

From Atabey to Hatuey: Manifestations of the Indigenous in Cuban Art and Literature

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Given the almost complete extermination of the native peoples following Spanish conquest and colonization, few people relate the indigenous with the Caribbean and more specifically with Cuba. In contrast to Mexico, with a vibrant indigenous presence, Cuba has for the most part been viewed an amalgam of the Spanish and African peoples who settled the island. Yet despite the apparent absence of the Native, references to the indigenous have always been a part of Cuban cultural, literary and artistic manifestations¹. Literary references to native Cubans begin during the colonial period and have continued through the present. In this essay, I briefly trace the presence of the indigenous in Cuban literature and art to show how the figure of the Native has been used to represent and recreate Cuban identity. Depending on the period, the figure of the Native has been used as a way of re-imagining Cuban identity. Whereas in the colonial period and early Republic, the Native served as a symbol of resistance and heroism, most recently the figure has been used as a metaphor for a displaced Cuban culture. I focus briefly on nineteenth-century authors and then turn to the contemporary art of the late Ana Mendieta and the narrative of Daína Chaviano, to elucidate how the indigenous continues to survive within the Cuban psyche. Mendieta and Chaviano's return to the native is striking. As women and exiles, they speak from the margins and connect with a group of people that have all but disappeared. Although different, Mendieta and Chaviano's work rewrite Cuban history, lending women and other marginalized people a voice through which to tell their forgotten and altered stories.



Early Representations of the Indigenous

In the nineteenth century, while most of Latin America was engaged in its wars of independence from Spain, Cuba continued to be a slave-holding state under Spanish rule. Several attempts were made throughout the century to free Cuba from the Spanish, yet many of these movements were crushed². It would not be until the end of the century, with US intervention, that Cuba achieved its independence. Thus, while during most of the century, Latin America's new nations sought to consolidate their power under the new ruling class elite, Cuba was still pondering questions of slavery and autonomy. As Doris Sommer argues in her now classic text *Foundational Fictions*, Latin America's statesman began drafting narratives which centered on the future of the new nation-states³. These so-called foundational fictions sought to legitimize a new ruling class and create a sense of belonging among its citizens. Cuban intellectuals, many of whom were in exile abroad, also wrote the future nation, questioning who would be considered Cuban following independence. Many Cuban representations of the Native appeared within this political and social context. One of the earliest representations of the Amerindian appears in [Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*](#), published in 1841. In this novel, the Native Cuban appears in the figure of Martina, an Indian woman which served as an adoptive mother to Sab, a young, mulatto slave. Through Martina, Sab and others come to learn about native Cuban legends and heroes, thus forging a connection between Cuba's Spanish, Black and Amerindian cultures.

La Avellaneda's *Sab* was not the only nineteenth century work to include the Amerindian Cuban in its narration of the nation. Other works with Amerindian characters include poems by Juan Cristobal Nápoles Fajardo (1829-1862), better known as "El Cucalambé", José Joaquín Luaces (1826-1867), José Fornaris (1827-1890) and Francisco Sellén (1838-1907)⁴. This group of writers belonged to the literary movement, *Siboneyismo*. According to Ivan Schulman, in exploiting the figure of the [Siboney](#) Indian, these writers sought to reconstruct the idyllic (lost) nature and the (unremembered) traditions of the Siboneys in a creolized, Cuban discourse. In general, the main theme in siboneyista poetry was the cruelty of the Spanish conquerors and the simple life of the Indians and their myths. As Schulman contends, this literature, which on the surface appears harmless, when read between the lines became a threat to colonial authorities (Schulman 943-944)⁵.

For the most part, nineteenth century references to indigenous Cubans were closely connected to desires for autonomy from a despotic Spain. Twentieth century representations, however, have ranged from the purely exploitive (as in the use of



indigenous figures in Republican Cuban consumer goods) to desires to trace the importance of the Amerindian in the development of Cuban culture. Whereas some artists, such as the painter [Antonio Gattorno](#) (1904-1980), continued to present pre-Hispanic Cuba as a (lost) paradise, others, such as anthropologist [Fernando Ortiz](#) (1881-1969), turned to Cuba's indigenous past to analyze the development of Cuban society, including Amerindian impact on popular culture and the economy⁶. In *Cuban Counterpoint*, Ortiz delves into the production of tobacco, from its use within the Amerindian society to its development into one of Cuba's most important products. Although most of Ortiz's work focused on the African influence in Cuban society, he certainly did not overlook the Amerindian. In fact, he chose the term *ajiaco* as a metaphor of Cuba's distinct syncretic culture. The *ajiaco*, an original Amerindian meal, was, as Ortiz stressed, continuously altered and adapted by Cuba's different ethnic groups and migrations, including the Spanish, the Africans, the Chinese and others. The Amerindian and its culture, despite its almost complete absence from Cuba, was a vibrant part of the island's distinct culture⁷.

