

TRANSNATIONAL CUBAN AUTOBIOGRAPHERS: JUAN ABREU, OCTAVIO ARMAND AND LORENZO GARCÍA VEGA

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Abstract: This article focuses on contemporary Cuban autobiography by examining three texts by Cuban intellectuals of different generations who endorse different politics of memory, transcending the traditional opposition between Revolution and Counter-Revolution. From a global perspective, based on the idea of Cuba as a transnational space, these autobiographies are considered as part of a network made of ideological, cultural and economic exchanges between people from both outside and inside the island. Juan Abreu, Lorenzo García Vega and Octavio Armand belong to a large group of Cuban artists who have written autobiographies, considered in the widest sense of the term, in the last twenty years. Since the beginning of the Cuban Revolution, many authors have told their own experiences throughout their lives and have built a specific image for themselves.

Keywords: Cuban literature, Cuban autobiographies, Transnationalism, Lorenzo García Vega, Juan Abreu, Octavio Armand

I. INTRODUCTION

This article is part of a wider project, titled *The Island and its mirrors: The Networks of Cuban Memory in*

the 21st Century, which will offer a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Cuban autobiographical writing by examining a significant range of autobiographies written by Cuban intellectuals belonging to different generations. This global perspective is based on the idea of Cuba as a transnational space characterized by the regular ideological, cultural and economic exchange between the island and the different Diasporic groups (Fernández 2005). In this context, the networks that develop from the different politics of memory, and which transcend the traditional opposition between Revolution and Exile, acquire special relevance. The active role that, according to Aleida Assmann (2012), memory plays in the processes of transition from dictatorship to democracy contributes to the presentation of these autobiographies as loci for the reconstruction of the Cuban Revolution and its consequences.

The central question that this article seeks to answer is: what are the socio-political circumstances and the formal features that help us define Cuban transnational autobiography? The starting point for this analysis is the assumption that Cuban autobiography is part

of the economic, human, cultural and ideological exchanges that make up a notion of the Cuban identity which transcends the geographical boundaries of the country. This idea derives from the contemporary conception of Cuba as “part (actor and subject) of a transnational social space, with material and symbolic exchanges and human networks that link people across time and space” (Fernández 2005). According to O’Reilly Herrera, this vision is justified by the historical development of the island: “Cuba, by nature of its strategic physical location and consequent political and social history, is transnational and multicultural”, and she adds that “Cuba and its history, therefore –including the post-1959 Diaspora– must necessarily be understood in the context of a series of displacements and dislocations” (2007: 4). Although the Cuban Diaspora began earlier, it is in 1959 when it acquires significance as a process characterized by different forms of displacements, suffered by people of several generations emigrating to a variety of geographical locations, and by the Diasporic subjects’ problematic insistence on maintaining a sense of original identity (Weimer 2008).

The present study makes use of two main theoretical frameworks: memory and autobiography. Regarding the politics of memory that emerge from historical processes of transition from dictatorship to democracy (the Holocaust, Apartheid), Paul Ricoeur (2000) refers to the dynamics of “tying and untying”, which presents two distinct forms of manipulation of memory, leading either to accusation (tying) or forgiveness (untying). According to Ricoeur, this dynamics tends to generate mechanisms of reconciliation, giving rise to a “happy memory, a peaceful memory, a reconciled memory”. Aleida Assmann (2012) also examines the adequacy of

these mechanisms in transitional periods: “to forget or to remember”. In this regard, Rafael Rojas (2006) states that the “knots” of Cuban memory emerge from the acts, discourses and ideas which, historically, have set revolutionaries and exiles in opposition, mainly because of their resistance to acknowledge the historical legitimacy of each other. Rojas concludes that the manipulation of these knots is resolved by means of two different attitudes: opposition and conciliation. Taking all this into consideration, this article presents an analysis of several autobiographies in terms of the dynamics of tying and untying, according to their willingness or reluctance to remember or to forget. In this way, autobiographies will be divided into three major groups, which respond to the three main attitudes adopted by these writers: 1) opposition, characterized by the use of memory as a form of accusation and by reluctance to forget; 2) reconciliation, as the recovery of the past becomes a form of redemption; 3) oblivion, through which the conflict is displaced. This analysis will show how the negotiation of these attitudes in the texts may contribute to securing the prosperity of a future democratic transition in Cuba.

