

September 2016

# Poetic Illiteracy and Cultural Insularity: The Crisis of Cultural Nationalism in Virgilio Piñera's *La Isla en Peso*

Stephen A. Cruikshank  
*University of Alberta*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/tqc>

 Part of the [Latin American Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Cruikshank, Stephen A.. "Poetic Illiteracy and Cultural Insularity: The Crisis of Cultural Nationalism in Virgilio Piñera's *La Isla en Peso*." *The Quiet Corner Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 1, Iss. 2, 2016.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/tqc/vol1/iss2/4>



**Poetic Illiteracy and Cultural Insularity:  
The Crisis of Cultural Nationalism in Virgilio Piñera's *La Isla en Peso***

*My country, too young to define yourself!*  
- Virgilio Piñera

**Prologue: Towards a New Reading of Illiteracy**

Transnationalism poses a problem with cultural nationalism. The prefix of the term "trans-" jumps cultural fences, hops national borders, and leaps over language barriers. Therefore, to identify oneself based on a particular nation or culture becomes a task that is challenged by the momentous dissemination of other cultures and nationalities that run rampant across borders, zones, and territories unrestrained by the vast economical and technological ties engaged in the efforts of globalization. If twentieth-century Latin American poetry—distinguished by the avant-garde and the neobaroque poets—saw the task of aligning literature to the burgeoning development of post-colonial national identities, then the task of the modern Latin American poet and critic today is by all accounts defined by the struggle to rearrange nationalist ideologies and questions of cultural identity based on the imposing measures of transnationalism and globalization. This requires an erudite finesse that takes into account the desire of poets to explore national identities through the use of aesthetic verse while acknowledging the implausibility of fully inaugurating such a task. Indeed, under the scope of recent studies, the descriptions of nationalism as a "cultural pathology" (Larson 145), a "psychosis" (Bhabha 7), and as "imagined" (Anderson 6) have left nationalist objectives of literature under the rigid scrutiny of being too decadent, ideological, or imaginary. Consequently, modern readings of literature have been pressured to take into account—in the words of Néstor García Canclini—"globalization as a process of fragmentation and recomposition," thereby reordering "differences and inequalities without eliminating them" (3). Based on this premise, literary criticism can now be expected to reevaluate how to theorize national differences and cultural inequalities according to the context of global communities and current reassessments of "hegemony". It is in this respect that this article is written— an attempt to recomposit the culturally fragmented work of the poem *La isla en peso* (The Whole Island) originally published in 1943 by the twentieth-century Cuban poet Virgilio Piñera.<sup>1</sup>

Assessing Piñera's work according to the transnational shift in recent literary and cultural debates in Latin America uncovers what the cultural theorist Abraham Acosta describes in his work *Threshold of Illiteracy: Theory, Latin America, and the Crisis of Resistance* (2014) as a "postnational torsion," (3) an inherited contradiction of cultural nationalism permeated through popular social fields such as *mestizaje* and transculturation. For Acosta, this *torsion* of identity politics has opened a new "threshold" of cultural and literary studies that leads to a "deadlock of resistance" (6). Cultural and literary resistance finds itself at a "deadlock" because the transition from national into subaltern interventions has proved incapable of superseding the boundaries of hegemony as a way to promote cultural difference. According to Acosta, hegemony has always been activated by "the notion of the popular or the people wherein is ascribed the essential and desired attributes that make the people a People, that is, an imagined community constituted by

---

<sup>1</sup> For the duration of this essay I will use the English translations of the *La isla en peso* found in Mark Weiss' 2010 translation "The Whole Island". However, for the sake of consistency I have chosen to keep the title of the poem as mentioned throughout the paper in the original Spanish.

its cultural opposition to a state that oppresses the populations that make it up [...] that is, neither of the two [the subaltern nor the nation] results in any positive designation" (4). Based on such stipulations, subaltern resistance in literature redirects attention towards the "imagined community" that it is resisting against and thereby reverts the argument of cultural identity back into the hegemonic discourse that created its subaltern status in the first place. Therefore the modern literary scholar is left with the predicament of restructuring cultural differences while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of cultural alterity contingent within the design of hegemony— all in all, not an easy task.