Most recently, scholars, such as [Antonio Benitez Rojo](#) (1931-2005), have also reiterated the importance of the Amerindian in the formulation of Cuban identity. In *La isla que se repite*, Benitez Rojo centers on the figure of the Patron Saint of Cuba, *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, or the Virgin of Charity. According to Benítez Rojo this figure is the syncretization of various other mother figures, including Atabey, the Great Mother of the Taíno culture, the Virgen of Illescas, the Christian mother of Jesus, and Ochún, the Yoruba Orisha of love and fertility. The figure of Atabey underlies this Roman Catholic figure as he explains:

"...la imagen de Nuestra Señora que se venera en el Cobre es, también, una imagen sincrética, generado por dos estampas distintas de la Virgen María que fueron a parar a las manos de dos caciques de Cueiba y de Macaca para ser adoradas a la vez como Atabey y Nuestra Señora. Imagínense por un instante la perplejidad de ambos caciques cuando vieron, por primera vez, lo que ningún Taíno había visto antes: la imagen a color de la Madre del Ser Supremo, la sola progenitora de Yúcahu Bagua Maórocoti, que ahora resultaba, además, la madre del dios de aquellos hombres barbudos y color de yuca, a quienes protegía de muertes, enfermedades y herida. Ave María aprenderían a decir estos indios cuando adoraban a su Atabey..."(Benítez Rojo 29-30)



Contemporary Representations of the Indigenous

Despite the almost complete extermination of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean during the conquest, their presence (real or constructed) has never ceased to exist within Cuban society. Most recently, artists and writers have continued to refer the Amerindian Cuban. Two contemporary artists whose works reflect the importance of the native in Cuban culture are the late [Ana Mendieta](#) (1948-1985) and [Daína Chaviano](#) (b. 1957), both of whom went into exile albeit at starkly different moments of their lives. In many ways, Mendieta and Chaviano reflect the dual-faced nature of post-1959 Cuban culture. Whilst Mendieta came to the US as a child and was artistically formed in this country, Chaviano came as an adult, after years of being a successful writer on the island. Despite differences in artistic production and personal stories, as women and exiles, Mendieta and Chaviano have looked toward the past as a means of reconstructing the present. For both, the incorporation and presence of the Cuban Native in their work is a means by which each can represent individual and collective displacement. In her return trips to Cuba, Mendieta tied herself to the native, as a way of connecting to her lost homeland, inserting herself into an indigenous past that had been previously altered and erased. In Chaviano's work, the Amerindian in conjunction with others from Cuba's *ajiaco*, allows the author and her characters a way of exposing Cuba's hidden history, a history that has, like the Native, been almost erased.

Ana Mendieta: Pre-Hispanic Myths of the Antilles

Ana Mendieta was born in Havana in 1948 into a well-known political family (Viso 36). Although her father was a supporter of the Cuban Revolution early on, his former political ties to the US and US companies quickly made him suspect to the new government. Due to increasing pressure and particular events that took place on the island, the Mendieta family decided to send their two young daughters to the US in 1961 as part of the Catholic-church backed *Pedro Pan* program. Ana and her sister Raquel arrived in the US in September 1961, and since they had no family to claim them, were placed in St. Mary's Home, a residential institution run by the Archdiocese of Dubuque, Iowa (Viso 38). In Dubuque, the young girls faced discrimination and loneliness. They would not be reunited with their mother and brother until 1966 and would not see their father until 1979 (39). During her university years, Mendieta became interested in pre-Columbian cultures and traveled to Mexico several times during the 1970s (45). In the early 1980s, Mendieta returned to Cuba and was heavily influenced by Afro-Cuban spirituality



and Taíno/Amerindian mythology (63-67). According to Bonnie Clearwater, Mendieta's fascination with the Taínos exceeded anthropological curiosity. Clearwater contends that for Mendieta, the obliteration of the Caribbean Amerindian was emblematic of the deculturation of indigenous cultures that was still taking place across Latin America. And, Clearwater adds that Mendieta's "aversion to deculturation was fanned by her own feeling of displacement as a Cuban living in the United States" (Clearwater 17). Before her tragic death in 1985, Mendieta was working on several projects tied to the Amerindians of Cuba. One was a book format on her Rupestrian Sculptures, a series of photo etchings of sculptural art that she carried out during her visit to Cuba in 1981; the other, a book of drawings centering on Pre-Hispanic Taíno Myths. In 1993, these works were combined and edited by Bonnie Clearwater into the volume *Ana Mendieta: A Book of Works*.

