

STEPHEN FAY

MAPPING THE CUBAN CONDITION IN FERNANDO
ORTIZ'S *Un catauro de cubanismos*

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world
(Ludwig Wittgenstein 1955:149)

Language and identity are irrevocably enmeshed. From within the infinitely complex quotidian chaos, language articulates, performs, and expresses experience. Each moment's mayhem is tamed by the narrative solace of "beginning," "middle," and "end" and it is through the articulation of solitary and egoistic experience that isolated "I" becomes known to, and part of, the collective "We." For Roy Harris, "language-making is ... the essential process by which men construct a cultural identity for themselves, and for the communities to which they see themselves as belonging" (Harris 1980:Preface). This sense of "language community" inevitably displaces others beyond the borders of collective expression; shared readings of shared experiences are catalysts for community coalescence and narrative self-defense.

Through perspicacious exploration of the lexicographic landmarks of a language community, therefore, it is possible to map the topography of its collective consciousness and apprehend and analyze the limits of its world. This article is an exploration of the idiom-identity complex in Cuba in the first three decades of the twentieth century, concentrating on an emblematic catalogue of the idiomatic raw material of the Cuban language community: Fernando Ortiz's vernacular dictionary, *Un catauro de cubanismos* (1923b).

I will analyze Ortiz's attempt to map Cuba's lexicographic territory and his exploration of the distance and difference from the metropolitan mother tongue and contested proximity to other etymological shores. The article takes as its antecedent Gustavo Pérez Firmat's analysis of the *Catauro* as a paramount contribution to the "finding or founding a vernacular *voz*" (Pérez Firmat 1989:6). Departing from Pérez Firmat's reading, this article goes on to consider the critical complex of history, geography, and identity within Ortiz's dictionary. Employing an anthropological understanding of rites of passage as "limens," I posit 1923 (the year the *Catauro* was published) as a transcendental turning point in Cuba's history and a liminal moment in the island's self-cognizance. Through the deployment of a distinctly psychogeo-

graphic ontology, I seek to interrogate “the recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity” and to explore the physical and meta-physical frontiers of the Cuban language community (Bhabha 1994:143). Particularly, this article investigates Ortiz’s uprooting of the fixed and teluric foundations of identity in favor of the fluid antiessence of oceanic subjectivity. Through this approach, the Cuban coastline will emerge as the liminal location *par excellence*, “an in-between social space that prompts reflection on self and other” (Denning 1998:170), a fecund threshold from where Fernando Ortiz launches his bold manifesto for Cuba’s linguistic and cultural self-discovery.

LEXICOGRAPHIC LIFE: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

A dictionary might seem an unlikely medium through which to deliver a manifesto for expressive autonomy. As Raymond Williams suggests, however, even the most seemingly dispassionate lexicons may have occult agendas:

The air of massive impersonality which the Oxford Dictionary communicates is not so impersonal, so purely scholarly, or so free of active social and political values as might be supposed from its occasional use. Indeed, to work closely in it is at times to get a fascinating insight into what can be called the ideology of its editors. (Williams 1976:16)

Since 1713 the Real Academia de la Lengua Española (through its *Diccionario*) had charted the official frontiers of the Spanish language from the metropolitan core to the furthest reaches of Empire. Three hundred years on, independence struggles in Hispanic America had forced the edges of Imperial influence back around the peninsula, but the Academy persevered in its “great and ever more difficult labor to conserve and preserve the invaluable treasure of our common language” (Dihigo y López-Trigo 1974:8).¹

Cuba came late to independence. After two calamitous wars had killed a tenth of the island’s population the military victory over Spain was diluted by the eleventh-hour intervention of the United States. In December 1898, Spain and the United States made peace at the Treaty of Paris, to which the Cubans were only invited as observers, and on 1 January 1899 the U.S. Governor-General moved into the palace recently vacated by the Spanish Capitan-General. Over the next four years of occupation, Cuba was shep-

1. Except for those quotations from Ortiz’s (1995) *Cuban Counterpoint* and the Catauro’s definition of *guayabo*, which is taken from Pérez Firmat’s (1989) *The Cuban Condition*, all translations from the Spanish are the author’s.

herded towards ever tighter relations with its northern neighbor: the legal system was recalibrated to the U.S. model, translations of U.S. textbooks were used in Cuban schools, and 13,000 U.S. investors bought up 15 percent of Cuban land (Kapcia 2000:60).

This creeping neocolonialism was ratified in the Platt Amendment to the 1901 Army Appropriations Act, subsequently incorporated into Cuba's first constitution (also 1901). The Amendment gave the United States the constitutional right to intervene in Cuban affairs and on Cuban soil for the "maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property and individual liberty" (Pérez Jr. 1991:52). The economic, cultural, and psychological impact of the Platt Amendment cannot be underestimated. The hard-won distance from *Madre España* was replaced by stultifying proximity to Uncle Sam. For Louis Pérez Jr., the Amendment gave the United States an authority over Cuba "not unlike sovereignty" (Pérez Jr. 1991:vvii). For Cuban poet Rubén Martínez Villena, the island's independence was simply stillborn:

Thus far this century, the takeover of this country has increased to such a degree that there is very little that is Cuban left in Cuba save the ridiculous symbols of a fictitious sovereignty: the national anthem and the flag. (Roa & Fernández Retamar 1972:170)

This mediated Cuban Republic was only twelve years old when the Real Academia published the fourteenth edition of its *Diccionario*. In the quest to forge a vernacular voice from within "the matrix of the mother tongue" (Pérez Firmat 1989:27), whilst simultaneously parrying the bombastic linguistic expansion of "the Americans" (who had semantically conquered both continents in anticipation of a more physical presence south of the Rio Grande, with the Spanish "e" silenced), Cuban lexicographers set about elaborating *suplementos* to *el Diccionario* to better express the insular idiosyncrasy and better articulate the peculiarities of Cuban Spanish.

