

TRUMPETS IN THE MOUNTAINS

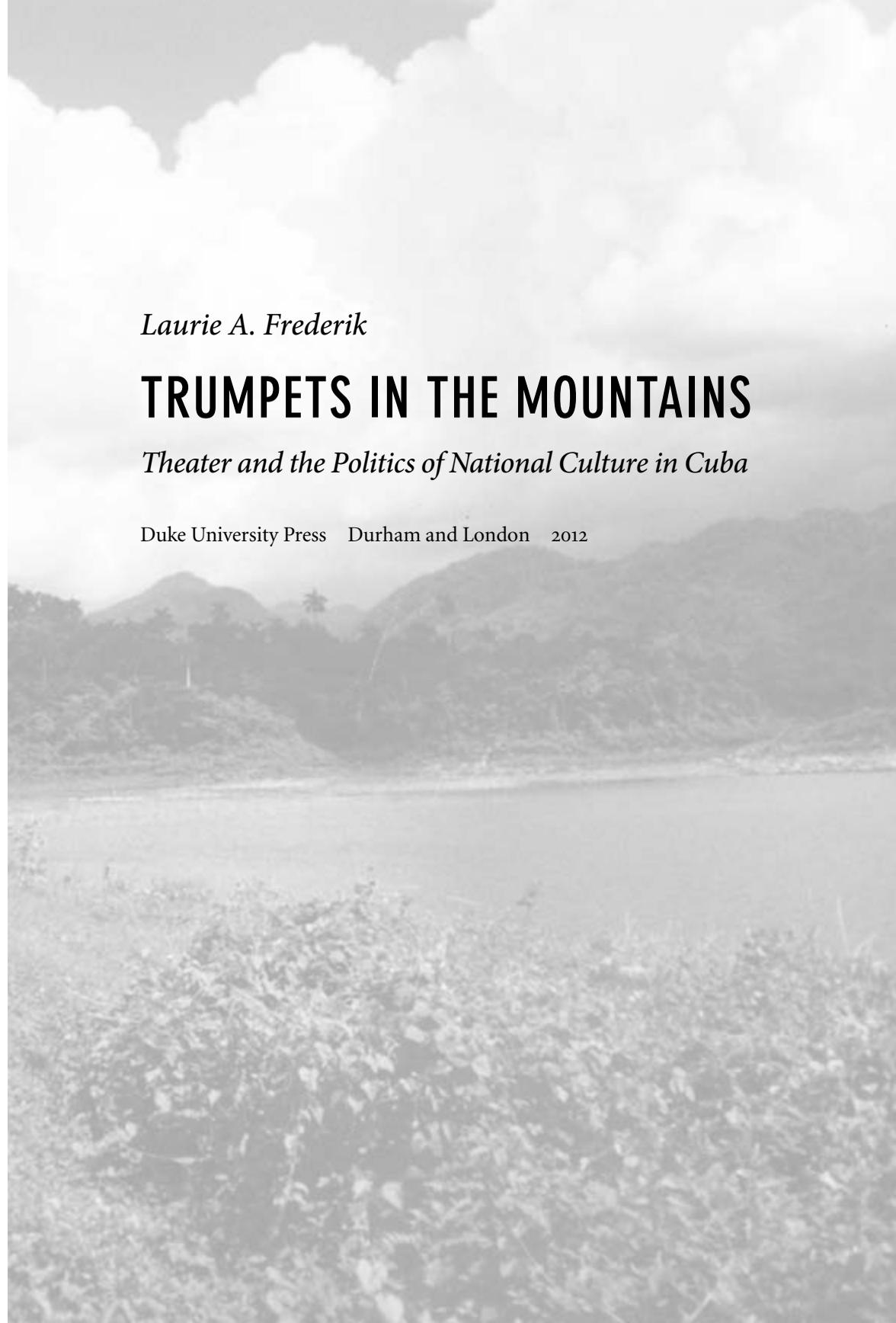
Theater and the Politics of National Culture in Cuba



Laurie A. Frederik

Trumpets in the Mountains





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DEDICATED TO

Nena, la viajera & Mom, la teatrista

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MAP 1. Cuba and Cuban provinces after 1976 (map by George Chakvetadze, Alliance USA, 2011)
 (below) MAP 2. Cienfuegos and Villa Clara Provinces, including Cumanayagua, Manicaragua,
 and the Escambray Mountains (map by George Chakvetadze, Alliance USA, 2011)





MAP 3. Guantánamo Province, including the traveling route for La Cruzada Teatral (map by George Chakvetadze, Alliance USA, 2011)