In the series *The Rupestrian Sculptures*, Mendieta wanted to draw attention to the culture of the Taíno, the first inhabitants of the Greater Antilles. As a Cuban-American, she considered herself a "cultural inheritor" of Taíno culture and hoped her book would reveal the artistic and spiritual legacy left by the ancient inhabitants of the Antilles (12). Mendieta drew most of her knowledge from the work of Frey Román Pané, Juan José Arrom and Salvador Bueno. The Rupestrian sculptures were carried out in Cuba, in the Jaruco State Park's caves in 1981. They evoked the Taíno worship of several goddesses, including Atabey, the great Mother figure, and Guacar, Guabancex and Iyare. According to various art critics, the works echo Taíno artifacts in the way they are done. Indeed, while sculpting these works, the first she carried out in her homeland, Mendieta adapted the sculptures to adapt to the cave's shapes, in much the same way art is represented in Taíno caves across the Caribbean. As Jane Blocker explains, "Like the Taíno, Mendieta's sculptures are destined to live and die with the earth in which they are connected" (18).

The other project, which Mendieta planned to name *Pre-Hispanic Myths of the Caribbean*, was closely tied to the photo etchings of the Rupestrian Sculptures. This project would compose of a book of drawings on Taíno myths. In her notes, Mendieta wrote, "I understand the myths are the accumulation of the experience of a people, based on their most profound and significant beliefs. They express their general attitudes and feelings, how they perceived the world and represented natural phenomena. So it follows as a Cuban American and cultural inheritor of the Taínan Culture that I want to make a small publication a collaboration you might say between them and I (sic), using their myths and my drawings" (25).



In a sense, Mendieta comes to see herself as part of the Taíno legacy, and hopes that through this project, she will make others aware of their importance in Cuban history. What's more, through her collaboration, she inserts herself into Cuba's greater history. According to Jane Blocker, Mendieta seeks to rewrite herself into Cuba, making it home once again (101).

Because of the nature of Mendieta's oeuvre and due to her tragic, untimely death, access to Mendieta's work is rather limited. Like all of her work, knowledge about her projects on the Taíno remains limited to a select few, generally art historians. Yet their importance should not be underestimated. Mendieta's work follows in the footsteps of other Cuban artists and writers who have stressed the importance of Cuba's Amerindian population in the formation of the island's culture and identity. Through her art, Mendieta retells *both* her story and the story of Cuba's indigenous peoples. Feminist scholar Trinh Minh-ha discusses women's role in the transmittance of the past. For her women are both the witnesses and bearers of history, the memory of a people is transferred, from generation to generation through women. As she explains:

In this chain and continuum, I am but a link. The story is me, neither me nor mine. It does not really belong to me, and while I feel greatly responsible for it, I also enjoy the irresponsibility of the pleasure obtained through the process of transferring. Pleasure in the copy, pleasure in the reproduction. No repetition can ever be identical, but my story carries with it their stories, their history, and our story repeats itself endlessly despite our persistence of denying it (Minh-ha 122).

Although not of indigenous extraction, through her art Mendieta, retells the Taíno's stories, transferring their almost forgotten stories to others. Although Mendieta's (re)tells only a fragment of the Taíno story, it is fundamental for it shows how she chose, as a marginal, exiled woman, to contest official discourses who have sought to erase and alter the history of Cuba's first peoples.

Daína Chaviano: The Cuban Ajiaco in *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*

Like Mendieta, Daína Chaviano was also born in Havana into a professional family. As opposed to Mendieta, however, Chaviano was raised in revolutionary Cuba and educated under its political system. At the university, Chaviano studied English language and literature, and began to write at a young age, receiving her first



