

## **Cuba: Images Between the Stereotypical and Multiple Realities<sup>♦</sup>**

*Friends of the Cuban Heritage Collection*

*University of Miami*

*January 11, 2007*

*Translated by Frank Rodríguez*

*To Kelsey Vidaillet*

### **Carlos Alberto Montaner**

The brain is a natural stereotype factory. It needs stereotypes. Our brains set out to simplify reality allowing us to make sense of it. This simplification always works on the basis of “select and discard.” The brain controls and trains the eyes, the ears, and the sense of smell to select those images, sounds, and odors that a person will need to be able to survive. The eye receives a great deal of information, but the brain discriminates and automatically selects that which is really important for the survival of the individual it controls and defines. The rest of the information is relegated to a lower level where it remains with little attention paid to it.

The same happens with sounds and smells. The brain knows that the sound of an approaching car is more important than that of the breeze shooting through the trees or of music coming out of an open window. The brain places all environmental sounds in hierarchical order. This is accomplished according to our interests, alerting us to those that are really significant. For example, at the movies, the brain first registers the sound of the actor’s voice or the sound of the door slamming shut on the screen while we hardly notice the coughing of the patron seated next to us. Something similar takes place with

---

<sup>♦</sup>A great deal of my analysis regarding these topics relies on the original work of the Spanish anthropologist José Antonio Jáuregui, who passed away at age sixty in 2005. Jáuregui—someone I never met personally—helped me, through his books, to understand certain enigmatic and brusque behaviors relating to nationalism and human nature.

smells. We live in a society saturated by a variety of aromas—our own body, books, the wood in the table, the flowers in the vase, the humidity in the air. Yet, suddenly, it is a gas leak or a burning smell that pricks our attention. Why? The brain is automatically alerting us. We have not asked it to keep vigil. It is always on, untiringly on, all on its own.

It seems that the first identification made by the brain is not of us but rather of the mother that is nursing us. Her warm breasts, her smell, the taste of the mother's milk, these stimuli begin our discovery of what is at first a blurred and kindly creature on which we will come to depend. We cannot tell where this warm presence ends and where we start. Little by little, we will gradually discover our own identity in a fascinating and progressive journey of segregation of the environment and affirmation of the self. From the moment we are capable of being aware of our own identity, a tenacious process begins, one that will go on throughout our life, aimed at sustaining, maintaining and distinguishing that identity that individualizes us. This tiresome battle—one from which we partially rest during sleep—will end only with senile dementia or with our death.

Our conscience is forged by comparison and contrast. I am older or younger than so and so. I am more or less intelligent, good looking or nice than so and so. That other person is the one that regulates and modulates our self-esteem. The other person is our unit of measurement. Self-esteem is a necessity. We get depressed when we perceive that everybody, or almost everybody is better than us. Euphoria sets in when the opposite is true. Depression and euphoria are the names given to the two moods resulting from the voluntary and uncontrollable action of our neurotransmitters. The brain punishes us or

rewards us automatically in order to induce us to act according to its (our) interests. It rewards us if self-esteem is sufficient. It punishes us when it is lacking.

Emotional balance resides in having a good equilibrium between self-esteem and empathy. Empathy is the ability to get inside someone else's mind to be able to decipher his or her emotions. When we lack self-esteem, a certain queasiness comes over us. But when self-esteem is excessive, a person pathologically overflows with selfishness and the other person disappears from the affective field. There is no empathy. We don't see the other person. In these cases we are in the presence of narcissists. A narcissist is someone who urgently needs to raise his ego above all that surrounds him and who must keep on doing it constantly. His brain rewards him for it. He or she lives for this, a slave to his or her insatiable neurotransmitters. And why do narcissists bother us? They bother us because we perceive them as a menace to our own ego. They do not see us. Not being aware of our own existence is a brutal form of aggression to our ego.

### ***The Border of the Tribe***

But the self, the ego, needs to subscribe to a group in order to maintain itself. There is no I when there is no other. There is no ego if there is no tribe. The tribe is already a complex construct built upon a common history, traditions, manners, communicative codes, symbols, and legends. If we visualize an umbrella and a top hat we can visualize the British tribe. Those symbols are part of the stereotype. We think of others and we think of ourselves according to simplifications that our brain has made. "The British" in truth do not exist. They are sixty million residents, all of them different, living on islands located west of Europe, but what makes them "British" is an arbitrary conceptualization. One glance encompasses them all. It is an idea constructed from the simplifications that

the brain has gradually collected to be able to form judgments and to establish its defensive mechanisms.

