THE LAST EXILES

para Lesbia Orta Varona

Gustavo Pérez Firmat

Sumario

El autor ofrece un retrato vívido y matizado de la experiencia del exilio cubano, combinando recuerdos personales, historia cultural y comentarios sociales. Describe el impacto de un destierro duro por duradero en un grupo de figuras conocidas de la comunidad cubana de los Estados Unidos, al tiempo que registra los cambios inevitables y la evolución de perspectivas, entre ellas las del propio autor.

In the summer of 1979, after a short illness, my grandmother passed away. Abuela Constantina was born in Morales del Vino, a small village in central Spain. As a teenager she emigrated to Cuba, where she met my grandfather, who had also been born in Spain. They had three children, one of them my father. After half a century in Cuba, already widowed, she emigrated once again, this time to Miami.

For years before my grandmother's death, it seemed to me that no one ever died in Miami. Children grew up, married, and had

children of their own, while the oldest members of the family kept hanging on. When Constantina died, I became aware that the family I was born into was beginning to change. Once the last exile among us passes away, and that may be me, the Pérez family will continue but everyone in it will have been born in the U.S.A. This is not a bad thing. My younger relatives will not long for a life elsewhere, since their only life has been here. They will not complain about *los americanos,* since they're American themselves. But the family's history will be truncated once again, as it was when my grandparents left Spain. Emigration feeds the demon of discontinuity.

A staple of American culture for more than half a century ,—think Bay of Pigs, the Watergate Plumbers, *Calle Ocho,* Scorsese's *Scarface,* the Miami Sound Machine, the *ventanita* at the Versailles — the Cuban exile is a vanishing breed.

In 2000 Celia Cruz, at the time the most recognizable Cuban exile in the world, released an album entitled *Yo viviré.* The title cut is a Spanish-language version of Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," with the difference that Celia's version is not about empowerment but about literal survival. When she recorded the song, she had already been diagnosed with the brain cancer that would take her life three years later. In what would be one of her last public appearances, Celia sang "Por si acaso no regreso," another cut from the album, during an outdoor concert held to celebrate the renovation of the building that for many years served as the Cuban Refugee Center. Wearing a flame-colored gown and a blonde wig, with the Freedom Tower and the Miami skyline looming behind her, Celia was singing about herself, yes, but also on behalf of all those Cuban exiles who never saw their homeland again, whose lives closed without closure.

When she left Cuba, she says in the song, she was certain that she would return. Many years later, approaching the end of her life,

she realizes that she's not going to. "If I don't return," she repeats, "I'll die of sorrow." And then she whispers: "I'm dying already."

¡De película!

The summer of 1990 was a good time to be a Cuban exile. In the wake of decades of fruitless waiting, of a seemingly endless cycle of booms and busts, the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union made us hopeful that the Castro dictatorship had entered its final chapter. A few months earlier, Willy Chirino, a popular Cuban exile singer, had released "Nuestro día ya viene llegando," which quickly became our international anthem. Inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall, Chirino's lyric confidently predicted that soon Cuba would be free.

At the time I was beginning the research for what would eventually become a book entitled *Life on the Hyphen,* which was to include a chapter on Cuban music. In August I spent a week in Miami interviewing several musicians. The interview with Cachao, one of the originators of the mambo, took place by phone. The others – with Rolando Laserie, René Touzet and Rosendo Rosell – were done in person. All three were well-known figures in *la farándula,* a more picturesque and perhaps accurate term than "show-business," since it derives from *fharender,* the German word for vagabond. And vagabonds these men had been. As young men, they had traveled widely and enjoyed fame and considerable fortune in Cuba and Latin America.

It was odd asking them about the past when everyone I knew in Miami was pointing to the future. As part of the so-called "Mayflower exiles," the initial wave of Cubans that left the island after the Revolution, they had been living in relative obscurity for almost three decades. Their day had come and gone. The youngest, Laserie, was in his late sixties; the others were in their seventies.

What for me was a fact-finding expedition, for them was a bittersweet stroll down memory lane.