literary prize, the David, in 1979 for her book *Los mundos que amo*. Whereas Mendieta was interested in pre-Columbian cultures, Chaviano was fascinated by the other-worldly, and her early literature could be labeled science-fiction and fantasy. Taking advantage of a trip abroad, Chaviano decided to permanently abandon the island, eventually settling in Miami, where she continues to live and write. In 1998, her novel *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* won the prestigious Premio Azorín in Spain. Returning to Fernando Ortiz's ideas on the Cuban *ajiaco*, Chaviano's novel centers on Claudia, a young female protagonist, her struggles on the island and her communication with ghosts from the past, who represent Cuba's various ethnic groups. These spirits or ghosts, serve as guides for the young woman, presenting her with images from Cuba's past, a history of which she was unaware. According to Rafael Rojas, both Republican and Revolutionary discourses have promoted a certain image of the Cuban family tree. As he explains, the Cuban nation appears as "un tronco en el que desembocan cuatro raíces antropológicas: la india, la española, la africana y la china" (109). By using these ghostly figures to represent nation, Chaviano both rewrites previous narrations, as well as redefines national identity. Indeed, these figures represent and confront nation. That is, their continuous interventions in the narration serve to disrupt the present, opening a space for the past to seep in and for Cuba's history to be retold. By showing and guiding Claudia through *their* past, which is also *hers*, these ghosts expose the official discourses that have attempted to erase them.

One of the most important supernatural guides in the novel is Muba, an African woman from the 18th century who serves as Claudia's guide into Cuba's colonial past⁸. El Indio, a native Cuban also plays an important role in the novel. As opposed to Muba, a figure from Cuba's colonial past, the period during which Cuba began the importation of African slaves to replace the dwindling native population; el Indio represents Cuba's pre-Columbian past, a peaceful, idyllic time, ruptured by the arrival of the Spanish. Initially appearing during Claudia's childhood, shortly before the death of her parents, El Indio's appearances always foreshadow tragedy. Unlike Muba who is given a name, El Indio remains nameless as an indication of the complete erasure of Cuba's native population following the arrival of Columbus and the Spanish. More importantly, whereas Muba is given a voice in the narration, el Indio is completely mute. During his visits, he merely points and makes hand gestures to Claudia. El Indio only speaks on one occasion, during Claudia's first and last transport into his pre-Columbian past. At that moment, he speaks to Claudia in his native tongue, repeating incomprehensible phrases. But, outside his world, El Indio is mutilated, unable to act or speak. Nevertheless, his ghostly presence in the novel is significant for it points to a deep-seated, unconscious presence of the native in the Cuban collective and his appearance contributes to yet another



element of hybridity found in the novel and in Cuban society, in general. As anthropologist Daisy Fariñas Gutiérrez affirms: "La huella indígena está presente a nivel de consciencia individual y social en su forma pura, al menos muy interrelacionada con elementos hispanos y africanos" (100).

As with Muba's figure, El Indio and his manifestations remind the reader of previous Cuban narratives. As mentioned earlier, the native Cuban, specifically the Siboney (or Sub-Taíno) has been mythologized in a number of Cuban narratives. As is true with other North and South American narratives centering on indigenous cultures, the Cuban Amerindian islanders have often been portrayed as heroic members of a race that preferred death to slavery. Chaviano's El Indio is reminiscent of the historical figures of Hatuey and Camagüey, two native caciques murdered by the Spanish during the Conquest. In various Cuban legends, the figure of the native is said to appear in the form of a light to warn of impending danger. The most famous of these popular legends is the so-called *Luz de Yara*. According to this legend, the Cacique Hatuey was burned at the stake by the conquistadors in the town of Yara for refusing to accept Christianity. Since the very night of his death, in the area surrounding Yara, in the eastern part of the island, "pudo verse por primera vez la fatídica LUZ, que es amarillenta y fría, y va creciendo entre las sombras hacia el cielo..." (Alzola 21). Following the first appearance of this light, "se presentó, vengador y terrible Huracán, el dios devastador del caribe, sembrando a su paso la muerte y la desolación" (21). Variations of this legend have made their way into Cuban literature, as in the narration of the story of Camagüey that appears in *Sab*. In Avellaneda's novel, the character Martina la India narrates the story of her ancestor Camagüey to her adopted children, in particular, Sab, the mulatto slave, who, in turn, retells the story to others. In *Sab*, the story tells of frequent appearances of Camagüey in the Cuban countryside in the form of a light, warning the descendents of his murderers "la venganza del cielo caerá sobre ellos" (Gómez de Avellaneda 168).

