

## Cuba's Poetic Imaginary (1989–2020)

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## The 1990s and the End of the Allegorical Teleology

The generation of the 1990s poets established a dialogue with the conversationalist poets of the so-called first generation of the Cuban Revolution, the following generation of *coloquialista* poets, and the Orígenes movement. Traditional Marxist critics, including José Antonio Portuondo, Mirta Aguirre, Eduardo López Morales, and Alberto Rocasolano, viewed long-standing debates between abstraction and figurativism as formalist questions. They believed that as social agents, writers should contribute to making the revolution. Since language was their tool, they saw it fit to strip it of all unnecessary ornamentation. In poetry, this translated into a method called conversationalism, which conceived of poems as social artifacts that should avoid opacity and encourage clarity. Conversationalism sought to correct the hermetic nature of the poetics of Orígenes, which Roberto Fernández Retamar understood as transcendental. In metaphysical terms, poetry thus conceived was akin to an a priori form of experience and stood in strong contrast with the immanentism of conversationalist poetics. Yet, in both cases, there was an implicit desire to transform reality, through the power of naming or the material effect on reality. Instead, the poetics of the 1990s and the first two decades of the twenty-first century were not based on the redemptive or transformational power of art.

Be it a testimony to the anxiety that the lack of a strong directional poetic provoked, or merely a sign of the times, the number of anthologies published in the 1990s exceeded that of any other decade. One of these, *Retrato de grupo* (1999) [Group Portrait], was emblematic for mapping a movement with a cohesive, though unstated, poetic trend. Because it was edited by four of its authors, it acted as a first presentation of the group and the prologue, a poetic manifesto of sorts. Although Víctor Fowler (1960–) and Antonio José

Ponte (1964–), who authored the prologue, refused to offer any hermeneutic clues justifying the selection, their acknowledgment of exclusions spoke of their poetic preferences. What was specifically unique to this anthology was the abundance of experimentalism and the emphasis on language. In this regard, the members of Proyecto Diáspora(s) were all included, except for Carlos A. Aguilera (1970–), who was younger. Also included were Damaris Calderón (1967–), Juan Carlos Flores (1962–2016), María Elena Hernández Caballero (1967–), Heriberto Hernández Medina (1964–), and Omar Pérez (1964–), all writers who foregrounded the conceptual and formal aspects of language. They were heirs of the Language Poets and their experimentalism.

Despite the heterogeneity, young intellectuals from the 1990s had much in common: they distrusted the grand narratives of the left, rejected classical notions of beauty and decorum in esthetics, and welcomed mainstream critiques advanced by poststructuralism regarding various topics such as subjectivity, sexuality, and nationhood, among others.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, we briefly address these common characteristics and then delve into the analysis of a vanguardist trend grouping together certain authors.

The poem “Generación” (1998) by Ramón Fernández-Larrea (1959–) best describes the ethos that defines this generation, as a refusal to inherit the historical debt owed to the 1959 revolutionary martyrs (139). By invoking Roberto Fernández Retamar’s 1959 poem “El otro” [“The Other”], “Generación” rebukes two assumptions: one, revolutionary rebels acted on behalf of their heirs; two, only revolutionary acts were ethical (Fernández Retamar 72). In the words of Iván de la Nuez, these authors were “irredeemably marked as subjects of the hammer and sickle” (118), because they were the first to be formed by the revolution.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while they were haunted by the expectations thrown upon them by the Guevarian trope of the “new man,” they rejected that legacy by deploying a radical anti-heroic subjectivity. “Los golpes” [Blows] by Emilio García Montiel (1962–) describes the idyllic structure of heroism in the form of a memory, whose evanescent nature questions its real existence and points to its imaginary form instead (27). Thus, the blows, whose referents are absent in the poem, hark back to the blows of César Vallejo’s *Black Heralds*, an image of the incalculable misfortunes that humans face. In Calderón’s “Un gusanillo esteta” [The Worm, an Esthete], the poet has become a worm in charge of a Sisyphean task: the creation of verses that won’t have a revolutionary and materialist impact (51).

1 We follow the generational divide and focus on poets who were born roughly between 1959 and 1970 and who lived on the island or in the diaspora.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are our own.

Instead of dying like heroic bards with their boots on, poets will be crushed by a boot.