Of course, Cuba was not alone in Hispanic America in seeking equilibrium between strident cultural autonomy and pragmatic acceptance of the linguistic and patrimonial legacy of Spanish colonialism. Other Spanish-speaking countries had produced their own vernacular dictionaries in an effort to add more meaningful lexicographic detail to the Academy's topography of *americanismos*. This continental context is specifically alluded to in the introduction to the *Catauro*, which commends Argentinian, Puerto Rican, and Venezuelan philologists for their efforts to authorize the "indecent voices" heard in the region which, in Ortiz's opinion, do not debate but rather "fertilize the language." From the very beginning of his *Catauro*, Ortiz seems to be issuing an unequivocal warning against linguistic insularity, claiming that:

it is a task little short of impossible to elaborate a vocabulary of Cubanisms or Chilenisms, or Andalusianisms, etc., without an integral Hispano-American plan. Until this is undertaken ... we Iberoamericans will continue to claim as specific to Cuba, for example, words that are also heard in Mexico, Quito, Tegucigalpa, Bogota, Lima, or Buenos Aires. (Ortiz 1923b:14)

I will argue, however, that this advocacy of Cuba as part of an Ibero-American cultural archipelago is more ambiguous than it first appears and that Ortiz's manifesto often straddles the ontological divide between semblance and difference, universality and individuality, with centripetal and centrifugal forces pulling and pushing it towards archipelagic solidarity or insular singularity. In short, the *Catauro* occupies the limen between the open and closed dialectic approaches to archetypal Cuban identity or *cubanía*.

One of the most notable Cuban supplements to the 1914 *Diccionario* was Constantino Suárez's *Vocabulario cubano* (1921). The author, who wrote under the pseudonym "Españolito" (Little Spaniard), sought not to undermine the official lexicon's "supreme authority," but only add his efforts to the Academy's foresworn goal to "clean, set, and give splendor" to the Spanish language (Suárez 1921:viii). Ortiz responded to "el Españolito's" book with his own *catauro de cubanismos*. For Ortiz, "Cuba has the foul mouth of its hard life" and must staunchly resist any attempts to "clean" *el castellano* (Ortiz 1923b:10). Unlike Suárez, Ortiz does not offer a supplement to the Academy's authoritative lexicography nor a re-reading of the Americanisms at the edge. Instead, the *Catauro* is a fundamental re-articulation of the Spanish language from within the idiomatic, idiosyncratic, and fundamentally archipelagic frontiers of the Cuban condition.

Despite Ortiz's self-effacing assertion that his dictionary records nothing more than "a few fruits of this land, collected as we crossed the jungle of the Creole tongue" (Ortiz 1923b:vii), it is hardly necessary to read between the *Catauro*'s lines to reveal an ideological approach to identity and its idiomatic articulation. With the title alone Ortiz makes it clear that his dictionary is designed to put carefully chosen and infinitely *criollo* words into the collective Cuban mouth. Instead of an encyclopaedia or lexicon, Ortiz has written a *catauro* (woven basket for collecting food), an Americanism redolent of aromatic tropical exuberance. A step further into this idiomatic jungle and we are told that the *Catauro* is a catalog, not of *voces, frases, or refranes* (as in Suárez), but "a tome of lexicographic 'cubicherías' [supreme Cuban slang]" (Ortiz 1923b:17). From the opening pages, therefore, it is clear that the *Catauro* offers a most enigmatic map through "the jungle of the Creole tongue" for those not already familiar with the expressive Cuban terrain.²

2. The fact that the first edition of *Un catauro de cubanismos* was not ordered alphabetically, but rather presented in "its naturally unraveled form," "without any dressing" would not have helped (Ortiz 1923b:vii).

To take one of the most emblematic of Cuban fruits (both culturally and agriculturally) as our initial example, Ortiz's definition of the *guayabo*, or guava tree is a neat synthesis of some of the *Catauro*'s ideological tenets:

Guayabo – The tree that produces the *guayaba*, according to the Dictionary of the Academy. Why does it add: In French: *goyavier*? Does it mean to suggest that it is a gallicism? Really? Well, does the Dictionary by any chance provide the French translation of every word? No? Then out with the *goyavier*! The etymology, if that is what is being proposed, is not worth a *guayaba*, as we say. Let's recall, instead, some of the twenty-two acceptations and derivatives of *guayaba*, cited by Suárez, that, like *guayabal*, *guayabera*, *guayabito*, would look better in the Castilian dictionary than that inexplicable Frenchified etymology. This *guayaba* is just too hard to swallow!, and let us thus note, in passing, another cubanism. (Ortiz 1923b:43; translation taken from Pérez Firmat 1989:18)

Not troubling to explain the idiosyncratic *guayabas* he contemptuously tosses at the Academic interpretation of the word,³ Ortiz unleashes his “exuberant, tendentious and even fruity” prose in defense of truly Cuban definitions for the fruits of Cuban soil (Pérez Firmat 1989:10). The most important thing for Ortiz is to “*decirlo en criollo*,” to say it in Creole, to wrest descriptive authority from the distant Academy and its insular acolytes, and consign appropriately “dirty” words to every facet of the island's *mala vida*.