PROLOGUE

The Red Blood of Cuban Identity

In the spring of 2000, I traveled through Cuba's rural Guantánamo Province on the back of a Russian flatbed truck with twenty-four Cuban artists and theater performers. Holding on for dear life as the ancient machine thundered through rocky mountain passes, hats tied down tight so gusts of wind and dust did not blow them off onto the dusty roads, we took in the *paisaje*—the beautiful scenery of the most distant points from Cuba's capital city of Havana. At the Punta de Maisí, the absolute eastern endpoint of the island, we jumped down from the truck and looked out over the ocean toward Haiti, conscious of our position on the map and of the vastness of the ocean that surrounded the island. An eerie graveyard of shipwreck victims was haunting, reminding us of the ultimate fragility of human life and the risks some take to chase a faraway dream.

The group that disembarked from the truck that afternoon was called *La Cruzada Teatral* (the Theater Crusade), and it trekked—loaded with bedding, cooking supplies, and the group's puppets, costumes, and stage props—into the farthest, most isolated reaches of rural Cuba called the *zonas del silencio* (zones of silence). Considered *inculto* (uncultivated, uneducated), even fifty years after a revolution that promised equality, education, and “cultural development” for all, many Cuban *campesinos* (farmers, once rural peasants) still had never had access to professional artistic performances. Their exposure to the performing arts and to what urban Cubans considered “culture” was limited to local amateurs—guitar trios and folk singers who practiced on front porches, bartering their music for bottles of rum and pork sandwiches at neighbors' *fiestas*. La Cruzada's old truck rumbled through the small mountain communities once a year, performing in local schools by day and in town plazas at night, actors and audience congregating under and around a single spotlight powered by a small, humming generator.

The members of La Cruzada claimed that during the first years of the trek, some campesinos did not understand the difference between the character and the real individual and were confused to see the actors walking around town in their normal clothing without the make-up and puppets that had accompanied them on stage the night before. Disturbed by this, the campesinos were initially hesitant to socialize with the visitors. The children of these isolated caseríos (small village-like communities with a scattered handful of dwellings) feared the small and unnatural-looking puppets even more than the costumed humans, since they had been warned by their parents and local pastors that the colorful figures with large heads mounted on sticks were unnatural, even demonic. However, after ten years of annual mountain crusades, these hesitations and suspicions were gone among those living in the visited areas, even though “selective inattention” still seemed to be their natural mode of behavior for theater-watching—conversing openly during the performance, coming and going, sometimes watching and sometimes not, often dispersing without applause or the usual formalities of exiting a conventional performance space.

In 2000, residents welcomed the itinerant actors by lining up along the narrow roads leading to the central plaza. They sang, cheered, and threw small white flowers. I caught one of the airborne flowers, tucked it into my field notebook, and took in the scene. I was thankful to be able to blend in with the Cuban artists, rolling into each location on what could have been a magnificent white stallion donned with red feathers instead of a huffing, puffing, smoke-spitting, and rusted-out blue truck. Tired travelers were offered tangerines and sweet coconut candy called *cucurucho*. They were hugged and greeted by name. Carlos, whose clown character, Tío Tato (Uncle Tato), was by then a Cruzada favorite, had changed his act entirely to dispel the type of fear demonstrated in the first mountain treks. Instead of entering as a made-up character, he began calmly seated, dressed in his own clothes, and introduced himself as Carlos. He pointed to a big backpack, inside which, Carlos claimed, was his good friend Tío Tato, who happened to be sleeping. He invited the children to “wake up” Tato and pulled out the clown outfit, piece by piece, putting each article on a different child. At the end, Carlos took the clothes back from the children and put them on himself, thus becoming his character and dispelling the theatrical mystery. He applied his clown make-up in the same fashion, pulling out his make-up kit and telling the children it was Tato’s “face.”

Once the conversion was complete, Carlos then asked: “What color is Tato’s face most made up of?” to which the children answered loudly and in unison, “yellow!”

“What does the color stand for?”

“The sun!”

“And blue?”

“The sky!”

“And red?”

“Blood!”

Carlos corrected them on the last point: “No, no, not blood. Red stands for the Caribbean culture.” In this way he subtly sidestepped Cuba’s preoccupation with the struggle, *la lucha*, and the blood shed by revolutionary heroes, which were so prominent in the children’s education. “They always yell *sangre* when I say red,” Carlos told me afterward, perturbed and shaking his head.

Watching Carlos and Tío Tato and listening to the reactions of the children and their parents in the audiences revealed the extent to which politics and metaphors of the Cuban Revolution had infiltrated the consciousness of the population, even those without electricity, television, and radio. In these zones of silence, campesinos relied on their teachers, on the locally appointed Communist Party delegates, and on older residents for guidance and ideological modeling. When La Cruzada came to town, the artists were given temporary cultural authority in the community. They became the town storytellers and familiar national tales were retold in new ways—by enacting fables, legends, and poetic histories.