In the 1990s, the heroic figures that had populated conversationalism gave way to anti-heroic representations: marginal voices whose ethnic, sexual, and spiritual differences had been silenced by the universalizing pretense of revolutionary discourse, exemplified by the trope of the new man. The point of view of these other subjectivities had already surfaced in the poetry of the late 1970s, in the work of Reina María Rodríguez (1952–), Marilyn Bobes (1955–), Efraín Rodríguez Santana (1953–), and Norberto Codina (1951–), to name just a few, and in works of the mid-1980s by Soleida Ríos (1950–), Raúl Hernández Novás (1948–1993), and Ángel Escobar (1957–1997). Other common features of 1990s poetry were intertextuality, a distrust in the symbolic capacities of language, and an erasure of the linguistic notion of register. It is important to note that in this regard, the poetry of the 1990s fulfilled more adequately one of the premises upon which conversationalism had been predicated. In his seminal study about 1960s colloquialism, Virgilio López Lemus had already noted that conversationalism was a misnomer, because it wasn't written in a colloquial language, but rather as a poetic and esthetic elaboration of colloquial language; further, it wasn't dialogical, but rather monological (*Palabras* 11). To reflect the universal character of the Marxian class struggle, poetic discourse from the 1960s sought the universalization of subjectivity and language. To reverse this trend, the poetry from the 1990s chose to represent the linguistic particularities of specific groups and to erase the distinction between poetic and colloquial language. This didn't mean that poets from the 1990s attempted to speak through the voices of the other; quite the contrary – the emphasis was personal, and many poets wished to capture the idiom of their own socioeconomic realities. This was true of Carlos Alfonso (1963–) and the later work of Juan Carlos Flores.

Through an extensive use of intertextuality, Alfonso's "La corriente del niño" [The El Niño Current] levels poetic diction and popular language (15). The elimination of punctuation also erases the distinctions between proper and common nouns, and their power differential. Most specifically, the poem cites different nonliterary sources (newspaper headlines, popular sayings) and plays on the double meaning of El Niño as the meteorological phenomenon and the Christ Child, after whom it was originally named. By leveling all discursive registers, equating subjects and processes, climate change becomes an agent whose actions have the same devastating effects as those of "carbide," the company that caused the death of thousands in the Bhopal catastrophe. Climate change, and the apparently accidental nature of the El

Niño current, has created predictable consequences. In turn, the Christ Child comes back to us through resurrection, and the yearly celebration of its birth is determined by political serendipity (the celebration of Christmas was banned in Cuba from 1969 until 1997). As a meteorological phenomenon, but behaving like children's biological needs, El Niño returns and demands that we pay attention to its incessant political and ecological demands.

The collapse of the Communist Bloc and the ensuing ideological crisis that it produced were determining factors of the cultural turn that occurred in Cuba during the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> An epochal change in Cuban literature took place, as a response to two different cultural malaises generated by an unsuccessful socialist revolution. The first one had to do with the fusion between philosophy and historical materialism and the ensuing transformation of philosophy into science, and the second one was due to the dedifferentiation between poetry and Marxism and the transformation of poetry into politics, as occurred, for example, in conversationalism. A dissenting faction of intellectuals responded in Nietzschean fashion to what they perceived as a cultural calamity, by merging philosophy and poetry.<sup>4</sup> However, unlike Nietzsche, they understood that poetry needed to account for its own failure to respond to the catastrophe of historical materialism, a failed revolution, and stagnant philosophical thought. This group of thinkers was eclectic. Coming from different disciplines, they initially met in the 1980s through *talleres literarios* [literary workshops], the Asociación Hermanos Saíz (for creators under thirty-five years old), the Centro Cultural Alejo Carpentier (founded in 1989), and, most importantly, Reina María Rodríguez's *azotea* [rooftop], a cultural space which, unlike the others, was not under the aegis of the state. During the 1990s all of them, as unpublished poets, participated actively in the literary gatherings Rodríguez organized on the rooftop of her house, a space that came to represent the most effervescent and transgressive poetic scene of the time. Rodríguez served as a mentor for most of these poets, and her own poetics also took a new turn. In what follows, we will briefly describe the pivotal work of this highly awarded poet.

Jorge Luis Arcos (*Las palabras* 23) and Osmar Sánchez Aguilera (40–41), among others, have argued that Rodríguez's first poetic works, *La gente de mi barrio* (1976) and *Cuando una mujer no duerme* (1982), are characterized by lyrical anticonversationalism. These works examined womanhood and

3 This historical reading is inspired by Alain Badiou's own reading of the "philosophical age of the poets."

4 In a similar fashion, the Grupo de Avance and Grupo Orígenes understood that political crises had their origin in profound epistemological crises.

subjectivity through introspection, but were still concerned with the nation, while *Páramos* (1995) and subsequent works deemphasized gender identity, dealing instead with broader philosophical questions articulated in more abstract language, becoming more cosmopolitan and less lyrical. Rather than positing this evolution as the opposition between interiority (or subjectivity) and exteriority (or an extraneous objectivity supposedly derived from philosophical inquiry), it would be more accurate to say that all Rodríguez's work unfolds as an oscillation between the epistemology of the body and that of the mind.

