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In an Unending Desert of Cement and Skyscrapers: Lydia Cabrera, Revolutionary Cuba and Transnational Exile, 1960-1962

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In an Unending Desert of Cement and Skyscrapers:
Lydia Cabrera, Revolutionary Cuba and Transnational Exile, 1960-1962

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History
International & Global

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the Cuban writer and anthropologist, Lydia Cabrera, experienced exile following the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Cabrera's personal letters and photos show that she endured a nontypical exile experience. Instead, Cabrera is an example of a transnational exile, because throughout her life she remained both professionally and personally connected to people in multiple locations. Although discussion regarding the Cuban Revolution describes its transnational scope, for Cabrera and similar transnational figures, the events of 1959 meant a disruption to their longstanding international networks. In this way, this thesis will present evidence of Cabrera's transnational connections and her response to disruption of these networks from 1960 – 1962. Key sources for this thesis can be found in the archival holdings at the University of Miami's Cuban Historical Collection in Coral Gables, FL.

Keywords: Lydia Cabrera, Cuban Revolution, Cuban Exile, Transnational, Transnational Exile

Introduction

For writer and anthropologist Lydia Cabrera and her life partner Maria Teresa Rojas, summer afternoons included conversations on the patio with people visiting from around the world, as well as the joys of holding research interviews with Afro-Cuban religious figures within the grounds of their home, Quinta San Jose in Havana. This home was a space of comfort and pride for the two women, serving as not only a living space, but also a dedicated work space for the development and preservation of research related to Afro-Cuban history. These comforts came to a dramatic end following the Cuban revolution of 1959, as the two women fled into exile in 1960. Soon after their departure, the museum they had personally developed and curated in their home was destroyed in a catastrophic fire taking their life's work with it in the blaze.¹

For Cabrera and Rojas, these flames, possibly set by Castro's forces, would be a metaphor for the cultural and political upheaval experienced by the exile community.² Cubans of all political viewpoints, including the apolitical, would be swept up into the chaos that followed 1959, some being newly inspired to take political action. This involvement not only included political involvement, but also the use of creative works to communicate ideas and recruit additional participation. Historians have explored the ways writing, such as poetry, journalism, plays and novels created during the French and Haitian revolutions, reflect the cultural and political changes and participation of revolution. Work related to Cuban revolutionary poets and artists tends to focus on those in support of the revolution or those who could not relocate.³

¹ Jose Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 249.

² Ibid, 249.

³ Carmen Alemany Bay, "Nacion y memoria en la poesia cubana de la revolucion," *Atenea (Concepción)* 497 (2008): 23-35, accessed September 21, 2016, http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0718-04622008000100003.

This thesis will add to the scholarship related to Cuban revolutionary poets, artists and academics through the personal letters of Lydia Cabrera from 1960 to 1962. Cabrera's writing and documents offer insight into the experience of a transnational exile, connected to multiple locations and a broad network of academics and artists. Her personal letters show her attempts to regain agency in a new and unfamiliar land, the struggle to create a new livelihood and rebuild her transnational network, as well as the important role of poetical work in reestablishing that network and reconciling the trauma of exile.

The following discussion will offer an answer to the question suggested but not answered by Edna Rodriguez-Mangual "how can the exile find a space in a new land which might encompass the identity that defined them in their native country but which also includes the new experience of exile?"⁴ Since Cabrera's identity was not fixed on one homeland or group, her experience indicates an additional perspective on the exile experience, that cannot be fully described in unidirectional terms. Instead, Cabrera's narrative must be approached through the transnational nature of both her lifestyle and exile.

Cabrera: A Transnational Life from Birth

Lydia Cabrera's personal and professional interactions indicate a life lived in opposition to or disregard for the divisions of gender and race that permeated her environments in Cuba, interwar Europe, and the United States. Further, her life transcended national boundaries. Lydia's life spanned most of the twentieth century from 1900 to her eventual passing in 1991. The transnational nature of her life began at birth. Her father was forced into exile in New York during the Cuban war for independence in 1895. Once the war ended in 1898, he returned to

⁴ Edna Rodriguez-Mangual, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro-Cuban Cultural Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 139.

Cuba sometime soon after.⁵ This further disturbs the determination of her birth location. Cabrera claims she was born in 1900, but official documents list 1899 as her birth year.⁶ Furthermore, Cabrera declared that she was born in Havana, while official documents list New York City as her place of birth.⁷ While it's uncertain which is accurate, Cabrera was likely conceived in New York and later born in Havana, considering records of her father's exile and return to Cuba.

Raised by her family in Havana, Cuba, Cabrera enjoyed a life of relative ease within an affluent Cuban family of Spanish descent. At the age of twelve, her father gave her a column in his newspaper. This column, titled "Nena en Sociedad," was the earliest example of Cabrera's courage to express ideas in a satirical manner. She included this satire into announcements of births, weddings and other social events.⁸

Another early influence that had lasting effects on Cabrera's life and work was an interest in Afro-Cuban culture. Several accounts of archival evidence discussed by Mangual suggest this interest could have begun in childhood. For instance, her initial interest is attributed to the influence of Afro-Cuban women employed in her family's home, such as her nanny, Tata Tula. By 1923, Mangual notes that Cabrera attended the opening of a center dedicated to Afro-Cuban studies opened by her brother-in-law, Fernando Ortiz. Ortiz was an anthropologist as well and his work regarding African culture in Cuba is widely read in Europe, while Cabrera's is not.⁹ When compared to the work of Cabrera, some suggest that she was influenced by this familial connection to Ortiz, while Mangual argues that Cabrera provided a more objective approach to

⁵ Lydia Cabrera, *Afro-Cuban Tales*, trans. Alberto Hernandez-Chioldes and Lauren Yoder (London: University of Nebraska, 2004).

⁶ Edna Rodriguez-Mangual, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

⁹ Dr. Doris Eibl, Universitat Innsbruck personal conversation with author, April 4, 2017.

that cultural preservation. In fact, Mangual argues that it was Cabrera who influenced Ortiz and was responsible for changes to his later work.¹⁰

Despite Cabrera's documented attendance to Afro-Cuban ceremonies in the 1920s, her family and friends did not suspect her future professional focus on anthropology and Afro-Cuban culture at that time. Showing early promise as an artist, Cabrera received praise from many during her studies at the San Alejandro Art Academy in Havana, Cuba. However, always an ambitious and independent woman, Cabrera took the initiative to open and manage an antiques store she named *Casa Alyds*, and earned enough to fund her travels to Europe in 1927.¹¹

While living in France during the interwar period, Cabrera was exposed to the French approach to studying African culture. This led to an increase in her interest in the study of African culture in her homeland. Furthermore, her education at L'ecole du Louvre and L'ecole des Beaux Arts exposed her to the influence of African art on France. Cabrera recognized a similar influence of the African diaspora upon Cuban history and twentieth century culture. Feeling there was a gap within historical and anthropological scholarship about the Afro-Cuban influence, Cabrera returned home determined to fill it.¹²

Cabrera's resolve to preserve Afro-Cuban history was not the only import she returned with. Cabrera participated in exposing the Spanish-speaking world to the term *negritude* through her collaborative work with Afro-Cuban artist Wilfredo Lam and Martinique poet Aime Cesaire. This exposure aided in increasing the interest in African cultural education and participation, as well as promoting African diasporic studies. In 1944, Cabrera and Lam translated the poem

¹⁰ Edna Rodriguez-Mangual, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 8.

¹² *Ibid*, 8.

Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal (hereafter “*Cahier*”), originally written by Aime Cesaire.¹³

Aime Cesaire’s *Cahier*, describes the Afro-Caribbean identity as a series of masks that the narrator wears at various points, with different motives and attitudes. Cesaire published the work for a French-speaking audience and featured a heavy influence of the French *negritude*.

Negritude included the reverberations of Afrocentric cultural appreciation in Europe and the Caribbean.¹⁴ As a result of Cabrera’s translation, this influence was exposed to a broader public.

As a writer, Cabrera’s literary influence has been compared with legends such as Jose Lezama Lima. Both Cabrera and Lima are respected for their continued influence on Cuban literature today, particularly for their contributions to the visibility of Afro-Cuban culture.¹⁵ Examples of her most influential work include the aforementioned translation of *Cahier*, a collection of African folklore titled *Cuentos Negros de Cuba*, a short story published by Cesaire in 1944 titled “Bregantino, Bregantin,” as well as a broad array of poetry, short stories and folkloric traditions.¹⁶ The content of these works included African themes and many were a part of Afro-Cuban culture. As a wealthy Cuban woman of Spanish descent, Cabrera was not a member of the Santeria tradition or African diaspora. Despite not being a member, she produced a large quantity of work related to the preservation of that history and culture.

By adding her voice to those calling for the preservation and expansion of Afro-Cuban literature, Cabrera defied racial divides in much the same way that she did gender roles in pursuit

¹³ Mangual suggested that Lam and Cabrera bonded over their lifestyles which were controversial within Cuban society. Lam was a black man, living with a white woman, and Cabrera openly identified as lesbian. Mangual alludes to this shared experience as the glue binding their friendship. She also suggests that the two ceased communicating over their differing opinions about the Revolution of 1959, a break that Lam ended by sending her an art piece not long before his death in 1982. Mangual does not mention the reason for this tension but it could be due to the persecution of openly gay individuals while Afro Cubans had been promised greater freedom and advancement, making their post-Revolution circumstances drastically different. Edna Rodriguez-Mangual, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction*, 13-14.

¹⁴ Emily A. Maguire, “Two Returns to the Native Land: Lydia Cabrera Translates Aime Cesaire,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 4 (2013): 126.

