Dear Author

Some questions have arisen during the preparation of your manuscript for typesetting. Please consider each of the following points below and make any corrections required in the proofs.

Please do not give answers to the questions on this sheet. All corrections should be made directly in the printed proofs.
Dismantling Political Mythologies: Cabrera Infante’s Essays of Mea Cuba

WILLIAM ROWLANDSON
University of Kent at Canterbury

Borges declared that history is an act of memory, and that memory is fallible: ‘It is very difficult to change the present […] but as to the past, we are changing it all the time’. The past, he declared, ‘is an act of faith’.\(^1\) History, therefore, like language, becomes an act of consensual will—just as the users of a language consent to the meaning of the words, so do the readers of texts consent to certain ‘truths’ concerning the nature of history. Borges, of course, derived much delight from the fictitious possibility of history, expressing that the more engaging the narrative, the more attractive the narrated episode of history will be. Any episode of history recorded in dull or tedious narrative will soon be condemned to ‘el olvido’, and will, accordingly, cease to exist in the collective memory.

In the series of lectures delivered in the Instituto Nacional de La Habana in 1957, published as La expresión americana,\(^2\) Cuban poet José Lezama Lima (1910–76) elaborated a vision of pan-American culture grounded upon a notion of history similar to that of Borges. Where for Borges history is a shared memory and a shared narrative, for Lezama, history is a shared vision of la imagen, the poetic image. Rejecting the Hegelian belief that American culture, lacking a civilized past, was still in a state of pre-history, barbarism and irrationality, Lezama outlined particular movements in both the pre and post-Colombian American history where American culture absorbed European culture, adapted it into its landscape, fused it with the indigenous and the African, transformed it, and converted it into a new, wholly criolla culture. Centring on ‘el senyor barroco’ in the figures of early post-conquest architects Kondori and Aleijadinho, or on the romantic figures of Fray Servando and Simón Rodríguez, or discussing José Martí, Lezama explored how these creators succeeded not only in forging the new culture,

---
\(^1\) Jorge Luis Borges, Borges at Eighty, ed. Willis Barnstone (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1982), 14.

\(^2\) José Lezama Lima, La expresión americana, ed. Irlémar Chiampi (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica 2001 [1st ed. 1957]).

ISSN 1475-3820 print/ISSN 1478-3428 online/07/04–05/000493-19
© Bulletin of Spanish Studies. DOI 10.1080/14753820701452444
but also in generating that which gives the culture historical permanence: *la imagen* and, importantly, the myth.

Cuban author Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1929–2005) built into his writing similar concerns relating to the development of myth in the construction of history, expressing views that history and culture are products of image, myth and fashion. There emerges, however, a crucial distinction between the creative direction of Lezama and that of Cabrera Infante. Where for Lezama the generation of myth surrounding people, events and artistic movements served to generate a strong and independent American cultural identity, a new *era imaginaria*, Cabrera Infante viewed the same myth-making process at work in the construction of falsehood and misinformation. In essence, the positive, poetic generation of myth in the American past, explored by Lezama, was perceived by Cabrera Infante as being the creative spirit in the generation of propaganda. Perceiving that aspects of twentieth-century Cuban history had been distorted by the manipulative process of propaganda, Cabrera Infante, in his politically orientated essays of *Mea Cuba*, and writing with an outspoken bias against the revolutionary government of Cuba, strove to counteract what he considered to be dangerous levels of misinformation that surrounded the land. In doing so, he hoped to redress this distortion of history and to reveal the substance of these mythical narratives to be fictional.

This article analyses the theoretical dimension of Lezama, exploring the development of such ideas in the writings of Cabrera Infante. Interestingly, Cabrera Infante examined the process of myth-creation in a manner akin to that which Roland Barthes employed in *Mythologies*, primarily in adopting the semiological perspective that ‘myth is a language’ which signifies according to given unstated predicates. Where Barthes ‘tracks down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which […] is hidden there’, Cabrera Infante, as *mythologist*, examined areas of Cuban revolutionary history to explore where, to use Barthes’ term, ‘history has been transformed into nature’ and where the reality of a historical event has been transformed into an ideological or political ‘truth’ by mythical speech.