If self-esteem is the positive valuation of the self, and if it is based on a comparison to other's egos, the mechanism that regulates belonging to a tribe has similar characteristics. We need to belong. To belong we are willing to endure great hardships. Not to belong is a curse. The Greeks would punish using ostracism, that is, exile, because the penalty of being expelled was very grave. To belong to a tribe we are obliged to appreciate it. Our tribe is always the best. The myths and legends with which we sustain it lead to a positive valuation.

When we notice the values of our tribe, our brain rewards us through the action of our neurotransmitters. This is the equivalent of self-esteem. If we reject them, our brain punishes us. On the other hand, when the beloved tribe rejects us, when we believe or feel that it rejects us—an absolutely subjective phenomenon—we suffer. When this happens, some psychologists and anthropologists talk about an “identity problem.” The issue comes up when a member of the tribe rejects the traits of the group to which he belongs, or when he believes that the tribe has rejected him. This dissonance has an emotional cost that is collected by our punitive brain. At times this cost can be very high leading to aggressive behaviors.

### ***The Cuban Tribe Looks at the U.S.***

Cubans make up a tribe that branches off from the vast and complex Spanish identity. During three centuries Spaniards set out to mold a society in the Americas in their own image and likeness. As all other imperial powers, Spain sent to the Americas a governing class that brought with it its beliefs and habits, religious rites, vision of the cosmos, in

summary, its culture. But towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, just as throughout the rest of Western Civilization, those societies born on the other side of the Atlantic, and following on the republican model that emerged in the United States, and the downfall of the reigning establishment in Europe, perceived that they too could set up their separate tents because the elements that differentiated them from their colonial masters were already very clear and strong. This perception, mixed in with the romantic esthetic of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, drove all nationalist movements that shake and shape the planet even today.

In Cuba, the effort to segregate away from Spain—that reaffirmation of the tribe—in the political realm was embodied in three tendencies that began to timidly appear towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, becoming even stronger all throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century—one were unionists that sought to create their own state with the objective of later annexing it to the American Union; another were the autonomists, who desired to be in total control of the administration of the government of the Island while still remaining under Spanish sovereignty; and the separatists, those insisting on creating an independent republic. Although they were political and social forces that were seeking different objectives they coalesced in one basic fact—the certainty that a different creature, a Cuban, different from a Spaniard, already existed. And this creature merited his own separate tent in which to seek his own fortune.

As occurred in the United States and in Latin America, those that within Cuba felt with greater urgency the need to break or substantially modify their links to the mother country were the enlightened white Creoles, some of them extremely rich due to a business activity that was very lucrative at the time—the sugar industry. But this kind of agribusiness, in addition to money, engendered in these Cuban businessmen a sort of

superiority feeling as compared to Spaniards. These were complex enterprises that incorporated science and technology, requiring numerous employees and slaves, occasioning many international links that necessitated business trips abroad and the knowledge of foreign languages. These Creoles, therefore, began to look upon a relatively backward Spain with a certain amount of disdain. They did not feel victims of a superior colonial power, to the contrary—they felt subjugated by a second-rate power, while they were in turn sophisticated and successful entrepreneurs.

To that high self-esteem, after the wars of independence, a legendary vision of heroic Cuban war stories was added. The names of José Martí, Antonio Maceo, and Máximo Gómez were turned into objects of popular devotion. This allowed the creation of a cult of violence and the enshrinement of “men of action” in a sacred position. Cubans not only saw themselves as more enlightened and intelligent than Spaniards, they also saw themselves as more courageous and bold. Unfortunately, the focus of their patriotic fervor was centered on these warriors and their military feats rather than on civilian heroes.