Nicknamed "el guapo de la canción," Laserie happened to be my favorite singer when I was growing up in Havana, and I was thrilled to meet him. He began his musical career in the 1940s as a singer and *baterista* for Beny Moré's Banda Gigante, where he played the *timbales* and sang backup. By the mid-fifties he had become a solo performer, second in popularity only to Moré himself. The first two sides he recorded, "Mentiras tuyas" and "Amalia Batista," both became hits. My favorite song of his was "Déjenme en paz," a *guaracha* whose singer complains of not being allowed to live life his own way. Back then I couldn't have told you why I liked this song so much. Sixty years later, I have a pretty good idea.

Endowed with a strong, piercing tenor voice, Laserie brought toughness to the soapy lyrics of boleros. The term he used to describe his performing style was *braveza,* which I remember because it's an unusual word. Hence his nickname. Had he been born half a century later, he might have become the founding father of Latin rap. His enunciation lacked the precision characteristic of other interpreters of boleros. On his tongue, "amor" and "dolor," the yin and yang of bolero lyrics, became "amol" and "dolol." He headlined at the Tropicana and other Havana nightclubs. In addition to a flat, short-brimmed cap, his trademark was shouting *¡De película!* during breaks in the relentlessly dismal lyrics. When something is "de película," it's as unexpected, as unbelievable, as the things that happen in movies.

Laserie and his wife Tita (her real name was Gisela) lived in one half of a small duplex on Flagler Street. A ten-year old Cadillac was parked in their driveway. When I walked in, I noticed the fruits behind the front door, an offering to Eleguá, the deity who opens and closes doors, literal and not. Laserie was a short, slight, very

black man. He looked frail, though he continued to perform occasionally. Nickname notwithstanding, there was nothing bullyish about him. Sitting on the living room sofa with Tita, he spoke with easy informality, as if we already knew one another. He wanted to know about American universities – how much they cost, where my students came from, how I got the job I had. I did my best to explain, but the academic world was as mysterious to him as it was to my father, who never quite understood what a literature professor does for a living.

Born into a large and poor family (his father worked in a sugar mill), Laserie had little education and no formal musical training. At the beginning of his career, he had moonlighted as a cobbler. Not so René Touzet, a classically trained pianist who looked upon the songs he composed and the time he spent in the States with Latin orchestras, among them Desi Arnaz's (whose musicianship he disdained), as slumming. His serious works were pieces for piano, among them a collection of forty Cuban *danzas* he had published earlier in 1990. I offered to meet him at his home, but he insisted on coming to the Miami Beach hotel where I was staying. He was a tall, svelte man, still vigorous at 74. Unlike Laserie, who greeted me in a short sleeve shirt, slacks and slippers, Touzet wore a beige turtleneck and a brown jacket over dress pants and well-shined loafers. We addressed one another formally as *usted.*

After a brief exchange of pleasantries, he sat across from me at a table. I clicked the microcassette recorder and he asked me what I wanted to know. Our conversation revolved around his involvement in the mambo and chacha craze of the late forties and fifties, mostly as a bandleader at nightclubs in Los Angeles. He had released albums with such titles as *Cha Cha Cha for Lovers* and *Mr. Cha Cha Cha.* In the 1960s, when the popularity of Latin rhythms faded, he moved to Miami. (I didn't dare ask whether he

had considered going back to Cuba.) Though he'd had a good deal of success, he exuded the bitterness of a man who feels that his talent was unappreciated. One anecdote stayed with me. Touzet wrote a song for Chirino and took him the demo. Chirino said he didn't have time to listen to it. "That song," he said ruefully, "would have been a hit." And it was, for Gustavo Rojas. The song is called "Oye."

The interview ended abruptly when I made the mistake of referring to Olga Guillot as his wife. I knew that he and Guillot had a daughter named Olguita and I assumed (wrongly) that they had been married. Had I done my homework properly, I would have avoided the topic. In Havana the composer and the diva had been the protagonists of a scandalous affair memorialized in his best known bolero, "La noche de anoche" (no relation, except the title and topic, to Bad Bunny's reggaeton). He bristled at my mention. "La Guillot was not my wife," he shot back. Then he told me his wife's name, which I have forgotten. I do recall that instead of "mi señora," the polite way of naming a wife, he used the more colloquial appellation, "mi mujer," which seemed odd for such a formal man. After my misstep, he asked if there was anything else I wanted to know. I thanked him for his time and walked him down to the lobby. He had left his car with the valet.