The critical literary and cultural dilemma posed by the predicament of cultural resistance is addressed by Acosta and defined as a textual "illiteracy," that is, "what emerges when a regime of sensibility encounters 'zones of indistinguishability' between identity and difference, inside and outside, proper and improper, truth, and error, and so on" (11). Basically put, "illiteracy" does not represent an inability to read words themselves, but rather a disruption of one's critical reading by exposing the antagonism and contradiction of hegemonic resistance advocated in writing. To this extent, I argue that the key feature that seems to expose this contradictory "torsion" or "illiteracy" in literature, as exemplified by Piñera, is realized in the motif of exile. In the case of Piñera, despite the poet's Cuban nationality, his poetic search for belonging is revealed in a sentiment of national exile and cultural insularity. His distanced or insular connection with the nation-state remains the single greatest unresolved antagonism of his Cuban identity, a constant impediment to his "cubanness," otherwise known as his *cubanidad*. By being irrevocably distanced from his ability to identify with Cuban nationalism Piñera's work *La isla en peso*, I contend, demonstrates an early existence of a transnational crisis in Cuban culture and exemplifies the insertion of textual "illiteracies" into twentieth-century Latin American poetics.

For the most part, *La isla en peso*, like a prophetic letter, seems to have uncovered the "threshold of illiteracy" now being discussed about nearly seventy years after its publication. Indeed where modern cultural scholars such as Acosta see a cultural "deadlock" Piñera in a similar fashion has described a cultural "insularity". Both descriptions are synonyms of cultural stagnancy resulting from the ideology of national imaginaries. Piñera's publicized homosexuality—which for the duration of his life caused him to struggle against social *machismo* and later with the heavy political intolerances of homosexuals promoted during the sixties in Cuba—can without a doubt be seen as a subtext of his insularity. As a homosexual, Piñera existed within a marginalized socio-cultural position that is reflected in the culturally counteractive themes of his poetry. Piñera's exilic tone of his poetry gives the impression of one speaking into Cuban culture from the outside. Exiled, Piñera's works present a queer take on Cuban culture that, in a radical manoeuvre of that time depicts a country shrouded by national imaginaries of *cubanidad* and the consequential intolerances to cultural differences, particularly that of homosexuality. For Piñera, it is therefore possible to be exiled even while living within the borders of one's own country.

Exile is always politicized nationally. If, for example, we consider Piñera's sense of exile to represent what Sofia A. McClennon describes as a subject "cast out of the present of his or her nation's historical time," then the discourse of national hegemony is without doubt the rusty clockwork of this expulsion— "a suspension of linear time" (2). Rather than be defined by their historical progression, the exile is defined by their temporal stagnancy and cultural agitation. To be in exile is therefore to have one's cultural values ignored politically and negated nationally. Any form of resistance is propped up as a disorderly conduct working against the conglomerate and unitary national future of the state. The exile, like Piñera, is therefore accused of being

different, distinguished, and diverse— differentiating themselves from the so-called temporal progress of national history, from the political national subject, and from the ideology of the "imagined" national community. It is in this way that we may recognize the insular sentiment of exile described in *La isla en peso* to represent a textual illiteracy. Piñera's exile, within national borders, poetically exposes the ideological contradictions of postcolonial identity in a national hegemonic system that feeds on the very ideals of postcolonial difference to legitimate its own power. In this manner, what Piñera reveals in *La isla en peso* is that the state of Cuban culture cannot be written autonomously, only illiterately counter-produced as a "zone of indistinction between identity and difference" (Acosta 10).