In this adherence to the viscerally vernacular lies the kernel of Ortiz's understanding of Cuban identity. For him, *cubanidad*, or “the generic condition of being Cuban” (Ortiz, *Revista bimestre cubana*, cited in Suárez 1996:8), was an off-shore, Academy-driven, and bloodless definition of “Cubanness” to which he responded by nationalizing the semantics and coining *cubanía* to encapsulate “that condition of the soul, that complex of feelings, ideas, and attitudes ... that emerge from the island's very innards” (Suárez 1996:6). *Un catauro de cubanismos* is Ortiz's gutsy response to Suárez's moderate and metropolitan catalogue of *cubanidad* and is as much an ideological as a lexicographic reflection on the frontiers around the *criollo* Cuban condition in the early years of the Republic. But before exploring Ortiz's lexicon further, and in recognition of Peter Jackson's assertion that “many important social and historical processes take place *within language*” (Jackson 1989:157), we must anchor the *Catauro* in the historical context of 1920s Cuba.

3. Pérez Firmat (1989:160) has the word as an Americanism meaning “lie” or “deceit.”

1923: *ANNUS MIRABILIS*

The *Cuba libre* for which so much had been sacrificed awoke in the early twentieth century to find its industry in the hands of foreigners, its monoculture economy calibrated to satisfy the exogenous sweet tooth, its autonomy infringed by an opprobrious amendment, and its elected representatives distracted from the task of governance by the fabulous fortunes to be pilfered through bogus public works contracts, juicy sinecures, and the national lottery racket.⁴ Of the first four Cuban Presidents, the second, General José Miguel Gómez (president from 1909 to 1913), in many ways encapsulated the sordid spirit of the age:

Large, easygoing, tolerant, loving the good life, he was to the Cubans the archetype of their own ideal personalities, the fulfilment of their expansive cigar-smoke daydreams.... Known as the Shark (*Tiburón*), of him the phrase was coined *Tiburón se baña pero salpica* (that is, he knew how to be a friend to friends, a Cuban virtue). (Thomas 2001:301)

Gómez belonged to the heroic generation whose feats in the Wars of Independence guaranteed some initial credibility, even when the empirical evidence suggested malignant moral bankruptcy. By the early 1920s, however, the fervent dream of a true *Cuba libre* had evaporated and many Cubans, particularly young Cubans, began to lose patience with their venerable but venal elder statesmen.

Over the first three decades of the twentieth century, 1923 stands out as a transcendental year in the island's history, an *annus mirabilis* of radicalism and discontent. In January, the Federación Estudiantil Universitaria (FEU) was formed under firebrand Julio Antonio Mella. Inspired by the 1918 student reform movement in Córdoba, Argentina, the FEU's first manifesto (10 January 1923) limited itself to educational reform, but Mella's sanguine speeches spoke to the urge for more profound change on the island:

I will let my words spill from my mouth, as blood spills from the wound, because my words are blood-soaked and my soul is wounded as I contemplate the University's present malaise.... I only intended to speak in favor of the reorganization of this University, but perhaps this could become the catalyst for the reorganization of our Cuban homeland. (Mella 1975:41)

4. The National City Bank estimated that between 40 percent and 50 percent of the sugar mills were owned by North Americans in 1919; the 1912 reciprocity treaty with the United States and the price increases during the First World War led to the last vast expansion of Cuban sugar, largely carried out by foreign mills, foreign capital, foreign managers, and foreign labor. Hugh Thomas (2001:325) remarks: "Cuba was thus a spectator in her own destiny. The great forests of Oriente did not burn for her own carnival."

On 30 January, Ortiz, in his capacity as member of the House of Representatives (he was also a lecturer in the University's Law Faculty), presented a bill to the legislature conceding complete autonomy to the University of Havana. After protracted negotiations, the government of Alfredo Zayas finally capitulated and over one hundred corrupt professors were sacked.

Beyond university hill, radicalism smouldered towards revolt. On 18 March, a group of fifteen intellectuals (led by twenty-three-year-old poet and propagandist Rubén Martínez Villena) walked out of an event at the Science Academy as Justice Minister Erasmo Regüíferos, who was implicated in one of the Zayas government's most public financial scandals, was about to speak.⁵ Thirteen of the intellectuals later signed an anticorruption manifesto (known as "the Protest of the Thirteen") against "our delinquent rulers' utter lack of patriotism and civil decorum" (*Cuba literaria* online).

In April, Ortiz pushed further into the political fray by launching his Junta Cubana de Renovación Nacional to promote civil and moral regeneration and resuscitate the *Cuba libre* dream at what the founder called "one of the most critical moments" in the life of the young Republic (Academia de la Historia 1923:96).

Generational, intellectual, political, and economic conflicts and the never-ending oscillation of authority between Havana and Washington infused daily life and the collective consciousness with uncertainty, doubt, and a thirst for new direction.⁶ Cuban history entered a limen: a place "of thresholds, margins, boundaries ... of ambivalence and unset definition" (Denning 1997:2). The terminology is borrowed from anthropology; for Victor Turner (following Arnold van Gennep's example), the limen is the midpoint in a three-stage rite of passage often observed in societies ruled by ritual. Neophytes are separated from the normal "social structure," undergo a cathartic and liminal transition, and are subsequently reincorporated within established social rhythms, although often at a higher or more integral level. The limen is an introspective interstice; "a time and place lodged between all times and spaces [where] the cognitive schemata that give sense to everyday life no longer apply, but are, as it were, suspended" (Turner 1982:84).

Cuba's sociohistorical trajectory in the first three decades of the twentieth century was a rite of national passage punctuated, in 1923, by a liminal period within which society took "cognizance of itself" (Turner 1974:239). The venerated (but venal) *vox patriae* of the *Independentista* generals was challenged by the insurgent and vitriolic *vox populi* of young Cubans un-

5. The sale and then repurchase of the Convento de Santa Clara at a grossly inflated price caused fierce public outcry.

6. Cuba was ruled by a U.S. Governor between 1898 and 1902 and between 1906 and 1909; through the provisions in the Platt Amendment, U.S. troops landed in Cuba on four occasions between 1902 and 1923.

lied by the indignity of the Platt Amendment and the malfeasance of the new Republic. Mella's inflammatory rhetoric to Havana students was a critical facet of this vernacular revolt. But equally imperative was Ortiz's lexicographic battle for the right to describe Cuba in Cubanisms; the right to speak of, as, and to *el pueblo cubano*.