In Cuba, the color red symbolized blood, war, the Revolution and *la lucha*, and children as young as four recognized the semiotic system set so firmly into place. Although red also symbolized the Caribbean—the perceived redness of indigenous skin, the warmth of the tropical sun setting over the ocean, or the fiery spirit of the culture—the association took a back seat to the all-pervasive propaganda in the schools and mass media calling for sacrifice and “¡Patria o Muerte!” (Fatherland or Death!). In contrast, little American children asked to call out associations for red might come up with red apples and Mom’s apple pie (honesty, security, love), or red cherries and Washington’s cherry tree (“I cannot tell a lie”). Although weakened by national controversy, perhaps some would still point to the red stripes of the American flag (“I pledge allegiance” and “liberty for all”). National narratives are guided by our national symbols and key metaphors and shaped by the political history read to us repeat-

edly throughout our lifetime. The moment when Carlos shakes his head at the children yelling “¡sangre!” emerges as a familiar motif throughout this Cuban story I am about to tell.

Living in the rural regions of Escambray and Guantánamo with the campesinos, their *buey* (oxen) and *gallos finos* (fancy roosters), under the thatched roofs of their small *bohíos* (huts), amidst the mountains and winding rivers and where salsa music and the Afro-Cuban religion Santería were out of place as “too urban,” I learned about a part of Cuba that was not seen in tourist brochures and was not for sale. I would never have understood the complexities of *cubanía* without having woken up, day after day, to its dewy morning sunlight and the sound of campesinos calling “heetoow” to their animals in the fields. Yet romantic and isolated as it may have appeared, the countryside was still a place where red meant blood and revolution, and where “¡Viva la Revolución!” “¡Patria o Muerte!” “¡Salvamos a Elián!” and other political messages were spelled out in white stones and coconut shells placed upon a hill.

*Sonido de trompetas en las montañas
tocan a nacimiento
Siguatepeque como el Tibet, el universo
como un reloj de bolsillo
y mi alma como un jarrón
donde florece el mundo
que mañana no será más.*

Sounds of trumpets in the mountains
marking a birth
Siguatepeque, like Tibet, the universe,
like a pocket watch,
and my soul like a vase
where the earth blossoms,
but that will not exist tomorrow.

*Décima sung by campesino during
interview with actors, Siguatepeque, 1999*

INTRODUCTION: MORE THAN JUST SCENERY

Campesinos in rural Cienfuegos and Guantánamo claim that Havana is not the “real” Cuba, for it is a cosmopolitan city that has always been exposed to international influences. The real Cuba is in the countryside, they argue, where the culture has developed in its own uncontaminated way and where the *pura cepa* (pure stock or root) is still alive and thriving. The president of the National Theater Board, Julián González, also told me this when he met up with La Cruzada Teatral in Holguín for one of its performances. As an urban dweller (he admitted), but also a cultural specialist, he conceded, “Laura, mira,” waving his hand to indicate the green hills lying for miles before us, “*esto es Cuba de verdad, ya te das cuenta*” (Look, Laurie, *this* is the real Cuba, as I’m sure you realize by now). This *Cuba de verdad* (real, true), according to its residents and proponents, is a “pure” and noble face of Cuba whose spirit is not yet “contaminated” by the commercial market in the cities, the discontent of fleeing rafters, or dissident Damas de Blanco (Ladies in White) posing for foreign cameras. Conversely, urban residents say that Havana is, indeed, the real Cuba, and that *todo el resto* (the rest) is *sólo paisaje* (just scenery). After all, Havana is where the majority of Cubans live or want to live; it is “where everything happens.” This popular jab extends to theoretical debates in artistic and academic communities both inside and outside of Cuba. Most stories about Cuban national and cultural identity have been told from the perspective of the intellectual and urban center, neglecting the other voices that have actively participated in conversations about *cubanía* (Cubanness). At various academic conferences between 2001 and 2009, I was bewildered by what some of my fellow scholars had to say; it was as if we had been conducting research in entirely different countries. According to many of these scholars, “Cu-

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bans” (without qualification) during and after the economic crisis of the 1990s had begun to see themselves as active agents in the international system, comfortably participating in the capitalist market. They were firmly on the road to socioeconomic transition and would inevitably proceed to political transition as well. Capitalism was teleologically inevitable; in fact, much of the analyses of this period were referred to as “transition literature.”¹ The *campesino*, or small-town Cubans, were nowhere to be seen in these narratives. The voices presented were urban, racially politicized, and dollar-savvy.²