### ***Ajiaco*: An Illiterate Reading of National Recipes.**

Before assessing Piñera's poem itself along with its impending illiteracies, a reevaluation of the cultural theories of the Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz is first required. Indeed it is difficult to address any evaluation of Cuban culture, without acknowledging the early contributions of the scholar known as "Cuba's third discoverer" following Columbus and Humboldt (Firmat 16). Esteemed primarily for his contributions to the understanding of Cuban identity based on the ethnology of transculturation and the ideology of *cubanidad*, Ortiz's work has in a large way transmitted itself into the reading of twentieth-century Cuban literature. The historic continuity of his writing—by this I refer to his tendency to repeat the ideologies of the nineteenth-century writer José Martí—encouraged literature to be utilized as a medium for exploring cultural values as a coming-to-age process, finalized in the identifiable nature of *cubanidad*. According to his 1940 essay "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad" [The Human Factors of *Cubanidad*] Ortiz describes this latter condition as "la peculiar calidad de una cultura, la de Cuba" [the peculiar quality of a culture, that of Cuba] (Rojas 77). In this same essay Ortiz reapplies Martí's national project of *Nuestra América* (1891) into the ideals of *cubanidad*. Like Martí, Ortiz advocates for an ideology of Cuban culture whereby racial categories are eliminated in favour of a homogenous national identity. One is not black, white, or *mulato*, but simply "Cuban". For Ortiz, cultural homogeneity is then idealized in the metaphor of the Cuban soup concoction known as *ajiaco* which is created out of different food elements that are thrown together into a single "unitary" meal.

The long-standing connection of Cuban poetry to the themes of cultural nationalism is in many ways indebted to Ortiz's metaphorical critique of *cubanidad*. Ortiz opened a door for cultural debates in Cuba that encouraged poetry to be read along the lines of a chef analyzing the quality and flavour of Cuban *ajiaco*. Good poetry is interpreted as that which provides good unitary flavour; literature in this way becomes directly associated with the objectives of national taste. This was of course promulgated on a political level with the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and Fidel's latter infamous "Speech to Intellectuals" in 1960 that condemned any artistic works within Cuba that were not created for the Revolution. If we consider that Ortiz promoted the artistic expressions of a single national identity, later it can be said that Fidel promoted the national expressions of a single artistic identity. Considering the latter, what is at stake is the direct converging of socio-politics with literary aesthetics. At this point, any valid reading of literature that surpasses an allegorical interpretation of national socialism would require, in the words of the cultural critic Neil Larson, "to take the nation(al) out of history altogether and to locate it within an unconscious territory of subject formation" (152). In other words, such a reading under the scope of transnationalism would require an escape from the

literary confines of cultural nationalism and a reassessment of literature under more non-essentialist lines.

A different recipe rather than the national platter of *ajiaco* is needed in order to read the works of Piñera. Rather than concoct an *ajiaco* out of a history of transculturation and consequently promote Cuban nationalism through the conglomeration of racial differences, Piñera's poetry urges for the lettered power of postcolonial subjectivity to be validated according to its hybrid continuity of differentiation rather than its allegorical assertion of the nation. Being that the national *ajiaco* contradicts Cuba's cultural realities—i.e. *nacionalismo* versus *negrismo*—the progression of identity politics in Cuba therefore urges for the formation of subjectivities prone to a "different taste"—hybridity not homogeneity; queered not nationalized. A re-reading of Cuban poetry along these lines radicalizes the role of literature and cultural identity and in turn partners with the subaltern/exile's objective which, as John Beverley asserts, is "to *universalize* their singularity" (Italics in original; 41). *Cubanidad* is in this way not *concocted* like an *ajiaco* at all, but rather *constituted*; cultural identity is less a matter of cultural becoming, and more so a habitual condition promoting what Jon Beasley-Murray denotes as "the illusion of transcendence and sovereignty" (ix). It is illusive to the extent that the dialectical relationship of hegemony realized between state power and subaltern resistance is less a reflection of created power structures and more so the habitual condition of power that always-already exists within any discourse of cultural politics.