Unlike Laserie and Touzet, Rosendo Rosell was not a professional musician. In Cuba he had been an actor, a comedian, a journalist, an entrepreneur, as well as the composer of several hits. Born in Placetas, in Miami Rosell remained active as the author of a weekly column in *Diario Las Américas,* where he reminisced about show business figures in what he called Cuba B.C. (before Castro). He lived in a small one-story house on Normandy Isle in North Miami Beach. Olive-skinned, with a full head of gray hair, a neat mustache and an ever-present twinkle in his eye, he could have played the part of an aging Latin Lover in a 1940s Hollywood

movie. Less arrogant than Touzet and less endearing than Laserie, he portrayed himself as *un vivo,* someone who prospers by dint of his cunning. (The opposite of *vivo* is *bobo. ¿Vivo o bobo?* – among Cubans, *that* is the question.)

The story behind "Caimitillo y marañón," his greatest hit and a song I knew by heart, illustrated his *viveza.* Before the Revolution he owned a house in Santa María del Mar, a seaside town a few miles east of Havana, on a property large enough so that his father, a *guajiro,* could plant vegetables and fruit trees. Two of the trees were *caimitillo* and *marañón.* This gave him the idea for an absurdist *chachachá* whose lyric enumerated the fruits, adding that he liked *caimitillo* better than *mamoncillo* but much less than *marañón.* The refrain reiterated this predilection: "El marañón me gusta, ¡eh!, mucho más." When he went to record the tune, the arranger, who happened to be the legendary flutist Richard Egües, told him that the repetition of the names of the fruits was monotonous. That gave Rosell the bright idea of recycling an old bolero of his, "Cobarde," and wedging it between the chacha choruses. Somehow it worked. The resulting *macédoine* was deliciously fruity.

An indefatigable self-promoter, Rosell told his stories with such disarming good humor that it was impossible not to like him. Even when he talked about the Castro dictatorship, he cracked jokes. On New Year's Eve in 1958, another of his songs, "Cubita cubera" was atop the Cuban hit parade. But by New Year's Day the number one hit was "Sierra Maestra," a song in support of the nascent dictatorship. Rosell attributed the overnight change to *guatasaurios,* a portmanteau of *guataca,* sycophant, and *saurios,* as in *dinosaurios.* Unlike Laserie and Touzet, he impressed me as someone who, wistful as he was when he recalled Old Cuba ("era nuestro mundo"), had been able to adjust to life in exile. *Vivo* indeed.

I had all but forgotten these interviews until recently, when someone who'd read *Life on the Hyphen* asked whether I had transcriptions. I didn't think so, but I was sure I had kept the microcassettes, since I'm a hoarder by temperament and tradition. Up in the attic, in a musty box with thirty-year old notebooks and xeroxes, I found four cassettes tied with a piece of string. Unfortunately, they were mostly inaudible. Of my conversation with Laserie, the one I recalled most fondly, all that remained was scratchiness and intermittent bursts of laughter, mine or his.

As I tried to make out the words in the recordings, I thought back to that summer: to the interviews, to my own mid-life changes, to visits with parents and aunts and uncles, all of whom have passed away. It's said that Miami is a Cuban city because of the number of Cubans who live there. But the truth is that Miami is a Cuban city because of the Cubans who have died there. The living can always move away, as I did. It's the others who are the city's permanent residents. Laserie died in 1998, Touzet in 2003, Rosell in 2010. Like Celia Cruz, none of them returned to Cuba, Cubita, Cubera. I think I know what Laserie would say about this: *¡De película!*

Lindas cubanas

My friend Jorge calls them, after the classic Cuban song, *las lindas cubanas*. In the song the epithet refers to the six provinces into which Cuba used to be divided, each of them with a distinctive personality. Jorge uses the epithet to describe four librarians at the University of Miami whom we knew when he and I were undergraduates there. They weren't all beautiful, but they made up for it with cheer and charm. Together they built the Cuban Heritage Collection, the largest trove of materials relating to Cuba and Cuban Americans in any American library.