Although the chosen texts may be considered as autobiographies, that is, recollections offered as truthful narrations of past events by a first-person narrator, who is also made to coincide with the author and the character (Lejeune), I will problematize the concept of autobiography as applied to these narratives by resorting to more recent autobiographical theories and theories of self-representation (Doubrosky 1977, Amícola 2007, Arfuch 2002). In the 1970s, Philippe Lejeune defended the social and public character of this kind of narration which, according to him, establishes a pact between writer and reader that conditions its compo-

sition and reception as a statement of truth. However, towards the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida argued otherwise, as they reduced self-writing to its structural and rhetorical dimension, contending that its purported truth is merely a fabrication of the author. Finally, in the late 20th century, critics have tended to bring together both theories, accepting autobiography as a form of fiction while acknowledging the effect that the pact of veracity does in fact have on the reader (Loureiro 2000; Pozuelo Yvancos 2005; Sarlo 2005). According to these critics, the identity of the autobiographical fact is not to be found in the events that are narrated, but in the narration of those events *to* a reader. This means that the discursive rhetoric is maintained in the text in the “dialogue with others to whom the text is addressed, turning that discursive construction into an ethical act” of justification, forgiveness, condemnation or persuasion (Pozuelo Yvancos 2005). Close to this view, Franco’s *In(ter)venciones del yo* (2012) studies several Hispanic American autobiographies paying special attention to particular rhetorical forms of self-representation used by the author to persuade readers and highlighting the performative character of autobiographical language. It is this double perspective on autobiography as both a social and a literary event that the present study adopts. The literary analysis proposed here identifies and analyzes the different modes of self-representation present in these texts, their diverse styles (narrative, descriptive, poetic, metaliterary), their themes and symbols, the kind of pact that is established between writer and reader and, finally, their adoption of a private (personal) or public (social) perspective.

II. CONTEMPORARY CUBAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Written from a variety of locations, personal circumstances, ideological positions and conceptions of the genre, Cuban autobiographies published since the 1990s and up to the present are an essential part of the literary corpus of autobiographical writing produced since the beginning of the Cuban Revolution, a corpus which has been substantially increased since the late 1990s. This article analyzes the different ways these authors articulate the networks of Cuban memory by focusing on the ideological stance revealed in their works and how these are expressed through recognizable styles, themes, symbols, images of the self and of the other, and the attitudes adopted towards the reader.

Within the scant criticism on Hispanic American autobiography, it is important to mention Silvia Molló’s influential *At Face Value. Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America* (1991) and José Amícola’s *Autobiografía como autfiguración* (2007). More recently, Sergio R. Franco’s study, mentioned above, *In(ter)venciones del yo. Escritura y sujeto autobiográfico en la literatura hispanoamericana ‘1974-2002’* (2012), which, from a comprehensive perspective, includes the analysis of the autobiographies written by Neruda (Chile), García Márquez (Colombia), Vargas Llosa (Peru), Margo Glantz (Mexico) and Severo Sarduy (Cuba), evidences the interest that autobiographical writing is arousing in scholarly circles.

Most studies on Cuban autobiography have focused on specific works, especially on Reinaldo Arenas’s *Antes que anochezca* [*Before Night Falls*] (1992) (Clark 1999), Eliseo Alberto’s *Informe contra mí mismo* [*Report*

Against Myself] (1996) and Heberto Padilla's *La mala memoria* [*Self-Portrait of the Other: A Memory*] (1989) (Buckwalter-Arias 2010; Weimer 2008; Clark 1999). Although there are a certain number of autobiographies written from inside the island, it is generally the traumatic experience of the Diaspora that has generated the greatest amount of this type of accounts. The Cuban American community is the most productive in this sense, with a large corpus of autobiographical writing (Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Carlos Eire, Pablo Medina) and substantial criticism on it.