Trumpets in the Mountains takes the reader far away from the urban and cosmopolitan cultures of Havana and Santiago de Cuba to reveal a face of Cuba that has had great cultural and political significance in the history of the nation. It is the Cuba that thrives in the countryside, in the nooks and crannies of the rocky mountain regions. These seemingly faraway places are referred to as Cuba’s *áreas de acceso difícil* (areas of difficult access) or *zonas de silencio* (zones of silence), for they are far off the beaten track and one must be determined (and in good physical shape) to reach them. A distinct interpretation of national identity is presented through the eyes of these rural folk and the performing artists living among them. Unlike in Havana, rural storytellers and theater people draw creative inspiration from the religious rituals of *espiritismo* (spiritism) and *cruzados* (crossed or mixed religions), not Santería, and they ride on horses and mules, not in crowded buses or ’57 Chevys. Rural folk dance *danzón* and *son* instead of salsa and they rap to traditional *décimas* (improvisational sung verse) rather than hip-hop. In the countryside, artists and local residents assert that Cuba is inaccessible and thus safe from the contaminated *pseudo-cultura* (pseudo-culture) of global culture and capital that seeps into the cities (cf. Adorno 1993). The process that creates pseudo-culture has also been referred to as “folklorization” “folkloricization,” where what is supposedly “authentic” folklore (spontaneously generated and orally passed down) is redesigned and marketed (cf. Hagedorn 2001; Mendoza 2008; Olson 2004). The distinction between pure culture and pseudo-culture was the underlying dichotomy in many ideological conflicts in Cuba during the period of my fieldwork. As one might expect, such divisions were never cleanly delineated or collectively understood, and one of the more fascinating parts of this ethnographic research was to see how Cubans, particularly Cuban artists living outside the cultural capital of Havana, dealt with inconsistencies and contradictions. The comedies and trag-

edies of a society adapting to crisis were revealed during the creative processes of artistic production.

I first arrived in Havana in 1997 during what Fidel Castro termed the “Special Period in Time of Peace,” the severe economic crisis Cuba suffered after the fall of the socialist block in Eastern Europe. Castro explained that it was to be a “special period” rather than an emergency, since it was not acute (at least not yet) and would be temporary, not then predicting ten-plus years. It was not a war or a revolution (or perhaps more accurately, not a counter-revolution); therefore it was to be a difficult but passing phase “in time of peace.” Although the Special Period was still in full force in 1997, it was much improved compared to its direst era: from 1990 to 1995. Memories of near starvation, immobility, and utter desperation were still fresh in the minds of the population, and both rural and urban citizens of Cuba often categorized their social realities as *antes* (before 1990) and *ahora* (now, after 1995). My first impressions of Cuba were similar to those of my academic colleagues. For this initial three-month visit, I stayed mostly in Havana with just a couple of short trips to the cities of Santa Clara and Santiago de Cuba, seeing for myself what Katherine Verdery calls an “economy of shortage” (Verdery 1996). Describing primarily Romania and other socialist countries in Eastern Europe, she explains that an economy of shortage occurs when economic decline, product scarcity, and hoarding (company and individual) produce an imbalance in the access to goods. “It was a scarcity primarily of supplies rather than demand (the scarcity central to capitalism)” (ibid.: 42–43). I observed and experienced the daily blackouts and lengthy queues to buy bread, milk, and cooking oil, and the endless waits for buses impossibly stuffed with sweaty bodies. With a ridiculous level of determination and American obstinacy and used to a country of overabundance, I would sometimes set off on a day-long mission to find the toilet paper rumored to be on sale somewhere in the city or the ever-elusive loaf of whole wheat bread I periodically found in the *shopping* (dollar stores) out in Miramar, which was an hour-long bike ride each way.

I was fascinated by the endurance of Afro-Cuban religions: the historical process of Yoruba-Catholic syncretism, rich symbolism and dynamic ritual performances, mystery and magic of *consultas* (consultations with Santería priests), and powerful drums and music of *toques de santo* (ritual and festive gatherings to give homage to the *orishas*). The loosening of the restrictions on the religious rituals and artistic performances sent synco-

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pated rhythms and dancing bodies pulsing into the street—invisibly drifting through open apartment windows or thrust out into the public spaces. As a dancer and musician, these vibrant and performed elements of Cuban culture were very seductive to me. I spent many an afternoon watching rumba and drumming performances and taking classes with area dance companies in the hopes that my body, trained in ballet and gymnastics, might yield to Caribbean movements and rhythms.