¹⁵ Julia Cuervo Hewitt, “Jose Lezama Lima y Lydia Cabrera: poetas de la metamofosis,” *Hispanofila* 168, (2013): 83-99.

¹⁶ Emily A. Maguire, “Two Returns to the Native Land,” 126.

of her ambitions. She acted as though unaware or unaffected by the social barriers that demanded she remain within the domain of women and not assist in the promotion of Afro-Cuban culture. This rejection of social restraints proved successful for her education and professional pursuits. She earned high praise from other writers and academics, such as Katherine Dunham and Gaston Baquero in later years.¹⁷

As tensions rose in the days prior to World War II, Cabrera and many other expatriates were forced to leave Europe.¹⁸ Upon her return home to Cuba, Cabrera began studying and documenting Afro Cuban culture, and gained a reputation for being accepted into circles others were not, such as the secret society of men called the “*nanigos*.” These nanigos were central to the practice of the religion Santeria, a set of beliefs connected to the worship of the Orisha gods brought to the island by enslaved Africans.¹⁹ Despite gender barriers which typically limited the *nanigos*’ meetings to Afro-Cuban men, the men made their environment accessible to Cabrera. Many informants among the community shared cultural secrets and traditions that she would document and later preserve in her museum.

Cabrera and her life partner, Maria Teresa Rojas, transformed their home in Havana called Quinta San Jose into a museum reflecting Afro-Cuban culture and the religion Santeria.²⁰ Photos within her archive at the University of Miami indicate the museum enjoyed a high level of visibility in the 1950s. Many officials and visiting academics, Cuban and international, chose to visit and admire the wealth of items related to Afro Cuban history collected by Cabrera and Rojas. While living and working at Quinta San Jose, Cabrera produced a large amount of work before being forced into exile following the 1959 revolution.

¹⁷ Reinaldo Sanchez and Jose A. Madrigal, *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera* (Miami, FL: Ediciones Universal, 1978).

¹⁸ Edna Rodriguez-Mangual, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

Cabrera was among those who feared they'd be a target for the new regime, as a writer and academic. In addition, she supported the constitutionally directed government that had existed after the 1933 revolution and before the coups of both Batista and Castro successively altered the political terrain of Cuba.²¹ Yet perhaps a greater danger for her and Rojas was their openly homosexual relationship. Since homosexuality remained illegal in Cuba, this population quickly became a target of the Castro administration. In response to these events, various artists who had been living openly as gay or lesbian, such as Cabrera and Rojas fled Cuba.²² Cabrera never explained the reasons she chose to leave Cuba. However, research shows a wave of gay and lesbian men and women left Cuba for the US soon after Castro took power. This was due to an increase in hostility related to sexual orientation. Many transnational figures, such as Cabrera chose exile out of this fear.²³

Cabrera and Rojas left quickly and sustained through the financial strain of exile with assistance from friends. However, tragedy struck soon after they settled in Miami. Cabrera and Roja's work at Quinta San Jose had been destroyed in a fire. Accounts suggest that the cause of the blaze remains undetermined.²⁴

The loss of their home, life's work, and disruption of Cabrera's transnational networks created an experience that cannot be understood through the unidirectional narrative that is usually applied to exile. Therefore, in order to begin the description of this experience, the content of Cabrera's personal letters will be discussed. This discussion will feature her attempts to regain agency, the despair she communicated through personal letters, as well as her attempts

²¹ Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to Dr. Philip Showalter Hench, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

²² Mark Weiss, ed., *The Whole Island: Six Decades of Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), Introduction, Kindle.

²³ Arguelles Lourdes and Ruby B. Rich, "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part 1," *The Lesbian Issue* 9, no. 4 (1984): 688-699.

²⁴ Jose Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America*, 249.

to reconnect and build a new global network and continue producing impactful work. Her global work and relationships offer insight into the ways exile is experienced by a transnational exile following the disruption of global networks.

Literature Review

Current scholarship related to the Cuban exile community focuses primarily on identity formation and political involvement as it pertains to a Cuban identity. Furthermore, the work specifically discussing Lydia Cabrera examines her professional work but leaves a void regarding much of her personal letters and interpersonal experiences during her exile.

Considering the benefits of comparing the content and language of professional documents with creative and personal documents, Cabrera's archive becomes a significant resource for studying the aftermath of the revolutionary moment of 1959. Research regarding the Cuban exile experience benefits from examining Cabrera's diverse relationships, acting as a figure who defied gender and racial barriers and transcended the borders of Cuba. Her transnational life influenced her work, personal relationships and identity, and that influence followed her into exile. Thus, Cabrera's experience provides a definition of transnational exile, typified by separation from a global network.

Cabrera's presence as a sort of centrifugal force within the academic community of Cuban exiles can be best understood within the 1978 book *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera*. The editors included short testimonies from her cohorts, such as Cuban poet Gaston Baquero and the famed choreographer and anthropologist, Katherine Dunham. Following these personal accounts are articles discussing the aesthetics and influence of her work on literature, history and

anthropology. While some of the testimonies mention her personal life, each only briefly remarks on how she lived and experienced exile, leaving that part of her life lost in a silence.²⁵

In order to set the stage for the position which Cabrera's exile experience exists, what follows is a summary of work related to the Cuban Revolution and the exile experience.

Alexandra T. Vazquez focuses on Cabrera's academic work, especially during her time in Miami.²⁶ Edna Rogriguez-Mangual discusses Cabrera's influence on Afro-Cuban identity.²⁷

Both researchers hint at the personal side of Cabrera, but devote minimal discussion to that topic.

A literary-focused text is Carmen Alemany Bay's research of several Cuban poets of the twentieth century and the ways they reflected Cuban identity and philosophy within their work.²⁸

Gronbeck-Tedesco's dissertation provides an in-depth discussion of the revolutions of both 1933 and 1959 and how the philosophies of both moments were connected and their influence on not

only Cuba, but much of what he coins a "tricontinentalism," giving a nod to the transnational nature that existed before 1959.²⁹ Gronbeck-Tedesco also highlights the presence of poetry and

literature as a tool for spreading such ideas. Finally, Anthony Rossodovito sets the stage for the political environment surrounding Cabrera in his discussion of US covert operations of the early

1960s. He focuses on those implemented without the knowledge of the American public, as the Kennedy administration advertised withdrawal from the Cuban situation that contradicted with

the reality discussed by Rossodovito.³⁰

²⁵ Reinaldo Sanchez and Jose A. Madrigal, *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera*.

²⁶ Alexandra T. Vazquez, "Learning to Live in Miami," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 853-873.

²⁷ Edna Rodriguez-Mangual, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction*.

²⁸ Carmen Alemany Bay, "Nacion y memoria en la poesia cubana de la revolucion," 23-35.

²⁹ John A. Gronbeck-Tedesco, "Reading Revolution: Politics in the U.S.-Cuban Cultural Imagination: 1930-1970" (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2009), 263, accessed September 17, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/18432>.

³⁰ Anthony Rossodovito, "The Struggle Against Bandits: The Cuban Revolution and Responses to CIA-Sponsored Counter-Revolutionary Activity, 1959-1963," (master's thesis, University of North Florida, 2014), accessed March 9, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/etd/>.

In the article, “Learning to Live in Miami,” Vazquez uses Cabrera’s impact on Cuban literature and identity to start her discussion on how literature reflected the broader experience of the Cuban exile in Miami. Vazquez describes the lives of the exile community in Miami as a “mangrovia existence,” suggesting an image of Cubans as resilient and connected life forms taking root in the land of Miami.³¹ In her introduction, Vazquez suggests further research into Cabrera’s archive would prove valuable for understanding this community’s experience and development of identity.³² Despite this assertion, Vazquez does not address this silence in the historiography, instead focusing on how Cuban-American literature reflects Cuban identity.

In her article, Vazquez attempts to describe how a new “Cubanidad” took form for the exile community of Miami, and she begins her essay by discussing items found in Cabrera’s archive, which Cabrera curated herself.³³ Vazquez reflects on several obscure objects drawing conclusions about Cabrera’s intent without clear evidence to support these theories. For instance, Vazquez observed an old phone book which Cabrera had drawn several doodles and added beards to a family photo on an advertisement for long distance phone calls. Vazquez asserts that such “entretenerse,” or “making different,” evidences Cabrera’s feelings of disconnectedness due to exile. However, closer inspection of the page and doodles in question shows a few names, as well as the name of a bank, and a telephone number.³⁴ It is possible that Cabrera was simply drawing out of boredom while making phone calls and may, for example, have been on hold for an extended period of time. This theory is just as plausible as the emotional reflection proposed by Vazquez.

³¹ Alexandra T. Vazquez, “Learning to Live in Miami,” 854.

³² *Ibid*, 855.

³³ *Ibid*, 859.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 853-873.

While Vazquez's introduction touches on certain items within Cabrera's archive, much of the remainder of the essay focuses on creative expression within the Cuban exile community. One literary example discussed is the novel *Learning to Die in Miami*, which approaches the experiences of first-generation Cuban exiles through a fictional account of an exile feeling lost and disconnected from home. The protagonist feels lost and alone in Miami and struggles to accept that he would eventually die there, never returning to his homeland. While Vazquez's article offers significant insight into the ways Cuban exiles reflected that identity and experience through literature, Vazquez admits that Cabrera's archive provides a wealth of resources that remain unused at present.³⁵

In a similar vein, Edna Rodriguez Mangual's text *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro Cuban Cultural Identity* supports the relevance of Cabrera's archive as a resource for understanding the exile experience. However, Mangual only mentions this within the introduction. The remainder of Mangual's work describes Cabrera's academic work and influence related to Afro Cuban identity on and off the island. Mangual's work begins with a biography of Cabrera's life prior to the revolution of 1959, and presents discussion of her academic work through various stages of her life.³⁶ Since Cabrera was unable to continue academic work from 1960 to 1962, Mangual does not address this period, nor her expression related to the exile experience. However, the biography she includes emphasizes several transnational elements within Cabrera's life, which support the argument that Cabrera's exile was of a transnational nature.

