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# Walking the line: Cuban exiles in the United States and Maghrebin immigrants in France

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*Migratory patterns differ from one community to another, from one international context to the other. Thus, it is difficult to find common points between them, considering all the variables involved in migration and Diaspora studies. One element that is common to all Diaspora communities is that rupture, though traumatic, can become the source of creation. This interdisciplinary case study compares and contrasts the situation of Cubans in the U.S. and that of the Maghrebins in France by means of lyrical literary production. By analyzing the literature produced by migrants one can better understand the socio-political aspects involved in how various communities adapt to their host countries.*

Keywords: *migration, exile literature, shifting borders, imaginary homeland*

## 1. National Contexts versus Hybrid Identities

The idea of us living in a 'global village'[2] is acquiring more and more substance: it has never been easier to travel, meet people from all over the world and even relocate to any given country. In this internationalizing-inclined context, the notion of 'nation' is becoming blurred, as frontiers are quite elastic, especially for those lucky enough to be born in the right country. Considering all this, a series of terms are being redefined, especially in the area of migration studies. As Andrea O'Reilly Herrera underlines in *ReMembering Cuba*, issues such as immigration, exile, integration and identity "are painful realities that are often obscured, minimized, fetishized, and even effaced by the thickly layered cloud bank of theoretical jargon that claims to describe and analyze the relationships between culture and identity, the post-colonial condition, and the diasporic or nomadic consciousness" (O'Reilly Herrera 2001, xxi).

In such a rich pool of investigation material it may appear difficult to choose a particular topic to study, but two cases have particularly drawn my attention: the

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[2] The term, coined by Marshall McLuhan, originally designates the World Wide Web, but in the context of this study it is being used to point out that because of new advanced in technology and communication the Earth has 'shrunk', allowing us to travel practically anywhere without this posing particularly challenging logistical problems.

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Cubans in the United States and the Maghrebins in France. At a first sight, there are no grounds for a comparison between these two cases, but it is exactly their perfect antagonism that makes them so interesting to compare and contrast. These two communities represent the two opposed ends of a (sometimes twisted) line: on the one hand those who are well received in a host country, but they willingly search their identity elsewhere, and on the other hand a community that affirms its identity is a hybrid between tradition and new homeland, but it is constantly rejected by the host country.

What better way to contrast these two situations than analyzing the literature produced in the communities concerned? For, as Azade Seyhan states in *Writing Outside the Nation*, "Literature as social document resists the erasure of geographical, historical and cultural differences" (Seyhan 2001, 7).

The purpose of this study is to underline that migratory patterns differ greatly from community to community, so much so that there are no patters of migration, integration or identity construction. This will be done by opposing two stances of migration from the perspective of literary texts.

In order to do this I have chosen four primary texts: *For Ana Veldfort* by Lourdes Casal, *Landscapes of the Mind* by Carlota Caulfield, *Banlieue* by Karim Kacel and *Le quotidian* by Ridan. Though the four texts are all lyrical, the ones by Lourdes Casal and Carlota Caulfield are poems, while *Banlieue* and *Le quotidian* are song lyrics. This may seem as an odd choice, but in fact they have one common point that makes them particularly interesting to me: they were written by persons that live(d) their life on the hyphen, as Gustavo Pérez Firmat[3] would say. In the sense defined by Pérez Firmat, those who live on the hyphen, or the one-and-a-halfs, represent the generation of Cubans who migrated to the United States as children or teenagers, thus spending their formation years in two different countries. But in the context of this study I shall use this term to define those that are neither-here-nor-there, the persons living in two different worlds. It may seem curious to refer to the French Maghrebins as such, but in fact it is very much the case: while the Maghrebins born in France are French by law, the truth is that they are still considered second hand citizens, thus they are indeed neither-here-nor-there. While some of the terminology used in migration and Diaspora studies may be somewhat restrictive when it is time to draw a comparison[4], the umbrella term of neither-here-nor-there can constitute some kind of 'firm ground' in this problematic area of study.

Before embarking on the analysis of the primary texts, it is useful to briefly outline the socio-historical context in which they were produced.

[3] Gustavo Pérez Firmat describes people who live life on the hyphen as 'fertile hybrids' of several cultural spaces.

[4] Please take into account the difference between Cuban *exiles* and Maghrebin *immigrants*, or, even better defined in French, *les français issus de l'immigration*.