Liminal moments of intense introspection expose the ideological and historical axioms underpinning the national narrative to erosion and flux. History's implacable momentum is halted and refracted "into various forms of discursive incoherence, thereby creating divisions within supposedly stable identities" (Giles 2000:33). But the limen is not simply a moment of ideological chaos or psychosocial angst during which the national narrative degenerates into a confused cacophony of voices. In the stead of all-pervasive ideology and momentous history a more contemplative psychosocial logic asserts itself: "In this no-place and no-time ... the major classifications and categories of culture emerge within the integuments of myth" (Turner 1974:259). These myths (and the metaphors in which they are enunciated) transmit the cognitive codes for collective self-perception and projection, establish the "system of associated commonplaces" (Herbert & Johnston 1982:12) that forge "nations" within fractal frontiers, and evoke the shared and treasured images which transform scattered people into "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983).

Ortiz's *Catauro* is as much a metaphoric as a lexicographic guide to *cubanía* in the early 1920s. It seeks to supplant the stolid tones of *vox patriae* with the more vital and vibrant accents of a youthful *vox populi*, calls for pause in the errant national narrative, and enunciates the multivocal, multivalent, and fundamentally archipelagic ethos on the island: "a heterogeneous conglomerate of diverse races and cultures ... that, bubble together, intermingle, and disaggregate in a single social coction" (Ortiz, *Revista bimestre cubana*, cited in Suárez 1996:11).

ORTIZ'S ARCHIPELAGIC ISLAND

Fernando Ortiz is the magnum scholar of Afro-Cuban culture and its axiomatic role in the island's heterogeneity. Although his book *Los negros brujos*⁷ was influenced by Italian positivist criminology and regurgitated much of the racist discourse imported from Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, over the next fifteen years Ortiz underwent an ethnographic epiphany. One of the *Catauro*'s most virulent criticisms of Suárez's *Vocabulario*, for example, refers to its utter failure to recognize and accredit the African etymologies of many *cubanismos* "as if the large African population that

7. Prologue dated 1905, introduction dated 1917.

came to our country had not imported, together with their bodies bent under servitude, their souls, their religions, their cultures, their languages” (Ortiz 1923b:12). Pérez Firmat suggests that Ortiz’s essays were the inspiration for some of the most important Afro-Antillean literature of the first half of the twentieth century, including Nicolás Guillén’s *Motivos de son*, Alejo Carpentier’s *Écue-Yamba-Ó!*, and Emilio Ballagas’s *Cuaderno de poesía negra* (1989:19-20).

But Ortiz’s nascent aphrophilia was not the norm in 1923; others observed Cuba’s ethnocultural heterogeneity with horror. Cuba had been an island of migrants (both eager and coerced) since the Arawaks caught ocean currents northwards from the mouth of the Orinoco. The arrival of the sea-sore Spaniards at the end of the fifteenth century initiated four hundred years of immigration “of the most varying origins, either in sporadic waves or a continuous flow, always exerting an influence and being influenced in turn” (Ortiz 1995:98).

The end of the slave trade and of colonial rule did not stem the tide of arrivals from overseas (not even from the ex-colonial core).⁸ In *La crisis del patriotismo: Una teoría de las inmigraciones* (1929), Alberto Lamar Schweyer blamed what he called Cuba’s “low patriotic level” on enervating ethnic and cultural diffusion caused by excessive “maritime influence” that threatened “the total disappearance of Cubanness” which would only be reversed by insular isolation from foreign immigrants and ideologies (Lamar Schweyer 1929:44). The discovery of a fossilized skeleton in a cave in Sancti Spiritus in 1914 provided a potent catalyst for feverish debate on the ethnogenesis of “proto-Cuban,” with some scholars seizing upon the skeleton as a propitious factual fossil around which to flesh a defensive mythology of resolute insularity, or what Rafael Rojas calls “a prehistoric epic of Cuban identity” (Rojas 2008:249). Some archaeologists went as far as to suggest that the indigenous people of Cuba had not arrived in the Americas after an epic trek over the frozen Behring Straits, but had always and forever inhabited their tropical island redoubt (Rojas 2008:250). For them, *protocubano* was a true child of the Cuban earth, an original islander, an authentic *homo cubensis*.

Much of Ortiz’s work from the 1920s onwards can be understood as an emphatic rejection of this notion of the insular autarky of the Cuban condition. In *Historia de la arqueología indocubana* (1923a), Ortiz defended Columbus’s stubborn insistence that he had discovered the westward passage to Cipango, arguing that the Taínos and Ciboneyes the Admiral encountered in Cuba were, in their ethnogenetic origins, actually Chinese (Rojas

8. Hugh Thomas (2001:295) notes that more Spaniards arrived on the island between 1900 and 1925 than during the 400 years of Spanish colonial rule.

