

# CUBAN WOMEN WRITERS

*Imagining a Matria*

MADÉLINE CÁMARA BETANCOURT

TRANSLATED BY  
DAVID FRYE

[NEW CONCEPTS IN LATINO AMERICAN CULTURES]



# Cuban Women Writers

NEW CONCEPTS IN LATINO AMERICAN CULTURES  
A Series Edited by Licia Fiol-Matta & José Quiroga

*Ciphers of History: Latin American Readings for a Cultural Age*  
by Enrico Mario Santi

*Cosmopolitanisms and Latin America: Against the Destiny of Place*  
by Jacqueline Loss

*Remembering Maternal Bodies: Melancholy in Latina and Latin American Women's Writing*  
by Benigno Trigo

*The Ethics of Latin American Literary Criticism: Reading Otherwise,*  
edited by Erin Graff Zivin

*Modernity and the Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity: From Sensuality to Bloodshed*  
by Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba

*White Negritude: Race, Writing, and Brazilian Cultural Identity*  
by Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond

*Essays in Cuban Intellectual History*  
by Rafael Rojas

*Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations, and the Territories of Writing*  
by Damián Baca

*Confronting History and Modernity in Mexican Narrative*  
by Elisabeth Guerrero

*Cuban Women Writers: Imagining a Matria*  
by Madeline Cámara Betancourt

**Forthcoming Titles**

*Other Worlds: New Argentinean Film*  
by Gonzalo Aguilar

*Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*  
edited by Ariana Hernandez-Reguant

*Telling Ruins in Latin America*  
edited by Michael J. Lazzara and Vicky Unruh

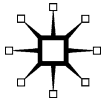
# Cuban Women Writers

## Imagining a Matria

*Madeline Cámara Betancourt*

*Translated by David Frye*

palgrave  
macmillan



CUBAN WOMEN WRITERS

Copyright © Madeline Cámara Betancourt, 2008.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2008 978-0-230-60658-6

All rights reserved.

First published in 2008 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the US—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-60330-5 ISBN 978-0-230-61466-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230614666

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cámara Betancourt, Madeline, 1957–

Cuban women writers : imagining a patria / by Madeline Cámara Betancourt; translated by David Frye.

p. cm.—(New concepts in Latino American cultures series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Cuban literature—Women authors—History and criticism.
2. Cuban literature—20th century—History and criticism.
3. Feminist literary criticism—Cuba. I. Frye, David. II. Title.

PQ7378.C35 2008

860.9'9287097291—dc22

2007050073

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: September 2008

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Transferred to Digital Printing 2012

*To Michelle, Granddaughter, Pure Joy.*



## Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
A Polyphonic Introduction	1
1 The Feminist Discourse of Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta: <i>Garzona</i> or <i>Espartana</i> ?	19
2 Lydia Cabrera: Along the Paths of Cryptomemory	53
3 Cassandra's Calling: The Poetics of Convocation in the Works of María Elena Cruz Varela	85
4 From the Baroque to Postmodernism: Parody of the Picaresque in <i>La nada cotidiana</i> , by Zoé Valdés	115
5 In/Conclusion	137
<i>Notes</i>	149
<i>Bibliography</i>	171
<i>Index</i>	187



## Acknowledgments

This book has had many benefactors. I am indebted to several friends and colleagues for their support and their patient and lucid critiques. For editing and translating the proposal, I am obliged to Alex Levine and Harry E. Vanden. I thank Adriana Novoa, Pablo Brescia, Adriana Méndez Rodenas, and José Quiroga for their readings of different stages of my project; they all give me useful insights. Sonia Wolhmut guided me in presenting my bibliography under the dictatorship of the MLA emporium. For her assistance as a caring and experienced “lula” in the “final push” of the manuscript, I am grateful to Eliana Rivero.

For travel funding for my research, I thank my former employer, San Diego State University, and my present institution, the University of South Florida. I recognize the invaluable technical support of the librarians at the Latin American Collection in University of Florida, as well as the Cuban Collection in University of Miami. Financial assistance for translating the manuscript was possible thanks to the support from The Publication Council of the University of South Florida to the Department of World Language Education [The College of Arts and Sciences], and the Latin American and Caribbean Center at my university.

To acknowledge David Frye’s exquisite translation and rigorous editing, I must return to my mother tongue in search of a word that conveys both gratitude, and the celebration of a special gift: Gracias!