However, there are few studies that focus on Cuban autobiographical writing after 1959. Among these, Stephen J. Clark's *Autobiografía y revolución en Cuba* (1999) presents an analysis of four texts written by exiles: Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *La Habana para un infante difunto* [*Infante's Inferno*] (1979), Carlos Franqui's *Retrato de familia con Fidel* [*Family portrait with Fidel: A Memoir*] (1981) Heberto Padilla's *La mala memoria* (1989), and Reinaldo Arenas's *Antes que anochezca* (1992). Clark's analysis considers contemporary gender theories and the political events that have shaped Cuban history from the outbreak of the Revolution to the end of the 20th century.

In the field of Cuban American autobiographical studies, Iraida H. López stresses the importance of the autobiographical essays written by Cuban American women (in Alvarez-Borland 2009). According to López, these fragmentary essays, considered manifestoes, share some common ground, as they present a similar denunciatory tone in considerations about the communal space, the future and the Cuban American identity. Isabel Alvarez-Borland (1998) establishes two groups of Cuban American writers, according to whether they

left Cuba as adults (memory) or as children (post-memory). Hers is a generational study which deals with several narrative genres, and one of her chapters analyzes the autobiographies of Pablo Medina, Pérez Firmat and Virgil Suárez, and some autobiographical essays by Eliana Rivero and Ruth Behar.

The motivation for this article lies in the growing number of Cuban autobiographical texts published since the 1990s, a number which has increased in recent years. This upsurge of autobiographical writing is intimately connected with the expectations of political change raised by recent events (Fidel Castro's old age, Raúl Castro's takeover). The possibility that the regime might be dissolved, opened up or perpetuated encourages the use of autobiographical writing as a form of personal reflection on these historical events. Also, as these texts show, the new century presents itself as an appropriate moment for reflecting on the past and for collecting memories of the historical period that comes to an end (Assmann).

III. ABREU, GARCÍA VEGA AND ARMAND AS CUBAN AUTOBIOGRAPHERS

Within the autobiographies selected, this study identifies and examines the following aspects: 1) the part that these texts play in the cultural and ideological transnational exchanges through which new conceptions of the Cuban identity are being constructed; 2) their relevant role in the reconstruction of Cuban memory and the revolutionary process through discourses of opposition, reconciliation or oblivion; 3) their themes (nostalgia, loss, the triad past-present-future, the public and the private spheres and the spatial

politics of the island); their symbols (in relation to the weather, such as snow and heat; in relation to the cityscape, such as ruins and inner cities; in relation to traditions, such as food and music); their styles (metaliterary, confessional, fragmentary, essayistic); and their specific features within the autobiographical genre (attitude towards the reader, autofiction, memoirs and journals).

Concerning Lorenzo García Vega's, Juan Abreu's and Octavio Armand's autobiographies, it is possible to have a look at some of these aspects. Lorenzo García Vega was born in Jagüey Grande, Cuba in 1926 and was one of the members of Orígenes, the poetic group founded by Lezama Lima, the author of *Paradiso*. He left Havana in the late sixties. His autobiography *El oficio de perder: Memorias [The Art of Losing: Memoirs]* (2004) is really his second autobiography. His previous one, *Los años de Orígenes [Orígenes' Years]* (1979), is a polemic autobiographical essay where García Vega depicts his controversial relationship with other intellectuals in the group and with his leader, Lezama Lima, in Havana during the 1940s and 1950s. While this book was written during his exile in New York in the seventies, *El oficio de perder* was written in Miami at the beginning of the 21st century and García Vega avoids focusing on the time when he was close to Lezama and to the Orígenes' writers. Instead, he sets his speech in his childhood in his hometown, in his youth in Havana and finally, in his old age in Miami.

