

Intertextuality and Identity in *Guantanamera*: Expressing Cubanness through Song

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Abstract

Music and other aspects of popular culture are often used to address issues of national and cultural identity because of their capacity to stay current and to speak to concerns that lie outside of national history. In the present study we examine the popular Cuban song, *Guantanamera*, and how it is used in a movie of the same name to construct and identify national spaces. While its most popular verses are those based on the poetry of José Martí, the song belongs to a long musical history of improvisation. Thus, *Guantanamera* can be used to evoke the past, describe the present and suggest a future for the island of Cuba.

Introduction

Music has always served as a means of connecting the past and the present. Rhythms, lyrics, themes, and melodies stand as natural bridges of the chronological continuum and help keep tradition alive. Nationalism and identity often tie themselves to the pride associated with famous rhythm associated with a particular area of the world. For instance, the tango and its exuberant dance, lyrics and melodies have placed Argentina on the map. The characteristics linked to the sentiment and feelings associated with the tango mirrors the national sentiment of a country forged into greatness by its immigrants who arrived to “Hacer la America [Build America]” and out of nostalgia for their countries of origin and most importantly their loved ones who invented this world-famous rhythm. Music, especially popular music, frequently embodies issues of national identity that distance themselves from the national history, since it bases its history in the popular memory that allows it to stay current and fashionable. Nabeel Zuberi (2001) echoes this argument in his study of the English transnational popular music:

“Popular culture is a site of struggle, albeit on an uneven field. The field of popular music reveals a much wider, more variegated terrain of popular memory, national belonging, and identification than the apparently singular theme-park nation of a place for everyone and everyone in its place.” (p. 4)

John Hutchinson (1994) argues that a national history must be built upon its history of splendor and suffering:

Typically cultural nationalists establish informal and decentralized clusters of cultural societies and journals, designed to inspire a spontaneous love of community in its different members by educating them to their common heritage of splendor and suffering. They engage in naming rituals, celebrate national cultural uniqueness and reject foreign practices, in order to identify the community to itself, embed this identity in everyday life and differentiate it against other communities (p.124).

Hutchison affirms that a nation cannot participate in the world without previously establishing its identity: “The recovery of national pride is a prerequisite for successful participation in the wider world” (p.129). Homi Bhabha (1990) contributes to this cultural conversation about nationalism and identity by stating that the creation of national identity based on a national history exposes a dilemma because cultural historians merely try to define a work in progress: “This turns the familiar two-faced god into a figure of prodigious doubling that investigates the nation-space in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority because it is caught, uncertainly in the act of ‘composing’ its powerful image” (p. 3).

A study of *Guantanamera* reveals how this song has been used by Cubans to construct a cultural emblem of national pride that spans many spaces and times. The present study mirrors Zuberi’s main goal for his own analysis:

I am less concerned with music as a reflection of national history and geography that how the practices of popular music culture themselves construct the spaces of the local, national and transnational. How does the music imagine the past and place? How does it function as a memory-machine, a technology for the production of subjective and collective versions of location and identity? How the technique of sounds, images, and activities centered on popular music create landscapes with figures? (p.3)

In what follows, we consider the use of the popular Cuban song, *Guantanamera*, to construct and identify national spaces. After addressing the complicated cultural and intertextual origins of the song itself, we explore the use of the song in the 1994 Cuban movie of the same name.

A History of *Guantanamera*

Because of its worldwide popularity, no song more readily identifies Cubans and Cuban-ness than *Guantanamera*, which continues to do so, in the words of the historian María Argelia Vizcaíno (1998), like a national anthem. The music and the refrain to *Guajira guantanamera*, as the earliest version of the song was known, were written and popularized by Joséito Fernández Díaz on his Havana radio program sometime in the 1930’s. However, the melodic roots of the song stretch into the previous century, and this earlier title identifies the song’s musical genre: the *guajira*. The *guajira* itself is derived from the *son*, a style of popular dance music that originated in the Oriente province of Cuba and is said to be the foundation of modern salsa (Roy, 2002). Played a little bit slower than the *son*, the *guajira* is identified by its arpeggiated guitar or piano parts.