Carmen Alemany Bay's work presents support for research on the lived experiences as well as the creative work of poets and academics in her article titled, "Nacion y Memoria en la Poesia

³⁵ Alexandra T. Vazquez, "Learning to Live in Miami," 853-873.

³⁶ Edna Rodriguez-Mangual, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction*, 139.

Cubana de la Revolucion.” In this article, she argues that the Cuban poets captured the patriotism and expressions of desire for nation formation. Using letters, various documents and notes from presentations given by the revolutionary poets from the 1970s and 80s, she presents the political relationship with poetry and the revolutionary poets. Alemany-Bay focuses on their work related to their remembrance of the revolution and its immediate aftermath. She examines the ways these poets offer historical understanding of the nationalist ideas and cultural history of Cuba from 1970 to 1989.³⁷

However, Alemany Bay’s work has a few limitations. For instance, her research focuses on the 1970s and 1980s within the Cuban experience primarily among those remaining on the island and does not discuss the Cuban exile expression. Nevertheless, Alemany Bay’s research exemplifies how some poets and academics remain connected through their creative endeavors and political activism.³⁸ Therefore, approaching the topic of the Cuban revolution through the transnational lens of Cabrera reflects this experience through her roles within the creative and academic community as well as her personal letters.

A philosophical and transnational approach to Cuban revolutionary moments is provided by John Gronbeck-Tedesco, who discusses the ways the ideologies related to the 1933 and 1959 revolutions of Cuba were connected. Furthermore, he discusses how this was reflected within the creative work of those involved. In his doctoral dissertation, he argues that smaller nation-states, such as Cuba can exert power over larger ones through their usage of cultural elements, using

³⁷ Carmen Alemany Bay, “Nacion y memoria en la poesia cubana de la revolucion,” 23.

³⁸ It is important to note that Alemany-Bay’s research may have focused on the 1970s and 80s because a moratorium on certain writing had ensued following the Padilla Affair, involving the imprisonment and torture of Heriberto Padilla. He was imprisoned due to accusations that he had written poetry in a subversive manner against the Revolution. Many writers who were not state-sponsored refrained from producing work publicly. These events are discussed in Mark Weiss, ed., *The Whole Island: Six Decades of Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) Introduction, Kindle and Angel Cuadra, *The Poet in Socialist Cuba*. ed. Warren Hampton, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994).

sources such as “poetry, journalism, plays, federal policy, music and radical literature” to support this argument.³⁹

Tedesco’s scholarship draws from historical elements, yet focuses on the development and changes in philosophy. Furthermore, the time period of his study centers on the relationship between the prevailing philosophies that connected the revolutions of 1933 and 1959 to each other.⁴⁰ His research does not examine the historical results of this philosophical shift, nor the experience of Cuban-Americans. Nevertheless, Tedesco’s research evidences the historical relevance of the life and work of poets and academic when researching revolutionary history. Furthermore, Tedesco discusses the ways transnational networks thrived between the 1933 and 1959 revolutionary moments.

The works discussed above support the focus on Cabrera as a reflector of the transnational exile experience. In order to understand her response to this, one must explore the environment to which she reacted. Anthony Rossodovito’s work titled, “The Struggle Against Bandits: The Cuban Revolution and Responses to CIA-Sponsored Counter-Revolutionary Activity, 1959-1963,” offers relevant discussion of the US involvement in Cuba, most of which neither Cabrera nor the American public was aware of. In her letters, Cabrera responds within that media silence.

Rossodovito argues in his thesis that the interactions between Cuba and the US during the early 1960s resembled a “chicken and egg” conundrum, in which one cannot determine which occurred first: further radicalization of the Cuban revolution or U.S. encroachment and covert operations. He focuses on what the Cubans coined “Struggle Against Bandits,” which encompassed operations to thwart anti-Revolutionary operatives on the island and those

³⁹ John A. Gronbeck-Tedesco, *Reading Revolution*, ix.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

approaching from outside their borders. Through his research and discussion Rossodovito critically discusses the operations of the United States in opposition of the Castro administration of Cuba. In doing so, he provides insight into the covert operations and the struggle between forces supporting and opposing Castro's leadership.⁴¹ However, he does not include discussion of Cuban exiles who were not active participants in such actions, nor their attempts to rebuild and connect through a shared culture in Miami or other spaces.

The aforementioned research is indicative of the historiography surrounding academics from the Cuban revolution and exile, as well as what is commonly written about Cabrera. In order to expand on the historiography, a more global perspective will be applied. Although the Cuban revolution is often credited for its transnational nature and international influence, for Cabrera and other similar figures, the revolution disrupted pre-existing transnational networks. A study of the archival holdings of Lydia Cabrera indicates that the experience of the transnational exile features a disconnect from a global identity as opposed to a national identity. In response to this disruption of her transnational network, Cabrera entered a creative and professional silence. Her personal letters communicate the potential cause of this silence and the methods she employed to reconcile with the trauma of exile and return to her beloved work.

A Life of Interconnectedness

Father San Francisco, Teach me to love, In small steps...
Lydia Cabrera in a 1962 letter

Thanks to Lydia Cabrera we know today that Cuban is not anti-African as it is not anti-Spanish... a new man of his own, of the Island, the Cuban, that underneath the various colors of his skin has a common soul a wonderful same magical way to receive in His soul the weight of the world.

Gaston Baquero, *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera*

⁴¹ Anthony Rossodovito, *The Struggle Against Bandits: The Cuban Revolution*, 508.

We believe that mediation can be decisive for the future of Cuban poet Angel Cuadra,
Whose essentially human and universal work, has earned our admiration.

Lydia Cabrera in a letter in 1982

Despite their separation across oceans, in very different locales, the quotes above indicate a close affiliation and respect among Cuban figures though separated by geography and circumstances. These quotes express the willingness of the exile to protect others within that community and those separated by national borders and to uplift them with praise. What follows is a focus on these relationships and how the content of Cabrera's letters allows for an understanding of the lived experience of the transnational exile.

The first section will present her initial reaction to exile in 1960, which featured significant attempts to exert agency over the circumstances of the exile community in Miami. This will be followed by a second discussion of the disillusionment she later communicated in 1962 and the reasons she identified for that change in mood. The third section will address Cabrera's nostalgic reflection which took place by 1962 in response to the experiences of loss and isolation from her transnational network. This section will also examine the ways Cabrera defied gender and racial barriers and how even within her personal letters she served as a reflector of the pre-Revolutionary Cuban transnational community in exile. The final section will explore the transition Cabrera achieved by the late 1970s and 1980s in establishing a renewed global network and the enduring legacy of her work through the words of her cohort and fellow exile, Gaston Baquero.

Expression of Agency in Exile: A Coping Mechanism

One factor evident in Cabrera's writing is her immediate attempt to express agency within the precarious position of the exile. According to research completed by Schweitzer, van Wyk and Murray, exiles, such as Cabrera, and refugees struggle to find purpose and agency in a new

land while attempting to reconcile trauma.⁴² Writers and academics in exile approach this method of reconciliation through writing, both creative and professional. Cabrera's ambitious nature in the 1920s to pursue the education and travels she wished, find a reemergence in her attempts to pursue agency in 1960 in her initial contact with US media.

In one such letter, Cabrera offers information regarding Cuban military and politics, as well as connections to intellectual figures living in exile in Florida. In 1960, soon after fleeing Cuba and arriving in Miami, Cabrera wrote to James Quigley of NBC (National Broadcasting Corporation). In this letter, Cabrera offers the names of several key figures within the Cuban exile community of Miami, most notably of which is Dr. Aureliano Sanchez Arango. Cabrera describes Arango as someone who held positions of power and influence. She explains that he "has always fought Batista, and was the first person in Cuba to know what Fidel Castro was and he took his stand." In this letter, Cabrera also states that Arango was "the head of the AAA party."⁴³

Arango, who previously served as a professor of labor law at the University of Havana, took action against several Cuban leaders, according to an interview completed in 1953 titled "Interview in the Night" in *Time* magazine. Arango described to the reporter that his aim with the AAA party was to oust Fulgencio Batista and reinstate Prio as the "lawful president." Though Arango refused to divulge the full name of his organization, it was later revealed to be known as "Asociacion de Amigos Aureliano."⁴⁴ It is possible he hesitated to reveal the name since it alluded to himself as the central figure and Arango may have wanted to avoid suggestions of

⁴² Robert Schweitzer, Sierra van Wyk, and Kate Murray, "Therapeutic practice with refugee clients: A qualitative study of therapist experience," *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 15, no. 2 (2015): 113.