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The massive Cuban migration towards the United States began after the 1959 Cuban *Revolución*. As several scholars explain, there were three waves of migration after this date. The first wave took place at the beginning of the 1960s, and the migrants were mostly well off or middle class educated people. They were warmly welcomed by the US government. The migrants of the second wave (in the 1980s) were called *Los Marielitos* and were 'marginal elements' of the Cuban society, such as homosexuals. Many of the *Marielitos* were poor and unqualified and were not received with open arms. As for the third main migration wave, the *Bolseros* wave, its reasons were mainly economic, caused by the critical situation in 1994's Cuba. It is important to note that in the mid-1960s the US government launched the Peter Pan operation – Cuban parents were encouraged to send their children to the US unaccompanied, in order to 'save them'[5]. One immediately notices that those who chose to exile themselves in the US (more often than not returning to Cuba was not an option) come from very different backgrounds and left Cuba at various ages, thus though conservative Cubans are trying, or rather tried, to re-create their homeland in Miami, this 'myth of Cuba' is strongly contested by those who do not fit the description established mainly by the first wave generation. But, as Antoni Kapcia highlights in his work *Cuba: Island of Dreams*, "the pre-1959 intellectual elite's concern - or even obsession – with *cubanidad*" evolved from it being a minor concept to it becoming, during Castro's regime, a main issue for the masses. (Kapcia 2000, 5-7). But *cubanidad* and *cubanía* - what it means to be Cuban, the Cuban identity – remain volatile notions that evoke different things to different Cubans.

The situation in France is quite the opposite: many Maghrebins, initially encouraged by the French government than needed to rebuild the country after World War II, settled willingly in France. But when they decided to bring their families and start a new life in the Hexagon, the situation began to change (Hargreaves 2007, 17-29). Still, though the fact that more and more Maghrebins were moving to France and raising families was increasingly frowned upon by the State, "Prior to 1993, automaticity was the norm for the children of immigrants, i.e. they became French on reaching the age of majority without any action being required on their part." (Hargreaves 2007, 29-30).

Here is a situation where the children, born in France, automatically become French, thus they should easily be assimilated and this should be the end of it. In the case of Cuban-Americans, the hyphenation stands mostly for the generation born in Cuba and raised in the US, as those who were born in the States, though retaining some kind of Cuban-ness, are mostly seen as American[6]. In the exact same case, the *français issus de l'immigration* – those born of migrant parents – make up France's

[5] Information compiled by myself in the form of notes taken during seminars attended at the University of Manchester, 2008/2009.

[6] This is how Gustavo Pérez Firmat sees his children, but it is possible that Andrea O'Reilly Herrera's opinion on the issue be different.

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own hyphenated generation, in spite of being born and bred in France. William Kidd attempts an explanation for this: "Now we know, of course, that 'national identities', and many of the socio-cultural 'traditions' which express those identities, are characteristically *constructed*, products of evolving economic forces and manipulation by powerful interest-groups and parties" (Kidd 2000, 154). The migrants and their Franco-Maghrebin children simply do not fit nicely into the 'national identity'. Hargreaves blames the non-integration more on economy than on politics:

> The principal obstacles to the incorporation of post-colonial minorities in the French society lie not in cultural differences but in the radical restructuring of the labour market since the mid-1970s, greatly reducing the opportunities open to minority groups, and in the discriminatory treatment which they have suffered in the competition for jobs and scarce resources. (Hargreaves 2007, 6)

Whichever the causes may be, the fact remains: a whole generation is left spiritually homeless, neither-here-nor-there.

When it comes to the authors of the four primary texts, they are all people on the hyphen. Lourdes Casal, who passed away in the early 1980s, was an important scholar and member of the Cuban Diaspora in the States, who migrated as a young adult. In the 1970s her personal convictions changed and she began supporting the Revolution and trying to forge a link between Cuba and its US exiles. She eventually returned to Cuba. She wrote mostly in Spanish, but many of her works have been translated into English, sparking off various responses. Carlota Caulfield, contemporary writer, was born in Havana, but since 1981 she has been living in various countries. She writes both in Spanish and in English. Karim Kacel, born in France in the late 1950s from a Kabyle father and an Algerian mother, was raised in the Parisian *banlieue*[7]. Though his music was in tone with the 1980s French style, some of his songs – such as *Banlieue* – as well as his origins got him on the hyphen, as he was called by some a *beur*[8] singer. When it comes to Ridan, he is also a *français issu de l'immigration*, born in France in 1975. He became famous in 2004 as a rap artist and urban poet describing the difficulties encountered by Maghrebin immigrants[9].