In addition to representing a musical genre, the word *guajira* is also a slang term for a girl from the countryside. Thus, Fernández Díaz was said to have also sung the song as *guajira holguinera* or *guajira vueltabajera*, etc., until settling, perhaps for sentimental reasons,

on *Guajira guantanamera*. During the radio show, Fernández would often improvise lyrics to the beat of the music, denouncing injustices and reporting the latest gossip (Rodríguez-Mangual, 2002). In the late 1950's, Julián Orbón, popularized the song using Fernández Díaz's melody and refrain, but substituting the lyrics with verses taken from José Martí's collection of short poems, *Versos sencillos*, which were written in 1891 (Vizcaíno). A student of Orbón took the song to New York, where it was recorded in 1966 by North American folk singer, Pete Seeger. Seeger's recording of *Guantanamera*, as it became known, led to its universal popularity, for which Seeger was awarded the prize of the Order of Felix Varela in 1999.

The song continues to be sung and recorded today in and outside of Cuba. In particular, it was a signature song of Celia Cruz during a musical career that spanned over six decades and included both her life in Cuba and her exile in the United States. Known even after her death as the Queen of Salsa, Cruz helped transform *Guantanamera* into a symbol of national pride--the song of the Cuban *diaspora* and exile. *Guantanamera* is such a part of the Cuban and Cuban-American musical tradition that it has been rendered in many different kinds of ways, without losing its ability to bring Cuba to mind.

Guantanamera is usually heard in a bolero version, although Cruz's trademark rendition of the song was of the salsa variety, complete with bongo drums and trumpets instead of the customary guitars. The melody and the refrain remain the same, but to this day the lyrics are often changed at the singer's whim. Perhaps since the refrain and the melody by themselves serve to identify the subject or singer as Cuban, artists are free to change the lyrics of the song in order to represent other characteristics of identity or to tell other stories. In this way, the song is both traditional and contemporary at the same time. Thus, *Guantanamera* connects with or imagines the past and at the same reflects the on-going struggles and experiences of the present (Zuberi, 2001) for those who identify themselves with Cuba.

Nonetheless, it is significant that the most enduring version of the song has at its heart the poetry of the great Cuban national figure, José Martí. Internationally renowned as an important poet, Martí is more notably considered the figurative father of Cuba's independence. Born in La Havana in 1853, he became involved in the Cuban independence movement as a teenager. As a result, he lived most of his life in exile, much of it in New York City. When he returned to Cuba to take part in the independence struggle, he was killed in 1894 during his first encounter with the Spanish Army, only three years after writing his *Versos sencillos*.

As both poet and revolutionary, Martí continues to inspire. In Cuba's independence from Spain, both Spain and Cuba claim Martí as their heroic figure. Fidel Castro has called him a revolutionary hero, while exiled Miami Cubans regard him as a symbolic hero of their fight for a Castro-free Cuba. Thus it is particularly fitting that a song with Martí's words identifies both island Cubans and Cuban exiles more than 100 years after his death.

Intertextuality and Identity

The film *Guantanamera* is both a road movie and a dark comedy. *Guantanamera* is the title of the film and is also the place where the story and the song that narrates the movie begin. Although widely funny, it is critical of the Cuban situation and particularly of the "special period" that began after the Soviet Union pulled out of the country. It was the last major work by the Cuban director, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, who died shortly after the film was released in 1994. The movie tells the story of two very different *guantanameras* or young girls from the town of Guantánamo. The first is world famous Cuban opera star Yoyita

(Georgina) Travieso who returns to her hometown after fifty years abroad. The second is her younger niece and namesake, Gina, who is left to bury her aunt after she dies unexpectedly in the arms of an old boyfriend, Cándido. Thus, *guantanamera* identifies both one who stayed and the one who left after 1959, creating the geographically separated family common to Cubans everywhere (Grenier & Pérez, 2003).