The poet, plastic artist and journalist Juan Abreu was born in Havana in 1952 and belongs to the same intellectual generation and group as Reinaldo Arenas. His work *A la sombra del mar: jornadas cubanas con Reinaldo Arenas [In the Shadow of the Sea: Cuban Days with Reinaldo Arenas]* (1998) is a detailed account of

his and Arenas's persecution by the Cuban security forces during the seventies and their flight by boat from Mariel Port in 1980.

Octavio Armand is a poet who was born in Guantanamo in 1946. *El ocho cubano [The Cuban Number Eight]* (2012) is a collection of autobiographical articles, some of which had not been printed before. Most of them focus on his childhood in the countryside and the coast scenery around his hometown. Other texts in the book tell us about his experience as an exile in New York and Caracas. As opposed to the previous two writers, he left Cuba as a youth, so that his autobiographical works belong to post-memory.

Briefly, comparing these three autobiographies there are a series of significant peculiarities which can be pointed out. The tone is completely different in each of these works. Armand's tone is mainly nostalgic and ludic using a baroque style. Abreu's words are full of anger and pride, his tone is clearly of complaint regarding Castro's government. It reproduces the claims of the "marielitos" –the Cuban people who fled Cuba from Mariel– and was called "slag" by Cuban official bodies. García Vega offers a highly rich style characterized by self-reflections, literary quotations, persistent feelings of doubts, colloquial words and expressions and a permanent sense of humour. Abreu's explicit rejection of the political situation in Cuba contrasts with Armand's proposal of leaving bitterness and resentment out of his memories. [1] Considering García Vega's text, his opposition regarding Castro is clear. However, his main goal is not the criticism of the regime. According to him, the topic of the Cuban Revolution has already started to become boring.

Besides this, another difference between these texts has to do with the writing process. On the one hand,

Armand's and García Vega's autobiographies are written in old age. These texts are thought and created from a perspective closer to death, which it is not an abstract and remote reality anymore, but a real and close horizon at this time in the life of the individual. It has been said that this is a good time to remember and to think of childhood as a time when everything was possible, as opposed to the time of writing, when everything is coming to an end for the author (Franco, 2012: 171). On the other hand, Abreu's text does not pay attention to his childhood as it is written at a mature age still far from the moment of death.

One of the features that all three autobiographies have in common is their fragmentary speech, which serves to oppose the old and traditional conception of life as a totality. García Vega subtitles his book as "Memoirs", probably in an attempt to justify his iterative, elliptical and twisted style. Nevertheless, "memoir" has to be differentiated from "autobiography": whereas the former refers to a first-person narrator who mainly tells about others, the latter refers to a narrator who tells about himself most of time; that is, in Gérard Genette's terms, a homodiegetic narrator and an autodiegetic narrator respectively (Franco, 2012: 34). Considering this feature of autobiographical writing, *El arte de perder* would be distant from the subgenre of the memoir because García Vega –or his own thinking and writing– is the main character here. Some of the articles included in *El ocho cubano* were written in different periods and collected several years after their first publication in newspapers and reviews. Finally, the extreme situations endured during the composition of Abreu's *A la sombra del mar* are highlighted in the subtitle of the book: "Jornadas". This Spanish word points to a risky period of Abreu's life: it

refers to the days spent close to Reinaldo Arenas, who had gone underground, and to the difficult patch through which they had to go and which changed them forever.

Cuba's representations reach a special ironic tone in García Vega, who dramatically and symbolically names Havana and Miami "Antarctica" and "Albina Beach" respectively. The strong influence that Miami has on the author in this autobiography is clearly seen in the following quote, where it is also possible to perceive a great bitterness: "Es mi última etapa [...]. Es el se acabó lo que se daba, es mi vejez, en esta Playa Albina" [*This is my last episode [...] This is the real end, my old age, on this Albina Beach*] (García Vega, 2005: 34). The author himself links both his current context, where he is writing his life, and his book: "yo soy el autor de una autobiografía albina" [*I am the author of an albina autobiography*] (Aguilera, 2005). [2] Similarly, Abreu rejects the noxious environment of both cities, Havana and Miami, and shares with the reader his nostalgic feelings from the terrace of a bar in Barcelona during a meeting with other intellectuals. Abreu depicts himself as a stranger in Havana, which is like "un gran basurreo" [*a great dumping site*] (Abreu, 1998: 20); at the same time, he considers Miami a new home where Cuban people have to survive but have lost their soul (Abreu, 1998: 31). In spite of this, the existence of Cubans like Reinaldo Arenas allows for a brief reconciliation with his country (Abreu, 1998: 15). Finally, Armand's attitude towards Castro's Government is not really that different, but he uses a different tone or avoids talking about it. He tries to capture part of the Cuban essence through topics such as the Cuban people, nature, tobacco and foods, which he remembers both in his childhood on the

