technically we were "parolees," the term used for political exiles, but everyone called us "refugees." What we were taking refuge from was the Cuban Revolution, which two weeks earlier had expropriated my family's food-wholesaling business. Because we had traveled to the United States before, I did not know that we were going into exile. I assumed that we were going on vacation. It was not until a few weeks later, when we left the hotel and moved into a duplex, that I realized that this trip was different. The morning we boarded the ferry for Key West was the last time I set eyes on Havana. I have not gone back to Cuba, and chances are that I never will.

For the first two decades, being an exile meant cultivating habits of expectancy. Our years were lived in the mode of the interim (the necessary word for this state exists only in Spanish: *interinidad*), as a hiatus between departure and return. Hence, the New Year's Eve toast: "El año que viene estamos en Cuba" (Next year in Cuba) (Pérez Firmat, *Next Year in Cuba* 10). Given the island's turbulent history, our optimism was not unfounded. The rule of other Cuban dictators, including Fidel Castro's predecessor, Fulgencio Batista, had not lasted more than a few years. For myself personally, going back to Cuba was also not unrealistic. Even after two decades in exile, I had not developed strong ties to the United States. My attachment was to Cuban Miami, which I viewed as a bridge to the island. Unlike the immigrant, I did not come to the United States to start a new life. (My old one was good enough.) I came to wait. As a young man I was a dreamer, but my dream was returning to Cuba.

By the time I was 40, things had changed. I no longer lived among Cubans. I had American-born children. I was married to an American woman. Occasionally I still fantasized about returning to Cuba, but my thoughts typically centered on the issues faced by middle-aged men and women: family, finances, career. When I visited Miami, which I often did, my father would take me to lunch at a restaurant called La Habana Vieja, Old Havana. At some point between the Chivas and the espresso, he would ask whether, when Castro fell (that's how we spoke in those days: *cuando se caiga Fidel*), I would return to Cuba to work in the family business. I said I would, though I do not think I meant it. I am not sure that he meant it himself, because by then he was well into his seventh decade and in no condition to start all over. My father was also a dreamer, but his dream accompanied him until he died.

I still regarded myself as an exile, but with a difference: those early habits of expectancy had been replaced by exile as habit. I have wondered whether it would have been easier to adopt a different attitude had I left Cuba voluntarily. I didn't want to leave, and once here I didn't want to stay, not for political reasons but for an 11-year-old's reasons: I had just made my school's baseball team. (My Cuban baseball career would have been short-lived, however, because the

Catholic school I attended was shut down by the government a few months later.) But I do not recall questioning my parents' decision. Because we were staunchly anti-Castro, exile seemed inevitable. I also have never regretted leaving. Nonetheless, had I been old enough to choose, it may have been easier to regard myself as an immigrant, someone who comes to stay. By the time in my early teens that I became truly self-conscious, that is, by the time I began to think of myself as an autonomous individual, bound but not defined by my parents' view of me, I was already living in Miami. I know myself best as an exile. It seems as much an unchangeable part of my makeup as my height or the color of my eyes.

What took the place of the dream of return was writing and teaching about Cuba. During this period, I liked to distinguish between *patria* and *país*, homeland and country. A country was a geographical and political reality, a homeland was a spiritual one (Pérez Firmat, *My Own Private Cuba* 229–37). In the first phase of exile, *patria* and *país* are one. The exile has no country but his homeland. In the second phase, *patria* and *país* drift apart. Sometime in the 1990s I convinced myself that Cuba remained my *patria* even though it was no longer my *país*. After 40 years of exile, the American man I became had grown away from the Cuban boy I had been. Then also, too many Cubans who had lived to see the end of the Revolution did not live to see the end of the Revolution. Whatever happens in Cuba, I told myself, will have happened too late.

If I no longer could—or wanted to—claim Cuba as my *país*, I could still inhabit it as my *patria* by writing and teaching about its literature, its music, its language. As *patria*, Cuba was a personal possession, an intimate passion, a country I could not leave or lose. In some measure my idea of *patria* evoked pre-Castro Cuba, the country that older generations of exiles kept alive in their memories; but it was also my own private Cuba: a Cuba without Cubans, or rather, with a population of one: myself. In a short story entitled "The Swimmers," F. Scott Fitzgerald has a character say: "France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter. . . . It was a willingness of the heart." I took the phrase as a definition not of America but of Cuba. Of all the terms that might be applied to someone like me—parolee, refugee, exile, émigré, expatriate—the only one I did not answer to was the last. As a homeland for one, my *patria* stayed with me wherever I went.