The death of Yoyita sets the stage for Gina's husband, Adolfo, a low-level government funeral industry regulator, to orchestrate an overly complicated and senseless scheme to transport Yoyita's remains across Cuba in a cross-country hearse relay. Though Alea supported the Cuban revolution until his death, he consistently used his films to expose bureaucratic hypocrisy and parody overt nationalism. The hapless funeral procession in *Guantanamera*—which Adolfo hopes will turn him into a national hero—becomes instead a satire of modern Cuban society, where “gasoline for one's decrepit Russian-made sedan is a coveted luxury and the national currency ranks third in desirability behind American greenbacks and bartered fruit” (Smith, 1997). In the background, tour guides and radio broadcasts promote the agricultural successes of the revolution while the travelers find little more than cigarettes and coffee to eat along the way. There is a decided lack of public transportation, and this situation reveals one more instance in which Cubans must improvise economically in order to survive.

The story progresses quickly with the help of song and a narrative voice-over. In particular, Alea returns the song *Guantanamera* to its improvisational roots, using it to orient the viewer towards each of the main characters at different points throughout the film: Yoyita, Cándido, the soon-to-be-lovers Mariano and Gina, and finally Adolfo. Fittingly, the verses are sung by Celia Cruz, arguably the singer one most identifies with the song. Unlike the upbeat tone of her salsa version of *Guantanamera*, however, the tempo and tone of this version change, going from wistful, to sorrowful, to hopeful and to chastising as she sings of and even addresses the different characters. Cruz herself is not named in the credits nor seen in the movie, but her voice is instantly identifiable from the beginning, from a playful exchange at a recording studio that opens the film, to the last verse she sings.

The movie opens to the background melody of the song. An airplane emblazoned with the word “Cubana”, Cuba's only national airline is shown. The viewer is instantly situated in modern day Cuba. Cruz begins with the traditional opening refrain to the song, but instead of moving on to Martí's verse, she sings with more than a hint of nostalgia:

“Ay mi divina guajira,
[Oh, my divine guajira]
Guajira guantanamera.
Guantanamera,
guajira guantanamera.”

Thus, the subject of the song—a specific “girl” from Guantánamo—is identified. In the following verses it is revealed that the *guajira* is no longer a young girl, but an old woman returning to the hometown she left many years ago. Her coming death, from a weary heart, is foreshadowed:

Yoyita, vieja cantante,
Yoyita, an aging singer,
 En Guantánamo nació.
In Guantánamo was born.
 Yoyita, vieja cantante,
Yoyita, an aging singer,
 En Guantánamo nació.
In Guantánamo was born.

A Guantánamo volvió
To Guantánamo she returned
 A un homenaje elegante.
To an elegant homage.
 Desde el lejano pasado
From a distant past.
 Fue a buscar una ilusión.
She left in search of a dream.

Desde el lejano pasado
From a distant past
 Fue a buscar una ilusión.
She left in search of a dream.
 Que trajo mucha conmoción
It brought too much excitement
 A su corazón cansado.
To her weary heart.

The refrain follows the verses and the music fades as the action of the film picks up the storytelling. We hear from singer/narrator Cruz again after the death of Yoyita. This time she tells the story of Cándido, the man who faithfully waited fifty years for her return, and who now accompanies her body to Havana:

Cándido está consternado
Cándido is upset
 Porque a su amada perdió.
Because he lost his true love.
 A la que tanto añoró.
The one he missed for so long.

Dos veces la han robado.
Twice she has been stolen from him.
 La fúnebre comisión
The funeral commission
 Deja de lado el Oriente,
Leaves the East behind,

Va rodando hacia el Occidente
Makes its way West
 Para cumplir su misión.
To complete its mission.