island and in his mature age in Exile. The title, *El ocho cubano*, refers to a specific Cuban aviation pirouette. Through this image, Armand links Cuban symbols and memory mechanisms: “mi vida es una carambola de infinito y memoria. Una acrobacia en el tiempo que me devuelve a la infancia. [...] No todos los números son árabes o romanos. Hay por lo menos uno nuestro. Una cifra cubensis. [...] Un ocho acostado que se perfila en las alturas como una hamaca taína. Un sueño inagotable envuelto en las aromáticas espirales de un H. Upmann. [...] La maniobra criolla ha despertado un sorprendente axioma de la infancia” [*my life is a serendepity of infinity and memory. A spin that takes me back to my childhood [...] Not all numbers are Roman or Arabic ones. At least one of them is a Cuban number. A Cubensis figure [...] An laid-down eight which draws a Taino hammock in the sky. An inexhaustible dream surrounded by the aromatic swirls of a H. Upmann [...] The Creole pirouette has awaken a surprising axiom of my childhood*] (Armand, 2012: 22).

To sum up, this article has sought to explore a group of Cuban autobiographies from an inclusive perspective which considers the conceptual framework of Cuban transnationalism in order to explain the connections established between different Cuban centers inside and outside the island. These autobiographies are studied as part of a network of cultural and intellectual exchanges which problematizes Cuban identity as a notion that transcends geographical boundaries. From this point of view, the ideological and literary analysis of these works contributes to the reconstruction of the individual and collective images of Cuba produced in the past fifty years. Far from providing polarized visions of Cuba and Miami as stable and conflicting ideological positions –Revolution and Counter-

Revolution (Rojas 2006)–, these images offer heterogeneous views on the issue that respond to these writers’ diversity in terms of generation, ideology, linguistic traits and culture. At the same time, from this transnational and inclusive viewpoint, these autobiographies are considered as central to the “global memory” that has developed since the second half of the 20th century, an idea that also sheds light on the connections between these and similar productions by other communities worldwide (Assmann 2010).

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ENDNOTES

- [1] His autobiography starts like this: “Evito el azúcar amarga y amargo –la ambigüedad del término es un sobrecogedor resumen de nuestro devenir– para evocar el sabor del pasado sin sus venenos” [I avoid the bitter, sugar –the ambiguity of this term is an overwhelming summary of our history– in order to evoke the flavor of the past without its poisons] (Armand, 2012: 5).
- [2] García Vega continues his metaliterary and biter game even in reflections on his own autobiography included in a letter to another Cuban autobiographer, Manuel Díaz Martínez (*Sólo un rasguño en la solapa [recuerdos]*, 2002): “viví en New York, dos años en Caracas, y ahora en esta Playa Albina; nunca me he adaptado; mis memorias podrían titularse *Confieso que he tomado* (como dijo Guillén que Neruda debería de haber titulado las suyas), pero tuve que parar el trago, ya que me han dado dos infartos; y, para colmo, nunca aprendí inglés (actitud suicida)” [*I lived in New York, two years in Caracas, and now on this Playa Albina; I have never adapted; my memoirs could be entitled I Confess that I Have Drunk (as Guillén said that Neruda should have entitled his), but I had to quit drinking, because I have had two heart attacks; and above all, I never learnt English (a suicide attitude)*] (García Vega, 1992)

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