Although the dynamics of hegemony—one power above the other—remains at play in culture, what is truly at work here is not a game of resistance and domination, but what Beasley-Murray confirms as a cyclical production of social order "secured through habit and affect" (ix). Hegemony is the illusion of an unnatural power imbalance that is in fact both a natural and inevitable series of cultural habits and affects. The work of habit and affect on culture defines what Beasley-Murray has called condition of "posthegemony". Concurrent in this condition is the work of the "multitude" which philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's have described as the "innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity" (xiv). Posthegemony implies that the multitude takes prevalence over the national subjectivity of the people (*el pueblo*). Cultural identity in a posthegemonic setting therefore no longer requires to be assessed according to the *cause* of hegemonic interpellation, but rather rethought as the *affect* of multitudinous interactions. In following, the question arises now as to how such multitudinous interactions form the habits and affects that for so long have been utilized as the ideological building blocks of cultural nationalism. It is under such conditions that I now turn to Piñera's poem *La isla en peso*, reading his subaltern struggle as a queer poet not as an opposition to hegemonic power, but as an affirmation of the poetic illiteracies voiced in his exile.

### **Illiteracy and Insularity**

Piñera's early poetic work *La isla en peso* was written in a time where the notions of *cubanidad* hailed by Ortiz were being promoted through the neobaroque writings of the *Orígenes* journal group directed by José Lezama Lima. Piñera himself belonged to this group for a short period. As Mark Weiss notes in the introduction to his recent English translation of *La isla en peso*, Piñera, after assessing his position with *Orígenes*, chooses to jump off the neobaroque wagon, opting instead for a more pessimistic approach to Cuba's cultural reality. According to Weiss: "Piñera, secular and skeptic, had drawn a line, and a bit more: he had denied not only the semi-mystical understanding of *cubanidad* of his fellow *orígenistas*, but also the possibility of

any national self-definition" (9). To a certain extent, Piñera's objective of writing *La isla en peso* can be considered as a deconstructive project that aimed to undo the discourse of cultural nationalism addressed by the *Orígenes* group. He, likely more than any poet of his time, wrote 'illiterately' against the post-colonial assertions of national culture being condoned by the majority of his neobaroque contemporaries. Piñera's work is therefore known for both violating and "queering" the space of twentieth-century Cuban literature. Furthermore, recent literary critics, according to Jesús Jambrina, have begun to not only reassess the work of Piñera's day, but also admire the intrepidity of Piñera's now classic texts: "las nuevas generaciones han comenzado a repensarla en el contexto post-revolucionario de los noventa y los dos mil, usando su sentido irónico, sarcástico, pero también humorístico, de juego y de agudas reflexiones históricas" [the new generations have begun to rethink of in the post-revolutionary context of the nineties and the twenty-first century, using his ironic, sarcastic, but also humoristic tone, and his playful and witty reflections of history] (my trans; 24). Perhaps too early for his time, Piñera's work aimed to disrobe the "national cloak" of Cuba's postcolonial culture. Where others saw a cultural revolution, he saw cultural misery; where others saw national change he saw history recycled; and where others saw cultural movement and creativity, he saw stagnancy and insularity. To summarize: while other's sought to *read* into Cuban national culture, he seemed unable, *illiterate*.

The first few stanzas of Piñera's lengthy poem *La isla en peso*—generally the most cited and well-known—sets Piñera's rather insular and damning tone concerning Cuban culture:

The curse of being completely surrounded by water  
condemns me to this café table.  
If I didn't think that water encircled me like a cancer  
I'd sleep in peace.  
In the time that it takes the boys to strip for swimming  
twelve people have died of the bends.  
When at dawn the woman who begs in the streets slides into the water,  
precisely when she's washing a nipple,  
I resign myself to the stench of the harbor,  
to her jacking off the sentry every night  
while the fish sleep.  
A cup of coffee won't dispel the fantasy  
that once I lived in edenic innocence.  
What caused the change?

The eternal misery of memory.  
If a few things were different  
and the country came back to me waterless,  
I'd gulp down that misery to spit back at the sky. (13)