Havana was a captivating city, full of dynamic cultural production, revolutionary ghosts, and political importance, and there were research themes aplenty for patient and persistent ethnographers. However, it was not the only face of Cuba, and my love of the mountains and an interest in nontraditional theater and performance sent me on a quest to find an alternative to the noise, bustle, and internationalism of the city. I began by investigating the different sorts of theater groups based in rural locations, traveling out to see them rehearse and perform, and to talk with the artists. Social life in rural Cuba was similar to most “country” cultures around the world in that it moved at a much slower pace and was far less densely populated than the urban centers. The days began before sunrise, when it was still cool enough to work the land, and ended at sunset, when it was difficult to see much beyond the circular glow of the lantern. One had to walk many hours through mountain paths and pastures to reach a village or even a single family dwelling, which were easily missed if not situated on the main path or if one did not know the subtle landmarks of the trails heading elsewhere. Since rural *bohíos* (rural huts, small rural houses) were built from the land—earth, wood, and palm leaves—they were often camouflaged by the shade of the trees or tucked into the side of a hill. The richness and uniqueness of rural culture was found along those long, quiet walks through the mountains as well as in the peopled destinations. The network of households and the periodic passing of ox carts or men on horseback along the path took longer to map out, but were ultimately just as identifiable as a square community block in one of Havana’s neighborhoods. My understanding of these relationships and their connection to urban cultural practices were made visible, not through architectural proximity, agricultural trade relations, or kinship structures, but along the waving and creative connective lines of theater, music, and storytelling.

I did not set out to study campesinos; nor did I expect them to be such an important part of studying artists and national politics, but the con-

trast between the reality and the mythical conception of the Cuban rural peasant and farmer soon became a central theme in my fieldwork. Concentrated in the figure of the campesino were nostalgia (Boym 2001; Dent 2009; Stewart 1996; Williams 1972), notions of purity and contamination (Douglas [1966] 2003), and the maintenance of cultural authenticity and national heritage (Dávila 1997, 2001; Handler 1988; Handler and Gable 1997; Herzfeld 1982). The relationship between nature and national identity, as well as between nature and tourism (Desmond 1999) greatly influenced the ways in which both intellectuals and everyday citizens were discussing nationalism in twenty-first-century Cuba. Connections to nature and *la tierra* (land) became popular and safe, seemingly apolitical ways to narrate the nation after 1990 (cf. Bhabha 1990; Sommer 1991). The distinctive language of the Revolution (the people's struggle) and the revolutionary citizen (humble, modest, with a socialist consciousness and morality) played a crucial role in the development of notions of Cuba's *pura cepa* and the fight against imperialism and globalization.

The campesino was largely isolated in a geographic sense from the majority of Cuba's population living in urban or semiurban areas. Historically, the campesino had been conspicuously persistent in the popular imagination and in artistic representation; although the campesino's symbolic power had fluctuated over the years. Rural folk were talked about, sung about, and represented in dance and theatrical demonstrations of what was labeled "traditional" life. The stereotypical campesino (also popularly called the *guajiro*, akin to "hillbilly") still made an appearance in modern productions of a prerevolutionary blackface vernacular theater called Teatro Bufo where his character (usually male) continued to appear as brutish, illiterate, and shoeless, in spite of the ubiquitous propaganda about the social advancement of the rural populations after the Revolution.

The image of the campesino as a national icon that also represented a distinct population was conceptualized differently in space and time—the most marked shift in this trope occurring just after Fidel Castro's Revolution in 1959. Although the campesino appeared on a superficial visual level much the same as in the rural imagery of the nineteenth century and early twentieth, people understood the meaning and actuality of the post-Revolution Cuban campesino in a very different way. One distinct example was Carlos Enríquez's well-known painting, *Campesinos felices* (*Happy*

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Peasants, painted in 1938), which could never be mistaken for modern-day rural reality. The long, scrawny, sickly faces, the ragged clothing and destitute surroundings ironically labeled “happy” made a clear statement about the condition of prerevolutionary campesinos. Cubans recognized the difference between *antes* (before) and *después* (after), and so did the campesinos themselves, even if the living conditions for some were not very much better than what they were prior to 1959. Interestingly, the contemporary (albeit contradictory) movement for Cuba’s *pura cepa*, did, in fact, lend a degree of cultural coherence to the campesino image through the generations.