In Havana Rosita Abella had worked at the National Library. Once in Miami, she got a job as the librarian at The Academy of the Assumption, an exclusive girls' school, and in 1962 found a position at the University of Miami's Richter Library. Ana Rosa Núñez, who had also studied library science in Cuba, began at the Richter in 1965. After leaving Cuba, where she had obtained a PhD in Arts and Letters, Esperanza Bravo de Varona lived for a few years in the Dominican Republic. Once she, her husband and their four children relocated in the States, she recycled herself as a librarian. A generation younger than her colleagues, Lesbia Orta Varona studied library science at Florida State University. Like Esperanza, she was hired in 1966. Ana Rosa worked in Reference, Rosita and Esperanza in Acquisitions, and Lesbia in the Microform department.

Tall, with long legs and a short torso, Rosita (no one ever called her "Rosa") looked like a restless ostrich. Anytime I ran into her, she was rushing back and forth between her second-floor office and the card catalogue. In her forties and unmarried, she used to joke that she was looking for a young man with an Oedipal complex. Ana Rosa, thin and reserved, would sit at her desk, also on the second floor, and point students like me to the resources we needed to write our term papers. When she wasn't busy, she would write poems in a notebook. I still have one of her books, *Haikus del Caribe*. Like Rosita, she was a spinster. True or not, the story that went around was that she had been engaged in Cuba but her mother had opposed the marriage.

Esperanza personified the best of Old Cuba: elegant but with a touch of spice. The last time I saw her, ten years ago, she had been retired for two years but still came to "work," as she put it, every day. In a corner of the stacks she sat behind a desk topped with books and papers. Approaching eighty, she was as animated

and engaged as ever. She recounted a favorite story, how she acquired the papers of Gastón Baquero, a distinguished Cuban poet who passed away in Madrid after many years in exile. The way she told it, it sounded like something out of a spy novel. Soon after Baquero's death she heard through the grapevine that he had left correspondence, drafts of poems and other documents. Afraid that another library would scoop her, the next day she got on a plane to Madrid, tracked down the papers through a friend of a friend, and brought them back with her. She was seventy years old at the time.

Because we were closer in age, the *linda cubana* I got to know best was Lesbia. You could always tell when Lesbia was around because of the ruckus. Loud and lively, she brought the street into the stacks. Unlike the other women, she dressed down, wore little make-up and hardly any jewelry. Her husband Orlando, a small man with a booming voice, acted in local Cuban theater. For years after I graduated, I'd go to the library and run into her. There we'd be, in the middle of the second floor, surrounded by silent, studious young men and women. Oblivious to them, Lesbia would greet me with a kiss and start talking mile-a-minute Spanish in a voice that sounded like someone banging kitchen pans. I never said much. With Lesbia, you didn't have to.

It was Rosita Abella who, in the mid-1960s, came up with the idea of collecting materials related to Cuba exiles. Since they had no funds, the *lindas cubanas* took it upon themselves to begin gathering items that didn't cost anything. A prime example of their collecting practices, and one of the highlights of the collection, is the unique archive of *periodiquitos*, anti-Castro tabloids with names like *Libertad*, *Réplica* and *Patria* (whose motto was: "El periódico de Martí, sin Martí, pero por Martí"). Ad-driven, the *periodiquitos* were distributed for free in the bodegas, pharmacies, liquor stores,

and beauty parlors that sprung up to serve Miami's burgeoning Cuban population. Anyone could pick them up from metal racks placed at the entrance to the establishments. I read them as passionately as I've ever read anything. Ads for the Datsun dealership on Calle Ocho for which my father worked appeared nearly every week in one *periodiquito* or another. Silly as it may seem, it was always a source of pride to see his photo in the ad.

Like other exiles, though for different reasons, the four women made a point of rounding up the *periodiquitos* week after week and bringing them back to the library. Eventually the issues in the collection of exile periodicals came to number in the thousands. They did the same with other ephemera. If they saw a poster advertising the floor show at a popular nightspot called Les Violins, they'd rip it off the wall and take that too. They did the same with menus and playbills (some of which featured Lesbia's husband). Whatever the *lindas cubanas* came upon, they catalogued and stored in a cage on the third floor of the library.

This stealth collecting – which expanded to include magazines, photographs, personal papers and correspondence, oral histories, organizational records, videos – did not receive significant institutional support until the 1990s. Before then, for the purchase of books Rosita and Esperanza had to compete with the other needs and priorities of the library. To acquire books published in Cuba (a controversial topic among exiles) they had to go through a Canadian intermediary, since the embargo prohibited their importation.