The work of this prolific, award-winning poet reminds readers that the experience of thought has often been considered a source of knowledge superior to that of bodily awareness. It also reminds us that within the patriarchal matrix of gender structure, emotional experience has been equated with feminine experience, which in turn undermines the capacity of the former to be a legitimate source of knowledge. Rodríguez's work shows that exercising the body at the expense of the mind, or the opposite, produces an incomplete experience of truth. In this regard, it makes one of the most radical feminist claims of her times, seeking instead some kind of truth that may allow her to understand the question of being and constantly posing queries regarding the ontological question of what it means to be human:

Quiero ir al ser, (aunque el ser no exista, las palabras no me interesan) quiero tocar el centro, la cosa oscurecida, enturbiada, del centro . . . quiero la muerte de las historias (de la mía) y el lenguaje como un cuerpo avanzando hasta cubrirlo todo – incluso el ser.

[I seek to reach the being (even if the being doesn't exist, words do not interest me) I want to touch the center, that obscured, clouded thing at the center . . . I want the death of histories (mine) and language as a body advancing until it covers it all – even the being.] (. . . *te daré* 55)

Similarly, "Páramos," a poem in the 1995 book *Páramos*, raises this epistemological question by contemplating conscious versus unconscious perception. Beginning as a commentary on Artaud's *Voyage to the Land of the Tarahumara*, through metalepsis it reflects upon the difference between lived experience and the work of memory, noting how our experiences are also shaped by our memories, readings, and imagination. Our knowledge of the world is limited, because our body and intellect fail to make sense of it and because our words – a mediation between the world and us – are an impediment.

"En la arena de Padua" [In Padua's Arena], a poem in the 1992 book of the same name, describes a poetic voice experiencing distant Padua through

a mise en abyme of oneiric representations that fold and unfold into themselves. The poetic voice represents an observer not partaking in the unfolding action: a group of girls throwing a diabolo. In political terms, the observer is passive, and the girls throwing the diabolo still hold utopian dreams. The arena's ruins, despite their barren appearance, are a source of warmth for the observer, yet the visions within the observer's dreams are unreliable. The concrete materiality of Padua's Roman ruins provokes a powerful contrast with the ephemeral nature of those dreamlike visions. Despite their precarity, ruins, like representations, are in a perpetual state of transformation. Thus, when the observer describes how the observer's consciousness is trapped into the folds of representation, the reader also understands that thought and critique, as precarious and uncertain as they may be, are much more productive than ideology. Ideologies in tatters, repurposed ideas, conceptual crosspollination, uncertain knowledge, and dysfunctional spaces in decay populate this epochal work written during the worst years of the economic crisis of the 1990s.

If *Páramos* posits that rhetorical ornamentation should be expunged, *El libro de las clientas* (2005) interweaves two crucial elements in Rodríguez's poetics – sewing and writing – along with references to Martin Heidegger, Roland Barthes, and Virginia Woolf, to push the limits of language. The book opens with “Prendida con alfileres” [Pinned on], a text the author has modified and expanded on several occasions. It establishes a parallelism between her own writing and the work of her seamstress mother, whom she observed as a child, and to whom the collection is dedicated. More than the fabric as a whole, the pieces, leftovers, and remains interest Rodríguez, along with the wound, the scratch, the trace on the body of the act of sewing/writing. Later on, the text offers a suggestive definition of writing: “merodear a través del sonido frufú de una tela que se estampa en la carne” [lurking through the froufrou sound of a cloth that is stamped on the flesh] (7). And then, “¿Qué hacemos si no ensartar? ¿Volver y volver sobre las puntadas de un largo hilván que mientras más pasa el tiempo se zafa, y se zafa?” [What are we doing if not threading? Going back and forth over the stitches of a long seam; the more time goes by, the more it unravels and unravels?] (7–8). These words led Francisco Morán to speak of Rodríguez's writing as a poetics “of the unstitched” (in Rodríguez, “Como de camino”). A sewing imaginary runs throughout *El libro de las clientas*, in poems such as “Sayuelas” [Petticoats], “Hilos” [Threads], “Frufú” [Froufrou], and “Traje de novia” [Wedding Dress], among many others, as does the philosophical realm, in a seemingly impossible alliance that the poet makes real and plausible.

The poets of the 1990s further radicalized the limits of language. Of the poets Rodríguez mentored, Carlos A. Aguilera, Ismael González Castañer (1961–), Pedro Marqués de Armas (1965–), Ricardo Alberto Pérez (1963–), Rolando Sánchez Mejías (1959–), and Rogelio Saunders (1963–) went on to form Proyecto Diáspora(s) in 1993.<sup>5</sup> Their poetics privilege thought, and they articulate conceptuality through three specific operations: counter-romanticism, detotalization, and the diagonal.<sup>6</sup> Their poetics are “counter-romantic” because of their emphasis on thought and the concept rather than the image (Badiou 65). This explains their condemnation of lyricism, which for them was prevalent among some of the anticolloquial poetics of the 1980s, such as Víctor Rodríguez Nuñez (1955–) and León de la Hoz (1957–). A poetry formed by images will result in the esthetization of the idea rather than the production of a concept. In order not to produce esthetics, poetry and philosophy need to be sutured. In one of Marqués de Armas’s untitled poems in *Cabezas* [Heads], there is a counterimage expressing the idea that lyricism is belated: “el hartazgo; gasto fútil . . .” [over-fullness; futile gesture] (13). The excess of words makes the poetic voice feel bloated, but is it actually nourished? These poets believed that it was precisely the excessive reliance on the image in the poetics of Orígenes, especially in the work of José Lezama Lima (1910–1976), which opened the way for Cintio Vitier’s reading of Lezama’s last imaginary era as the infinite possibility of the Cuban Revolution and its poetic hypostasis (396). Thus, it’s not that Diáspora(s) was anti-Orígenes. On the contrary, they claimed a different genealogy of Orígenes, one that had been silenced by the cultural apparatuses of the revolution and which included poets Virgilio Piñera (1912–1979), the last Lezama Lima, and Lorenzo García Vega (1926–2012).