Chapters 4 and 5 were previously published in slightly different Spanish versions: Chapter 4 in *La letra rebelde* (Miami, FL: Universal, 2002) and *Confluencia* 18.1 (2002): 139–154; Chapter 5 in *Vocación de Casandra* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000) and *Cuban Studies* 29 (1999): 83–105.

# A Polyphonic Introduction

*¡Adiós, patria feliz, edén querido!  
¡Doquier que el hado en su furor me impela,  
tu dulce nombre halagará mi oído!*

*¡Adiós!... Ya cruje la turgente vela...  
¡El ancla se alza... El buque, estremecido,  
las olas corta y silencioso vuela!*

—Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, “Al partir”

## In a Personal Tone

My editor will no doubt call this an introduction, though I prefer to call it a confession; for this is nothing less than an attempt to explain what is behind the writing of this book—its methodological aspirations, its ideological limits, the emotional position from which I carried out my readings and constructed the interpretive niche that I used to share them.

“Getting Personal” was the name Nancy K. Miller gave to this position and the title of the book she wrote to defend it within North American feminist criticism. More than a decade later, I benefit from her valuable endeavor to synthesize the quests of all the women in the academy who felt a need to use new approaches in order to dismantle the coded messages that continue to be ignored or underestimated. I therefore share Miller’s sense of urgency for making room in academic research for poetic language. As she put it so well:

But metaphors are to be taken very seriously, and they still appeal to me as an economical way to both theorize outside of systems dependent of a unitary signature (allowing you to combine things that usually don’t go together) and to imagine in the material of language what hasn’t yet come—what might not be able to come—into social being. (1991: xii)

I have allowed myself to be carried away by this freedom with an eye to depicting the place from which I do my reading and writing. This decision has obliged me to “banish” to the notes many of the concepts and crucial pieces of information that serve as the foundation of this

work, simply in order to maintain the personal tone that would be interrupted by academic citations. Placing them in the notes should not be interpreted as a gesture of subordination in terms of ideas, but rather as a rhetorical and stylistic decision that reinforces my affinity for deconstructing the spaces assigned to what it is called Center or Periphery. Luce Irigaray has penned some lucid words about the challenges of new avenues in academic writing by a woman: “Because in relation to the working of theory, the/a woman fulfills a twofold function—as the mute outside that sustains all systematicity; as a maternal and still silent ground that nourishes all foundations—she does not have to conform to the codes theory has set up for itself” (1985: 365). Kristeva would say it in other ways too: “It is probably necessary to be a woman (ultimate guarantee of sociality beyond the wreckage of the paternal symbolic function, as well as the inexhaustible generator of its renewal, of its expansion) not to renounce theoretical reason but to compel it to increase its power by giving it an object beyond its limits” (1980: 146).

The idea of creating a body of research on Cuban women writers grew out of my work on my doctoral dissertation at the University of Stony Brook in 1996, three years after my arrival in this country. I had just read Benedict Anderson and had come to understand that countries were also created through writing, and I ardently hoped to reclaim for the voices of “las Madres de la Patria,” as I used called them, their foundational place.

The strain of being a 38-year-old graduate student, rooming with fellow students, with my little daughter in tow and with no other financial resources than a fellowship on cold Long Island, made me readjust my perspectives and work to graduate as quickly as possible with a less pretentious dissertation. I ended up limiting my study to poetry of dissident Cuban writer María Elena Cruz Varela, who had, of course, been one of my original subjects. Paying exclusive attention to her work was not an arbitrary decision. I did it to repay an old debt. An article on this author, published in the Mexican journal *Plural* in 1992, forced my flight to the United States and my abandonment of the “third positions”<sup>1</sup> I had been trying to explore in Mexico City. Once I was here, my entrance into the North American academic world—my shelter against the *Intemperie* that is anyone’s life in exile, as philosopher María Zambrano would have said—necessarily had to be built around the voice through which I had adopted a subversive discourse that I was unable to enunciate, but that I was indeed able to interpret.

An appointment as assistant professor at San Diego State University–Imperial Valley followed upon my graduation. Five years in the California desert, surrounded by sand dunes, coyotes, and rosy nights, offered me enough time and solitude to come to terms with the new conditions of my existence. It was there that I came to understand the profound meaning of two words, two inescapable events in my life: writing and exile. The door between the two was opened for me by Zambrano. Leading me along routes I had never traveled before, the Spanish writer’s gentle words explained to me that exile can be a privileged place, a second birth, for those who had been left with “all of life, and all the world, but no place in it” for them (1993: 382).