2008:250). This sarcastic swipe at the kind of romanticism (or *siboneyismo*)⁹ purveyed by some Cuban scholars developed into a consistent thesis of the fundamental plurality of the Cuban condition. For Ortiz, *cubanía* was (up) rooted in movement and flux over porous insular borders, in the interpenetration of ethnic groups, traditions, foods, and languages, and in the constant cultural give-and-take along the beaches of this fundamentally archipelagic island:

There was no more important human factor in the evolution of Cuba than these continuous, radical, contrasting geographic transmigrations, economic and social, of the first settlers, this perennial transitory nature of their objectives, and their unstable life in the land where they were living, in perpetual disharmony with the society from which they drew their living. Men, economies, cultures, ambitions were all foreign here, provisional, changing, “birds of passage” over the country, at its cost, against its wishes, and without its approval. (Ortiz 1995:101)

To the *siboneyistas*' romantic mythology of autochthonous peculiarity, Ortiz countered with ethnographic evidence of cultural, culinary, and linguistic imports “of the most varying origins”; to the eugenicists' horror of a descent into black *barbarie*, Ortiz retorted by dissecting the *corpus cubanus* and exposing “the ebony heart” that the slave trade had transplanted from the coast of Africa (Ortiz 1923b:viii). In short, “Ortiz's whole career is nothing but a sustained examination of how the exogenous roots of Cuban culture took hold, grew, and changed in the island” (Pérez Firmat 1989:20).

I read Fernando Ortiz's *Catauro* as a lexicographic manifesto of a liminal moment in national self-cognizance, as an assault on the myth of *homo cubensis*, and as a catalog of plural and many-mouthed *cubanismos* and the *cubanías* they articulate. Moreover, and critically, I read the *Catauro* as a vernacular manifestation of the metaphoric oscillation between *protocubano* as an isolated *isleño* standing belligerently behind autarkic frontiers, or as an archipelagic island-hopper with his mouth full of foreign tastes and taxonomies.

9. *Siboneyismo* was originally a movement born in the literary *tertulias* of Domingo del Monte in the 1840s in an attempt to “Cubanize” the Spanish poetic form of *el romance* and thus “propagate a tentative and derivative sense of their Cuban identity” (Kapcia 2005:52). The emblematic text of the movement is José Fornaris's *Cantos del siboney*, which makes an oblique critique of the social stratification of colonial Cuba and evokes a utopian indigenous age of noble savagery.

THE IDEOLOGICAL CONTOURS OF *UN CATAURO DE CUBANISMOS*

Ortiz has as little lexicographic as anthropological patience with the notion of an autochthonous *homo cubensis* founding an original and originary Cuban condition to which all subsequent offshore contributions are undesirable appendages. Interrogating the etymology of the *voces* in the dictionaries of “el Españolito” and others, Ortiz is scathing of their ingenuousness:

Siboneyism in Cuba has engendered the habit of cataloging all words of doubtful origins, and even many words of well-known Castilian, Catalan, Galician, Anadalusian, and Basque derivation, as authentic autochthonous voices.... English or American linguistic bastards are often transformed here into proud Siboneyes or Caribs, like any old Oriental street urchin being transformed into a direct descendant of Amadis of Gaul (Ortiz 1923b:9&12).

To other lexicons’ insistence on etymological immobility, Ortiz brings the immense complexity of living languages colliding and colluding over centuries of migration into and out of the island. To give an initial example, Ortiz scorns what he sees as endogenous myopia, disputing Suárez’s cataloging of the word *jaba*, or “basket, whose greatest dimension is its height,” as a “Carib voice,” a home-grown word for an indigenous object. Instead, “it was Andalusian sailors and conquistadors who deployed the extremely common Arab word, *al-chaba*, which the Academy’s dictionary still preserves to signify the long basket for holding arrows, *aljaba*” (Ortiz 1923b:39). In this, Ortiz eschews any attempt to find or found an autochthonous and autarkic language community, positioning himself instead in the limen between origin and invention, between endogenous immobility and exogenous flux, from where to best appreciate and give authority to the multivalent voices that articulate the insular idiosyncrasy. *Cubanismos*, like the Cubans who use them, are creatively caught “in the crossroads of the Americas, where all peoples and civilizations come together in a kiss” (Ortiz, *Revista bimestre cubana*, cited in Suárez 1996:16).

Spurning the artificial simplicity of *siboneyismo*, Ortiz gives full and hearty voice to the chaos of hybridity which he sees, reads, and hears around him:

Guafe – small pier or platform over the sea. Zayas adds, giving it as an Indianism: “the letter F was probably introduced into this word in erroneous substitution of some other.” Not at all. Cuervo, several lustrums before Zayas’s text, had already asserted that it came from the English *wharf*, and ... God help us, it was not Siboneyes, Tainos, nor Caribs that bequeathed us this word, but rather pirates and filibusters of very different lineage. (Ortiz 1923b:134)

For Ortiz, the encounter between exogenous and endogenous accents is super-syncretic;¹⁰ the Anglicism is unloaded onto the Cuban *guafe* but is not passively and acculturally accepted. Instead, it is creatively mauled and masticated, even acquiring a dubious indigenous genealogy along the way. Although scoffing at this latent desire to “naturalize” imported idioms, Ortiz may well have admired other lexicographers’ genealogical excesses as the height of syncretic irreverence and inventiveness: “he believed that whatever originality there was to achieve, it had to emerge from the judicious – and even malicious – manipulation of imports” (Pérez Firmat 1989:20).

We have already remarked that language offers landmarks for particular folds in the collective consciousness or for particular limits of idiomatic and idiosyncratic worlds. In the *Catauro* we see that geography can permeate lexicography with equal force as land and life embrace in intimate symbiosis, and landscape becomes the prevalent metaphor for the inscape of national identity (Bhabha 1994:143). Many of the *cubanismos* recorded by Ortiz emerge from a fundamentally spatial praxis and are suggestive of a national narrative inspired by the physical milieu within which it is inscribed. In the *Catauro*, topographies, flora, fauna, and even climatic conditions have all acquired metaphorical significance in the Cuban vernacular *voz*.