⁴³ Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to James Quigley of NBC, National Broadcasting Company, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁴⁴ Ruth M. Lewis and Susan M. Rigdon, *Living the Revolution: Four women* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 38.

personal political ambitions. This is supported by his response to the reporter when asked if he held any political aspirations himself. Arango stated firmly that he had no intention of holding political office and only sought the necessary revolution to return Cuban leadership to “constitutional government.”⁴⁵

Both Cabrera and Arango profess an unwillingness within their academic lives to become politically involved. However, their actions prove political in nature. This change in motivation indicates that a person’s social involvement tends to adjust in response to altered circumstances. As the political and social environments of Cuba changed, so too did the nature of Cabrera and Arango’s habits, shifting from academically focused into a more political nature.⁴⁶

Arango and other leading figures among the revolution later felt betrayed when Castro, like Batista, refused the implementation of a constitutionally-controlled government. The betrayal expressed by Arango is reflected in other sources as well. Rafael Rojas examined this reaction in his article “Por la Reconstrucción de la memoria cubana, entrevista realizada por Ariel Ruiz Mondragon.” Rojas explains that many who had fought to overthrow the leadership of Batista also opposed Castro’s acceptance of Soviet patronage. This feeling of betrayal prompted the AAA party to turn its resources and manpower against Castro whom the group previously supported.⁴⁷

In this letter to Quigley, Cabrera indicates her trust in the US media’s willingness to report on Cuban matters and to show interest in the mission for change led by figures such as Arango. This trust in the media and her intimate contact within the Cuban exile community are further

⁴⁵ "Interview in the Night," *Time* 62. no. 18 (1953): 38, EBSCOhost (accessed February 6, 2017).

⁴⁶ Other figures within the Latin American community who exemplify this response to changes in political climate are Octavio Paz, (discussed below) and the revolutionary figure Lolita Lebron of Puerto Rico, whose biographies indicate political involvement followed a change in circumstances within their respective communities.

⁴⁷ Rafael Rojas, “Por la reconstrucción de la memoria cubana, entrevista realizada por Ariel Ruiz Mondragon,” *Metapolitica* 12, no. 57 (2008): 26-30. accessed July 22, 2016, https://issuu.com/revistametapolitica/docs/metapolitica_57.

supported as Cabrera gives Quigley the address and phone number of Dr. Arango, and entrusts him with information regarding a man she states “has been mentioned many times as a possible choice as President of the provisional government in exile.” She advises Quigley to use her name as an introduction saying “they will not hesitate to speak freely then.” She ends as she began the letter, mentioning recent events in Venezuela that have preoccupied her prior to this reply. She writes, “keep your eyes on Venezuela, for the situation hasn’t finished there.”⁴⁸

By mentioning Venezuela, Cabrera evidences an understanding of transnational influences and their potential to exert power across borders. The events Cabrera mentioned in Venezuela are most likely related to the division of the prominent political party, Accion Democratica, which resulted in the creation of the Revolutionary Left Movement in 1960. Venezuela would follow Cuba as a battleground between the Cold War powers. This occurred in the same year that Cabrera wrote to Quigley.⁴⁹

Having direct contact with a figure such as Arango indicates the affiliation of Cabrera to the insular network of support among Cuban exiles of Miami, a network that developed in the immediate aftermath of exile in 1960. Cabrera instructs Quigley to use her name as a password to gain access to this reclusive group. In doing so, Cabrera shows her consideration as a trustworthy figure if her name would permit open discussion between the US media and those political and economic leaders she named. As a result of such organization among figures relocated to Miami, Castro’s fears of artists and academics appears well-founded. However, as Rossodovito stated about the “chicken and egg” conundrum related to US-Cuba interactions, one

⁴⁸ Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to James Quigley of NBC, National Broadcasting Company, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁴⁹ Peter Winn, *Americas: The Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 540.

has to ask whether these academics and writers would have reacted in the same manner had the leaders of the revolution offered them protection and the freedoms they wished.

Despite feeling betrayed by the revolution, Cabrera uses hopeful language in her letter to Quigley, indicating an open attitude soon after her exile in 1960. She entrusted Quigley with sensitive information, and expected him to hold similar interests in the futures of Cuba and Venezuela. She expresses willingness to cooperate and see action taken to restore Cuba and remove Castro from power. In this way, she is seeking agency over her situation as an exile, by using her writing to connect media outlets to key figures within the exile community, with hopes that the US intervention in Cuba will soon follow.

Expressing Disillusionment and Confronting Opposition

It is important to note that the reactions and response to exile are not only varied among individuals, but can also change with time on an individual level. Over the next two years, Cabrera's experience led to expressions of disillusionment. Within the span of time from 1960 to 1962, Cabrera's exile was followed by loss of her home and museum at Quinta San Jose, and separation from friends and family. Furthermore, the disastrous events of the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 led to the removal of US forces from active participation in attempts to remove Castro as dictator.⁵⁰ For Cabrera, the accumulation of these events affirmed the permanent status for her and Rojas as exiles who would live and die away from home.

By 1962, Cabrera developed a viewpoint that contrasted with her initial hopeful sentiments. Only two years after leaving Cuba for the US, Cabrera described a firm distrust of the US media and government, particularly for President Kennedy, the same distrust she held for Castro. In a letter written in 1962 Cabrera explains her views to Dr. Philip S. Hench, a Nobel Prize-winning

⁵⁰ Anthony Rossodovito, *The Struggle Against Bandits*, 45.

physician who won that honor for his successful use of cortisone to treat rheumatoid arthritis.⁵¹

The doctor and his wife had visited Quinta San Jose, the home that Cabrera and Rojas converted into a cultural museum in the 1950s.⁵² Furthermore, Dr. Hench and his wife sent monetary assistance to Cabrera and Rojas soon after their move to Miami in late 1960.⁵³ Therefore, when she addresses the doctor by a pet name, “Henchies,” it is likely due to sincere affection.



Figure 1: Lydia Cabrera (far right) and Maria Teresa Rojas (far left) seated at Quinta San Jose with Dr. Philip S. Hench and his wife (middle). Photo credit: Cuban Heritage College University of Miami

Cabrera’s writing to Hench expresses disillusionment connected to a sense of hopelessness for not achieving what she had hoped for with the US media. The letter in question was written in November 1962 in which she mentions the destruction of her life’s work at Quinta

⁵¹ Personal letter from Dr. Philip Showalter Hench to Lydia Cabrera, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection 0339, Series 1 Correspondence, Subseries 2 To Lydia Cabrera Box 1 Folder 15 1962, at the University of Miami Cuban Heritage Collection. In this letter, Dr. Hench discussed his research on rheumatoid arthritis, and also mentioned an invitation to visit a conference in Russia, which Hench was unsure about attending, because he feared being accused of Communist affiliation. Nevertheless, he declared that he would be interested to witness the state of Communist Russia at that time.

⁵² Photo of Lydia Cabrera (seated at right) and Philip S. Hench and his wife Mary (at center) at Quinta San José in Cuba. Located in the Lydia Cabrera Papers Collection, Collection No CHC0339, Series IV. Photographs, n.d., 1901 – 1991, Box No 41, Folder No 3 Quinta San Jose: Group Portrait, n.d. Though a date is not mentioned, Quinta San Jose is described as destroyed by 1962, and Cabrera and Rojas moved to Miami in 1960, making the date of this photo prior to their exile in 1960.

⁵³ Telegram delivered from “Mary and Phil Hench” to Cabrera and Rojas located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection 0339, Series 1 Correspondence, Subseries 2 to Lydia Cabrera Box 1 at the University of Miami Cuban Heritage Collection.

San Jose. Cabrera and her life partner, Maria Teresa Rojas lived and worked to transform this eighteenth-century structure into a museum of art and culture, reflecting Cuban history through preserved items gathered and preserved by the two women.⁵⁴ The photo below indicates Cabrera additionally used the space for continued research into the Afro Cuban culture and Santeria worship, as she is pictured with an informant named Saibeke.⁵⁵



Figure 2: Lydia Cabrera (left) interviews an informant named Saibeke (right) Photo credit: Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami Cuban Heritage Collection.

Despite devoting years to the development of her museum, in this letter to Hench, Cabrera does not dwell on the loss of her work at San Jose. Instead, she includes lengthy discussion of her distrust for Castro and US president, Kennedy, declaring that Kennedy is “an American

⁵⁴ Edna Rodriguez-Mangual, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction*, 10.

version of Fidel Castro (Harvard Style.)” She quotes Kennedy as saying “Cuba shall not be abandoned” and then discusses how the US reduced its efforts in Cuba soon after. As a result of these abandoned promises, Cabrera feels her homeland has been betrayed. Kennedy’s policy toward Cuba changed quickly and the Soviet influence created a wedge between the island and US leadership. In response to Kennedy’s failure to act in opposition of Castro, Cabrera explains her opinion as follows: “we have no hope of liberation; it is clear that we have lost our country and there is no return for us.”⁵⁶ Here Cabrera admits two years after her initial exile that she feels hopeless for the salvation of her work at San Jose and for the restoration of Cuba to its previous state.

In addition to disillusionment related to failed promises, there is further evidence that Cabrera may have experienced some guilt as far back as December of 1960. In her archive, she includes an article published in Rochester, Minnesota on December 17, 1960, in which the writer Richard Valeriani discusses interviews he held in Havana with anti-Castro forces. In the article, Valeriani indicates he was speaking to the AA party, which may have been a typographical error, indicating the AAA forces previously under the leadership of Arango. The writer captures the feeling of betrayal for those left behind in several quotes. One of his informants is quoted as follows, “I have become very disillusioned. There is too much blablabla and not enough work. And the Americans don’t help. They seem disinterested.” This quote mirrors Cabrera’s statements in 1962, that Kennedy had abandoned the anti-Castro Cubans he previously promised to support. The final informant quoted in the article expresses further feelings of abandonment by those who left in exile as he states, “They should stay and fight.” Valeriani describes the reactions of the anti-Castro forces as “disgusted by the flight from the country of Cubans with

⁵⁶ Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to Dr. Philip Showalter Hench, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

anti-Castro sentiments.” Cabrera’s decision to preserve this article indicates its usefulness as a reflection of the cultural separation and the resentment that may have developed between those Cubans who fled the island and those who chose to stay and fight, as well as those who were unable to leave due to health, age, or finances.