The article focuses also on the language Cabrera Infante himself employs. With a clearly stated language of factual reportage, the essays of *Mea Cuba* analyse not only the degree to which history is distorted, but also the levels of rhetoric that appear thinly disguised within a wide spectrum of textual media concerning Cuban history. And yet similar flourishes of rhetoric and persuasion appear within the language of Cabrera Infante as *mythologist*. Accordingly, this article focuses on the language of myth as it appears in a

---

variety of texts relating to Cuban revolutionary history, examining the conflicting forces that operate upon this emotive historical subject.

By the use of the adjective *americana* in the title of his 1957 essays, Lezama Lima at once transcended national barriers of cultural identity and addressed a shared cultural history of the Americas. The importance of this vision is the emphasis that Lezama places upon the processes by which American history is recorded and transcribed, and by which the individual gains a knowledge of this history:

> Nuestro método quisiera más acercarse a esa técnica de la ficción [...] Todo tendrá que ser reconstruido, invencionado de nuevo, y los viejos mitos, al reaparecer de nuevo, nos ofrecerán sus conjuros y sus enigmas con un rostro desconocido. La ficción de los mitos son nuevos mitos, con nuevos cansancios y terrores.⁵

The landscape of the New World, as Lezama analyses it, proved immensely fertile for generating mythical narratives around the exploits of discovery and conquest, akin to the chivalric romances popular in the Old World at the time of conquest. Mythical images fuelled the imagination of Columbus, the conquistadors, and the later *criollo* settlers, as they gave the lands mythical names such as California, Patagonia or Amazonia, or perceived the landscape in resemblance to *Amadís of Gaul*, or searched for fictive goals such as the Fountain of Eternal Youth and Eldorado.⁶ Yet European mythical images were adapted to the American landscape, blended into a *mestizo* plurality, and gave rise, as Lezama argues, to ‘nuevos mitos’ and, ultimately, to ‘una nueva era imaginaria’. This then challenges conflicting arguments concerning the poverty of American history, and establishes the American past on a mythical plane alongside the Etruscan, Carolingian, etc.:

> Para ello hay que desviar el énfasis puesto por la historiografía contemporánea en las culturas para ponerlo en las eras imaginarias. Así como se han establecido por Toynbee veinte y un tipo de culturas, establecer las diversas eras donde la *imago* se impuso como historia. Es decir, la imaginación etrusca, la carolingia, la bretona, etc., donde el hecho, al surgir sobre el tapiz de una era imaginaria, cobró su realidad y su gravitación. Si una cultura no logra crear un tipo de imaginación, si eso fuera posible, en cuanto sufriese el acarreo cuantitativo de los milenios sería toscamente indescifrable.⁷

---

Lezama elaborates the process by which history enters the collective consciousness. With a notion remarkably similar to that of Borges, Lezama explores how history is a shared memory, and how memory is creative. As a result, history becomes a shared narrative or fiction, composed of the poetic image: ‘Recordar es un hecho de espíritu, pero la memoria es un plasma del alma, es siempre creadora, espermática’. Thus for Lezama history is by no means a science of concrete facts, but is a product of consensual will, fluid and changeable from the perspective of the present. Lezama engaged not so much in a recreation of history as in a revision of the way these historical events are perceived; and thus the past, both pre- and post-Columbian, gains greater importance and becomes a focus of attention in the assertion of national and continental identity.