The *seboruco*, for example, is a “rocky, porous and spiny stone found just below the surface, particularly on the coast,” but is also a hard-headed, “rude, ignorant” person who stubbornly resists the tides of others’ opinions (Ortiz 1923b:126). *Sabina*, “an indigenous wild tree of broad flat leaves,” is applied with metaphorical malice to “a busybody who is always sticking his nose into others’ business” (Ortiz 1985:439). *Acana* is the name of a precious hardwood but is also used to scold those who are “stingy, miserable, despicable, and hard” (Ortiz 1985:35). The *bijirita* is “a migratory bird ... that spends the autumn and winter in Cuba” (Ortiz 1985:64), but is also a Cuban born of a Spanish father (with “seasonal” affiliation to both shores).

Some climatic events are of such significance that *cubanismos* have been invented to describe them. The hurricanes that torment the island during the autumn months have been at the heart of insular mythology since well before *el castellano* conquered Cuba. Once more on the liminal threshold between origin and invention, Ortiz scorns spurious etymological *indigenismo*, but judiciously defends the Antillean origins of the word *juracán*, lamenting that

10. The fecund fusion that characterizes Cuban cultural complexity and which Ortiz elaborated in *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar* (1940) as “transculturation.” In defiant counterpoint to the then prevalent European interpretation of the collision of cultures as a process of deculturation (or shedding of original elements) and acculturation (assumption of new elements) towards the syncretic finale of neoculturation, Ortiz posited a more egalitarian exchange in which both sides of the cultural equation are altered in a fertile and symbiotic embrace.

the word “has fallen into disuse here, replaced by the Hellenistic cult to the cyclone, imported by the English” (Ortiz 1923b:52). Louis Pérez Jr. goes as far as to suggest that hurricanes are the tempestuous engines at the core of the Cuban condition:

The hurricane entered the cosmology of Cuba as a fact of life, a spectre against which people were obliged in the ordinary course of events to mediate the possibility of potential catastrophe with the needs of daily life. Because hurricanes were recurring phenomena, they played an important role in forging a people into a nation. (Pérez Jr. 2001:11)

Ortiz claims that the horror of hurricanes, and particularly their unpredictability, brought out the best in Cuban lexicographic inventiveness, much to the chagrin of Academic orthodoxy: “*Recurvar* – curve back on itself. We Cubans invented this unusual word to explain to ourselves the sudden surprises of cyclones which, judging from their treacherous curves and *recurvas*, always travel by the most twisted paths” (Ortiz 1923b:30-31).

Domestic as well as savage spaces have also taken their place within the national consciousness through the kind of metaphorical osmosis in which Ortiz delights. In analyzing the exclamatory expression *cierrapuertas* (“close the doors”), he distances the *cubanismo* from the antiquated Spanish war cry “*!cierra espana!*” (“close the doors to Spain”) used in the wars of reconquest against the North Africans, describing instead:

The sound and action of suddenly closing all the doors in alarm at some external disturbance or danger; it is said: *there was an almighty “cierrapuertas.”* This word is related, both in composition and intent, with that other Cubanism *salpafuera*; except that the latter gets everyone out whilst the former lets no one in. In both cases, a tremendous *correerre* [run amok] in every direction is the usual result. (Ortiz 1923b:31)

In the first expression the domestic haven is secured against external menace, whereas the second produces a chaotic *correerre* to escape the enemy within. In whichever direction the metaphoric travel takes us, the leitmotif is the idiomatic innervation of mobility and flux. As a metaphor for the sanctity and sanctuary of the island redoubt, *cierrapuertas* and *salpafuera* eloquently encapsulate the liminal indecision between resolute insularity and archipelagic interaction. Cuba, it seems, is caught in a perennial *correerre* between the two.

CATAURO ON THE COAST

The most notable land-life-language association in Ortiz's lexicography is the perennial presence of the sea and the fundamental importance of the coast for the genesis of insular idioms and the idiosyncrasy they enunciate. Throughout the *Catauro* there is a proliferation of "nautical expressions" and "maritime meanings" that are "clear proof of the secular contact with maritime folk" (Ortiz 1923b:21, 23). What for the Real Academia's dictionary are mere states of the sea become for *cubania* profound states of the soul. *Calmachicha*, which in the peninsular *Diccionario* describes maritime tranquillity, becomes in the vernacular *voz* a "phlegmatic" Cuban (Ortiz 1923b:21). *Escarceo* in Spain is "a ripple across the surface of the sea, with small blister-like waves arising where currents meet," but on *la isla* the very intimate and interpersonal relations of *el pueblo cubano* seem ruled by the humors of the sea with the word being applied, "elegantly and appropriately . . . , to the oral collisions which, like small waves, tend to arise in debates: He had an *escarceo* with his mother-in-law" (Ortiz 1923b:51).

On an island of relatively recent arrivals, the originary ocean crossing has had a fulminating effect on the character of society and the collective consciousness within: "peoples and cultures were all exogenous and uprooted. . . . The mere crossing of the ocean had altered their very spirits" (Ortiz 1978:94-95). To the telluric rootedness of endogenous origins, Ortiz brings what Jessica Dubow calls an "anoriginal ontology" which is "always already a complex of the distant, the open, the unfixed" that "erodes the sedentary *habitus* of the modern subject" (Dubow 2004:219). To the *siboneyistas'* *homo cubensis*, Ortiz counters with the antiessentialist *homo maritimus*, baptized in the liquid epiphany of the epic voyage and unable to forget the oceanic inscape and saltwater idioms of their beginnings.

But are the maritime voices that Ortiz hears restricted to the insular edge? Is it possible, perhaps, to chart an indelible border between coastal Cubans, or *playeros* ("beachers") as Ortiz calls them, and the more settled, sedentary, and telluric communities of the Cuban interior? The *Catauro* suggests not and clearly catalogs the oceanic irrigation of land-locked language in even the most intractable inland terrain. The word *aguada*, for example, originally used to describe the coastal wells from where the fleet replenished its drinking water supplies, has "like so many other salty and brackish companions . . . become land-bound" and conquered the entire Cuban language community: "today we use it to refer to the place where cattle drink" (Ortiz 1923b:31-32).