The poetics of these *Origenistas* was favored by Diáspora(s) for two fundamental reasons. First, concomitant with their rejection of esthetics was the rejection of the Western association between esthetics, beauty, goodness, and completion. García Vega and Piñera were known for destabilizing those traditional esthetic and ethical canons by espousing antimoralism

5 The writers Radamés Molina (1968–) and José Manuel Prieto (1962–) were also members of Proyecto Diáspora(s).

6 I’m borrowing Alain Badiou’s rhetorical terminology to describe the poetics of these authors. For Badiou, the diagonal happens when “a statement of the poem wager[s] that a nomination may come and interrupt signification, and from the point of this interruption for a localizable thought to establish itself, without any pretence to totality, but capable of being loyal to its own inauguration” (68). There are striking affinities between the poetics of Proyecto Diáspora(s) and those of Badiou’s “philosophical age of the poets,” including Paul Celan, Osip Mandelstam, or Georg Trakl, key references in the work of Diáspora(s).

in their poetry and tropes of monstrosity and deformation. The predominance of monstrosity as a trope in Diáspora(s) poetics can be seen in the recurrence of rodents and repellent insects which, as in Franz Kafka's and Nicolás Guillén's work, also point to the Deleuzian "becoming animal." In "El varón de los cerdos" [The Male Pig] by Ricardo Alberto Pérez (1962–), the pig is anthropomorphized, which explains why the poet refers to it as a "varón de los cerdos" instead of a boar (83). The poem tells the story of a pig who allegedly knows it won't be stabbed with a knife. The pig's agency results from its being human. Conversely, humans know there's a value assigned to their life based on their worth as *zoon politikon*.

Second, and as a corollary to the rejection of completion or wholeness, there was also a propensity to detotalization – that is, an operation which understands that there is no great whole, but rather an irreconcilable multiplicity (Badiou 67). Embedded in these poets' understanding of detotalization was their fierce critique of nationalism and the essentialist quest for the identarian narration of the nation that had characterized poetry for many decades. While this idea is more clearly expressed in their critical essays, it can be found in the poetics of Omar Pérez, Calderón, Alessandra Molina (1968–), and Flores, whose work shares formal and conceptual aspects with the Diáspora(s) oeuvre. More specifically, the idea of detotalization is pointedly illustrated in Omar Pérez's "Contribuciones a una idea rudimentaria de nación" ["Contributions to a Rudimentary Concept of Nation"], which ironically debunks the notion of cultural identity by mocking *costumbrismo* and the tradition of defining national consciousness through moral vices and virtues (131).

The last conceptual operation under discussion is the interruption of signification, which is also at play in the works of this larger constellation of poets. Through the process of nomination, an utterance may interrupt the signification of the poem, and thus its legibility. By becoming partially opaque to hermeneutical analysis, the poem may be generating another thought (Badiou 68). Calderón's "Sílabas: Ecce homo" alludes to this idea by unsettling the romantic and transcendent symbolism of the bird taken as the faculty to speak reflectively and attain knowledge (109). Intertextual references, including to the poets Guillaume Apollinaire, Ezra Pound, and Juan Luis Martínez, constitute the long poetic tradition that, along with Calderón, questions the possibility of attaining knowledge through rational thought. Their birds are silent, caged, or have a glare that suddenly disappears and interrupts communication. Attaining knowledge requires an introspection into the darkness of human subjectivity. It requires taking risks and

implies an investigation into language and signification. Meaning happens at the expense of absolute clarity and verbosity. In this sense, language needs to be mutilated and excised, even if it means breaking the syllable, which represents the smallest unit with meaning.