While this perception of Spaniards and of themselves was taking root among Cubans, the value judgment they were making about U.S. society was very benevolent. The United States was the country of prosperity, liberty, and technological advance. It was towards America, and not Europe, that the Cuban elite wished to travel for an education. So much so, that the king of Spain, Charles IV, without much success, published an edict that prohibited such dangerous contacts. At any rate, all through the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cubans, in general, were busy constructing a stereotype of their neighbor to the North that was a very favorable one. Even among those that rejected certain

American expansionists attitudes, such as José Martí, still greatly admired several virtues attributed to the population of that country, viewed as: industrious, creative, democratic, and well organized. That is how they had succeeded in building up such a rich and progressive society.

### ***The American Tribe Looks Towards Cuba for the First Time***

Yet the vision held by the Americans towards their Cuban neighbors did not correspond with this positive image. Businessmen only saw Cuba as a good international market, as it was the best market they had towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Politicians, for their part, perceived, fundamentally, the strategic angle— Cuba was a large island situated at the entrance of the Gulf of Mexico, and this could mean a potential danger if a powerful nation such as England were to control it. This danger grew when the U.S. expanded into Louisiana and later into Florida. It continued as well when Texas joined the Union. But Cuban society, under the control of a second-rate Catholic nation, did not warrant any special consideration. For the Americans of that day, Cubans were a blurry mass of Spanish Catholics, that is, of backward and bloody fanatics, with some black slaves added amongst them. This image was to later mix in with that of the Mexicans. When Americans began to construct the Latino stereotype, especially after the creation of the Republic of Texas, and the later war against Mexico, it was a Mexican they had in mind.

Matters didn't change too much after the war of 1898. The attitude held by the invading Americans was, simultaneously, spite towards Spaniards, and minimal fondness for Cubans. Cuban society seemed unruly and dirty to them, one that required lessons in such elemental things as not urinating or defecating in the street. The occupation troops,

literally, wash down the cities with soap and water. The private correspondence of Teddy Roosevelt makes this clear—Cubans were a sorry lot. The Platt Amendment, which sought various objectives, among them opening the door to a hypothetical future annexation, also reveals a total lack of confidence in the proposition that Cubans would be able to govern themselves. But it was not just the Americans who shared this opinion. The first President of the republic, Tomás Estrada Palma, held the same position. It seems that history, melancholically, has proved him right. Fully two-thirds of the independent life of the Cuban Republic has transpired under dictatorial regimes.

### ***Americans Take a Second Look at Cuba***

After those early years, in which the Cuban establishment held on to a degree of anti-American resentment—going hand in hand with the popular admiration generated by the U.S.—and after the elimination of the Platt Amendment in 1934, when the appetite for annexation had died down in Washington, the perception held by Americans towards Cubans began to change.

The political focus weakened. Cubans began to be seen as mellow fellows. Although at a distance—several popular songs by Lecuona, Tropicana, Xavier Cugat (a Catalanian), Carmen Miranda (a Brazilian), Latin jazz, Havana cigars, and Bacardi Rum provided the framework for a gay way to look at Cuba. Cuba was still part of the wider Latin panorama, but with a sweet and fun Caribbean edge that included rumba, mambo and cha-cha. Cuba was linked to coconut trees, breezes, maracas, and drums. That was the image.

Not bad. It is not a solemn stereotype, yet it is not negative. When American TV took hold, the only Cuban *professional* that Americans knew was Ricky Ricardo, an

easy-going musician that talked in English with a heavy accent. The United States, in the 1950s, exhibited a cruelly racist outlook, yet American society accepted, to a large degree, that red head Lucille Ball, funny and silly in the scripts of *I love Lucy*, having in real life—as in her fictional character—Desy Arnaz as her mate, who, by the way, invented the modern *sitcom* with that show.

But towards the end of the 1950s this image began to darken. Fidel and his bearded gang showed up. Herbert Matthews reported on it three times in the front pages of *The New York Times*. These were the first symptoms of Castromania. Suddenly, the image of the good rumba dancer gave way to that of the good revolutionary. Yet American society did not look kindly on the cruel scenes of the firing squad or the confiscation of Yankee properties. All this was taking place in the midst of the Cold War. Eisenhower and Kennedy were harsh on the unpleasant neighbor. At that point, Castro did not have many defenders within American society.

