

Alberto Sosa Cabanas, ed. *Reading Cuba: discurso literario y geografía transcultural*. Valencia: Aduana Vieja, 2018. 380 pp. ISBN 9788494640728.

Reviewed by  
Toloo Riazi  
University of California, Santa Barbara

Divided in three sections, *Reading Cuba: discurso literario y geografía transcultural* offers a cohesive collection of twenty-first essays that engage different areas such as short story, novel, poetry, psychoanalysis, documentary, gender, and social media. The volume is a selection of papers that were originally presented at “Reading Cuba: una conferencia interdisciplinaria sobre literatura cubana y cubanoamericana” (Miami, 2016). The notions of literature and mobility are at the center of the first section critique. Second section deals with a wide range of disciplines, such as blogs and documentaries. The analytic lenses of the third section mostly focus on the poetry (12).

As stated in the prologue to the collection, the essays of this volume are brought into dialogue with one another through the concept of “culture in the plural” by Michel de Certeau. The essays have a multidisciplinary approach and try to combine different explanations from different disciplines and theoretic approaches, to clarify the concept of *hybridity* and *cubanidad global* (350) in the Cuban imaginary. The dichotomy between the ways in which we distinguish Cuban literature and culture and non-Cuban or Cuban-American one is a crucial point developed by Vitalina Alfonso in “De los Catskills a La Habana, una identidad viajera: acercamiento a la obra de Odette Casamayor.” The idea that Cuban identity and literature are culturally homogeneous has had a long history. Based on such classification, Cuban and Cuban-American literary and cultural production seem to sit inside different contexts of interpretations. Following Ronald Barthes’ theory, Alfonso’s analysis bears relevance to the active role of the reader in the construction of the multiplicity of the text (132). Therefore, the origins of the author, birth place, language, and ideology are not the only elements in making a work essentially Cuban (Alfonso 132-38). Here the idea of heterogeneity enters the picture. In calls to expand the horizons of *cubanidad*, she highlights the cultural negotiations that bring together in common focus the literature produced on the both sides of the frontiers. By the same token, Belén Rodríguez Mourelo in her well-developed article “A Postnational Encounter in Exile” assigns primary importance to the temporality in comparison to territoriality. She traces the transition of Pablo Medina and Daniel Iglesias Kennedy from a national fixed essence to a more global

essence. In other words, the concepts of “fluid” as well as “hybrid” identity frees the mentioned-above authors from the strait jacket of a fixed identity that is either Cuban or American. As the preoccupations of Medina and Kennedy shift to a more multicultural range, “the traditional *destierro*” becomes “a *post-tierro* in the temporal reality of the Twenty-First century” (350) of these authors.

Literature produced by Cubans, Cubans in America and Cuban-Americans provides an epistemological umbrella under which it becomes possible to develop further the concept of *cubanidad*. Eliana Rivero in “Leyendo a Cubamérica: visiones y revisiones” declares that dualism, biculturalism and interlingualism are crucial cards that must be accounted for in the analysis of Cuban-American or “generación uno y medio” (one-and-a half generation), situated in the middle of two generations. Rivero never claims that Cuban writers in America and Cuban-American writers are the same. As she states, being an American with a Cuban heritage makes the author to belong here more than there. However, the Cuban writers in America belong there more than here. It is that *dualism* that makes a distinguish between them. Her analysis supplies an insight into the so-called literature of exile and ethnic literature. The transnational or postnational ties have come to bear a veritable bonanza in different sections of the collection. In the second section, Kenya Dworkin analyzes the Cuban identity among Cubans on the island and Cuban emigrants in Tampa, Florida. Working on two pieces of theater in 1920s, Dworkin states that the Cuban theater and the Cuban-Floridian (Tampa) theater shared a mutual abhorrence for the imperialism and same socio-political concerns. These concerns and interests resonated far beyond the borders of Cuba, engaging in a transnational dialogue between Cuban from both sides of the frontiers. Those pieces were able to “minar las fronteras nacionales y políticas que separaban a los cubanos y su cultura en los dos lugares” (249).

Key to this approach in the studied collection is the idea of in-betweenness that disallows the narrative of separation and absolute isolation of exile writers or writers of “generación ABC” (American Born Cubans). This is what Olga Romero Mestas calls the literature of *hyphen*, written in interstice, in liminal spaces (367). Laura P. Alonso Gallo in “Cuerpos perdidos: Violencia y hambre” looks at the moments when the Cuban diaspora is not sealed off from American values and at the same time is not emerged into it totally. That is the moment of clash illustrated by Gallo in “The Perfect Fruit” by Ana Menéndez, *White Light* by Vanessa García, and “Men Who Punched Me in the Face” by Jennine Capó Crucet. The female body becomes a “site of struggle” in the mentioned stories. In the first story, the silenced body represents the constant conflict between the nostalgia and cultural adaptation in Miami, in the second one it is the incarnation of contemporary violence and in the last one, the body reflects the conflict between the Anglo-American and Cuban system of values.