Lezama’s extensive and catholic vision of cultural history is reflected in the work of Cabrera Infante, contemporary of Lezama in 1950s and ’60s Havana, and, like Lezama, editor of a literary journal. Cabrera Infante’s concerns for the past and for the recollection of history appear through the publication of the short stories Así en la paz como en la guerra, wherein turbulent times of the Batista era are transcribed into the fictive page from the retrospective position of 1960. A similar concern for the recollection of a past era lies within Tres tristes tigres, in which, as epigraph, the words of Lewis Carroll, ‘y trató de imaginar cómo se vería la luz de una vela cuando está apagada’, are generally associated with the recollection of pre-revolutionary Havana from the writer’s later position of exile. Where the theoretical dimension of Lezama finds its most pragmatic application, however, is in Cabrera Infante’s political essays published as Mea Cuba. Herein we observe his efforts to combat what he perceives as the pernicious re-writing of history and construction of myth that has taken place since the triumph of Castro’s revolution.

Cabrera Infante states quite clearly that his motives behind the publication of Mea Cuba were not so much an attack upon tyranny as upon tyranny’s appropriation of the past and the manipulation of that past through the machine of propaganda:

Mi crimen, lector incauto, candidato, no fue crear o apoyar o encubrir sino denunciar la infamia, revelar quién comió el loto de los intelectuales, advertir que la roja manzana está emponzoñada, levantar la cabeza y ver desnudo al despota que nos describen como un buen rey vestido de luces de promisión. Si esta desvelación equivale a un acto contrarrevolucionario, a herejía, a traición o lo que sea, me es igual. Hace rato que yo asumi esa culpa.

8 Lezama Lima, Expresión americana, 60.
10 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 39 (original italics).
The reference to the poisoned apple and its connection with folk tales is highly significant here, as the reader of fairy tales would expect *a priori* a fantastical account. The re-writing of Cuba’s history that has occurred since the revolution, argues Cabrera Infante, brings the reading public towards a similar realm of fantasy. Further in his account of the motives, Cabrera Infante anthropomorphizes the figure of history to that of a victimized entity: ‘La historia de Cuba murió porque la mató Fidel Castro con su pistola eterna en su uniforme de militar de perenne verde olivo’. Extending this metaphor, one could suggest that he perceives his role as that of resuscitating this history, giving it life and veracity.

Yet upon what historical details does Cabrera Infante base this mission of redressing the opposing forces of propaganda? Where Lezama opposed the Eurocentric and Hegelian view of culture by his assertion of a dominant American culture, Cabrera Infante perceives a European and US vision of Cuba’s history as being distorted through the forces of propaganda.

Cuba fidelista es un estado totalitario y un fracaso total. Sólo funciona la policía y la propaganda: la policía para el interior, la propaganda para el extranjero. [...] Goebbels dijo: ‘La gente creerá más fácilmente una mentira grande que una pequeña’. Esa gran mentira es la historia de Cuba rescrita [sic] por Castro sin papel ni tinta.

The effect of this distortion is to create what Cabrera Infante views at best as a misinterpretation, and at worst as a prejudiced or willing ignorance about the reality of Castro’s Cuba. In a manner strikingly similar to Reinaldo Arenas’ declaration that ‘evidentemente, la guerra contra los comunistas, los hipócritas y los cobardes no había terminado porque yo hubiera salido de Cuba’, Cabrera Infante explains how appalled he was, from a position of exile, to perceive how successful propaganda and dogmatic faith in socialism had been in colouring people’s perceptions of Cuba. By the time of the publication of *Mea Cuba*, this was already a common concern of his, as we observe in his reply, during the 1970 interview with Rita Guibert, to the latter’s question: ‘¿Ese apoyo de los intelectuales no está hecho entonces con espíritu crítico?’:

Es posible que aun cuando ese espíritu crítico está presente y juzga con pleno conocimiento de causa de la realidad de sus países, la mayor parte de los intelectuales que hacen el elogio desmedido de Cuba tienen una ignorancia absoluta de lo que fue y es Cuba [...] Toda la información de la mayor parte de estos neostalinistas se basa en un cúmulo de ideas recibidas de parte de los propagandistas de la Revolución Cubana y de la

---

11 Cabrera Infante, *Mea Cuba*, 44.
The 1970 interview serves as a limited but concentrated space in which Cabrera Infante could explain ‘las realidades cubanas’ and redress the ignorance of ‘los intelectuales’ who praise Cuba, especially in relation to mythical images that may have been created. In this line, Cabrera Infante dedicates a large proportion of the interview, and a significant part of *Mea Cuba*, to exposing the process of myth that has been constructed around the figure of Che Guevara.