Although many themes are addressed in this poem, including specific references to indigenous and Afro-Cuban culture, the motif of memory—the "eternal misery"—particularly seems to set the poem within a climate of both historical and cultural apprehension. Beyond merely his own temporal life, Piñera's agonizing memory is connected to the long-standing history of the island. In this manner, the "edenic innocence" he speaks of references both his previous "innocent" impression of Cuba as well as the origination of the nation itself. Concerning the latter, Piñera

makes a clear connection to the colonial history of Cuba in the poem found in a later stanza when he alludes to the ceremonial dance known as the *arieto*: "In this country where there are no wild animals./ I think of the conquistadors' stallions mounting their mares./ I think of the forever lost sound of the *arieto*./ I need to try to make sense of the first carnal contact in this country, and the first death" (15). The *arieto* dance belonged to the indigenous Siboney people of Cuba who were virtually extinct by the end of the sixteenth century. By connecting the *arieto* with "conquistadors" Piñera seems to implicate Cuba as a Miltonesque paradise lost that has historically, since the Spanish conquest, become a place of consistent cultural degradation and death. Thomas F. Anderson notes that the poem's "disconcerting images of misery, frustration, and racism similarly serve to demystify the stereotypical image of the Antilles as a tropical paradise" (32). In order for Piñera to "demystify" the edenic vision of Cuba, the coinciding dialectics between innocence and evil and life and death are exposed. The reader is left to question what type of "evil" and "death" is occurring here? What is lost? Piñera, a staunch atheist, is clearly not referring to a religious assertion of Cuba's "sinful" nature. Rather, what seems to be bluntly exposed in his words is the lasting wound of colonial trauma that despite any neobaroque or postcolonial mending has never fully healed.

Piñera is not one to think according to the ideology of the times. Ideology, for Piñera reflects the fantasy that "a cup of coffee won't dispel" (13) and the attempt to recreate a paradise already lost in Cuban culture and damned to the eternal memory of the past. In many ways, Piñera's national scepticism is used to target the neobaroque ideologies of the likes of Lezama Lima whose poem "La muerte de Narciso" (1937), published six years earlier than *La isla en peso*, situates the reader in the poetic process of mythological creation and the allegory of national creativity itself. Piñera in fact declares *La isla en peso* to have been written with the purpose of embodying "el antilezamismo" [antilezamism] which Thomas F. Anderson describes as "a term that he coined to denote his deliberate rejection of the poetic discourse of Lezama and other *Orígenes*" (42). History, for Piñera, is therefore not revealed as something that can be renovated like the baroque, but is condemned to an eternal memory of failures and cultural convolution that cyclically turns back upon itself.

For Piñera memory, inasmuch as it reflects the eternal misery of Cuban history, likewise reflects the "curse of being completely surrounded by water" (13); the *eternality* of history is reflected in the *insularity* of the island. For this reason Piñera is exiled, not outside of the island, but within it. Ironically, he is exiled on the island he lives on and marginalized in the community he belongs to. As such, he feels not a weight (*un peso*) motivating him to occupy Cuba, but rather *un peso* obliging him to identify beyond it. I would insert here that it is not an 'escape' that Piñera advocates for either. Although he is known to have spent various years as an exile living in Buenos Aires before the outset of the Cuban Revolution his writing does not seem to be addressed in a bitter tone like one wishing to leave but rather is presented in a very realistic, sceptical, and critical tone like one wishing to re-examine their place and role within their culture, which after such examination, Piñera concludes to be parochial and isolated. Under the weight of both history and insularity Piñera exhorts: "There's no way out! There's no way out!/ Life in a funnel crusted with rage" (25). Cuba's present is therefore always condemned to struggle with its past and the nation is always condemned to regress to its history. The past cannot be hidden under the novel creation of postcolonial identities, but consistently unveils what Piñera terms "the cloak of decadence" (23). Indeed if Ortiz saw the capability for a *transculturation* of Cuban culture, Piñera then seems to propose Cuba to be victim to a state of temporally *repetitive* *culturation*. Cuba has not *trans*-lated, *trans*-ferred, nor *trans*-gressed any

cultural frontiers or time. Rather the Cuban is an insular exile tied to the "eternal history" of the island:

Eternal histories or the history of a day beneath the sun,  
eternal histories of these lands that bring forth buffoons and blowhards,  
eternal histories of blacks who were  
and whites who weren't,  
or the other way around or any way at all (23)

This is not to say that Piñera saw the state of culture to be hopeless, but rather as an issue (an "illiteracy") to be addressed under a less essentialist lens, one that seeks to uncover history rather than camouflage it in the postcolonial assertions of *cubanidad*.