The desire to suture poetry and philosophy was also rendered through formal conventions. To achieve that goal, Cuban poets borrowed the haiku form. Like the Romantic symbol, traditional haikus are based on an identification between signifier and signified, and they require a strict stanza based on seventeen syllables or a breath's length. While not always adhering to its three-stanza formulaic precept, Cuban haikus share other attributes with the Japanese traditional form. Both possess a brief and condensed rhythm and are set in indefinite times and places. Haiku is known as the poetry of the noun for its rejection of metaphors, similes, and personifications. Like the Japanese haikus originally conceived by Matsuo Basho, Cuban haikus were antilyrical – that is, centered on the object instead of the poet's sensations. An excellent example is Molina's "Verano" [Summer] (11). This seven-stanza poem defines desire and the way it controls and directs us in a Lacanian fashion, by pointing to the paradoxical blinding aspect of vision. The poem uses the *mise en abyme* of eyesight as an image (as a pattern created by the waves) and an eye on the back of the neck (from which no vision comes) to then transform them into tropes that dispel vision instead of creating it. "Verano" thus points to the power of desire: a force which carries us away, as a boat gets carried away by the strength of the wind.

If conceptual conciseness became key to decreasing state-sponsored cultural capture, non-Western spiritualities replaced the void left by the ethical Guevarian consciousness. Burdened by the crisis resulting from the exhaustion of ideological alternatives, many poets turned to different cultures and spiritualities. Although only a few poets became serious Zen practitioners, many were allured by self-restraint, meditation, and self-reflection, especially as a poetic praxis.<sup>7</sup> A form of neo-Orientalism resurfaced in Cuban poetry, as it had done it in the nineteenth century through Julián del Casal. However, in some works of Sánchez Mejías and Ricardo Alberto Pérez it entailed a parody of Orientalism, and in Carlos Aguilera a critique of totalitarianism; for Sigfredo Ariel, Damaris Calderón, Omar Pérez, and Juan Carlos Flores, on the other hand, it generated a meditative and reflexive ethos.

7 Omar Pérez, for instance, was ordained as a Zen Buddhist monk and was involved with Kosen Thibaut in the creation of the first Cuban dojo (Havana, 1996).

“Cuento Zen” [Zen Tale] by Flores is a seven-stanza poem composed of three different verses that recur in a symmetric fashion by alternating the first verse after every other one to produce a monotonous litany (75). This was the initiation of a recurrent formula that would become a principal trend of his personal style in his *Trilogía de Alamar*.<sup>8</sup> The poem’s hypallage upends the symmetry as the monk, the subject of the poem, is repeated as a direct object. Although he is the actor raking the leaves, his repetitive actions create the state of a miraculous standstill, a continuous effort with no outcome, for it appears to have no subject other than the meditative practice: “barre el bonzo / casi ciego las hojas / El Milagro no puede ver” [the bonze sweeps / almost blind the leaves / Miracle cannot see] (75).

Caridad Atencio (1963–) characterizes her generational group by its “desire to reflect upon the act of writing / the making of writing” (124). Atencio was one of seven Black poets/creators who came to call themselves “El Palenque,” after Basilia Papastamatiu referred to them as such in 2001. They include González Castañer, Rito Ramón Aroche (1961–), Antonio Armenteros (1963–), Julio Mitjans (1965–), Julio Moracen Naranjo (1967–), and Dolores Labarcena (1972–), and their writing, as Roberto Zurbano notes, does not necessarily “prioritize the racial issue . . . although they do not exclude it either, . . . offer[ing] new identitarian sites and preoccupations.” Signaling the postmodern literary strategies upon which their work relies, he contrasts them to Eloy Machado (aka El Ambia, 1940–2019), an “African griot” whose polemic work draws from both writing and orality (117).

Atencio, like most members of Grupo Palenque, shared *Diáspora(s)* philosophical inquiry into reality, a quest carried out primarily through language. This explains Atencio’s experimentation with grammatical and orthographical rules as well as her desire to provoke or to show a feeling of estrangement. Her language is minimalist, condensed, and conceptual. Many of her poems, including “Sitio de Lautréamont” [Site of Lautréamont], “La legis en el texto” [The Legis in the Text], and “Subrayado en un libro de Nietzsche” [Underlined in a Book by Nietzsche], establish a metatextual relation with the act of writing and imply a hermeneutic function.

8 The first two volumes of the incomplete *Trilogía de Alamar* [Alamar’s Trilogy] are *Distintos modos de cavar un túnel* [Different Ways of Digging a Tunnel] and *El contragolpe (y otros poemas horizontales)* [The Counterpunch and Other Horizontal Poems]. Flores died before completing the trilogy.

## The Poets of the Late 1990s and Generation Zero

Reina María Rodríguez divides the poetic production from the 1980s onwards into three periods: the 1980s, the period spanning from the late 1980s to the 1990s, and the period that begins with the creation of the Torre de Letras in 2001 (“Poesía cubana”). Rodríguez describes the second period as a time when “all that is solid melts into the air” – that is, the era that marks the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc and the beginning of Cuba’s “Special Period in Times of Peace.” Drawing on this metaphor, ironically evocative of Marx’s well-known description of capitalist modernity, the first decades of the twenty-first century would then represent the inexistence of the solid – what has vanished, a time of disbelief rather than disappointment. This explains the significant political cynicism that Javier Mora and Ángel Pérez noticed among the youth of the period (12).