The verse also foretells the route of the funeral procession, which travels from East to West. This exaggerated and protracted journey can also be seen to represent Cuba's slow transition from the Communism of the East to the Socialism and Capitalism of the West (Rodríguez-Mangual, 2002). The increase of black market transactions—from the sale of garlic and bananas to the exchange of livestock and secret existence of backroom restaurants—as the cortege moves westward exemplifies the increase in capitalist ventures that have resulted from the legalization of the dollar.

In one of the several plotlines that run simultaneously through the film, Georgina finally comes to realize what perhaps she has known for some time, namely, that her marriage to Adolfo is over. As luck would have it, early into the journey she runs into Mariano, a student and admirer from her past as a college professor, and the two begin a flirtation that revitalizes them both. Thus, moving East to West in a romantic sense as well, Gina considers leaving her overbearing and bureaucratic husband for the freewheeling Mariano. Referring to the tragic end to Yoyita and Cándido's relationship and to the hopefulness of Mariano and Gina's, Cruz sings:

Cuando una flor se consume
When a flower is spent
 Hay otra flor que nació.
There is another flower born.
 Si un amor se perdió
If a love is lost
 La vida otro amor asume.
Life finds another love.

Mariano recuerda a Gina.
Mariano remembers Gina.
 Gina recuerda a Mariano.
Gina remembers Mariano.
 No ha de ser recuerdo vano
It does not have to be in vain
 El recuerdo que germinan.
The memory that they share.

Interestingly, this verse is the only one sung in the film that does not lead into the familiar refrain. Rather, the song ends on a hanging note, and the viewer is left to wonder what will become of the new couple.

One of the struggles shown throughout the film is that between the needs of the individual and those of the state (Rodríguez-Mangual). For example, while discussing the gasoline crisis facing the funeral industry, Adolfo declares the importance of thinking patriotically and sharing resources and costs. Another funeral director uses the same logic to

argue an opposing point, saying that we all come from the same country. By forcing the funeral directors into his planned hearse relay, Adolfo subjugates Gina's and Cándido's need to bury Yoyita in a timely and respectful manner to the needs of the country. Thus, it is especially interesting that Alea uses the melody of the one song that so readily identifies all Cubans collectively in order to highlight certain people as individuals in his micro-society. It is Adolfo, who perhaps because of his hypocrisy and quest for glory, is treated most harshly by narrator/singer Cruz. She sings:

Nunca debes pisotear
You should never step on
 Del prójimo el sentimiento
The feelings of your neighbor.
 Porque ha de barrer el viento
Because the wind has to sweep away
 Esa manera de actuar
This way of being.

¿Que ha sido, Adolfo, de tu vida?
What has become of your life, Adolfo?
 Sin principios sin pudor,
Without principles, without shame,
 Sin respetar el amor,
Without respect for love,
 Eso es batalla perdida.
That is a lost cause.

This verse occurs after Adolfo has been particularly cruel to Cándido and represents the last time we hear Guantanamera during the film itself. The song, however, is not the only recurring musical narrative device in the film. The Yoruba mythological figure of Ikú, or death, is interspersed throughout the film. Ikú is personified by a young, innocent-looking blond girl who foreshadows the deaths of several characters at different points in the film, first appearing as a spectral image in a photograph shown to Yoyita and, later, helping Cándido to cross the street. Near the end of the film, the narrative stops to include a Yoruba myth explaining the origin of death in the world. This occurs after a physical altercation between Gina and Adolfo that ends with Mariano slugging Adolfo. It is the point of no return for Gina in her relationship with Adolfo, although she has not yet moved on to be with Mariano.