It is not difficult to trace the line of continuity between the previous articles and “Postmemory, ‘CubAngst’, and the Genetics of Trauma in Cuban American Fiction” by Karen S. Christian. She takes up her plea to distinguish the role of nostalgia and

memory in the formation of cultural identity of Cuban-American writers, second-generation writers and “La generación Ñ” (ethnic Cubans). Our sense of self is shaped not only by “personal history”, but also “the social cultural history in which our personal history is embedded” (Fivush qtd. in Christian 94). Christian, basically, puts into work her analysis of postmemory and CubAngst in two novels: *Brand New Memory* by Elías Miguel Muñoz and *Days of Awe* by Achy Obejas, and draws on Marianne Hirsch’s definition of postmemory based on which it is “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch qtd. in Christian 89). The studied characters are torn between an idealized *patria* and a painful postmemory without knowing to where they truly belong. The author of the article expands her analysis on the relationship between the aforementioned authors and *patria* that they themselves have never experienced firsthand (92). Thus, the stories, told and untold, taboos, fears, and memories become part of the in-between and multifaceted identity of the characters that discover “a fluid, hybrid identity involving transnational ties and movements between the U.S. and the *patria*” (100).

The volume in the second section focuses, *inter alia*, on the representation of the “other” in the Cuban literature, theater, and *costumbrismo*. Damaris Puñales -Alpízar in “La cultura oblicua: ingredientes asiáticos en el ajiaco cultural cubano” puts under scrutiny the figure of Asian, particularly, Chinese in the Cuban literature and culture based on Edward Said’s groundbreaking work on Orientalism. The article unfolds the figure of Chinese from the angle of exoticism, social class, adaptation of cultural, religious as well as linguist practices. Susannah Rodríguez Drissi’s article attempts to provide a first step toward explication of the presence of the figure of Arab in José Martí’s literary production, especially, *Abdala* in which “call upon youth’s potential for political action finds release” (205). As indicated by the author, the figure of Arab supplies the imagery of “freedom and courage” for Martí (202). Drissi makes interesting comparative cases between *Abdala*, Arab Spring and Cuban struggle for independence. Lilianne Lugo Herrera in her analysis of *Repique por Mafifa* and *Ropa de Plancha* is looking for techniques and mechanism by means of which the female black body is not anymore, an object of sexual desires. By breaking the established codes, the stereotyped figure of black woman not only seeks to score against the cultural dictates of femininity, she also strives to assert autonomy over her own life. While most of the articles of this collection can work separately, I believe that a similar theme is linking the different sections of the book. Ideas such as otherness and cultural negotiation amplify those on which the first section is built.

It is not the feminine black body the only one that seeks to revendicate her silenced voice. Lina Jardines del Cueto’s article puts a new stamp on the role of blogs, as the new literature, in rearranging social representations of the Cuban immigrants, often affording them new degrees of voice. Her analysis shows that the blog is a useful mean

for Cuban immigrants to record and document their trajectory to the United States (270). This virtual medium is a functional space where “los inmigrantes cubanos reclaman reconocimiento y obtienen agencia” (276).

Besides the aforementioned themes, the rest of the articles in the third section focuses on the poetry. Ezequiel Moreno Escamilla’s study endeavors to unfold the impact of Blas de Otero’s stay in Cuba on his last phase of poetry. Michel Mendoza highlights the role of body in works of Kenneth Goldsmith, Severo Sarduy, and José Kozer and Cabrera Ortega’s study is a “crítica sobre la crítica” (312) that explores the major analytic criterion for the collection of three poetry anthologies.

*Reading Cuba: discurso literario y geografía transcultural* widens the scope of Cuban imaginary instead of restring it. As suggested throughout the volume, *transculturality* should be the axis of sociological analysis of Cuban and Cuban-American literary and cultural productions. Postnationality or the involvement of more than one country (336) trespasses the fixed national boundary in an effort to highlight the moments of overlapping and distinction at the same time. The book gives us so many threads to unravel and explores the Cuban identity as “una ciudadanía *posnacional* étnica y culturalmente heterogénea” (Rafal Rojas qtd. in 336).