A new linguistic reality was being imposed on me as my academic duties increased. A new job, now as associate professor at the University of South Florida–Tampa, constantly forced me to live, work, and write in English. Yet English is not becoming my second language, but my first anguish. Not coincidentally, as I now can see, this happened around the same time that I got remarried to a French-Algerian man, so that the French that I had learned “to be able to read Baudelaire in the original,” as I used to say when I was young, became my home language. My third exile, I called my marriage.

It was precisely these artificial contacts with language, this imposed adoption of other sounds and other systems for the most basic types of communication both at work and at home, that presented me with an estrangement from my own tongue that I never could have experienced so long as I used Spanish as something natural, inherited, my own. Reconquering it was the only way to answer for myself a question that I might have debated on Kristeva’s couch: What can we do when language is the Other? Thanks to the distance I had achieved, I could discern what Zambrano knew all along, with that clear vision of hers that never ceases to amaze me. There are regions in language—those in which one attains “poetic understanding” (1949: 13)—through which one can regress to the infancy of one’s soul, and also to the infancy of one’s nation.

With this new insight into my language, I returned to and began revising my Stony Brook project. Most of my research over the past decade has been devoted to this project, a decade when several works on women’s writing in Cuba have gestated in me, and some of them have been published. The chapters that comprise this book were conceived between 1996 and 2006, each independent of the others, but all under the same “gaze,” which I am now attempting to explain to my self and to my reader. The writers selected to be

analyzed are: Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta, Lydia Cabrera, María Elena Cruz Varela, and Zoé Valdés. I chose these writers because they inherited a legacy and transformed it; but also because their writings transformed me. I have reappropriated the nation of letters that they have given me, a nation that requires no territory to exist, only readers.

## Where This Book Comes From: Taking a License for Passional Criticism

I cannot say clearly, with any sense of authority, what could be the possible contribution of my research to the body of criticism already generated in the Cuban and Cuban-American Academy about Cuban female writers. But I am sure that I would have not produced my own book without the motivation and the background brought by other colleagues working in this field.<sup>2</sup> What I now see—and the position from which I see it—has been illuminated by these readings. But I cannot hold them responsible for the result, as my book is neither a new history of Cuban women writers, nor the study of a generation, neither is it a monograph about a unique theme; it does not even pretend to set examples on how to apply particular theoretical approaches. I only offer *certain ways* of reading,<sup>3</sup> not *models to read with certainty*.

That patriarchal discourse can hold the country hostage can be proven by reading Cuban history from the perspective of gender; the same is true when we read Cuban canonical literary studies. For methodological reasons, my book does not pretend to answer the historians nor all of the canonical texts that systematically ignore women's literary contributions in Cuba. Furthermore, I do not want to impose a formal list of which books should be considered "canonical," as that would simply create a second "canonization." Most of the relevant works appear, inevitably, in my bibliography. But what my study intrinsically does is dialog with its precedents, such as the one established by influential works such as *Lo cubano en la poesía* (1953) by Cintio Vitier and *Bosquejo histórico de las letras cubanas* (1960) by José Antonio Portuondo. I have selected these texts as canonical examples, well into the twentieth century, of the development of two of the extremes that have governed the Cuban critical canon since the latter established its foundations in the nineteenth century: the impressionistic tendency, which goes from Juan Clemente

Zenea (1832–1871) to Manuel de la Cruz (1861–1896), with a brief parenthesis in the critical work of Julián del Casal (1863–1893), and which was continued by Vitier; and the positivist legacy, represented by Manuel Sanguily (1848–1925) and Enrique José Varona (1849–1933), whose obsession with history we can still find, under a different ideology, in the Marxist criticism that dominates the post-1959 Cuban cultural arena in which Portuondo was a leading figure.<sup>4</sup>

Albeit from opposing perspectives—lyrical-stylistic in Vitier, and historical-Marxist in Portuondo—both critics analyze Cuban literature, regrouping styles, authors, epochs, and generations, and labeling them with a metaphoric expression, be it a word or a phrase. As the reader will see in the following chapters, I use too “metaphoric frames,” but I intend to avoid the monological reading that is done by their books.