This state of affairs lasted until recently. Now that I am as old as my father was when we would patronize La Habana Vieja, I find I'm having to take new coordinates to locate myself as an exile. The distinction between homeland and country does not convince or comfort me as it once did. It may be that *patria* and *país* have drifted so far apart that the tether between them has snapped. The prospect of return, which in my middle years was unlikely but possible, is out of the question. I have lived in the United States so long that a return to Cuba would amount to a second exile.

I am aware that many others in situations like mine have opted to make a virtue of displacement by embracing diasporism, cosmopolitism, the Plutarchian view that the same sun shines on exile and nonexile alike. For this attitude Claudio

Guillén coined the term "counter-exile," which he defined as "an imaginative response often characterized by a tendency toward integration, increasingly broad vistas or universalism" (Guillén 272). My homing instincts are too strong, my range of vision is too narrow, my insularism too ingrained for me to adopt this approach. In Spanish the word for well-being is *bienestar*; like the English equivalent, it is a compound: *bien-estar*. What sets it apart is that *estar* denotes location, not just "being" but "being-in-place." The experience of *bienestar* arises from the intimacy of person and place, a closeness grounded in language, culture, and personal and family history. *Bienestar* requires that you know your place, a knowledge that a transient cannot achieve. Little does it matter that the sun that shines on you shines on everybody if the land it illuminates is not your own.

Something else has happened, unexpectedly. I have developed an aversion to things Cuban. I have even stopped teaching my class on Cuban literature, which had always been my favorite. The last few times I taught it I found it wrenching to spend 14 weeks thinking and talking about Cuba. Every session became a pain pill, the kind that creates rather than alleviates discomfort. For similar reasons, I listen to Cuban music less often than I used to, and I no longer try to keep up with what Cubans here or on the island are writing (a dereliction of duty, given my profession). I still enjoy spending a couple of weeks among Cubans in Miami every summer, though that too generates mixed feelings. Because two generations of my family have passed away in exile, driving around our old haunts I sometimes think that I am touring a cemetery. But my strongest aversion is to current-day Cuba. It is as if my *patria* had come full circle and reunited with a *país* with which I want nothing to do.

In its initial phases, the longing of the exile has a concrete goal, a point in space: his homeland. In its third or terminal phase, the exile's longing has lost its point. If expectancy defines the first stage of exile, and a permanent feeling of transience defines the second, the third stage is marked by a detachment that borders on disaffection, and a disaffection that borders on disavowal. It may be that the exile has become an ex-pat.

Disaffection is a paradoxical word: literally the removal of affect, psychic retreat, it also expresses hostility toward whatever one is disaffected from. For the chronic exile, disaffection, hostile indifference, poisons his relation to the country of his birth, no longer his homeland. I once heard a writer friend describe herself as a "professional Cuban." She meant that Cuba was the matter of her books, though it did not have a lot to do with her life. In my case writing about things Cuban has taken up a large part of my career, but only because I was one of those Cuban things I wrote about. So when I acknowledge my disaffection toward Cuba, a feeling rooted in politics but branching out into the culture and the society that 60 years of unfreedom have produced, I find myself wishing that I could white out "La Habana" from my birth certificate. Then the title of one of Almodóvar's movies pops into my head: *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (What have I done to deserve this?)

As a species of misery, exile loves company. Refugees take refuge in one another. The company of other exiles anaesthetizes, creates a kind of buffer that

insulates us from history. When I lived in Miami and for years afterward, nearly all the Cubans I knew were exiles. Most Cubans alive today were born after 1959. The majority of native-born Cubans living in the United States arrived in the last 30 years and do not think of themselves as exiles. I belong to an organization that goes by the acronym NACAE: National Association of Cuban American Educators. Founded in 1990, it drew its membership from Cuban-born academics like myself. Initially running into the hundreds, now it is down to the dozens. When I attend one of their events, I get that last-of-the-Mohicans feeling, the impression that the people in the audience embody attitudes and experiences that will disappear with them. Because I left Cuba as a child, I have always relied on the recollections of my elders for my construction of the mythical "Cuba de ayer" (Yesterday's Cuba). As the ranks of Cubans like the members of NACAE thin out, the secondhand memories wither. And those I share with the remaining members of the group—memories not only of Cuba but of the early years of exile—fall into the category of what Lampedusa's Prince of Salina, the last of another race, calls *ricordi inconsueti*, unusual memories, memories shared by no one else (Lampedusa 241).