Cabrera’s disgust with Kennedy described in her letter to Dr. Hench may be overshadowed only by her fears of US media found in other letters. This fear of US media stands in contrast to the initial optimism and openness expressed in her letter to NBC’s James Quigley in 1960. In two letters written in 1962, Cabrera explains the reasons for her changing attitude toward US media. The first of these letters was addressed to Dr. Hench. To Hench, Cabrera declares that the Communists control the media and news outlets in the United States, and regularly misinform Americans. Cabrera expresses a loss of hope and possibility for change, saying that Americans in 1962 reminded her of Cubans prior to 1959, “They are brainwashed by long years of infiltration... they will understand too late.” Her lack of hope is evident when she writes “The American press and T.V. are managed by the Reds and there are no possibilities to be heard or read.”⁵⁷ It is unclear whether or not her contact at NBC was among those she resented, but it is clear she expresses outrage at being ignored and misunderstood by the media.

The second letter in which Cabrera explains her disillusionment with the US media includes more detail about the reasons for her change in attitude. In a 1962 letter to Jules Dubois, she devotes attention to her reaction to Dubois’ work regarding Castro. Jules Dubois, who wrote for the Chicago Tribune and other US publications, was also known for publishing a controversial book on the end of Batista’s rule and the rise of Castro titled *Fidel Castro: Rebel—Liberator or*

⁵⁷ Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to Dr. Philip Showalter Hench, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

*Dictator?*⁵⁸ In this text, Dubois documented events and Castro's stated philosophy and intentions related to the end of Batista's reign but betrayed a pro-Castro presentation thereafter, failing to capture the broad experience of the late 1950s. Dubois mostly discussed Castro's speeches and promises, but did not discuss the actions of Castro's administration.⁵⁹ Yet in her letter to the author, Cabrera does not mention his controversial book or English language periodicals. Here she directly references an article published in a Spanish language periodical, *Diarios de las Americas*. She accuses Dubois of participating in the erroneous reporting of events related to Cuba and Fidel Castro.

In this letter to Dubois, Cabrera describes her disillusionment with the media as a failure of transnational institutions, such as journalism and literature. She references academics, as well as many exiles who were not politically aligned. Nevertheless, even those who were not politically active on the island, such as Cabrera, expressed a desire for the return of their lifestyle prior to Castro's takeover. Cabrera states to Dubois that she speaks on behalf of "apolitical Cubans" who are not aligned with either Castro nor the US policy and practice. She describes Cuba prior to Castro as "one of the most prosperous and superdeveloped countries of the Americas."⁶⁰

According to her, the international community has ignored human rights violations committed by the Castro administration. She accuses Dubois of complicity in these atrocities through his own writing, in which Castro's leadership receives little to no criticism. Cabrera writes that Dubois has promoted the "intense and irresponsible propaganda carried out by a gangster as Fidel Castro with the characteristics of an idealist." In Cabrera's words, Dubois has

⁵⁸ Harriet C. Babitt, "Poet's Voice Provokes the Lider Maximo: Cuba: A young woman, now in prison, represents ideas and aspirations Castro refuses to acknowledge as legitimate," *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1992, accessed March 12, 2017, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-01-01/local/me-1020_1_fidel-castro.

⁵⁹ Jules Dubois, *Fidel Castro: rebel – liberator or dictation?* (Indianapolis: Bobby Merrill, 1959).

⁶⁰ Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to Jules Dubois, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

participated in elevating Castro to the status of “continental hero,” the same as Abraham Lincoln and Simon Bolivar. While doing so, he ignores criticism of Castro’s Communist policy and dictatorial application of government.⁶¹

In her letters, Cabrera reflects the reaction of an exile who understands the function of transnational networks. She longs for the return of her own interconnectedness while expressing discontent with existing networks of journalism and political structures. Cabrera’s letters are an initial attempt to exert agency and a hope that others will help remedy the suffering. If a remedy is not found, Cabrera’s letters indicate a sense of hopelessness and grief, and the target of this grief for her was the US government and media primarily, whom she expected would assist in the mission to oust Castro and provide for the safe return of the exiles to their homeland.

The Impact of Loss and Isolation for the Transnational Exile

By 1962, displacement and disillusion expanded to financial matters for which she sought support. Cabrera asserts to Jules Dubois that she had two choices following the revolution of 1959: poverty in the United States or enslavement to the Castro administration in Cuba.⁶² Cabrera describes her circumstances upon moving to Miami as “poverty,” which she also confesses in the previously mentioned letter to Dr. Hensch. She confided in Hensch that due to her age, she was limited in employment options, and expressed hope that his connections or information might lead to employment. She tells Hensch that starting life anew in the United States has been difficult, since she cannot access her professional work in Cuba and has no

⁶¹ Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to Jules Dubois, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁶² Ibid.

employment leads in the country of her exile, such as those she previously had access to in Cuba and Europe.⁶³

Cabrera reflects helplessness and nostalgia in her personal writing about her economic situation as well as her political hopes for her homeland. Rodriguez-Mangual asserts that such feelings of helplessness and nostalgia were also reflected in Cabrera's professional work on Afro-Cuban identity and that such feelings are shared among the first generation of Cuban exiles. She describes it as living "in an eternal state of melancholy, always looking back to the time when they belonged to the homeland and it belonged to them."⁶⁴

Despite the financial strain and loss associated with exile, Cabrera declares in her letter to Dubois that she has accepted the financial struggles associated with life in Miami as preferable to what she considered the risk of being "enslaved" under Castro's leadership. Cabrera does not explain her meaning for "enslaved," but certain events of 1961 are possible explanations for this term. The gay community was under persecution following Castro's takeover. In 1961, on a night that would later be called *La Noche de las Tres Pez*, people accused of pimping, prostitution or homosexual identity were imprisoned.⁶⁵

If she were able to avoid imprisonment, her work as a writer would have been under the administration's control. Following Castro's speech to artists in 1961, all literary work received harsh censorship.⁶⁶ During this speech, he declared that only writing in support of the revolution and discussing revolutionary topics would be permitted. The most visible example of punishment

⁶³ Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to Dr. Philip Showalter Hench, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁶⁴ Edna M. Rodriguez-Mangual, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction*, 139.

⁶⁵ Mark Weiss, ed., *The Whole Island: Six Decades of Poetry*, Introduction, Kindle.

⁶⁶ Following Castro's 1961 speech to artists and writers, poet Nicolas Guillen and other renowned literary figures formed the "Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC)," which served as an arm of the Castro administration to control published content on the island. Fidel Castro, "Castro's Speech to Intellectuals on 30 June 61," Castro Speech Database, last modified n.d., accessed February 11, 2016, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1961/19610630.html>.

under these censorship guidelines was known as the “Padilla Affair.” Despite a longstanding career as a respected poet, Heriberto Padilla’s work “Out of the Game” was charged with including anti-Revolutionary sentiment, resulting in his imprisonment, along with his wife.⁶⁷ Examples such as this, of harsh censorship measures and imprisonment, support Cabrera’s claim that life in Cuba would have been similar to slavery.

By 1965, the activities in Cuba’s leadership implemented a short-lived institution of slavery. Certain groups considered “socially undesirable” by the leadership of Cuba were placed in forced labor camps known as UMAPs (Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Produccion.) Castro’s forces used Cuba’s longstanding laws against homosexuality to target that community as a source of free labor to fill employment needs of the struggling sugar industry. Besides the homosexual community, any one accused of subversive writing or activity could be forced into the UMAPs. As Weiss notes in his text, Cabrera’s sexuality would have made her a target for this oppressive institution.⁶⁸

For Cabrera, Miami was not home and from 1960 to 1962 Cabrera was disillusioned and disconnected from multiple networks. First of all, she dwelt on the loss of her academic work and disruption of the transnational network of professionals, writers, and academics in various nations established through years of travel and communication. In her personal letters and documents, Cabrera devoted much of the content to advocating for US involvement and reminiscing about past relationships and networks. This focus on connections across borders and discussion of international relationships supports Cabrera’s lived experience as a transnational exile. Many exiles confess a similar sense of loss and isolation that emerges at some point in the new country, and express nostalgia for people and places significant to their past. However, for

⁶⁷ Mark Weiss, ed., *The Whole Island: Six Decades of Poetry*, Introduction, Kindle.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, Introduction.

the transnational exile, this loss is not fixated on a homeland. Instead, the expression of grief is connected with loss of networks that transcend borders.

Nostalgic Reflection and Attempts to Reconcile the Trauma of Exile

Another feature of the transnational exile experience found within Cabrera's writing is the cultural limbo they are forced into. These figures are separated from not only a homeland but also the established lines of communication and ease of travel that a stable nation permits to its citizens. This is worsened by various actors in an alien environment who may or may not ease the adjustment to the unfamiliar surroundings within the nation of exile. Cabrera captures the frustration with this limbo in a 1962 handwritten document titled "Mi intimada amiga." This document was included in a collection of personal communication, but it is not addressed to anyone. Furthermore, the phrase "Mi intimada amiga" is similar to a title since Cabrera wrote it in the top center position of the paper.

Regardless of its intended audience, this document reflects a nostalgia, highlights important figures from her past and describes a sense of déjà vu. Cabrera expresses her impression that events of interwar Europe during the 1930s were reflected in the political disruption in Cuba during the 1950s and 60s. Cabrera discusses her past relationships with several people, and devotes much of the content to the Spanish poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca. Lorca's murder in 1936 in Spain sparked a political controversy during the Spanish civil war.⁶⁹ Cabrera and Lorca shared an ambitious nature, both achieving success and recognition by their mid-twenties, and a tendency to defy social conventions, such as sexuality and political limitations.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Leslie Stainton, *Lorca – A Dream of Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2000), Epilogue.