Vitier speaks of “*esas diez especies, categorías o esencias de lo cubano reveladas en nuestra poesía...: Arcadismo, Ingravidez, Intrascendencia, Lejanía, Cariño, Despego, Frío, Vacío, Memoria, Ornamento*” (these ten species, categories, or essences of Cubanness, as revealed in our poetry...: Arcadianism, Weightlessness, Intranscendence, Distance, Affection, Detachment, Coldness, Emptiness, Memory, Ornament) (2002: 399), but in his category of *Lejanía* (Distance), lamentably, he did not take into account the pioneering endeavor of Avellaneda, whose work today we would call the literature of the Diaspora. For that, we had to wait until Adriana Méndez Rodenas developed the concept of “*Cercanía*” (1998: 41) in her work on *La Condesa de Merlín*, written in obvious counterpoint to Vitier. Nor will we find an assessment of the contributions of Lydia Cabrera in the twelfth “reading” of Vitier’s *Lo cubano en la poesía*, dedicated to Cuban black poetry, even though Cabrera’s *Cuentos negros* are essentially a poetic rewriting of both Yoruba and Afro-Cuban oral traditions. Dulce María Loynaz only merits a footnote in Vitier’s book, a comment on her “essential femininity” (270), and the designation of “Romantic” for her novella *Jardín*; fortunately, Ileana Rodríguez (1994: 95) corrects Vitier’s view when she finds a modernist sensitivity in the work of Loynaz. In Vitier’s seventeenth “reading,” significant works by Cleve Solís, Rafael Chacón Nardy, and Nivaria Tejera are grouped together in a brief paragraph under the vague rubric of “other poets” (396).

Portuondo does not find a place to locate the writings of la Condesa de Merlín, as Méndez Rodenas has noted, nor does he judge Gómez Avellaneda or Luisa Pérez de Zambrana fairly when he describes the former’s elegiac poetry as “meek” (29) and treats the latter’s writing

as mere “Cuban notes” and “purely incidental” (31). Worse, he does not discuss the splendid feminist movement that included Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta when he studies the period he classifies as “The Masses” (1930–1939), clearly revealing that his understanding of history favors the concept of class while ignoring gender. Lydia Cabrera is mentioned only once in his chapter on the “black movement,” and her contributions are not analyzed.

Is not my goal to undertake the exhaustive gender-aware revisions that these books, and others with similar approaches, call for. Some of my colleagues mentioned in note 2 have done a great deal of the needed rethinking. In my case, lacunae such as those in Cuban criticism made me see the need rethink the very concept of the literary representation of the Nation/Fatherland in order to appreciate the contributions made to this concept by female writers. As a result, I decided that I would not simply search for the contributions of a group of Cuban women writers to the imaginary of our *Patria*, but instead would look into the question of which women had achieved, from the place of writing, a radical transformation of *Patria* into *Matria*.<sup>5</sup>

To elaborate a concept of what *Matria* could be, rather than the play of sense and sound produced by counterpoising the etymologies and written forms of these words (*Patria*/*Matria*, *Fatherland*/*Motherland*), I am interested, following Greimas’s concept of “sememe,” in the “meaning effect” that results from putting the words *Matria* and *Matriz* (meaning both matrix and womb in Spanish) in the same context, the latter standing as a symbol for the singularity of women’s creativity. Therefore I do not use this book to describe the discourses of the *Patria* that are being deconstructed, or need to be contested, but rather I use this book to analyze the alternatives that are being constructed in order to enunciate them from a female/feminist perspective.

To describe what generates this writing of the *Matria*, which separates itself from the normativeness and representativeness of the discourse of the *Patria*, I apply an extended sense of Foucault’s term *dispositif*.<sup>6</sup> Following Deleuze’s interpretation of *dispositif* as “a multilinear ensemble...composed of lines, each having a different nature,” (1989: 161) I stress what I view as the “gathering effect” of a *dispositif*, as well as its multilinear character, to reveal how the writing of the *Matria* means much more than a new literary technique, since it incorporates “the living” of these authors into their writing, describing the particular female textuality of Rodríguez Acosta, Cabrera, Cruz Varela, and Valdés as a linkage between their practical experiences and the rhetorical/linguistic devices they utilized.