The last group, the “turn-of-the-century poets,”<sup>9</sup> shows a generational divide between the authors born at the end of the 1960s and publishing in the 1990s and those mostly born in the 1980s, the so-called Generation Zero, a group of poets who emerged strongly in the twenty-first century. Differentiating between these two groups can become complex. This is especially true in the twenty-first century, when so many writers inhabit a multifarious diaspora.<sup>10</sup> Critics Yoandy Cabrera and Duanel Díaz Infante identify this generation by dispersion. It’s as if Cuban literature had lost its geographical space and underwent deterritorialization, thus transforming what Ottmar Ette called in 2005 a literature with *no fixed residence* into one *without residence*. It also explains why Rafael Rojas has said that for these writers “temporality matters more than territoriality” (141).

Let’s propose a few common characteristics. More women have begun publishing on and off the island, and queer as well as marginal voices have become normalized. On the island, there’s been a decentralization in two different senses: more poets come from the provinces, and poems portray a provincial gaze. Other common features include the presence of the body<sup>11</sup>; the parodic rendering of the Cuban literary tradition; an even stronger presence of intertextuality; experimentalism, performativity, hybridity, and

9 Yoandy Cabrera categorizes “turn-of-the-century poets.” See “Poesía cubana.”

10 López Lemus speaks about the literature of the nineties as a “Cuban literature of open frontiers,” which explains why it is “an impoverishing to circumscribe any panoramic study to works by geographical area based on where they were written, even if referring to an insular space” (“Panorama” 615).

11 Félix Ernesto Chávez López has emphasized the importance of the body for the 1990s generation, which he says “reaffirms itself ‘on’ the body” (68).

transgenderism; a direct or indirect presence of new technologies; and a metaliterary or metalinguistic focus – that is, the questioning of language, writing, and the poetic endeavor. Other traits more intensely present in the works of the Generation Zero poets comprise the erasure of lyricism; the focus on civil poetry; the presence of mass culture; frivolity as a writing strategy; the lived experience of the end of history; the normalization of vulgar and marginal language; the influence of rock, punk, rap, hip-hop, or reggaeton; and, lastly, fatigue engendered by politics and identity. Such tendencies establish these poets as direct inheritors of the Diáspora(s) predicament: “Not in the space of the House of Being, but rather in the Alley of Rats” (Sánchez Mejías 88).<sup>12</sup>

Luis Manuel Pérez Boitel (1969–), who resides in Cuba, is one of the poets from the late 1990s whose work stands out for its reminiscence of the neobarroque, containing echoes of Gastón Baquero (1914–1997), Hernández Novás, and Reina María Rodríguez. At the same time, it is still lyrical, rich in symbolism, images, fabulation, and poetic prose. Body and writing look at one another as through a mirror: “Mi cuerpo enferma como un poema” [My body sickens like a poem] (22).

Nara Mansur (1969–), who resides in Buenos Aires, writes poetry that is especially performative. It is inhabited by a rich feminine imaginary. For instance, through the doubling of the speaking subject in *Manualidades*, a dramatization of a dialog between mother and daughter takes place. They speak, one and then the other, as if they were the characters of a drama within a home. To establish this framework, Mansur rewrites Martí’s “Nuestra América” [“Our America”] and “Los zapaticos de rosa” [“The Little Rose-Colored Shoes”] in an organic way. Few authors, among them Fina García Marruz (1923–2022), have been able to reproduce Martí’s tone as accurately as Mansur. *Manualidades* is a tender and insightful work that questions maternity. Possessing commonalities with Martí’s *Ismaelillo* – in this case, the daughter becomes the center, giving meaning to the mother’s being – it also claims influences and plagiarism in a post(Martian) turn: “Si alguien te dice, Emilia, que estas páginas se parecen a otras / díles que sí que sí que sí que sí que sí que sí / seguramente mamá hizo copy paste, hizo café, te gritó con palabras de otros” [If anyone tells you, Emilia, that these pages resemble others / tell them that yes that yes that yes that yes that yes that

12 Fowler writes that the sliding, the rupture in Cuban poetry, “began at the end of the eighties in the amount of small particles of exhaustion” (12).

yes / surely mom copied pasted, made coffee, shouted at you with other people's words] (87).

Dolan Mor (1968) represents the radical outside of Cuban literature. He resides in Zaragoza, where he published his first book. Cabrera has noted Mor's opposition to the biographical first person, which would explain "his appropriation of other's texts, the 'plagiarism,' the interaction with other figures from the literary tradition and the use of . . . heteronyms" (*Equívocos* 94). *El idiota entre las hierbas* (2010) [The Idiot on the Grass] is one of his most representative books, an experimental, interdisciplinary, and fragmentary work that includes photos and drawings that illustrate the poems, which are attributed to José María Mallosa, a poet created by Mor. One of *El idiota's* poems could be paradigmatic of this deracinated literature that is articulated through questions, but with no answers, as if through acting: "¿Estoy en Praga o estoy en Zaragoza? / . . . ¿Estoy en Praga que es estar a mi vera / en ninguna ciudad" [Am I in Prague or in Zaragoza? / . . . Am I in Prague which is to be at my side / in no city], and: "¿Meta no hay? Partir = / ¿esa es mi meta?" [Is there no goal? To leave = / is that my goal?] (30). An obsession with language and writing characterizes much of Mor's poetry, as seen in *Antología de Spoon Raven* (2018): "Si no existe tampoco la rama donde escribo, ¿entonces qué es la muerte del poema y su fin?" [If the branch on which I write doesn't exist either, then what is the death of the poem and its end?] (32).