Evidently, the personal backgrounds of these artists do not coincide, but they share a common point: they live(d) their life as identity acrobats: 'Writing between borders and languages, many writers plot complex strategies of translating in an

[7] Some would translate *banlieue* by ghetto, but I do not share this view, as they do not coincide as factual realities.

[8] *Beur* is a (derogatory) pun for the French *arabe*, Arab.

[9] The factual information in this paragraph is publicly available on various internet sites.

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effort to negotiate their loyalties to nation, language, ethnicity, class, and gender.' (Seyhan 2001, 8).

The analysis of the four texts is built along three important axes: Nostalgia versus Frustration, Resignation versus Irony, and Imaginary Homeland versus Harsh Reality.

## 2. Nostalgia versus Frustration

Both *For Ana Veldford* and *Landscapes of the Mind* permanently allude to endless nostalgia, creating a feeling of interior emptiness. The recognition of this is even stated in *Landscapes of the Mind*: "I am nostalgic today". Only that 'today' seems to extend into eternity, as the author has spent "ten years collecting dreams". As for Lourdes Casal, though New York is her home and she is "ferociously loyal to this acquired *patria chica*", it was not there that "I acquired my first convictions" reason for which she remains "a stranger among the stones,/ even beneath the friendly sun of this summer's day".

In the case of the French texts, what strikes me before any other kind of analysis is the fact that the two songs, though written almost 25 years apart, bear striking similarities as they seem to refer to the exact same issues, as if time had stood still from the point of view of the immigrants' social issues.

Compared to the Cuban authors' texts, the French ones seem to emanate an energetic sort of frustration. Except for a slight bout of nostalgia in Ridan's *Le quotidien*, 'J'aurais voulu revoir grand père pour qu'il me raconte une belle histoire' – 'I would have liked to see grandpa again so that he'd tell me a beautiful story'[10], the two songs underline the frustration of someone that does not belong, or rather is not allowed to belong, to the only home he has known. This tormenting feeling bursts into factual, often illicit, manifestation: 'il se saoule un petit peu, joue avec le feu, joue au delinquent,/ […]/ il vole des mobilettes, on fait la fête, sur le moment…' – "he gets a bit tipsy, he plays with fire, he does the delinquent,/ […]/ he steals a moped, for a moment it's all a big party."

It is very interesting to notice that in Casal and Caulfield's poems the situation is not blamed on anyone, there is no explicit motive for the disturbing situation, while, on the other hand, Ridan actively blames it all on Pasqua[11] (his name is mentioned both as a pun and as an intertextual allusion), Jacques Chirac (same as Pasqua), the police and the economy ('Ici le rêve s'est fait bannir par des pensées industrielles' – "In this place dreaming was forbidden by concerns for the industry").

[10] All translations from French into English are mine, unless otherwise mentioned.
[11] French politician.

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### 3. Resignation versus Irony

The idea of resignation is deeply felt throughout Casal and Caulfield's poems. Their fate as exiles seems to be, just as nostalgia is, perpetual. Casal both acknowledges and assumes it with a painful sense of fatality: "I carry this marginality, immune to all turning back,/ too *habanera* to be *newyorkina*,/ too *newyorkina* to be/ - even to become again -/ anything else." As for Carlota Caulfield, she roams the world, but only 'in my memory.' As Cristina García underlines, "Cuba is a peculiar exile, I think, an island-colony. We can reach it by a thirty minute charter flight…yet never reach it at all." (Behar 1995, 253).

As for the Franco-Maghrebin artists, their work expresses the exact opposite of resignation: they insist on never giving up. Their 'chosen weapons' seem to be: a) facing problems directly by speaking their minds 'hé banlieue, ne nous laisse pas tomber, on a droit d'exister nous aussi…' – "hey banlieue, don't fail us, we too have the right to exist…" (Karim Kacel) and asking for justice 'Je veux savoir pourquoi ici je manque de confiance la justice' – "I want to know why in this place I don't give any credit to justice." (Ridan) and b) making good use of irony: 'La douce France m'adore tellement qu'elle m'interpelle a chaque tournant' – "Sweet France loves me so much that the police stops me round every corner" (Ridan). This particular verse deserves special attention, as it is not only directly ironic, but also contains an intertextual allusion containing half of century of French history: *Douce France* is an emblematic song that stands for what France is supposed to be, namely a harmonious society in which everyone enjoys the famous *liberté, egalité, fraternité*.