In *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, Chaviano returns to both a popular legend and to Cuba's canonical nineteenth-century novel by representing the figure of the native Cuban, El Indio. She returns to and rewrites previous narrations of the Cuban native, giving the native an important role in the life of the protagonist, that of soothsayer. Reminiscent of the traditional legends, in Chaviano's novel, El Indio appears as "una figura de niebla," a fog-like being who warns others, specifically Claudia, of impending doom (222). He also forewarns the arrival of death and violence, but by sea. In her transport to El Indio's past, Claudia observes the massacre of El Indio and his family by the Spanish upon their arrival on the island by sea and interprets his words to mean "en el mar está el peligro" (225). The vision



of the past acts as a foreshadowing of the future, of Claudia's choice (and that of other Cubans) to flee the island on a raft at the conclusion of the novel⁹.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Amerindian is an integral part of Cuban society. Since the colonial period, there have been references to the Amerindians, their legends and ways of life. Although many of these representations have been exploitive, other representations have attempted to stress the presence and importance of this group within the larger Cuban context. In the art of Ana Mendieta and the literature of Daína Chaviano in the twentieth century, the Amerindian has been reinserted into the narration of the nation. By returning to Cuba's first inhabitants, these artists have sought to (re)present a Cuban history that has been altered and erased, lending a voice those peoples who have for the most part been overlooked from Cuba's official history.

Endnotes:

¹ Recent studies have proven that Cuba's indigenous people did survive and continue to live on the island in isolated areas, specifically in the eastern "Oriente" province. Although their way of life was for the most part completely altered, they intermarried or survived in small rural communities. Interest in documenting and researching the Amerindian populations of the Caribbean is growing. José Barreiro, a Cuban-American scholar of Taíno extraction argues that most of what is known as "guajiro" culture, or rural Cuban culture, has in fact, indigenous roots. José Antonio Molina, of the National Library of Cuba, states that in contemporary Cuban society, guajiros continue to use Taíno agricultural techniques and medicinal plants. For research on the Taíno of Cuba see the work of José Barreiro. Some works include: "*Beyond the Myth of Extinction: The Hatuey Regiment*" (www.kacike.org); "Indians in Cuba" (*Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 13: 3, pgs. 56-60); "Indian Roots of Eastern Cuba" (*Indian Country Today*. <indiancountry.com>); and "A Note on Tainos: Whither Progress?" (*Northeast Indian Quarterly*, Fall 1990: 66-77). For information on the Taíno in other parts of the Caribbean, such as Puerto Rico, see the work of Antonio Stevens-Arroyo *Cave*



of the *Jagua: The Mythological World of the Taíno* (2006) and Gabriel Haspliviera's *Taíno Revival: Critical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Identity and Cultural Politics* (2001). For general information on the Caribbean Amerindians see Irving Rouse's 1992 study *The Taínos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus* and Samuel Wilson's 1997 compilation *The Indigenous People of the Caribbean*.

² For information regarding Cuban history see the work of Louis Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (Oxford: 1995) and Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, And Revolution, 1868-1898* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999).

³ See Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

⁴ Nápoles Fajardo's poems were in the form of the "décima", deeply rooted in the traditions of the Cuban countryside. Some central characters in these short poems included Hatuey and Guarina, two figures who fought the Spanish during the conquest. See *Cucalambé: Décimas cubanas* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1999). Sellén's epic poem "Hatuey", published in 1891, focused on the life of the Taíno hero.

⁵ According to Schulman, Siboneyista literature did not present as much a threat to Cuban colonial society as the anti-slavery literature. See Ivan Schulman's "Social Exorcisms: Cuba's (Post) Colonial (Counter) Discourses" in *Hispania*, Vol 75, No. 4 (1992): 941-49.

⁶ For more information about Antonio Gattorno see Juan Martínez's study *Cuban Art & National Identity: The Vanguardia Painters 1927-1950*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994.

⁷ See Fernando Ortiz's works: *Cuban Counterpoint*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995; "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad." 1939. *Fernando Ortiz y la cubanidad*, Ed. Norma Suárez. La Habana: Fundación Fernando Ortiz y Ediciones Unión, 1996. 3-12; and *El huracán*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1947.

⁸ For more about this figure and the novel in general, see my dissertation *Beyond the Nation: Issues of Identity in the Contemporary Narrative of Cuban Women Writing (in) the Diaspora*, University of Miami, 2002.

⁹ Thus, in both the novel *Sab* and in Chaviano's *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, the figure of the native appears to forewarn a violent future, yet the authors' motives are quite different. In *Sab*, Avellaneda inserts the image of the native



leader Camagüey as a warning of imminent violence if slavery is not abolished. Thus, the dead Indian's message is transferred from an Amerindian, early colonial context into a White-Black, nineteenth-century slavery context. In Chaviano's novel, the Pre-Columbian, dead Indian is tied to the contradictory and unbearable conditions that affect late twentieth-century Cuba and its citizens. That is, whereas for La Avellaneda, slavery threatened to tear up the (unborn) nation, for Chaviano, it is the current political and socio-economic situation that threatens a nation in decay, causing its citizens to throw themselves into the temperamental sea.

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