Luis Yuseff (1975–), who resides in his native Holguín, is another significant poet. Yuseff's poetry, full of references to Virgil, Petrarch, and Baquero, deploys a lyrical tone that celebrates light, nature, and faraway cities, and even invents heteronyms such as Petrarchist sixteenth-century poet Antonio Broccardo. Yuseff also gives voice to the body, and like early-twentieth-century poet Mariano Brull, he dedicated an entire book to the rose. As Ruben Ricardo Infante has noted, in Yuseff's poetry insularity is an important issue. At times, it's an insularity that runs through the body, a theme that can be intertwined with the desire to leave the country. As Manuel García Verdecia (7–8) remarks, love is a recurrent theme in Yuseff's work, a homoerotic love between men that has been normalized: "Olvidese de la buena Beatrice . . . Y llévase a la orilla de un canal – cualquiera – a ese muchacho que le está mirando" [Forget the good Beatrice. . . . And take that boy who is looking at you to the edge of a canal – any canal] (47).

Oscar Cruz (1979–), who resides in his hometown, Santiago de Cuba, is one of the most emblematic voices of Generation Zero. In Cruz's writing, his province becomes the center. It's a province in decline, in a state of destruction, where revolutionary slogans are mocked and intertextuality, especially

in the guise of irreverent parody, is prevalent. Nicknamed “the cocky guy (*guapo*) of Cuban poetry” (Díaz Infante 14) by Carlos Manuel Álvarez, Cruz writes poetry that can be summarized in these two stanzas: “lecciones de poesía / cada piñazo es un poema” [poetry lessons / each punch is a poem] (92). Carlos Espinosa Domínguez notes that Cruz rejects estheticism, while Duanel Díaz Infante compares him to Flores, affirming that Cruz “has officialized tacky language” (14). In his writing, lyricism is entirely under erasure.

Based on her year of birth – 1980 – Kelly Martínez-Grandal should be considered a Generation Zero poet, but her work is closer to the previous generation’s. Like Mor’s, her work does not allude to the island. She produces an Ovidian poetics, what Claudio Guillén calls a nostalgic poetics (31), a concept that goes beyond the cultural meaning of insularity. At age thirteen, Martínez-Grandal moved to Venezuela from Cuba, but in 2014, she migrated to Miami. *Zugunruhe*, the title of one of her books, is a German word formed by “*zug*, meaning migration or movement, and *unruhe*, anxiety or agitation” (Martínez-Grandal 14). This book offers a poetics constructed with nomad or migrant voices: Odysseus, a rafter, or a Latinx migrant from the US.

Similarly, in the work of another Generation Zero poet, Jamila Medina (1981–), who resides between the US and Cuba, allusions to different parts of the world and migration abound. Her poetry is full of linguistic and topological exuberance; it has some neobarroque tendencies and plays with exoticism (her poems allude to Turkey, Lapponia, and Kamchatka, and transform Havana into *LaVana* or *habanasoul*). As with Mansur, gender is key in the enunciation of Medina’s poetic voice. Its avidness for knowledge is expressed through sex: “en mi vulva pudiera entrar el mundo” [the world could enter my vulva] (*Huecos* 91). The body, love, erotism, and postporn are key themes: “temiendo al daño / la lengua reptante por las paredes del cerebro / buscando un dardo y una cerrazón” (“Palpo/antena/tentaculario” 114) [“fearing the damage / tongue slithering on brain walls / searching for dart and closure”] (“Palp/Antenna/Tentaculary” 115). Postfeminism is also present, as is insularity conceived as excrescence. The metapoetic dimension of writing is key in Medina’s poetry, as a text ensnared in the body, as in “Langustia” [“Ananguish”] or in “Fur(n)ia” [“F(u)or(y)amen”], a question-poem about writing, a corporeal meta-writing, a feminine body speaking from all her residues or folds: “El ejercicio de la escritura como un latigazo en la carne para abrir zanjas y liberar fluidos” (*Anémona* 15). [“The exercise of writing like a whip on flesh to open ditches and free fluids”] (“F(u)or(y)amen” 119).