⁷⁰ Lorca's sexuality is alluded to Leslie Stainton in her work, *Lorca – A Dream of Life*, in which she describes his love in adolescence for a girl, followed by an expression of love for a male artist in his twenties named Salvador Dali. His success is exemplified by the reception of his play titled *Mariana Pineda*, which also received political

It is no surprise that the two would develop a fondness of one another, as artists, rebels, and participants in the development of their respective cultures. Their friendship provides an example of the transnational networks that existed prior to the revolution.

Cabrera spent many evenings in Cuba and Spain with Lorca and another friend named Jose Monia Chacon, during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Lorca visited Cuba in the 1920s and Cabrera ventured to Europe later that same decade. This is just one of a few factors that show the reciprocal nature of this connection.⁷¹ To Cabrera, these were intimate connections as she describes Chacon as follows, “al fue me venia una vieja amistad familiar,” (was an old family friend.) During their time in Cuba, Lorca, Cabrera and Chacon often ate dinner together at Chacon’s home, and Cabrera read and critiqued Lorca’s collection of ballads titled *Romancero Gitano* (Gypsy Ballads). In this document, Cabrera states that her favorite ballad of the collection was “La Casada Infiel,” which she says had “La vitalidad, la gracia” (the vitality, the grace)⁷².

Her nostalgic remembrance continues as she describes warm personal moments with Lorca, political involvement, field research, and gives insight into the relationships among her most intimate circle. One such intimate acquaintance was Lorca and Cabrera’s friend, whom she addressed as her “donacella” or maid, Carmela Bejarano. She describes Bejarano as “un tipo muy original,” and “con un sentido comico envidiable, muy artista, simpática buena y fina, como lo era la mayoría de la gente de color en Cuba” (a very original type. With an enviable comic sense, very artistic, nice, good and fine, as were most of the people of color in Cuba.)

Concerning the nature of Lorca and Bejarano’s relationship, Cabrera writes that Lorca enjoyed

criticism as its heroine was inspired by true events of an attempt to overthrow the Spanish king. Leslie Stainton, "From Lorca: A Dream of Life," *The American Poetry Review* (1999): accessed Jan 25, 2017, Literature Resource Center, 36.

⁷¹ Pio E. Serrano, “Lorca en La Habana,” *Centro Virtual Cervantes* (2017): accessed April 4, 2017, http://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/lorca_america/lorca_habana.htm.

⁷² Personal letter or document written by Lydia Cabrera titled or addressed to an unnamed contact she addresses as “Mi intimada amiga”, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection No. 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

teasing Bejarano, which shows they developed a friendship as well. However, Lorca was not playful when he accompanied Cabrera on many trips to speak with the “*nanigos*,” secret societies of men. The crux of Cabrera’s research involved the Afro-Cuban religious practice, Santeria, which was led by these *nanigos*. The *nanigos* rarely accepted the presence of outsiders or women, making Cabrera’s acceptance among them a rarity. Despite her evident comfort there, the “*nanigos*” frightened Lorca who had superstitious fears of these men he called “*diablos*” (devils).⁷³

In this 1962 handwritten document, Cabrera not only describes her friendship with Lorca, but also discusses events in Cuba during the first half of the twentieth century. These events express shared moments between Bejarano, Cabrera and Lorca, as well as their attitudes toward family, friends and Cuban leaders. Cabrera indicates that this discussion of Bejarano includes events prior to the “election.” Though she does not specify which election, the figures she names, such as de Cespedes indicate the time frame is prior to the 1933 revolution to overthrow Machado, and before Cabrera’s travels to Europe in 1927. Considering this, the events discussed below took place during the 1920s and both Cabrera and Bejarano were in their early twenties or younger.⁷⁴

Cabrera describes Bejarano’s outrage when General Machado ended her father’s employment after “many years of service.” With evident determination, Bejarano visited General Machado at his offices in the Ministry of Public Works and demanded the return of her father’s employment

⁷³ Personal letter or document written by Lydia Cabrera titled or addressed to an unnamed contact she addresses as “Mi intimada amiga”, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection No. 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁷⁴ As mentioned previously, there has been dispute about Cabrera’s birth year, but those sources reviewed herein suggest either 1899 or 1900. In the document “Mi intimada amiga,” Cabrera states that she and Bejarano were near in age as “sisters.” This indicates that Bejarano’s birth year was near 1900 as well. Ibid.

at the home of this major political figure.⁷⁵ Despite Cabrera's doubts, Bejarano achieved her goal.⁷⁶ This example of Afro Cuban agency within the Cuban state prior to the revolution of 1933, adds new insight into the experiences there. In this instance a Cuban woman of African descent from the "working class" speaks directly to political figures among the wealthiest and most powerful Cubans on behalf of her father, and acquires the goal she seeks.⁷⁷ Despite the legacy of oppression on the island, this proves that Afro Cubans were not apathetic or awaiting rescue from others.

As she discusses Bejarano, Cabrera indicates a cultural element of agency in response to discrimination within the Afro-Cuban experience of the early twentieth century. Bejarano's ambition and tenacity embody those same traits previously evidenced by the actions of Cabrera and Lorca in their own lives. This description also provides insight into what elements of the exile's life retain significance when disconnected from their homeland and contacts. As Cabrera recounts these stories, for figures such as Bejarano, who were likely left behind on the island, and those like Lorca, who were lost to violence, she expresses a continued attachment and longing for that cultural environment.

In addition to public success, poetry and literature were a consistent cultural feature within the personal lives of these artists. Cabrera mentions a memorable short poem by Bejarano written before the revolution of 1959. In English it most nearly reads, "I found a ladder that rose to the sun, And I went up, up, up, And up there the sun gave me so many kisses, that it left me

⁷⁵ According to Cabrera, Bejarano's father was employed as a mason or stone cutter at General Machado's home. While Bejarano's father was employed there, General Machado lived on the same street as Cabrera, Jorella St in Havana. Personal letter or document written by Lydia Cabrera titled or addressed to an unnamed contact she addresses as "Mi intimada amiga", located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection No. 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ In the document "Mi intimada amiga," Cabrera also discusses Bejarano's time as her interior decorator, describing her sense of style and rhythm, connecting it to her African ancestry. Bejarano designed Cabrera's garden and it was praised by many who saw it. The home in question was located across the street from the Universidad de Habana. Cabrera's mother was astonished when she invited Machado and others to view the garden. Ibid.

‘morena!’⁷⁸ “Morena” is a term used to describe a woman as having dark brown skin. In this short poem, Bejarano’s language and Cabrera’s remembrance of it indicates humor and Cabrera’s fond language expresses an intimate moment between two friends shared with poetry.

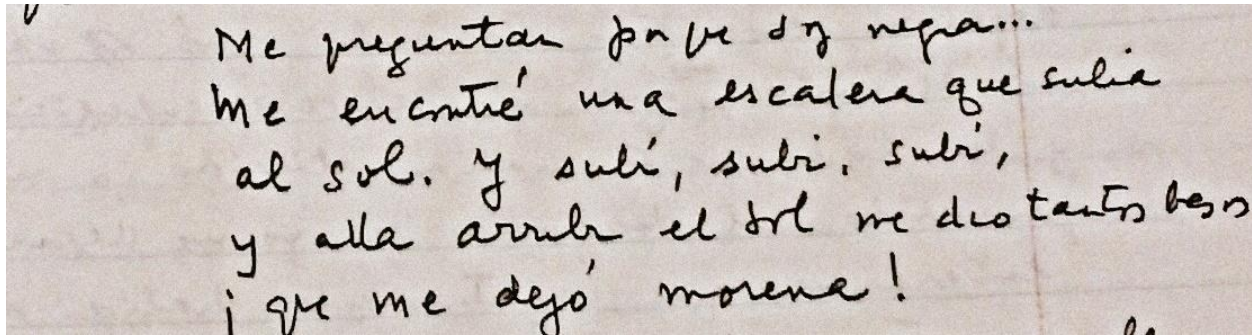


Figure 3: Excerpt of a handwritten letter from Cabrera to Dr. Hench in 1962. This excerpt includes a short poem written by Cabrera’s friend, Carmela Bejarano.

A shared transnational acquaintance during their time in Europe was the Spanish actress Margarita Xirgu. Cabrera states that she introduced Lorca to Xirgu when he was seeking an actress to portray the title role in his production, *Mariana Pineda*.⁷⁹ This production was a fictional interpretation of actual events in Spain to overthrow a monarch. The liberal party of Spain praised Lorca for work such as this, while the opposition considered him a threat.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, Xirgu and Lorca’s professional and personal relationship flourished in years following that production, and lasted until his murder in 1936.