The coastal frontier is typically perceived as an unambiguous terrestrial edge, the limit of earthly certainty and the beginning of the "barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilization has emerged and into which, unless saved by the efforts of gods and men, it is always liable to relapse" (Auden

1985:17). But this apparent coherence of subjective land versus objective ocean can be disrupted through an optical (and concomitant conceptual) recalibration; as Wittgenstein leans over the map “it is not the coastline of the island which he is bent on surveying with such meticulous accuracy, but the boundary of the ocean” (Thrift 2000:231). This evocative image opens up an interpretative interstice in which the coast marks not one, but two borders; a discursive space “beyond the repetitive schisms of . . . history, a space – ‘all subtle and submarine’ – of new perspectives, fresh colors, and imaginative liberation” (Klein & Mackenthun 2004:1). The coast is a liminal space *par excellence* where collusion overcomes collision, dialog subverts diatribe, and the indelible frontier between inside and outside is blurred in tempestuous chaos along the bifurcated edge.

The coast is a permeable physical, metaphoric, and lexicographic frontier that permits the ingress of influential “birds of passage” and all the inflections of the vernacular *voz* that they bring on their wings. But, in keeping with the liminal logic of the coast, Ortiz does not advocate the total dissolution of the insular edges that encompass *cubanía*; alongside his impassioned acceptance of cultural currents from overseas, he also appeals to Cuba’s insularity as a sign of distance and difference from exogenous accents. The *Catauro*’s cardinal motivation is to right (and write) the idiomatic wrongs the author believes have been perpetrated by the Academy’s dictionary and its insular acolytes. It is a struggle for *cubanía*’s right to express itself, if not in authentically autochthonous idioms, then certainly in terms that are appropriate to the land-life-language complex that those idioms enunciate.

The *Catauro* is a manifesto for lexicographic liminality, betwixt Academic pusillanimity and Creole effusiveness, between insular uniqueness and maritime flux. And the Ortizean coast is charged with ambiguity. It is a site of ethnogenetic absorption of foreign bodies and the cultures they bring with them, whilst at the same time delineating between the fruity *cubanismo*s of the periphery and the desiccated academe of the core. It is an entry point for syncretic interaction, but also a defensive margin from where to irreverently toss the *Diccionario*’s Frenchified *goyaviers* back in its face. It is a border from where Cubans and their *cubanismo*s can democratically rebel against “the authority of the royal dictionary” (Ortiz 1923b:68-69). The coast is a betwixt and between place, a liminal frontier where language and the idiosyncratic territory it charts are opened up to heterodox re-definition and where indelible edges are erased and re-inscribed in novel metaphoric configurations.

Ortiz menaces both sides of this liminal divide with dissolution. The Academy’s bombastic claim to universal descriptive authority in the “mother tongue” loses its way in his lexicographic labyrinth for which the *Catauro* is an all-but-useless guide for the uninitiated. On the other hand, any sanctimonious *siboneyista* claims to autochthonous authenticity are equally assaulted

by the Ortizean “anoriginal ontology” of movement and flux and the subsequent irreverence of syncretic chaos.

As a metaphor for this liminal disaggregation, Ortiz offers *picar* (to chop), a sublime maritime *cubanismo* which shreds all etymologic and metaphoric surety:

Picar for Cubans, as for all Spanish speakers, is to cut into very small pieces, from whence we obtain *picadillo de carne* [mincemeat], *picadura de tabaco* [pipe tobacco] and the *picapedrero* [stonemason]; and perhaps even, begging your forgiveness, the *picapleitos* [shyster] who, as a *picaro* [rogue] after all, has the habit of chopping everything up, including his fellow men, through his *picadas* [mincing] or *picardías* [craftiness]. In nautical terms, it is not necessary to chop something into many pieces in order to *picar*; one can *picar* something in two, as an anchor chain with an axe. And it is perhaps because of the influence of these salty expressions, that we Cubans have also reduced the number of chops called for in order to *picar*; we are able to *picar* a piece of cloth with the scissors without reducing it to *picadura*, without resort to *picoteo*, which undoubtedly does require a countless number of scissor snips and scraps; we have heard that it is possible to *picar* a chicken in two and between two with great taste, and we are even able to *picar* a single slice of ham. In conclusion, this parity in the number of slices *picados*, a Cubanism despite its apparent sobriety, is another trait unloaded from the colonial fleets. (Ortiz 1923b:32)

Despite (or perhaps because of) the authorial abandon (more literary than lexicographic), the manifesto is clear: to chop “proper” Castilian up, to make mincemeat of the regal authority of the peninsular dictionary, and to recognize and respect the oceanic origins of the essence of *cubanía*. But to *picar* is not to imperil the integrity of Cuban Spanish nor the island life it strives to describe. This is a creative not destructive deployment of the syncretic scissors that accepts ingredients from “the most varying origins”: both the *picadura* of Antillean tobacco and tasty slices of Andalusian *jamón*. Liminal to the end, this *picadillo* is both raucous and frugal, “a cubanismo despite its apparent sobriety,” an insular *picaro* that should never forget that it came over with the colonial fleets.

On a more sober note, this lexicographic maceration points to a fundamental facet of the *cubanía* to which Fernando Ortiz is attempting to give voice: its indefinite uncertainty and cardinal contingency; the “not-ever-yet” complex of the Cuban condition (Ernesto Mayz Vallenilla, cited in Pérez Firmat 1989:25). The *Catauro* does not propose to map the definitive contours of *cubanía*, but rather recognize the poetics of perennial uncertainty at its heart and the ephemeral frontiers around its edge.