Campesino conceptualizations—both *antes* and *después*—were guided, in large part, by the political maneuverings of Cuban artists and intellectuals, especially those who went out to live and work among the campesinos themselves. The campesino’s renewed popularity developed as the result of an almost universal attempt by urban society to return to what was simple and pure, unsullied by individual greed and capitalist materialism. This shift occurred both out of practical need and ideological idealism. Anthropological scholarship has played a distinct role in the construction of this image, for critiques of colonialism, modernism, and the nation-state seem to leave people no other choice but to construct nostalgic narratives about tribes (or theater groups) not yet “discovered” and the humble folks still living off the land. Given the primacy of urban culture, these rural folk sometimes seem to have become exotic strangers (see Ching and Creed 1997). During times of crisis, society frequently turns to the idea of a past it believes to have been better than its present, often reinterpreting details in the retelling of its history, cleaning it up and making it more attractive. Richard Handler and Eric Gable argue that the images that make up an “authentic” history can actually be represented by “mutually contradictory paradigms of a collective past.” They explain that icons may have contrasting meanings, because they express “the struggle between critical history and celebratory history” (1997:7). The juxtaposition between the narrative of nostalgia (rural past) and progress (urban future) was clearly visible in contemporary Cuba, especially in the 1990s, when a national image was promoted (the noble campesino as idealized representative of the “folk”) in much different form than the image of Cuba that was being marketed internationally and for commercial audiences (salsa music and Afro-Cuban “folklore”). Some tourist packages in Cuba included a trip to an authentic *casa del campo* (rural house) to meet

real-life campesinos and share a meal of traditional rural cuisine. But most tourists were encouraged to remain in the cities or on the beaches, and such *casa del campo* visits were usually set up as a stop on the way to or from other tourist destinations, such as Trinidad, Cienfuegos, or Varadero.

In Havana, the general image of the campesino or *guajiro* often remained one of backwardness and primitiveness, but *habaneros* (Havana residents), along with the theater groups I worked with in the rural areas, also saw the campesino as romantic, humble, noble, intelligent, strong, and resilient: this image served as the basis for their understanding of “pure” Cuban culture and identity. The term *guajiro* was used periodically by the actors I worked with, but in affectionate rather than derogatory terms. Rural performances were raw and gritty, performed for the entertainment of the campesinos themselves and not beholden to the usual aesthetic standards of urban, Western-style, “conventional,” and intellectually judged theater. Theatrical success was measured by attendance, decibel level of audience laughter, and the fact that residents lingered late into the night, grudgingly mounting their horses for home only when it became too dark to see. There were no local newspaper reporters to critique the production based on artistic interpretation, no high-tech set design or identifiable acting technique. There were no theater house managers to pay or national reputations to uphold: the rural audience did not know who the stars actors or directors were, nor did they care. All that was necessary was a relatively flat clearing and space for people to sit, preferably out of the glare of the sun. Rural performers felt fulfilled and successful with their productions until confronted with cultural elites from Havana during festivals and national tours, at which time the “expert” assessment of urban intellectuals rocked the fragile balance of artistic confidence.

Crisis and Creativity: Old and New Revolutions

New artistic genres and styles are often born when a society is undergoing crisis and traumatic transformation; when desperate times force artistic minds to bend a philosophy, to adapt to the new social, political or economic situation, and to paint the picture of reality from different angles. In theater and performance this type of creative surge is especially

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apparent, given the immediacy and ephemerality of the medium: controversial issues can be incorporated on the spot, without waiting for resources, production permissions, publication and distribution. Cuba's moments of social, political, and economic crisis have been frequent, if not constant. Yet while there have been times of physical hunger and material deprivation among the population, the theater has always been well fed, never short of polemic or paradox. The Cuban playwright and sociologist Esther Suárez Durán believes that theater is an art that lives in a permanent state of crisis and that ongoing debate and social tension serve as useful provocations for artists to reflect upon, helping them to "shake out" their axiology and subjectivity (interviewed in González Rodríguez 1996:45). Theater and literary critic Rosa Ileana Boudet agrees, adding that theater lives and creates from within each new crisis (ibid.:44). In 1990, Cuba entered the Special Period in Time of Peace, and Castro spoke frankly to the Cuban citizens:

Debemos estar preparados para las peores circunstancias [. . .] Nos llevaría a un período especial en época de paz si surgen problemas muy serios en la URSS y nosotros no podamos recibir los suministros que recibimos de la URSS, entre otros, los suministros energéticos que son tan importantes, en un país donde ya el nivel de vida y desarrollo se basa en un consumo de 12 millones de toneladas de petróleo. [. . .] ¿Qué pasaría si de repente nosotros no tenemos 12 millones? Tenemos que saber que hacemos si hay 10, si hay 8, si hay 6, si hay 5, si hay 4, tenemos que saberlo. (Fidel Castro, speech printed in *Granma*, March 10, 1990)

We must prepare ourselves for the worst circumstances. [. . .] We might be entering a special period in time of peace if the serious problems in the USSR escalate and we are not able to receive the supplies we now receive from the USSR, among others, the energy supplies so important to a country where the standards of living and development are based on the consumption of 12 million tons of petroleum. What will happen if suddenly we do not have 12 million tons? We have to know what to do if there are 10, if there are 8, if there are 6, if there are 5, if there are 4; we have to know what to do.