### ***From Freedom-fighters to Cuban Americans***

Cubans began to arrive in Miami. Those exiles, almost a half-century ago, saw themselves as *freedom-fighters*. Their self-perception was as comrades-in-arms of the U.S. in the defense of liberty and democracy against the Soviet threat. They were in the U.S. on a temporary basis. They dreamed of a quick return to Cuba. This feeling was eloquently reflected in the reunion of the former Bay of Pigs fighters with President Kennedy at the Orange Bowl in Miami following their freedom from prison in Cuba. At that time Cubans did not perceive the slightest hint of rejection, except for a slight rumor coming out of Liberty City that proffered that they were taking jobs from African Americans.

During the years of the 1960s violent anti-Castroism had the support and explicit blessing of American society and of the U.S. government. Kennedy had given orders to his brother Bobby to kick those Caribbean Communists out of power by force. CIA agents trained Cubans on U.S. soil to conduct sabotage incursions on the Island. It was to be known as “Operation Mongoose”. And these operations were not limited only to Cuba. Several dozen *freedom-fighters* were recruited to fight in the Congo against Communist infiltration there. These exiles even were to face, in those far-away places, their very own Cuban compatriots sent there from Havana. In those days, these arms and explosive experts who conducted clandestine missions inside Cuba were regarded with great admiration and sympathy by the exile community. The great irony is that decades later, these identical behaviors, even these very same people, are severely persecuted and punished. The patriot of the sixties had morphed into the terrorist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***The Appearance of Cuban Americans***

In any case, the consolidation of the dictatorship put an end to the temporary nature of the exile and of heroic anti-Castroism. Exiles, to their great chagrin, would have to remain in U.S. territory. There would be no return to Cuba. From visitors and ideological allies they had joined the ranks of a sub-minority group, the Cuban Americans, which in turn belonged to a larger minority group—U.S. Hispanics. Yet Cubans didn’t feel Hispanic. To them Hispanics were an artificial tribe created by the Americans. The Americans, for their part, could not precisely distinguish among Latins. They were all Hispanics, were they to be Guatemalan peasants of Maya origin, Argentines of Italian parents, or Cubans having Spanish and African roots. The U.S. Census Bureau classifies them all under the strange category of—“Hispanics of any race.”

For those *Cuban Americans* born or raised in the U.S. the assumption of that new identity was not easy. At home they had never heard talk about Hispanics. Their parents were fiercely proud Cubans. They would talk to them about Martí and Maceo. In Puerto Rico, the exiles would organize patriotic marches every year in which the children would dress up as Cuban patriots. It was a tribe imbued with very strong self-esteem. Parents and grandparents would describe a paradisiacal island lost due to Castroism. Distance and time worked to embellish the past. Many *Cuban Americans*, especially those living in the great exile communities of Miami or Union City, began to build a curious emotional cabriolet—they invented a veritable nostalgia for a world in which they had never lived. They felt themselves proximate Cubans, as they were naturally assuming their American identity,

Yet, as opposed to their parents and grandparents, these *Cuban Americans* understood something their family members did not know, that Americans—Anglo or black—could hardly perceive the traits of Cuban identity, and that they did not feel much fondness for the members of this ethnic group. The elements that appeared most prominently were the ones that were most annoying—the ever more frequent use of the Spanish language, the Cuban takeover of certain neighborhoods and schools, the different manners and customs, the higher tone of voice. To be a *Cuban American* was to be aware that the *Americans* did not exactly appreciate *Cubans*, as in general, they were not greatly fond of Hispanics.

Additionally, there was another element that added insult to injury—the Cuban government had succeeded in its campaign aimed at discrediting the exiles. It presented them as an extreme-right wing mafia, and that image began to take hold in the American

media. Added to this ideological varnish a sinister brand of crime and corruption was sold. Following the *Mariel Boatlift*, the Cuban that appears on American screens is no longer Ricky Ricardo, but rather the harsh drug dealer Tony Montana played by Al Pacino. The vast and plural reality of two million people would be buried underneath the weight of a nasty stereotype that *Cuban Americans* perceived even more clearly than anyone else, as they were immersed in the Anglo world, and were thusly not oblivious to the codes used by the media.