Xirgu and Cabrera’s reactions to Lorca’s death evidence the cultural role and transnational potential of a writer’s influence. Their words also reflect the affectionate response of those who followed and or participated in his work. Though his death was long considered unsolved, the circumstances surrounding his death have recently come to light in a documentary

⁷⁸ Personal letter or document written by Lydia Cabrera titled or addressed to an unnamed contact she addresses as “Mi intimada amiga”, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection No. 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Diego S. Sanchez, “Mariana Pineda’s Struggle Against Censorship,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 88, no. 8 (2011): 931-944.

film in 2006. The filmmakers determined through archival evidence and interviews with family that Lorca was a victim of firing squads employed by General Francisco Franco during the Spanish civil war that took place in the 1930s.⁸¹ Cabrera was in Cuba at the time of Lorca's death and Xirgu was in Madrid performing in another one of his plays, *Yerma*. Xirgu reportedly expressed her grief following his execution by changing her final line in this production. Instead of stating "I have murdered my own child," Xirgu said, "They have murdered my child." Xirgu had been told of Lorca's death only moments before the production began and was in grief throughout the performance.⁸² Through her intentional alteration of this final line, Xirgu gave voice to her fears and grief and expressed the controversy before a live audience.⁸³

Such public opportunities to improvisationally communicate with the public further supports the power of poetry and literature as communication tools among revolutionary and exile figures. Furthermore, this adds to the argument that creative work and live performances have potential for transnational influence. This moment of expression by Xirgu escaped censorship, just as many letters can be delivered without the oversight of government bodies.⁸⁴ In her writing, Cabrera often describes connection among people, places and events. For instance, she reflects a sense of *déjà vu* as she compares events during interwar Europe with those of Cuba in the 1950s and 60s. In 1978, Allen Joseph researched events related to Lorca's death, as well as his poem "La Casada Infiel." In this work he recounts conversations he had with Cabrera in which she described the fear Lorca expressed prior to his death. In Joseph's account, Lorca never explained what he was afraid of. In Cabrera's letter to her unnamed

⁸¹ Thomas Catan, "Playwright's mysterious killers to be 'unmasked' in new film." *Times, The (United Kingdom)* n.d. (accessed April 3, 2017): Newspaper Source.

⁸² Leslie Stainton. *Lorca – A Dream of Life*, Epilogue.

⁸³ Allen Joseph, "Lydia and Federico: Towards a Historical Approach to Lorca Studies," *Journal of Spanish Studies: Twentieth Century* 6, no. 2 (1978): 123-130.

⁸⁴ The methods used to escape censorship, such as improvisation and private letters can be understood by researching the figures, such as Angel Cuadra, Juana Rosa Pita, and Lolita Lebron.

“intimada amiga” she expresses her own fears for Lorca in the 1930s. Lorca’s well-known play, “Yerma” was emerging in popularity at this time, but simultaneously she explains she feared for Lorca in 1935 and 1936.

Cabrera’s fears for Lorca are discussed at the end of “Mi intimada amiga.” She describes her last encounter with him in March or April of 1936 as follows, “quien tenia miedo era yo... Me parecio preocupado. En Mayo me fui a Paris.⁸⁵” (he worried me... He seemed preoccupied. In May I went to Paris.) In this letter she explains that despite the great success of his plays, he was uncharacteristically nervous and soon after was executed. She suggests that Lorca was aware of the threat on his life.

Another example of this déjà vu between these two time periods is an event that occurred in her apartment in France on Avenue “Junod.” In the document “Mi Intimada Amiga”, Cabrera does not explain the specific event on Avenue Junod she is referencing.⁸⁶ However, other Segundo J. Fernandez mentions a possible scenario to match her statement. In his book, *Cuban Art in the 20th Century: Cultural Identity and the International Avante Garde* he writes that Cabrera set fire to several of her own artwork that did not meet her personal standards.⁸⁷ The fact that Cabrera does not offer more detail about the nature of this event in her writing of “Mi intimada amiga” supports the likelihood that it is a personal reflection not meant for publication or delivery to any recipient. Therefore, open disclosure of information was not needed.

⁸⁵ In this document written in 1962, Cabrera has misspelled the name of the street on which she resided in the interwar period of France. She writes “Junod,” while other texts spell the street as follows. “Junot.” “Avenue Junot,” Paris: Official Website of the Convention and Visitors Bureau, last modified 2015, accessed December 18, 2016, <http://en.parisinfo.com/transport/93079/Avenue-Junot>.

⁸⁶ Personal letter or document written by Lydia Cabrera titled or addressed to an unnamed contact she addresses as “Mi intimada amiga,” located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection No. 0339, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 3 From Lydia Cabrera 1960 – 1974, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁸⁷ Segundo J. Fernandez, *Cuban Art in the 20th Century: Cultural Identity and the International Avante Garde* (Miami, FL: Miami State University, 2016): 43.

Cabrera's writing shows that she had a tendency to see connections between different times, people and places. She perceived a mirror-effect between the period of her life prior to WWII in Europe and the one immediately following the 1959 revolution in Cuba. She draws a connection between the destruction of her artwork by fire in France to the loss of her work at Quinta San Jose which was also lost to flames. Also, she indicates a parallel between the death of Lorca and the persecution of her fellow Cubans. Beyond physical suffering, the loss of free expression and persecution of academics and literary figures in Cuba was also similar to events Cabrera witnessed during her time with Lorca in Spain. This habit of perceiving connection could also be due to the transnational nature of her lived experience.

Conclusion

Cabrera: Reconstruction of a Transnational Network

From 1959 to 1962, Cabrera faced tumultuous upheavals in her life that exemplified the cultural and political disturbances experienced by herself and other transnational Cuban exiles following the revolution. Within these four years she moved from a comfortable and interconnected life, to a role as a political activist for her community in exile, and finally to a sense of loss and despair. The Cuban exile community has existed within the US borders since that time, and their experiences offer insight into the varied ways individuals and groups reconcile that trauma in the reformation of community and personal lives.

For transnational figures, such as Cabrera, exile was not a unidirectional movement, nor a separation from just one homeland. To this group, the exile represented a disruption of a global community and the personal and professional relationships that thrived within that system. While the Cuban revolution is often credited for its transnational networks, Cabrera's letters show that

the revolution simultaneously disrupted pre-existing networks with the same global reach. In fact, networks such as Cabrera's were overtaken by the revolution and its usage was relegated to the spread of Cuba's revolutionary philosophy alone. Similar to the restrictions placed on published material through the oversight of UNEAC,⁸⁸ Castro's speech in 1961 was made manifest in multiple arenas of Cuban life. As he famously stated, "all things for the revolution."⁸⁹

Cabrera's letter illustrates the measures taken in a search for solace following the trauma of displacement from home and her transnational network. For Cabrera, this solace was connected to creative creation and observance, and the comforts of intellectual communication with others within her community. Cabrera's nostalgic discussion of Lorca highlights the importance she placed on these connections and their influence on her work. Furthermore, she would later pursue efforts to rebuild another transnational network, as well as reestablish connections she enjoyed prior to the revolution. This is evidenced within her archive primarily by documents from the late 1970s and early 80s, such as a 1982 letter addressed to Mexican writer, Octavio Paz.

In her letter to Octavio Paz, Cabrera expresses her respect, calling him the greatest writer of the Spanish speaking world, and invites him to speak at "Hispanic Week" at the University of Miami.⁹⁰ Prior to this, in the 1960s Paz achieved a reputation as not only a literary master but also a protector of Latin American creative work. Most notably, he took charge of rebuilding and taking control of the publication *Mundo Nuevo* from French officials. Paz declared that literature and such publications were necessary to connect "arte, literatura, y politica," (art, literature, and politics) and saw *Mundo Nuevo* as essential to this end, saying it would do so by "utilizando la

⁸⁸ Mark Weiss, ed., *The Whole Island: Six Decades of Poetry*, Introduction, Kindle.

⁸⁹ Fidel Castro, "Castro's Speech to Intellectuals on 30 June 61," Castro Speech Database, last modified n.d., accessed February 11, 2016, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1961/19610630.html>.

⁹⁰ Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to Octavio Paz, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 4, from Lydia Cabrera 1976 – 1980, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

intermediacion de un Nuevo lenguaje.” (utilizing the intermediation of a new language.)⁹¹ As a result of work such as this, Cabrera recognized Paz as one whose voice was necessary at a celebration of Latin American culture in 1982. Paz represented the development of a Latin American global community of writers, which Cabrera noticed and honored.

Furthermore, Cabrera describes the therapeutic and strengthening impact of literature in this letter to Paz. This healing nature of poetry is supported when one compares this letter’s contents with a poem written by another Cuban poet, named Eugenio Florit. In her letter to Paz, Cabrera describes exile as follows, “En esta interminable exilio en un desierto de cemento y rascacielos.” (in this endless exile in a desert of cement and skyscrapers.)⁹² Eugenio Florit utilized a similar comparison in his poem “Poet Alone in Manhattan,” which was the location of his exile following the revolution. In this piece, Florit states, “Here we all go about lost and alone, unknown, amid the noise of subway trains and firetrucks.” Florit writes that the firetrucks are travelling to rescue those who tried to kill themselves, “because, since they haven’t been found yet, what they want is to sleep and forget everything, to forget that no one remembers them, that they’re alone, terribly alone among the multitude.”⁹³ In her letter Cabrera reflects the same feeling of isolation in a land of concrete, connecting it to an endless desert.

This analogy evidences one element that bound these poets and academics in this transnational exile existence. The similarity in her analogy to that in Florit’s poem provides strong evidence that exiles not only express similar feelings of loss and isolation, but also that writing and poetry are a form of solace and ease from trauma. This further supports the

⁹¹ Jaime Perales Contreras, “Octavio Paz y el Circulo de la Revista *Mundo Nuevo*,” *Estudios: Filosofia, Historia, Letras* 102, no. 10 (2012): 193.

⁹² Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to Octavio Paz, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection, Box 1 Correspondence, Folder 4, from Lydia Cabrera 1976 – 1980, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁹³ Eugenio Florit, “Poet Alone in Manhattan” in *The Whole Island: Six Decades of Poetry*, ed. Mark Weiss (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), Kindle.

usefulness of creative and poetical work at understanding the cultural history surrounding revolution and exile. In other words, in addition to describing events that shaped historical moments, the reactions of the people and their attempts to reconcile the trauma or adjustment to change are imperative to historical research. As the creative work and letters discussed herein indicate, Florit, Paz, Lorca and others served as reflectors of the cultural history they experienced within a transnational network.