Another hurdle was the theft of Cuban books already in the general collection. To prevent it, they began withdrawing them from general circulation and putting them on reserve. Lesbia likes to tell the story of one well-known member of the exile community who, having gotten hold of someone else's borrowing card, checked

out books about Cuba and didn't return them. Not one to avoid confrontation, she caught up with him one afternoon as he was leaving the library and threatened to expose his thievery on Cuban talk radio, which at the time could make or break your reputation in a Radio Reloj minute. The man promptly returned dozens of books and was not seen in the library again.

Today The Cuban Heritage Collection occupies a large part of the second floor of the Richter library. You enter it by walking across the Goizueta Pavilion (named after Roberto Goizueta, the Cuban-born CEO of Coca-Cola), with its checkered black-and-white tiled floor, mahogany rocking chairs, and a *trompe l'oeil* mural by Humberto Calzada, a Cuban-American painter. When you look at it, it seems that you are peering through a window in Old Havana. The title of the mural, *Espejo de paciencia,* taken from that of a seventeenth-century Cuban poem, suggests that, given enough patience, the optical illusion of the mural will become a reality once again. Beyond the Pavilion is a spacious reading room with large windows that look out, not on Old Havana, but on a palm-tree-dotted campus in Coral Gables.

Lesbia, the only *linda cubana* still alive, said to me the last time we talked: "It was a labor of love. We knew that what we were doing was important because we were never going to return."

Amiguismo

Since my father's death more than twenty years ago, my ties to Cuba have, if not lapsed, loosened. While he lived, he was my lifeline to the island. Once he died, his expectation of return unfulfilled, any idea I had of returning also perished. I still saw myself as an exile, as I do to this day, but I began to regard my motherland as an otherland, a place that bore a faint resemblance to the country where I was born and raised. Recalling a sentence from

Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread,* I decided, for the umpteenth time, that I and my life must be where I live, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Other Cuban exiles, not much older than I, have never felt this way. Once they leave Cuba, they never leave Cuba. Jorge Sanguinetty, a distinguished economist, is one of these people. After initially supporting the Revolution, he left Cuba in 1966, when he was not yet thirty. In the United States he studied economics and launched a consulting firm that worked with companies in Latin America. When I met him, during one of my periodic pilgrimages to Miami, he was comfortably retired and lived with his wife Mercy in a pink, Spanish-style home in South Miami. Inside the house, the clutter was what you'd expect from a long-married, well-to-do couple: paintings, pieces of sculpture, wall hangings, and other mementos gathered in a lifetime of travel. As we were having lunch, Mercy pointed out that the glasses came from Bohemia, the plates from Sévres.

An amiable, heavy-set man who uses a walker to get around, Sanguinetty was wearing the canonic article of Cuban clothing: a neatly pressed white *guayabera.* Since he hadn't buttoned the *guayabera* all the way down, his pale bellybutton peeked out from his pants waist, a pineal eye gone astray. We sat in the Florida Room, the parlor in the back of the house that faces the yard. Along with a couple of other friends, we spent the afternoon talking about what exiles talk about when they talk about Cuba: the Revolution. As he spoke, sitting in an armchair, his immobility contrasted with the liveliness of his mind.

Sanguinetty did not accept the usual explanations of the origins of the Castro dictatorship. Believing that followers create the caudillo and not the other way around, he sought for an answer in the Cuban character. Thinking out loud, he asked himself questions

and kept puzzling over his answers. That he hadn't found answers that were satisfactory (his favorite adjective), didn't stop him from pursuing his quest. As the afternoon wore on, his energy began to flag but his focus remained sharp.

I wasn't surprised by his tenacity, but one thing did catch me off guard. Every night he and Mercy watch reruns of *Friends*, his favorite TV show. What's more surprising, he does this as part of his effort to understand recent Cuban history. His theory is that Cubans have an exceptional gift for friendship that makes us incapable of concerted political action. Habits of friendship, so-called *amiguismo*, trump principles and alliances. He finds a similar privileging of friendship in the characters of the sitcom. By studying them, he said, he gains insight into the psychology of his countrymen. Since I've never watched a single episode of *Friends*, I couldn't follow his references to the show, but I was fascinated by the picture of a brilliant, accomplished octogenarian exile watching reruns of *Friends* searching for clues about what went wrong in Cuba.