The myth is told by the actor who plays Cándido against the sound of rain and images of the island in a downpour, with the backing of some African-language vocals. According to the legend, the creator Olofin erred when he built a world in which no one dies. The resulting society is overcrowded and filled with people over 1000 years old who are leaving few resources for the younger generations. Ikú is asked to fix the situation and he does so by causing it to rain for 30 days and nights. The flood succeeds in wiping out everything on the planet so that Olofin can start anew. After his on-going criticism of the Cuban situation, Otero (1999) argues "Alea is calling for a cleansing of Cuban political culture, where some things may only be resolved with death." The use of the Yoruba legend also serves to identify

Cuba's African roots, another sociocultural characteristic that is often obscured by the country's Marxist tradition and emphasis on sameness, and that is not emphasized by the *criollo* title song.

The last music we hear in the film is not *Guantanamera*, but a replay of the African vocals that accompanied the telling of the legend, which foretells the coming of more rain. In the final scenes of the movie, it is the rain that, with the help of the young child-Ikú, sweeps Adolfo off the platform he has ascended in order to read a speech at Yoyita's and Cándido's joint burial. The cleansing rain beats down on the apparent graves of the two *viejos*, seemingly united in death (the viewer knows that another corpse is, in fact, in Yoyita's grave). Significantly, it is the rain, brought by Ikú, which ultimately makes a relationship possible between Mariano and Gina by removing Adolfo from the equation.

As if emphasizing the new life that awaits Mariano and Gina, and one must assume that the director hopes the same for Cuba one day, the music of *Guantanamera* returns during the credits in a more upbeat and modern version sung by younger singers. However, not all the verses heard during the film are played. Rather, only two verses are repeated over and over again with the refrain, the first addressing Mariano and Gina, and the second about Adolfo:

Cuando una flor se consume
When a flower is spent
 Hay otra flor que nació.
There is another flower born.
 Si un amor se perdió
If a love is lost
 La vida otro amor asume.
Life takes on another love.

Mariano recuerda a Gina.
Mariano remembers Gina.
 Gina recuerda a Mariano.
Gina remembers Mariano.
 No ha de ser recuerdo vano
It does not have to be in vain
 El recuerdo que germinan.
The memory that they share.

Nunca debes pisotear
You should never step on
 Del prójimo el sentimiento
The feelings of your neighbor.
 Porque ha de barrer el viento
Because the wind has to sweep away
 Esa manera de actuar
This way of being.

¿Que ha sido, Adolfo, de tu vida?
What has become of your life, Adolfo?
 Sin principios sin pudor,
Without principles, without shame,
 Sin respetar el amor,
Without respecting love,
 Eso es batalla perdida.
That is a lost cause.

Although the film has ended, these verses continue to tell the story of the characters, in a literal sense, by keeping them in the viewers' consciousness. Figuratively, however, they continue to tell the story of Cuba—its past, present, and reluctant political transition from Communism to Capitalism. The melody is traditional, but the arrangement is modern and the tempo is upbeat. Thus, the music by itself speaks to the past and present of Cuba: It is Zuberi's memory machine (2001). At the same time, the lyrics create a new and hopeful vision for Cuba, one that is only possible when the current political and social structure of Cuba is transformed. The old ways, in which principles and individuals are not respected, represent a lost cause, the singers tell us. The fading yet much loved flower that is Cuba today will give way to a newer, yet to be determined Cuban society and identity. Interestingly, this occurs, according to the lyrics, by remembering, perhaps, past relationships or identities.

Conclusion

Creating a national identity based on a national history is an imperfect and incomplete effort because it involves trying to define a work in progress (Bhabha, 1990). Popular music is able to bridge this gap to some extent because, being based in the popular memory, it tends to stay more current and fashionable and express concerns that are not addressed by the national history. Because it is both traditional and popular, *Guantanamera* readily evokes Cuba with only a few bars. By varying the arrangements, the verses and even the singers, Alea uses the song to express the complex and bi-national Cuban experience. Thus, *Guantanamera* is employed creatively to create Cuba's past, to narrate the story of the film, and to suggest a different future for both the main characters and the island itself.

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