And the problems in the USSR did escalate, just as Castro predicted, for soon after this speech, billions of dollars in aid and resources to Cuba were cut off.

Many Cuban artists and intellectuals remember the ideological oppression of 1968–76 as the last decisive crisis to hit their community before the Special Period. The era had various names, including the Quinquenio

Gris (Five Gray Years, attributed to Ambrosio Fornet; see Fornet 2007), *Década Negra* (Black Years), *Años Oscuros* (Dark Years), and also the Pavonato (literally “peacockery,” referring to the persecutions of then minister of culture, Luis Pavón Tamayo). While both times of crisis were serious enough to threaten faith in the intended goals of the Revolution, the two were different in underlying causes and in the populations they affected. During the Gray Years, the state made a focused attempt to suppress dissident artists and intellectuals, homosexuals unwilling to “re-form” themselves, and suspected counter-revolutionaries. In contrast, the crisis which began in the 1990s affected the entire Cuban population—artists, teachers, students, factory workers, administrators, doctors, and housewives, as well as elite Communist Party members. This time, the state’s response to the crisis was not to create hidden labor camps to instill proper socialist *conciencia* into ideological dissenters (UMAP camps and their successors, see glossary and chapter 1), but rather to mobilize the masses to actively defend the integrity of their national culture. The Gray Years marked the Revolution’s ideological crisis regarding ideas of freedom—the artistic community’s calls for freedom of expression and socially critical art battling head-to-head with the collectivism of socialist philosophy and the Communist Party’s claims to speak for the masses. But the catalyst that stimulated the Special Period was economic. The initial suffering and anxiety were based on a marked decrease in the availability of basic resources that affected all segments of society, producing a greater potential for mass resistance. Crisis in the country’s political ideology and national identity were bound to follow. Although different in many ways, both the Gray Years and the Special Period provided artists with new creative impulses, motivated by the confrontation with a dangerous “enemy,” regardless of whether the enemy was considered to be one of *los gusanos* (worms, traitors) within society’s own ranks or *más allá* (farther away, beyond) and off the shores of the island altogether.

Theatrical performance and artistic representation have provided a rich vantage point from which to look at how contemporary Cubans interpret and deal with crisis and social transformation, for dialogue, paradox, and contradiction can be found at every level of production, effectively reflecting the complexity of the larger situation. At the same time, as is well known among the artists themselves, crisis often drives creativity and gives social urgency and political meaning to art. Crisis leads to a rupture between two states of perceived tranquility that opens up a space for new meaning making, as well as for the reinterpretation

or recontextualization of old meanings (see Turner 1969 [social drama, liminality] and Taylor 1991 [theater of crisis]). I look at how these reinterpretations and recontextualizations of meanings in contemporary Cuba are interwoven with political structure and socialist ideology, and I analyze how national images are maintained and manipulated in both official rhetoric and popular consciousness.

Since the Revolution, Cuba has been in a perpetual state of self-defined crisis, of struggle, of *lucha*, and ideologically, these crises have been partially responsible for the defensive stance so pervasive in the rhetoric of daily life. “Ay, la lucha” (Ah, the struggle) and “Hay que luchar” (One must fight, keep up the struggle) have been popular refrains referring to a range of daily problems; from avoiding dissident imprisonment, to frustrations having to do with the workplace, *apagones* (blackouts), waiting for the bus, or even running out of milk. Much has been written about the development of Cuba’s particular consciousness of struggle and *luchar* (see Blum 2011; Bunck 1994; Fagen 1969; Medin 1990; Pérez-Stable 1999, among others). Many writers have traced the phenomenon back to Ernesto “Che” Guevara and his emphasis on “assiduity and sacrifice” in the development of the “new socialist being,” more popularly known as the *Hombre Nuevo* (Guevara 1965). In “Man and Socialism in Cuba,” Guevara laid out the ideals and goals of the new revolutionary and socialist society and the inevitable difficulties along the way. The road is long and full of difficulties, he warned:

We can see the new man who begins to emerge in this period of the building of socialism. His image is as yet unfinished. In fact it will never be finished, since the process advances parallel to the development of new economic forms. [. . .] What is important is that people become more aware every day of the need to incorporate themselves into society and of their own importance as motors of that society. They no longer march in complete solitude along lost roads toward far-off longings. They follow their vanguard, composed of the party, of the most advanced workers, of the advanced men who move long bound to the masses and in close communion with them. The vanguards have their eyes on the future and its recompenses, but the latter are not envisioned as something individual; the reward is the new society, where human beings will have different characteristics: the society of communist man. (Guevara 1965, full text in López Lemus 1980:39–40, translated in Gerassi 1968:392)

Accompanying the *Hombre Nuevo* was the development of a distinct “revolutionary consciousness,” or *conciencia*—a political concept that

would dominate state propaganda and artistic creation for the next four decades. Cooperation, sacrifice, struggle, political loyalty, and dedication to revolutionary heroes and legends became the backbone of national identity. Revolutionary metaphors were created and instilled in ideology and popular discourse, and thus, also perpetuated in theater and art. Regarding artists, Guevara stated:

In the field of ideas that lead to nonproductive activities, it is easier to see the division between material and spiritual needs. For a long time man has been trying to free himself from alienation through culture and art. He dies daily in the eight and more hours during which he performs as a commodity to resuscitate in his spiritual creation. [. . .] Artistic experimentation is invented and is taken as the definition of freedom, but this “experimentation” has limits which are imperceptible until they are clashed with, that is, when the real problems of man and his alienated condition are dealt with. Senseless anguish or vulgar pastimes are comfortable safety valves for human uneasiness; the idea of making art a weapon of denunciation and accusation is combated. (Ibid.:42–43, translated in Gerassi 1968:395)

The new man and the new artist were to be at the frontlines of the revolutionary struggle, standing up for the masses and for Cuba. Freedom was not to be defined according to “bourgeois idealism” as a “concept of flight.” Freedom had to be earned and would come with the successful building of socialism: “Our freedom and its daily sustenance are the color of blood and swollen with sacrifice” (ibid.:48, translated in Gerassi 1968:399).

From Marx to Martí

Economic crisis in Special Period Cuba ushered in an ideological crisis in which questions were raised about the competence of socialist politics and economy, alongside deeper questions about the true nature of cubanía.³ Cuba’s identity after 1959 was based on Marxist and Leninist philosophies, as well as modernization, socialist development, and a particular political consciousness created largely by Fidel Castro himself: a “Fidelismo” created, in part, by thousands of hours of his speeches and their published transcripts. But the events of 1989 proved a turning point in the trajectory of Cuban history. The desperation of the Special Period led to the legalization of the enemy currency (U.S. dollars) in 1993 and an

open invitation to Western tourists. Together, these released a deluge of popular global trends and products into the country, leaving behind a distinctly capitalist flavor (see Corrales 2004; Palmié 2004; Wirtz 2004). A heightened questioning of the socialist political structure ensued, and Cuban intellectuals began to return to a national identity and heritage rooted in culture—expressive and artistic culture, as well as linguistic, idiosyncratic, and quotidian. The Cuban state aggressively promoted a *batalla* (battle) against the imperial enemy to “defend” its identity and to “rescue” cultural traditions it considered to be key. This enemy was no longer depicted solely in terms of a demonic Uncle Sam and the antagonism of the United States government, but as something that was broader, more evasive, more dangerous: cultural imperialism and globalization. The Cuban state sought to defend Cuban culture *de verdad* from this perceived threat.

Throughout his fifty years as president, Fidel Castro repeatedly reminded artists and intellectuals of their crucial role in cultivating revolutionary ideology. As Cubans, they were to be loyal to Fidel and the Revolution. As artists, they were responsible for the moral development of the country and the healthy maintenance of cubanía. “Without culture, there is no development,” Castro repeatedly exclaimed, reminding members of UNEAC (*Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba*, or the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba) that Cuba was immersed in a battle for “spiritual” literacy, which was one of the most noble goals of socialism to date. “We have to create things that have value and that millions of people read,” said Castro, not just a few thousand (Castro 2000:1).⁴ Thus, he called for more cultural specialists to create “valuable” culture and to combat neoliberal globalization:

Hace poco estábamos aterrorizados tratando de saber como podíamos salvar nuestra identidad. Ya no es una lucha defensiva, sino un contraataque. La cultura tiene no solo un valor en si misma, sino como formidable instrumento de liberación y de justicia. Es la manera de inculcar ideas, conceptos, de una sociedad humana, fraternal, solidaria. (Castro 2000:1)

Not long ago, we were terrorized when trying to figure out how we could save our identity. It is no longer a defensive fight, rather, a counterattack. Culture not only has value in itself, but rather as a formidable instrument of liberation and justice. This is the way to inculcate ideas, concepts, of a society which is human, fraternal, and which has solidarity.