Cabrera repeatedly expressed this affection for writers and poetry's potential for transnational transmission to the various locations of the Cuban diaspora. In a separate letter regarding another writer named "Montenegro," she writes, "no importa de donde proceda, ahora, en el exilio, un buen escritor Cubano nos enorgullece y nos consuela." (It is not important where we proceed, now, in exile, a good Cuban writer gives us pride and comforts us.)⁹⁴ In this quote two elements reflect Cabrera's meaning herein. First, she chose to use the intransitive tense of Spanish, which has no English equivalent. This tense is used to express uncertainty. By writing "proceda" in this tense, she expresses uncertainty about the spaces Cuban exiles will find themselves in the future.⁹⁵ However, she contrasts this with certainty when describing the prevalent role of the Cuban writer as a source of solace for the exile. Furthermore, she trusts in the power of creative work to penetrate political barriers and borders in the same way that she and her network had in years prior to the revolution. While there is little evidence to determine

⁹⁴ In a personal letter addressed to Sr. Figueredo discussing a Cuban writer she only identifies as "Montenegro" and an event being held in his honor. In this letter, Cabrera expresses sorrow for missing this event due to illness. The quote included above discusses her impression of Montenegro as a writer and a Cuban. Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to Sr. Figueredo, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection No. 0339, Series No 1, Box No 1, Folder No 1, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

the identity of “Montenegro,” Cabrera reflects her appreciation and the important role writers have played in her recovery from the trauma of exile.⁹⁶

From Lorca to Cuadra: Honoring Revolutionary Writers

Cabrera’s letters from 1960 to 1962 indicate that she perceived a mirroring effect in her life. She connected the fire that destroyed her art on Avenue Juonot in interwar Europe to the fires that consumed her home and museum at Quinta San Jose. Also, she connected the political environment of interwar Europe with her experiences during the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Twenty years later, another mirrored event involved her efforts to secure the safe travel of poet and revolutionary, Angel Cuadra. Similar to her suspicions regarding political reasons for the attack on her dear friend Lorca, Cuban leaders had identified Cuadra as a target for his own political writing and actions.

Cuadra was imprisoned for fifteen years under suspicion that he was working with anti-Castro forces following 1959. Cuadra, who had initially supported the revolution to oust the US controlled leadership of Fulgencio Batista, was among those who felt betrayed by Castro’s decision to accept Soviet patronage after the US imposed embargo. Cuadra was among several people charged with suspicions of subversive involvement. He was sentenced to fifteen years under these charges. During his imprisonment, Cuadra’s primary communication to the outside world was to his friend, and possibly former lover, Juana Rosa Pita, who received several letters and much of the poetry he produced while incarcerated.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ In this letter, Cabrera mentions “homenaje a Montenegro.” There is a book titled *Homenaje a Montenegro*, which was written in honor of an historian named Angel Montenegro. However, Cabrera does not indicate the first name or the profession of the Montenegro she mentions in this letter beyond his work as a “writer.” Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to Sr. Figueredo, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection No. 0339, Series No 1, Box No 1, Folder No 1, at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁹⁷ Angel Cuadra, *The Poet in Socialist Cuba*. ed. Warren Hampton.

Cuadra's defiant nature was evident before, during and after his imprisonment. To begin with, Cuadra only avoided execution because the courts decided there was insufficient evidence to prove his involvement with anti-Castro forces. Nevertheless, he was sentenced to fifteen years for suspected participation. However, authorities granted him early release, which was then met with his continued publishing of counterrevolutionary poetry and communication. This led to his return to prison where he would complete the remaining years of his original sentence.

In the final decade of her life, Cabrera took up Cuadra's case. She wrote an impassioned plea to secure safe travels for Cuadra soon after his release from prison as a political prisoner in Cuba.⁹⁸ Upon his release in 1982, according to Cabrera's letter, he acquired the necessary passport for travel to the US but had not obtained the proper visa. In her letter, Cabrera pleads with an unnamed official for rapid approval of the necessary visa as rapidly, and stated that his safety demanded it. In this letter, Cabrera wrote the following, "We believe that mediation can be decisive for the future of Cuban poet Angel Cuadra, whose essentially human and universal work, has earned our admiration."⁹⁹ Here Cabrera evidenced her understanding of the precarious state writers and academics exist within inside nations which harshly censor and control their work and voice. Similar to her beloved friend Federico Garcia Lorca, Cuadra's life was in danger and his voice muzzled as long as he remained in Cuba.

In 1985, Cuadra was able to safely move to Miami, and soon after published his widely-read book, *A Poet in Socialist Cuba*, which provides a firsthand account of life on the island in the 1980s. In particular, Cuadra reflects the ways for the work of writers and academic was restrained while in Cuba. Cuadra's writing further supports Cabrera's previously mentioned statement that life for her in Cuba would have resembled slavery. Although one could argue a

⁹⁸ Personal letter from Lydia Cabrera to an unnamed official, located in the Lydia Cabrera Collection No. 0339, Series No 1, Box No 1, Folder No 4, located at the University of Miami, Cuban Heritage Collection.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

more appropriate term would be “servitude” since most were afforded an income. The descriptions and overall tone of the work indicate that many, including Cuadra, experienced a similar feeling of exile to that expressed by figures such as Cabrera, even while living on the island.¹⁰⁰



Figure 4: Cover of Angel Cuadra’s seminal work, *A Poet in Socialist Cuba*.

Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera

It is for this reason that the knowledge of the African spiritual world is today a wonderful tool for the liberation from the European man.

--Gaston Baquero, *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera*

Cabrera’s transnational connections prior to the revolution influenced her work and personal relationships. This influence would return by the 1970s due to her efforts to rebuild that network. This is discussed in Mangual’s previously discussed text *Lydia Cabrera and the*

¹⁰⁰ A future project will focus on the experiences of Angel Cuadra and Juana Rosa Pita, focusing on primary source material from the archives at the University of Oxford, which include original correspondence and discussion of his imprisonment and poetry.

Construction of an Afro Cuban Cultural Identity. Mangual promotes Cabrera as a major figure in the preservation of Afro-Cuban cultural history at various stages of her professional career, that surrounds but does not include the discussed silence from 1960 to 1962.¹⁰¹ In 1978, her contemporaries recognized her transnational influence in the production of *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera* (hereafter “*Homenaje*.”) This text includes testimonies from several of her contemporaries praising her transnational influence and personal connections, followed by a section devoted to the impact of her work as an anthropologist and historian preserving cultural history, and her role within literature.¹⁰²

The entry in *Homenaje* provided by Gaston Baquero summarizes the scope of Cabrera’s influence within the Cuban exile community in a transnational sense. He captures the essence of Cabrera’s rootedness to much of the Cuban diaspora that followed 1959 when he writes,

In the work of Lydia Cabrera many Cubans have learned to respect and to understand the deep contributions, in the territory of the spirit, the African culture, that some mentally underdeveloped insisted on presenting as pure barbarism... Thanks to Lydia Cabrera we know today that Cuban is not anti-African as it is not anti-Spanish... Born in the tenacious crucible that fused blood and conceptions of the universe, a new man of his own, of the Island, the Cuban, that underneath the various colors of his skin, has a common soul a wonderful same magical way to receive in His soul the weight of the world.¹⁰³

Within exile, Cabrera responded to the disruption of her global networks with initial hopeful agency in 1960 and by 1962 expressed a deep despair. In later years, she finally returned to her work of preserving cultural history. In particular, she would go on extending her pre-Revolutionary focus on Afro Cuban culture. Baquero’s high praise supports the prevalence of Cabrera’s work and the reach of her connections throughout the Cuban diaspora. He credits her with continuing to define what it is to be Cuban and alludes to the phrase popularized by Che

¹⁰¹ Edna Rodriguez-Mangual, *Lydia Cabrera and the Construction*.

¹⁰² Reinaldo Sanchez et al, *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera*.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 14.

Guevarra, “el nuevo hombre,” (The new man.)¹⁰⁴ By crediting Cabrera with defining the “new man” of Cuba, Baquero’s words provide further support that Cabrera acted outside of gender and racial limits, and transcended national borders. Cabrera remained an ambitious woman throughout her life. She funded her own travels to Europe, established a global network and committed years to the preservation of Afro-Cuban culture. Cabrera’s work and personal letters as well as her influence on poetry and literature, reflect the cultural reverberations that continued to ripple throughout the lives of the Cuban exile following the revolution. Cabrera’s example shows us that the exile experience cannot be described in monolithic terms. The disruption experienced by transnational exiles is not rooted to a single national identity, but rather to a global identity and connection to an international community.

¹⁰⁴ Reinaldo Sanchez et al, *Homenaje a Lydia Cabrera*, 14.

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Vita

Jessica Bordelon is a lifetime resident of Louisiana and currently teaching English as a second language at the University of New Orleans. She is also a graduate student in the History department with a concentration in International Studies. A long time poet and activist, Jessica's current research focuses on examining revolutionary history through the study of the lives of poets and protest poetry. Jessica has founded groups which use poetry and activism within the community, such as Project SOUND, and cooperates on various cultural projects such as 100 Thousand Poets for Change and Fearless Voices of the Struggle. She has also worked as a photographer for Nola Nobles and Noble Boys, projects sponsored by Charlie Boy LLC on Oretha Castle Haley. All of these aforementioned projects use creative expression to uplift the community in which they exist. Jessica's activities within these personal and collaborative projects connect with her research interests on the strength of creative expression as a communication tool and primary source for historical study.