I propose that only a *subversive women's discourse* can rewrite the Matria. Its *liberating* aspect creates a different *ordering* from that of the *Law of the Father* that applies in the male imaginary of the Patria. Obviously, I speak here under the influence of Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray, but I am also indebted to Nelly Richard's understanding of *feminine literature*<sup>7</sup> to prove how this *subversive women's discourse* permits the textual and ideological articulation of messages whose subversiveness is encoded not only in their new literary form or revolutionary content, but also in the construction of a new expressive space and the emancipatory conditions of reception and distribution they set forth. In this book, I aim at making audible, intelligible, readable, a feminine voice that can recreate history through a literary perspective that seeks neither to be representative nor authoritative, confronting the metaphor of masculine testimony with that of deterritorialized femininity.

In the present book, when I talk of *feminine metaphors of deterritorialization*, the concept takes on a broader meaning that it has before in my work,<sup>8</sup> where I used it following Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *nomadism*. My use of *deterritorialization*, in combination with the concept of *dispositif*, is now undergirded by a dialogue with a canonical text of Marxist criticism, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" by Frederick Jameson (1986). Like many others (see the critique by Franco, Sommers, and Ahmad), I experienced the narrowness of Jameson's stone-like phrase: "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory" (69). Such a reading would not do justice to the texts of the Cuban women I examine—not so much because they do not have a more or less explicit political content, but rather because the term allegory, as Jameson uses it (paradoxically, he also insists that "the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous," 73), is introduced as a unifying, balancing trope that makes possible a kind of reconciliation of the "Freud versus Marx" antinomy (69), understood in Jameson's text as the individual versus the collective. Reconciliation is not a priority in writing the "Matria." On the contrary, its destabilizing accent, its multilineal effect, operates by deconstructing binary oppositions such as *inside/outside* and *subject/object*, which are much more indicative of the patriarchal order confronted by these writers. Their writing's *dispositifs* deconstruct the "anxiety of national identity"<sup>9</sup> that has always haunted Cuban literature, whether written on the island or in exile.

In accordance with their use of these *dispositifs*, I have decided to distinguish each of the four writers selected with an epithet. When I call Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta “The Utopian,” Lydia Cabrera “The Founder,” María Elena Cruz Varela “The Mystic,” and Zoé Valdés “The Trickster-*Pícaro*,” I am putting forward a metaphoric framework that refers to each woman, each writer, in the sense of the image of herself that her work yields to us, but also refers to her writing, to her particular style. And I should point out that I do not know whether the woman is the style or the other way around, because I do not want to follow Buffon’s certainties<sup>10</sup> without questioning them through my alliance with the structuralists headed by Jakobson.<sup>11</sup>

In the chapters that follow, I examine how these *dispositifs* are nourished in Cabrera, while she was in exile, by her use of *intertextuality*<sup>12</sup> with memories of Cubans, white and blacks, all mixed; in Rodríguez Acosta, by *using the master’s tools to dismantle the old trap*;<sup>13</sup> in Cruz Varela, as is appropriate for such a *mystérique* discourse,<sup>14</sup> by the reappropriation of the religious tradition to speak for the Other; and in Valdés, by the *jouissance*<sup>15</sup> of her text. As the reader can notice, Rodríguez Acosta is somehow an exception; her passion, however, was greater than her faith in Utopias, and I give her a rightful place is among these daring women.

Chapter 1 discusses Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta’s feminist utopia, which was inspired by the times in which she lived. I explore the journalism and the fictions of a writer who tried to reconcile feminism with modernity in the dawn of Cuba’s Republic. The coherence and the differences between her fiction and her political writings are the focus of my analysis, based on a close reading of her prose. In chapter 2, I share with the reader the path Lydia Cabrera took to recreate the Cuban nation in exile by journeying back again through “cryptomemory” in a brief book written on a sleeplessness night. Drawing on María Zambrano’s readings and Stephen A. Tyler’s anthropological views, I suggest that Cabrera’s novel approach to the ancestral African legacy of Cuban culture can be seen today as postmodern. Chapter 3 shows how María Elena Cruz Varela’s poetry embodies the mystic and the prophetic function. I use, among others, French feminist theories and John Austin’s theories of “performative language” to uncover the power through her poetics of convocation; like Cassandra, Cruz Varela believes that her clear vision can save her people. In chapter 4, I read Zoé Valdés’s prose as a parody of the picaresque genre. My study focuses on how her style shows the transformation of the Baroque into Neobaroque in Latin America, as described by Severo Sarduy.<sup>16</sup>