### **Queering the Illiterate Space**

The Cuban scholar José Quiroga aptly observes that Piñera's poetry challenges the "redemptive" principles of Lezama Lima's Neobaroque: "Piñera wrote *La isla en peso*, telling Lezama, in coded language, that the density and weight of the Neo-Baroque was not the way to redeem the island from its damned condition, and that the formal complications of language had the effect of hiding a circumstance that the poet and his language needed to undress" (280). Quiroga is mindful of his words here, particularly the notion of "undressing". For Piñera, the body and the nation are very much connected, a union which Quiroga also sees to be a subtext for the poet's homosexuality: "But culture becomes, in [*La isla en peso*], a coded word that means homosexual, and homosexuality is what structures the question as to the cultural damnation or redemption of the republic" (280). To undress the body for Piñera can mean nothing less than undressing culture, and given Piñera's public testament as a homosexual—that years after writing *La isla en peso* would be the cause for intense harassment following the Revolution—the latter can mean nothing less than the disrobing of his own identity, stepping nude and open-skinned "out of the national closet". For Humberto López Cruz, this stripping function of Piñera's work is primarily achieved through the image of water described as "reconocimiento geográfico de la insularidad hiriente" [the geographic recognition of the wounding insularity] (198). Water, which ironically implies a cleansing function—one where "at dawn the woman who begs in the streets slides into the water,/precisely when she's washing a nipple" (12)—is what for Piñera likewise washes off the imaginaries of Cuban nationalism. If clothes are stripped off to reveal a body and *machismo* is stripped away to reveal a queer identity, then for Piñera water in a similar fashion washes/cleanses to reveal the true, uncontaminated island. The irony of course is that the island cannot escape the water that "encircles [Piñera] like a cancer" (12). To be washed nude becomes merely the memory of the dirty clothes that cannot be fully removed from the Cuban people in the same way that water cannot be removed from around the island. However, as if to pose an challenge to his insularity, his testament "We have all stripped naked" (15) reminds the reader of Cuba's inevitably exposed and unconcealed history. To the extent that culture, for Piñera may aim to cover bodies and surround the island with water, history—"the eternal misery of memory"—consistently reckons to strip it naked and lay all its inhabitants bare in front a racist and patriarchal past.

The motif of skin also becomes a strong metaphor for Piñera's queer embodiment of the nation whose so-called "confusion," causes "a people [to] escape their skin [that ...]/ tries to cover its light with palm leaves,/ with fronds carried carelessly by the wind,/ in a fury skin covers itself with parrots and pitahayas,/ absurdly it covers itself with somber tobacco leaves/



and the remains of shadowy legends" (29-31). Piñera formulates a dialectic that once again alludes to the edenic lost paradise whereby concealment and nudity reveal the two sides of interpreting Cuban culture, one as neobaroque and the other as cursed—the former ideologically written as "imaginary" and cultured, the latter textually read as "illiterate" and queered. For Piñera, "skin" is confronted in two ways: it is either uncovered like Piñera attempts to do by reifying the imagining of national ideologies or it is covered up satirically by various natural icons of Cuban culture such as "parrots," the Caribbean "pitahaya" fruit, "tobacco," and "legends," the latter which arguably infers to the legendary figure of José Martí. Piñera, in this way, figuratively seeks to uncover, disrobe, and undress the ideological Martían tolerances of Lezama Lima and the neobaroque *Orígenes* group that he fell out of favour with. It is also here that we see that Piñera's motive is not to escape Cuba geographically, but to escape Cuban culture ideologically. To confront Piñera's work in this context obliges the reader to assess not only the perspective of Piñera himself, but the purposing of writers such as Lezama Lima who are judged to "clothe" the island with the mythological interpretations of history and ideological assertions of culture. That is to say that Piñera, through the use of "queering"/"disrobing" the text, calls our attention to the textual illiteracies being written into the culture of his day. In a rather ironic fashion then, Piñera must "queer" his own text by disrobing cultural nationalism as a way to address the queer labels of culture "covering" the island. In this sense, if we are to consider Acosta's notion of illiteracy as "the points and zones of contact, exposure, and indeterminacy that are at once constitutive of determinate spaces and, at the same time, irreducible to them" (11), then Piñera's queering of Cuba's national space is exactly that—an illiterate position that while birthed from within the island, challenges the cultural insularity of the same space. Queered, Piñera defines what it is to be Cuban—different, innovative, revolutionary—all the while exposing the illiteracies that emerge in the process of such culturally definitive projects.