### 4. Imaginary Homeland versus Harsh Reality

Lourdes Casal, in her giving up the idea of ever having a real homeland again, does not even venture as far as to imagine a place that could feel like home, as she is conscious that 'I will remain forever a foreigner,/ even when I return to the city of my childhood.' On the other hand, Carlota Caulfield imagines a *Landscape of the Mind*. Though home is no longer tangible, it stubbornly tries to reside in the memory. The loss of even this trace of a home equals to the loss of identity and self: "I spent ten years collecting dreams/ and forgetting the coastland of my country./ I am now bordering the domain of a shadow." Thus "the exile knows his place, and that place is the imagination (Ricardo Pau Llosa)". (Pérez Firmat 1999, 10).

On the other hand, the Maghrebins reside on the very real territory of the *Banlieue*, and they do it on a daily basis, *au quotidien* ('Tu veux que je te dise le quotidien d'un maghrébin quand t'as 20 ans' – "I'm gonna tell you about the daily life of a 20 year old Maghrebin" – Ridan), with everything this implies: 'l'asfixie,/ son univers est lourd' - "it's chocking him,/ his universe is difficult to breathe in"

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(Karim Kacel). In a world where being a *beur* artist making rap is almost a form of rebellion (Marks and McCaffrey 2001, 116-118), one has to wonder where this determination stems from. The answer may be in the fact that the "unambiguous negritude of the bronze figures and Léopold Sedar Senghor's engraved reminder to the passer-by that 'ils sont tombés fratellement unis pour que tu restes Français'[12] is ironic as well as eloquent" (Kidd and Reynolds 2000, 160).

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the observations above one can safely conclude that migratory patterns differ so much so that it is actually very difficult to find common points between them, considering how many variable elements are involved in migration and Diaspora studies. One element that is common to all Diaspora communities is that rupture, though traumatic, can become the source of creation: "Multiple migrations end in the loss of our homes, possessions, and memorabilia. When the smoke clears, we are faced with charred pieces of identification, shards of language, burned tongues, and cultural fragments. However, from the site of this fire, the phoenix of a transnational, bi- and multilingual literature has arisen" (Seyhan 2001, 7).

Still, though literature might very well become transnational and give rise to new study fields, I believe that while we live in a forever smaller world, we still rely on the concepts of 'nation' and 'country'. The mere fact that this study had primary texts to refer to proves in an unambiguous manner, that for the time being the idea of home country and personal identity are forged together in our minds. Whichever our allegiances might be, we carry them inside us wherever we may want or have to go. At the same time, in Salman Rushdie's words, "To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier" (Seyhan 2001, 14). We acknowledge our sense of self and define what 'home' represents to us only by spending some time travelling. In a sense, we all walk this line sooner or later – the important part is to keep our balance.

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[12] "They have fallen fraternally united in order for you to remain French." – my translation.

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## Appendix

*For Ana Veldford*[13]

Lourdes Casal

Never a summertime in Provincetown
and even on this limpid afternoon
(so out of the ordinary for New York)
it is from the window of a bus that I contemplate
the serenity of the grass up and down Riverside Park
and the easy freedom of vacationers resting on rumpled blankets,
fooling around on bicycles along the paths.
I remain as foreign behind this protective glass
as I was that winter
- that unexpected weekend –
when I first confronted Vermont's snow.
And still New York is my home.
I am ferociously loyal to this acquired *patria chica*.
Because of New York I am a foreigner anywhere else,
fierce pride in the scents that assault us along any West Side street,
marijuana and the smell of beer
and the odor of dog urine
and the savage vitality of Santana
descending upon us
from a speaker that thunders, improbably balanced on a fire excape,
the raucous glory of New York in summer,
Central Park and us,
the poor,
who have inherited the lake of the north side,
and Harlem sails through the slackness of this sluggish afternoon.
The bus slips lazily,
down, along Fifth Avenue;
and facing me, the young bearded man
carrying a heap of books from the Public Library,
and it seems as if you could touch summer in the sweaty brow of the cyclist
who rides holding onto my window.
But New York wasn't the city of my childhood,

[13] Both Casal' s *For Ana Veldford* and Caulfield's *Landscapes of the Mind* appear in Ruth Behar's *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*. *For Ana Veldford* was translated from Spanish by David Frye, while *Landscapes of the Mind* was written in English and did not require translation.