Writers about exile tend to focus on gentle and even gentile emotions: nostalgia, melancholy, estrangement. I am writing about the anger, the resentment, the rawness of exile. Long-term exiles are sore losers. We bet our lives on an outcome that proved not wrong but illusory. When the defining experience of your life is of defeat, the inclination is not to go gentle into that good night. The emotional roller-coaster of exile begins with hope, moves on to nostalgia, and winds up in anger. Hence, Cuban American poet Virgil Suárez's question and answer: "How far do your roots extend?/Far enough to cause damage" (Suárez 37). And Ricardo Pau-Llosa's complaint in "For the Cuban Dead": "There is no *enough* in exile. Not enough anger,/and the blanket of safety always leaves the feet bare" (Pau-Llosa 24). It is probably unwise to admit this, but it gives me a sense of relief, as if a burden had been lifted, to visualize the Caribbean without its largest island: only limpid blue water where Cuba should not have been.

And yet the old country still tugs. Several years ago I made up my mind to forget about Cuba, to feed the fantasy of a life not touched by exile, and I immersed myself in a project unrelated to anything I had ever done before. I spent a couple of years writing a book about *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960–1968), one of the most popular programs in the history of American television. The show takes place in an imaginary small town in North Carolina, Mayberry, which if it existed would be little more than an hour's drive from my house in Chapel Hill. Unlike baby-boomer fans of *The Andy Griffith Show*, I wasn't watching to relive the golden years of my childhood. There was no nostalgia in my attachment to Mayberry, not even the hand-me-down nostalgia derived from someone else's memories, as happens with my nostalgia toward old Cuba. Of all the things that an emigrant leaves behind, none is more strictly irreplaceable than the intimacy of person and place. Watching the 249 episodes of the show, I began to understand how it must

feel to enjoy such intimacy, to feel rooted in the ground under your feet and to know that you live among people who are similarly rooted. What I liked about *The Andy Griffith Show* was Mayberry and what I liked about Mayberrians was that they lived in their hometown, which was the whole of their world.

As I was finishing the book, it occurred to me that for the conclusion I could write my own "lost" episode of the show. That would be the definitive way of inscribing myself in Mayberry, literary naturalization. I should have anticipated what happened next. Entitled "The Lost Boy," my doubly fictional episode tells the story of a Cuban boy sent by his parents to live with relatives in Raleigh, North Carolina. He gets off the bus at the wrong stop and ends up in Mayberry, where he is befriended by Opie, Sheriff Andy's young son. The episode takes place in 1961 and the boy is roughly the age I would have been at the time. The argument of my book has to do with sedentariness, with at-homeness, with being-in-place, yet I could think of no other way to close the book than by introducing a foreign body, my own. I often say to myself a line by one of E.M. Forster's characters, "I and my life must be where I live" (Forster 48). But even if my daily routines have nothing to do with Cuba, even if I have spent most of my life in the United States, exile continues to shape the workings of my imagination.

In one of the Leatherstocking Tales, *The Prairie* (1827), James Fenimore Cooper describes the death of his protagonist, Natty Bumppo, not incidentally the best friend and companion of Chingachgook, the last of the Mohicans. In the fading light of an "American sunset," Bumppo sits surrounded by a large assembly. Suddenly he rises, looks around him and cries out "Here!" (Cooper 401). When I read the novel in graduate school, this scene stuck in my mind. Natty Bumppo's final word is not a mere deictic pointing to the place where he was going to die. It notates a cadential moment, a stopping place. By crying out "Here!" the pathfinder becomes a squatter. His death is an act of emplacement, an affirmation of the connection of person and place. He does not name, he only affirms, because the right or power of naming belongs to discoverers or founders. As a man on the move who finally decides to stand his ground, he is neither. Echoing Cooper's hero, Emerson writes: "Best swallow this pill of America which Fate brings you & sing a land unsung. Here stars, here birds, here trees" (Emerson 8).