### **Piñera's Trans-Illiterate Vision**

How do the poetic illiteracies exposed in *La isla en peso* fit into the current discourse of transnationalism? According to William I. Robinson the concepts of transnationalism and transnationality "first became popular in the 1990s to denote a range of practices and processes brought about by the increase in social connectivity across borders and that cannot be defined through the traditional reference point of nation states" (214). These concepts have been particularly useful to studies of immigration by exposing cultural similitudes and common networks of social relations between an immigrant's homeland. What transnational studies achieves in this respect is a global, rather than nationally-focused outlook into the manner and processes of cultural relations—a necessary response to the advent of globalization. Although Piñera never advocated for a "transnational" literature per se, what is realized through his work is a distinct hesitancy to associate literature with Ortiz's notion of transculturation. Ortiz, wanting to avoid the category of "acculturation" uses the latter neologism to describe the unified process of Cuban culture exemplified in the array of indigenous, African, and European migrations to the island and their consequential formation into a single cultural identity. Piñera avoids this nationalizing project at all cost. One cannot deny the cultural differences evidenced throughout Cuban society, but neither can one account for such differences to be subsumed under a common "*ajiaco*" national identity. Piñera then, in the early twentieth-century, prognosticates the declining status of cultural nationalism that modern theories of transculturation have recently begun to address.

Piñera's notion of *insularity* reflects negatively upon the nationalist tone of *unitary* and in doing so leaves the reader with the doubt and skepticism of what national "culture" means and where one's cultural identity is located. Piñera, in this way, can be considered to have pre-established a "trans-illiterate" vision of literature as a lettered power. By this I refer to an attempt to not only expose the textual illiteracies of writers of his time, but to open the discourse for developing a new "illiterately-well-read" culture, that is, a culture well-advised in the ambiguity existing between cultural difference and national identity. This is what Beasley-Murray likewise attempts to accomplish theoretically through the notion of "posthegemony". Therefore, at the same that Piñera exposes poetic illiteracies in his poetry, he seems to advocate for a transnational evaluation of these "illiteracies". This is to say that *La isla en peso's* insular tone does not seek to abandon the island in its solitude, but encourage a rereading into the "eternal histories" (23) of Cuba and re-orientate one's role in culture accordingly.

To exemplify this novel manner of reading into Cuban history—what can be considered as an attempt to develop a *transilliterate* rather than *transcultural* approach—Piñera targets the poetic use of Greek mythology that is often referenced by his contemporary Lezama Lima. In many ways, to read Piñera ought to be done so as if reading a challenge to Lezama Lima's neobaroque mysticism. For example when Piñera writes "The ancient sadness of Cadmus and his lost status:/ on a tropical island the last red drops of a dragon's blood/ stain the cloak of decadence with imperial dignity" (23), the mythological figure of the Greek hero Cadmus, is figuratively placed against Lezama Lima's infamous interpretation of Narcissus. The primary difference between the two mythological representations is seen in the relationship between temporality and creativity. Lezama Lima's poem "Muerte de Narciso" resembles the attempt to re-create a myth in order to reveal the capacity of history to give way to novel transformations; in the same way that the poet is able to re-interpret Greek mythology, so too can Cuban history reinterpret culture. As Daniela Evangelina Chazarreta describes, Lezama Lima's verse can be interpreted as "la búsqueda de nuevos horizontes de expresión" [the search for new horizons of expression] (10). Such is not the case with Piñera who uses the myth of Cadmus to reflect on the "decadence" of one's so-called heroism or dignity. Like Cadmus, whose heroic exploits are known to have ended when he and his wife are doomed to transform into serpent-like creatures, accursed by Cadmus' actions of killing a dragon that was sacred to Ares, the god of war, Piñera sees a similar "temporal curse" placed upon Cuban culture. Lezama Lima's transformative optimism of history is therefore not the message found in *La isla en peso* inasmuch as is the decadent and temporal damnation of the "weighty" tropical island. Piñera, using the same mythological structures of Lezama Lima, therefore draws the reader away from neobaroque creationism and to the impugning decadence of Cuban culture that is portrayed as a "cloak" attempting to cover the eternal un-coverable history of colonial violence.