This notion of *cubanía* as a work in progress, a prayer towards not a sermon about the Cuban condition is manifest in the *Catauro* in two ways. First,

the author himself insists on the open-endedness of his “lexicographic tome” (Ortiz 1923b:vii); he is at his most conclusive insisting on the *Catauro*’s inconclusiveness:

We must insist that our notes are exactly that; a stockpile of material from which some future author will construct his edifice. Not all Cubanisms are recorded here, nor may the definitions be considered as definitive, nor the etymologies as cast in stone. (Ortiz 1923b:18)

Second, and in keeping with the *Catauro*’s fundamental liminality, Ortiz’s lexicon is posited as a dialogic rather than an antagonistic exercise; it welcomes contestation and contradiction, seeking coherence within, not dogmatic cohesion to its enunciation of the vernacular *voz*. And so we return to the *Catauro*’s principal counterpoint – “el Españolito’s” *Vocabulario cubano*. To take just one example of the lexicographic ebb and flow between the two (hearing the inescapable timbre of the Academy’s officialdom echoing in the background), in *pararse*, for “get to one’s feet,” Suárez seeks to distance himself from both the *vulgus* that inhabit the island and the Academy’s tolerance of their linguistic barbarity. Raising a voice for “those who take pleasure in speaking correctly,” “el Españolito” is defiant:

We add our disapproval to those protests against the cataloging of this definition in the official dictionary. We give little credence to the widespread use of that definition throughout America, especially considering the thousands of other words of this continent with a far greater claim to a warm welcome from the erudite Academy, which cleans, sets, and gives splendor to the speech of Cervantes, Granada, Calderón, and Lope. (Suárez 1921:400)

Although commending the *Vocabulario* as “oriented with skill and elaborated with good will” (Ortiz 1923b:9), Ortiz cannot resist rounding on Suárez’s attempt to cling to a purity of expression that even the Academy has abandoned. As we have already seen, Ortiz believed that any attempt to “give splendor” to Cuba’s filthy vernacular was futile. Instead, he exhorts peninsular receptivity to Cuba’s lexicographic license:

In defense of the Americanism, with what right can we be exhorted to renovate our language in concord with Spain? Is it not the case that by seeking to conserve certain Castilian words ..., we actually advocate greater purism than the Spaniards themselves? Rather let them reinstate a word that has committed no crime against the laws of the language to justify this exile from its homeland, although it is getting along so well out here that one could even say that it has “got to its feet.” (Ortiz 1923b:58)

Ortiz sees the syncretic exchange between the Academy, the insular elite, and the mass of Cubans more intimately familiar with the island's "hard life" as ongoing. He does not seek conclusion, it is enough that the vernacular voice has clambered to its feet; *se ha parado*.

CONCLUSION

Fernando Ortiz's *Un catauro de cubanismos* is a critical contribution to the finding or founding of a vernacular *voz* from within the matrix of the mother tongue (Pérez Firmat 1989:26-27). It radically re-charts the frontiers of lexicographic authority on the island and reclaims the right to "explain *en criollo* what it means to speak *en criollo*" (Pérez Firmat 1989:18-19). It subverts both the metropolitan map of "proper" Academic expression and insular attempts to Cubanize *el castellano* within an autochthonous and autarkic edge. By doing so, the *Catauro* conjugates a transcendental turning point in the island's history with the maritime archetype of *cubanía*. Against endogenous attempts to ossify the national consciousness around fossilized mythologies of proto-Cuban utopias, and against exogenous attempts to put ill-fitting words into the collective Cuban mouth, the *Catauro* takes an ideological stand on the national edge. The coast becomes the *locus amoenus* for a re-articulation of the vernacular voice and a re-calibration of the insular consciousness it inflects.

Cuba is the coast and the coast is Cuba: open, yet profoundly distinctive; multivalent, yet coherent; heterogeneous, yet harmonious. Above all, the coast is a site of never-ending experimentation; an anoriginal ontology of ebb and flow, ingress and egress, arrival and departure. The coast offers no conclusions; the liminal moment that inspired the *Catauro* did not ask for any. The year 1923 was an *annus mirabilis* in Cuba's self-cognizance that called not for idiomatic answers, but for the defiant dissolution of pre-conceived and permanent solutions whether wholly imposed from overseas or emerging from the romantic fog of insular *indigenismo*. The *Catauro* is a subversive *picoteo* of metropolitan metaphors for life on the edge of the Hispanic world and a radical attack on the *cubanía* codes purveyed by a despoiled and despised generation. It seeks not to defend any definitive frontiers around the Cuban condition, but rather fight for the right to explore all cultural and linguistic possibilities, opening the frontiers to the most awkward Anglicism one minute and drawing in the next towards the archaic eye of the indigenous *juracán*.

The authentic edges of *cubanía* are metaphoric, anchored around "a system of associated commonplaces" but nevertheless remaining permeable to poetic incursions from inland and overseas (Herbert & Johnston 1982:12). In this sense, the metaphoric community that Ortiz simultaneously speaks

to and stimulates paradoxically surpasses the descriptive capabilities of his *Catauro* and straddles the border between the “limits of language” and “that whereof we cannot speak” (Herbert & Johnston 1982:25). But this is an inherent strength, not a fatal weakness of Ortiz’s lexicon. The *Catauro* seeks coherence within the vernacular *voz*, not cohesion to a singular collective mode of expression and its “simple notes ... without any seasoning” (Ortiz 1923b:vii) lay the lexicographic, mythological, and ideological foundations for the future transcultural construction of the Cuban metaphoric community.

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STEPHEN FAY

Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies
Nottingham University
Nottingham NG7 2RD, U.K.
<asxsf@nottingham.ac.uk>