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it was not here that I acquired my first convictions,
not here the spot where I took my first fall,
nor the piercing whistle that marked the night.
This is why I will always remain on the margins,
a stranger among the stones,
even beneath the friendly sun of this summer's day,
just as I will remain forever a foreigner,
even when I return to the city of my childhood
I carry this marginality, immune to all turning back,
too *habanera* to be *newyorkina*,
too *newyorkina* to be
- even to become again –
anything else.

*Landscapes of the Mind*

Carlota Caulfield

My house is a music box
and the calm there
is a tunnel of almond blossoms.
I am nostalgic today:
summer is bordering my house
and I roam the world
in my memory.
I spent ten years collecting dreams
and forgetting the coastland of my country.
I am now bordering the domain of a shadow.

*Banlieue*[14]

Karim Kacel

il regarde sa ville,
tranquille, et il attend ,
il sais qu'il est fragile, difficile, et pourtant ;
il ouvre ses grands yeux, et regarde sa banlieue,
le chômage a son âge, ne le rend pas heureux...

[14] https://www.musixmatch.com/fr/paroles/Karim-Kacel/Banlieue [29.04.2017]

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cet horizon de tours, qui l'entoure, l' asfixie
son univers et lourd, passe les jours, et l'ennuie
ce n'est qu'un enfant, qui rêve de grands vents,
donnez lui de l'espace, qu'il efface ses tourments...

Refrain :
hé banlieue, ne les laisse pas vieillir, leur jeunesse s'étire...banlieue
hé banlieue, ta grisaille ne m'inspire que l'envie de partir... banlieue
hé banlieue ...ne les laisse pas tomber, ils ont droit d'exister eux aussi...
banlieue...oh oh...banlieue...ouhhh

De café en café , avec des pomés, il passe son temps,
il se saoule un ptit peu, joue avec le feu, joue au délinquant,
c'est pas qu'il soit méchant, demandez aux parents, mettez-vous a sa place, c'est dur de faire face quand on a qu' 17ans...
il vole des mobilettes, on fait la fête, sur le moment...
la police le guette, ses parents s'inquiètent,comme dans un roman ...
regarde c'est ton enfant, c'est le sang de ton sang,
c'est toi qui l'a nourri et jetté dans la vie , il n'y a pas si lontemps...

Refrain

*Le quotidien*[15]

Ridan

J'étais si môme, j'ai pas fait gaffe à la connerie de tous ces grands
Maintenant que je le suis je suis tellement con que presse mon temps
Comme une orange
J'aurais voulu revoir grand père pour qu'il me raconte une belle histoire
J'aurais voulu revoir grand père, il y a plus de lumière et je suis dans le noir
D'un coup j'entends le brigadier qui m'interpelle comme un vieux sac
Le dos au mur j'étais bloqué : c'était le corse patron du SAC
Il me dit passe tout je lui dit Pasqua il me de tout je lui dit que j'ai rien
Il me dit bougnoule je lui dit fonbou, je lui dit que dalle, j'ai rien
Il me dit au baste, j'y ai dit pourquoi il m'a frappé comme un maquereau
J'y fait des yeux de merlan frit et j'y ai filé un marron

Refrain :

[15] http://www.parolesmania.com/paroles_ridan_14607/paroles_le_quotidien_470449.html [29.04.2017]

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Tu veux que je te dise le quotidien d'un maghrébin quand t'as 20 ans ( x 4)

Tu veux savoir le quotidien d'un maghrébin quand t'as 20 ans
La douce France m'adore tellement qu'elle m'interpelle à chaque tournant
J'ai pas le profil d'un président pour eux je suis né pour être brigand
Demande à Jacques le fataliste si j'ai le cran d'être aussi grand
Et si le rêve s'est fait trahir par une monnaie qui n'est pas la mienne
Ici le rêve s'est fait bannir par des pensées industrielles
Que ça te plaise en fait je m'en fous on voudrait tant que je joue de la truelle
J'ai fait mon choix et c'est ainsi je serais un deuxième Patrick Bruel

(Refrain)

Tu veux savoir pourquoi les mômes restent tous en bas de cet immeuble
Je veux savoir pourquoi le voisin me regarde chelou à chaque matin
Tu veux savoir pourquoi l'école a fait de moi quelqu'un d'aigri
Je veux savoir pourquoi ici je manque de confiance la justice (bip)
Tu veux savoir pourquoi au fond je m'en fou un peu de tout ce qu'ils me disent
Le quotidien c'est moi qui le vit le plus souvent c'est moi qu'ils visent

(Refrain)

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