Through a more elaborated discourse, but also one akin to Cruz's, the poetics of Javier L. Mora (1983–) posit an erasure of lyricism. His is a philosophical, syllogistic, and fragmentary poetics that is especially influenced by Diáspora(s). Mora's first book, *Examen de los institutos civiles*, draws from Carlos A. Aguilera's *Das Kapital*. Like the poets of Diáspora(s), Mora aspires to lay aside the *canon cubensis*: "el correcto Eliseo [Diego] en su Avenida muerta" [the correct Eliseo [Diego] in his dead Avenue] (62), or "el bendito [Ángel] escobar en su puto balcón" [the blessed [Ángel] escobar on his fucking balcony] (64). Although Mora feigns apathy towards language and politics, he also questions them.

The leading and most controversial poet from Generation Zero is Legna Rodríguez Iglesias (1984–), a central figure within twenty-first-century Cuban literature who resides in Miami. As a prolific and voracious writer who practices distinct genres, registers, and styles, she relies on resources such as erudition, syllogism, irony, and playfulness. Her poems, exemplary of Generation Zero's perspectives, are characterized by their antilyricism and boldness, as well as peculiar, somewhat surrealistic or "bizarre" imagery (Vick 7) that adopts a radical rupture with the generation identified with the revolution. "Tregua fecunda" ["Fertile Truce"], for instance, can be read as a rewriting of Calderón's "Instantánea" [Snapshot]. The word "communist" in Calderón<sup>13</sup> is transformed by Rodríguez Iglesias into something vaguer, more imprecise, and distant: "luchó en una guerra / hace más de sesenta años" (18) ["fought in a war / more than sixty years ago"] (19). Yet, the contested party is no longer the father, as in Calderón, but the grandfather – in English in the original – and this gap intensifies the distance between him and the female subject. What is questioned is not the double standard of the character or his animality, as in Calderón, but his surveillance of his granddaughter even after his death, through the sinister and vivid pacemaker which transforms him into a revolutionary *Cedererista*<sup>14</sup> Frankenstein of sorts. But just as Calderón's speaking subject ate the father, like a vulture would, Rodríguez Iglesias's does too; in her case, metaphorically through the writing process, she considers herself, despite her young age, or perhaps because of it, *already* grown up, and proudly opposed to her grandfather's "flores nacionales" (18) ["national flowers"] (19) As a postmodern subject, the revolution of writing is the only one she is willing to accomplish. Despite its frivolous appearance, her poetry shows an intense preoccupation with

13 "Comunista, / pudo haber sido masón o cuáquero" [Communist, / he could have been a Freemason or Quaker] (27), writes Calderón.

14 This term refers to members of the Committees for the Revolution's Defense (CDR).

language, and a residual lyricism, as in “Te pido” [“I ask you”] or in “Verdadera escritor,” a ludic and performative metapoem.

Sergio García Zamora (1986–), who resides in his hometown, Esperanza, is one of the most internationally renowned contemporary Cuban poets. Irony and the absurd stand out in his poetic prose and short texts in the style of micro-fiction (Boccanera 76). García Zamora’s *Resurrección del cisne* (2016) pays poetic homage to multiple writers. For instance, in “Canto a Walt Whitman” the poetic subject and the American poet are “dos soldados que comparten litera” [two soldiers who share a bunk bed] (9); in the poem that gives the book its title, the ruins of contemporary Cuba are mirrored in the modernist ruins in the process of paying homage to nineteenth-century poet Julián del Casal: “Por nosotros ha vuelto como un fénix a defender nuestra ruina con su ruina. Maestro Julián del Casal, el cisne te ve salir a la calle vestido con kimono y comienza a cantar, comienza a cantar por todo lo que ha muerto” [For us he has returned like a phoenix to defend our ruin with his ruin. Maestro Julián del Casal, the swan sees you go out into the street dressed in a kimono and begins to sing, begins to sing for all that has died] (5).

In 1995 Jorge Luis Arcos affirmed that “the poets of the end of the century . . . dr[e]w a new map of the country” (“¿Otro mapa” 128). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this statement needs revision. These poets make up a new country, without residence, and without maps.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The twenty-first century has produced numerous poets, some of whom began writing decades before, and this essay only features some relevant ones. Other voices include Ileana Álvarez, Aymara Aymerich, Joaquín Badajoz, Ruth Behar, Richard Blanco, Gleyvis Coro, Pablo de Cuba Soria, Mabel Cuesta, Alexis Díaz-Pimienta, Norge Espinosa, Ernesto Fundora, Wendy Guerra, Félix Hangelini, Liuván Herrera, José Félix León, Gelsys M. García Lorenzo, Javier Marimón, Moisés Mayán, Lizabel Mónica, Marcelo Morales, Anisley Negrín, Achy Obejas, Yanier H. Palao, Leymen Pérez, Carlos Pintado, Antonio José Ponte, Liudmila Quincoses, Aleisa Ribalta, Milena Rodríguez Gutiérrez, Laura Ruiz Montes, José Ramón Sánchez, Nelsón Simón, and Armando Suárez Cobián.

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