On the other hand, in Miami, the sordid hostility of some Anglos towards Cubans included a not-too-frequent factor—*Cuban Americans*, instead of being part of a marginal ghetto in the natural course of two or three decades had forged a second *mainstream*, including good recreational venues, luxurious neighborhoods, and their very own cultural manifestations. An ultra-modern auditorium dedicated to the opera, for example, was recently inaugurated in downtown Miami, and in it simultaneous translations of the lyrics are provided both in English and in Spanish. That means that sophisticated music lovers that follow the opera are as likely to be members of the Anglo as of the Hispanic establishment, yet the Anglo tribe—as happens with any tribe—is not overly fond of this parallel *biculturalism*. Hence, the popular irony that states that—“Miami is the closest city to the United States.” It is politically correct to hail diversity, but, deep inside, many Anglos reject it. This is probably a universal phenomenon.

Undoubtedly, a fundamental part of the conflict between *The Miami Herald* and the Cuban community stems from the confrontation of some Anglos with some Cubans within that corporation. It is the secret conflict between diversity and uniformity. This was palpable inside *The Miami Herald* as in other media outlets during the so-called

“Elián Case”. It came up again when, unfairly, in September 2006, *The Miami Herald* furiously vent against eleven Hispanic journalists—ten of them Cubans, in addition to an eleventh, an American journalist of Nicaraguan descent—unjust attacks that were deeply defamatory, and the corporation, although later severely criticizing the libelous story in its own pages, did not have the humility nor the decency to issue a public apology to the people it had offended nor to the readers it had confounded.

### ***Cuban and Cuban American Nuances***

In no society is it simple or pleasant to be a part of a minority that is not kindly perceived by the dominant ethnic group. We have already learned that the brain punishes this dissonance with physical discomfort. Many *Cuban Americans* have experienced it and have reacted in various fashions. In some cases, they have tried to leave behind their Cuban roots as far as possible. Others have become severe critics of the way of life of their ancestors. They are the so-called “cultural renegades.” I suppose that the rest of the Hispanic community in the U.S. has experienced, to a greater or lesser degree, something akin to this.

There is even another way to cope with this uncomfortable feeling created by social ostracism —hypertrophied self-esteem. A member of a minority group takes refuge in its own eccentricity to protect itself. All manifestations of “pride” —such as gay pride, Hispanic pride, black pride—are defense mechanisms against rejection by the *mainstream*. At times this pride is taken to ridiculous and cruel extremes. The person to whom this essay is dedicated, Kelsey Vidaillet, a young and brilliant Cuban American born in the United States, grew up in Wisconsin, and is currently a graduate student at FIU. She related to me that she had overheard, in a mocking tone of voice, the moniker

*halfie*.

Kelsey—who actively and lovingly is trying to help Cubans to recover their freedom, never passes the chance to explain to her American compatriots what is happening in Cuba—is a *halfie* because her mother is American while her father is Cuban, which supposedly diminishes her load of “Cubanhood.” Kelsey, therefore, among some Cubans was paying the price for being half American, and among Americans was paying the price for being half Cuban.

### ***Parents, Academics, and Communicators***

When I selected the topic for this conference I did so because I think that in a city such as this, so complex and pluralistic, it is very important that centers of learning and the media examine carefully the topic of identity so that people may experience and live together with diversity without suffering trauma.

Parents belonging to minority groups must teach their children to live in a world that is partially different from theirs. They need to educate them to understand that rejection of cultural diversity, something they will need to face, is a totally irrational reflex legacy, rooted in atavism.

Parents of those *mainstream* groups need to vaccinate them against certain racist attitudes to teach their children that most racial or cultural differences lack significance. The greatness of American society rests on something that was first stated in the modern era in the United States—that all people are fundamentally equal and that they were all ruled or ought to be ruled by the same laws.

Perhaps without knowing it, the founding fathers of the American nation were proposing a way of organizing social coexistence based on reason and not on obscure

tribal links that had dominated our species for millions of years. The rule of law was, in a way, “contra natura.” It was akin to controlling fire, agriculture, dikes, or irrigation channels, know-how, the conquest of intelligence to dominate nature under the authority of human beings. But this knowledge, like all other forms of knowledge, needs to be learned, and has to be constantly examined in order to be able to perfect it.

Miami may be capable of turning the coexistence of its different ethnic groups into a permanent conflict. Or it may be able, on the contrary, to dedicate a strong intellectual effort to improve upon it. Its universities may be the best places to try the latter. And that has been the goal of this talk.