Two days later I had occasion to verify Sanguinetty's theory in my own person. A long-time friend invited us to his house, where another of the guests would be Raúl Castro's former chief of staff, Alcibíades Hidalgo. When Miguel Ángel told me the man's name, I had no idea who he was, but once I looked him up, I decided not to go. Hidalgo had faithfully served the Revolution for all of his adult life. He didn't leave Cuba until 2002, the same year that my father passed away. Upon reaching Miami, he declared, à la Edith Piaf, "I don't regret anything. Everyone has his own path to the truth." Executions, confiscations, purges, repression did not hurry him along his path.

I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to risk my friendship with Miguel Ángel, with whom I share a deep but unrequited (at

least for me) love of chess, but I've always avoided having anything to do with members or former members of the Castro regime, even at considerable professional cost. A part of me said that my intransigence may have been appropriate years ago, but that by now it was pointless. People I respect had welcomed Hidalgo's defection. He wrote for exile publications, hobnobbed with hardliners. Holding on to my long-standing non-contact rule, I felt like the chess player who refuses to resign an utterly lost position. As the day drew near, I grew more conflicted. If I had stuck to my principles for sixty years, why ditch them now? By socializing with this man I'd be turning my back on all those who had everything taken from them, including their lives, by the revolutionary regime. I'm not brave but I'm stubborn.

As it happened, I saw Miguel Ángel a couple of days before his party. I told him that we wouldn't be able to go and I explained my reasons. He said he understood and offered to disinvite Hidalgo, even though they'd been friends since childhood. Then he told me a story in two parts: in the 1970s, when Miguel Ángel was fired from his position at a Cuban magazine for being ideologically suspect, Hidalgo had come to his rescue by finding Miguel Ángel's then-wife a job that allowed them to survive until they abandoned the island. Thirty years later, after Hidalgo had defected, his daughter was finally allowed to leave Cuba via Canada, but the conditions under which he was granted political asylum barred him from leaving the United States. Miguel Ángel met Hidalgo's teenage daughter in Toronto and brought her across the US-Canada border, where her father was waiting.

After hearing Miguel Ángel out, I decided to attend. The gathering was going to take place on October 23, the anniversary of the day in 1960 that my parents, my siblings and I arrived in the United States. If I believed in *santería* like Tita and Rolando Laserie, I'd

conclude that Eleguá — a trickster deity — had arranged it this way. After braving the traffic on I-95 for an hour, Mary Anne and I got to Miguel Ángel's condo in North Miami Beach. When Hidalgo arrived, I shook his hand. A few minutes later he was sitting across from me on the balcony overlooking a canal. Hidalgo was not what I expected. Nothing like his Greek namesake, he was a spherical little man with a fine head of well-groomed gray hair, dark-rimmed glasses and a goatee. As in Sanguinetty's house, Cuba was the center of the conversation, which consisted mainly of Hidalgo's insider anecdotes about the foibles of the Castro brothers. Invariably he portrayed himself as an observer rather than a participant. Not once did anyone, including myself, bring up his decades of complicity. Hidalgo remembered many things but none that involved his activities in behalf of the Revolution.

The hours rolled by without incident. I had a feeling that he'd been warned about me. Once or twice, he mentioned having read something I had written, but for the most part he kept his distance. When he extended his hand to say goodbye, I answered with an *abrazo* in the Cuban manner. He didn't expect it.

Driving back to our Airbnb, I kept thinking about how things had changed, how I have changed. I thought I retained the early exiles' view that collaborators with the regime were anathema. But the fact is that the majority of Cubans who now live in Miami supported the dictatorship at some point in their lives. Most of the ones who never did, like my father, are buried in one of the city's cemeteries. Today that weekly feature in *Patria,* "Y siguen llegando," about former supporters of the regime, would have to list almost as many names as the Miami phonebook, did such a thing still exist.

Hard as it is for me to accept, no longer is there anything shameful or remarkable in having sympathized with the longest-lasting

dictatorship in the history of Latin America, or in being friendly with those who have. This is sometimes called "la política del borrón y cuenta nueva." The politics of the clean slate. I don't believe in clean slates, but that afternoon I acted as if I did.