Singing a land unsung is what Cuban American writers, including some in this book, have been doing for several decades. Believing that residence precedes essence, they continue to map out the cultural boundaries of Cuban America. This is why they write ethnic rather than exile literature. But this is not what chronic exiles believe or do. Just as there is a difference between an exiled Cuban and a Cuban exile, there is a difference between a Cuban American and a Cuban in America. Even in the latter part of our lives, Cubans in America struggle to achieve resolution, to say "Here!"

I remember a 1970s exile song in which the singer repeats, "Llévenme para allá. Aquí no, qué va." (Take me there. Not here, no way.) Because he does not want to die "here," he wants to be taken "there." The chronic exile also says, "Aquí no,

qué va," except that "not here" does not lead to an elsewhere. Time and history have taken care of that. His is an entirely negative gesture, an outlandish gesture, because it evokes an outland neither here nor there.

Exiles who bring themselves to say "Here!" reach the end of exile. I know people who have managed it. An uncle once told me that he boarded the plane in Havana as an exile and stepped off in Miami as an immigrant. For all practical purposes, I said it when my children were born. They anchored me, because for the first time I had a stake in this country. But even then it was only half a "Here!"—a deceptive cadence. As a father, I was new American; as a son, I remained old Cuban. My father never acquired American citizenship and held on to his Cuban passport until he died. He belonged to the "Aquí no" persuasion, an allegiance that I have inherited.

Some years ago a story in a Miami newspaper featured a man who had been paralyzed as a result of a stroke and would spend his days in a wheelchair by the window of his Miami Beach condominium, facing south, mumbling to himself the only word he was still able to pronounce: Cuba. He too was of the "Aquí no" persuasion. This turning toward Cuba as a succedaneum for returning to Cuba is the chronic exile's habit—iteration as emplacement: an invalid's apostrophe.

Because I am not planning my funeral just yet, my wish to defect from the "Aquí no" camp arises from a different motive: finding a resting place in life. As a middle-aged man, I did not have much reason to change my allegiance to exile. (As I write this, I realize how strange this phrase must seem: allegiance to exile, as if exile were a flag or a nation). Anytime I had to explain who I was, I responded that I was a Cuban exile. These days I am not sure what to answer, partly because Cuban exiles are a vanishing breed and thus less intelligible, partly because old age magnifies exile, because aging, as we know, is another type of exile. Now that I have entered what Spanish calls, euphemistically, "la tercera edad" (the third age), L.P. Hartley's much quoted statement that the past is another country has acquired a double referent, geographical as well as temporal. When I was young I was a Dreamer, but now that I'm not, I've become a Lifer.

As Janou is a Lifer. Except that she's not angry. Except that she does not yearn for a place that doesn't exist. Except that she has created for herself a world that she gladly inhabits. In her own way Janou has said, "Here!" Hers is not a theatrical gesture like Natty Bumppo's, nor is it a directive for others to follow. When Terry says that she would like to live in Janou's "perfect world," she replies that Terry is too young to "sit and remember." Yet she also worries that her grandson's restlessness will come back to haunt him: "Life will present its bill to Nicolò one day and he will find it hard to pay." He will find it hard to pay because he will not have a place to stop and say "Here!" (his uncertain nationality already hints at his nomadism: he has an Italian last name, a French grandmother, and speaks English like Cary Grant).

I know how odd it is to watch *An Affair to Remember* for lessons about exile. Janou is French and lives in France. The exile's restlessness is different from

Nickie's. It is not about the place he has not been, the woman he has not met, or the art he is not practicing; rather, it's the muted disquiet of the involuntarily unsettled, of people who have lost their place. Yet every time I see the movie I learn once again that to pay the unpayable bill, I must say "Here!" The sooner, the better. And if not now, when? The locative does not come easy, plants roughly uprooted may not survive replanting, but seeing myself in Janou edges me toward the affirmation. Like her, I inhabit a small world, a *patria chica* not poisoned by disaffection, a house on a hill that is both home and homeland. And yet I know that my emulation of Natty Bumppo does not go far enough, for every time I say "Here!," a voice inside me, perhaps my father's voice, answers back: "Aquí no, qué va."

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