Lezama Lima's attempt to mythologically re-advert Cuban culture towards the ideal of a postcolonial new beginning is for Piñera not only improbable, but an instable project. Like Cadmus whose heroic attempts were ended in failure, surely the post-colonial projects of Lezama Lima and the *Orígenes* group were bound to a similar path. It for such blatant comparisons that writers loyal to *Orígenes*, such as Cintio Vitier, saw Piñera's poetry as a "extraño hueco sin fin que nos ataca [strange gap without end that attacks us] (80). What is perhaps clearer now in the age of globalization is that Piñera's work was less a reckless "attack" against *Orígenes* and more so a literary criticism against their essentialist vision of culture. Where they saw culture to be transcended into Cuba, Piñera saw the Cuban nation to be transcended beyond the borders they were attempting to (re)create. In the end, as Piñera foresaw, although *Orígenes* may have opened

up a space for a revolutionary boom of literary production throughout the Americas, its project was limiting, decadent, and nationally imagined. Piñera's *La isla en peso* however sought a different course for culture by attempting to reevaluate this space by exposing the crisis or "insularity" of cultural nationalism in Cuba. In doing so we may summarize that Piñera arrives, at a rather early stage, upon Acosta's "threshold of illiteracy" and can furthermore be seen as an early advocate of Beasley-Murray's interpretation of posthegemony considering that his work promotes a transnational reading that extends beyond the ideological assertions of *cubanidad* and the social dialectics of hegemony.

### Bibliography

- Acosta, Abraham. *Thresholds of Illiteracy: Theory, Latin America, and the Crisis of Resistance*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014.
- Anderson, Benedict R. *Imagined communities : reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Anderson, Thomas F. *Everything in its place : the life and works of Virgilio Piñera*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006.
- Beasley-Murray, Jon. *Posthegemony : political theory and Latin America*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2010.
- Beverly, John. *Latinamericanism after 9/11*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2011.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The location of culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *The Cuban condition : translation and identity in modern Cuban literature*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- García Canclini, Néstor. *Consumers and citizens : globalization and multicultural conflicts*. Minneapolis : Minnesota UP, 2001.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Multitude : war and democracy in the age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Larsen, Neil. *Reading north by south : on Latin American literature, culture, and politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- López Cruz, Humberto. *Virgilio Piñera: el artificio del miedo*. Madrid: Hispano Cubana, 2012.
- Jambrina, Jesús. *Virgilio Piñera: poesía, nación y diferencias*. Madrid: Verbum, 2012.
- McClennen, Sofia A. *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2004.

- Ortiz, Fernando. "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad." In *Ensayo cubano del siglo XX*, edited by Rafael Rojas, 74-79. México: Fondo de cultura económica, 2010.
- Piñera, Virgilio. *La isla en peso/ The Whole Island*. Trans. Mark Weiss. Exeter: Shearsman books, 2010.
- Quiroga, José. "Virgilio Piñera: On the Weight of Insular Flesh." In *Hispanisms and Homosexualities*, edited by Sylvia Molloy and Robert Mckee Irwin, 269-285. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1998.
- Robinson, William I. *Latin America and global capitalism: a critical globalization perspective*. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.
- Sommer, Doris. *Foundational fictions : the national romances of Latin America*. Berkeley: California UP, 1991.
- Vitier, Cintio. *Diez poetas cubanos: 1937-1947*. La Habana: Orígenes, 1948.



Photo credit: Ilan Sánchez ©2016.