Veneration for Che Guevara is commonplace, as much in 1970 as in 2006. In keeping with Sartre’s outspoken admiration for Guevara, the revolutionary and his image have been the focus of a vast array of artistic and non-artistic media. Above all, as Cabrera Infante notes, Guevara is *fashionable*:

> Mi opinión de Guevara no es una opinión *fashionable*. […] Quiero decir que cuando conoces a ciertos personajes históricos que aparecen rodeados de una aureola pública más o menos mítica, esa extraordinaria atmósfera pública que parece envolverlos se convierte en privado en un aire tenue y mientras más subes estas cimas históricas más irrespirables y raros se hacen sus alrededores. […] Siempre me causó admiración la manera en que Gore Vidal desinfló el mito Kennedy simplemente con contar las intimidades del clan Kennedy. […] Mi opinión sobre el Che Guevara es tan poco *fashionable* y tan poco oportuna que hacerla pública parece a mis amigos una forma de locura. La de Guevara es una figura revolucionaria dudosa y dentro de cincuenta años, cuando pueda ser juzgado imparesionalmente, se verá cómo realmente es: otro avatar del mito del guerrero, creado por él mismo […] un hombre cuyo gran *historical claim* es haberse construido con un libro un mito personal que luego se encargó de actuar. Ni más ni menos que un héroe con *scenario* escrito por sí mismo. El *Diario* [de Bolivia] es el programa de un revolucionario activo que está más preocupado con su *imagen* de revolucionario que con su actuación revolucionaria.15

It is important to note that in the same interview Cabrera Infante sets out his belief about history that reflects the concept of *imagen* to be found in Lezama’s *La expresión americana*: ‘Cada día estoy más convencido de que no hay más que moda, que la historia no es más que un corsi recorsi de las modas o de una misma moda repetida’.16 Where for Lezama the *imagen* is the poetic construct of culture and history, for Cabrera Infante, blind adherence to the image, to fashion, is a dogmatic faith that supplants the truth of the realities.

---


Lezama, before Cabrera Infante, explores how to perceive the romantic and fashionable image surrounding Simón Rodríguez or José Martí is to be absorbed by the poetry of la imagen. Cabrera Infante explores how to perceive the romantic image surrounding Guevara is to be swayed by rhetoric and vacuous trend. Similarly, while Lezama may propose that Martí ‘engendraba una nueva causalidad’ or was ‘el mayor de todos’, the character Silvestre of Cabrera Infante’s *Tres tristes tigres* attempts to explode the Martí myth by claiming:

No soy, no éramos martianos. En un tiempo admiré mucho a José Martí, pero luego hubo tanta bobería y tal afán de hacerlo un santo y cada cabrón convirtiéndolo en su estandarte, que me disgustaba el mero sonido de la palabra martiano. Era preferible el de marciano.

A further revaluation of the mythical image of the figures of Martí and Guevara occurs where Cabrera Infante explores the nature of their death, claiming in both cases that the death was suicide with the intention of martyrdom—the self-conscious creation of a mythical aura.

Castro declared as an objective of his proposed revolution the reinstatement of Martí to the mythical status that he felt had been lost during the years of the final Batista regime. Not only does Castro make constant references to the spiritual wisdom of Martí, but he calls him by the name of ‘el Apóstol,’ claiming: ‘Parecía que el Apóstol iba a morir en el año de su centenario, que su memoria se extinguiría para siempre, ¡tanta era la afrenta!’ It is, he decrees, a sacrilege to allow the figure of Martí to slip into oblivion, and, with lofty and bombastic rhetoric, he raises the figure to this quasi-religious apostolic level:

Pero vive, no ha muerto, su pueblo es rebelde, su pueblo es digno, su pueblo es fiel a su recuerdo; hay cubanos que han caído defendiendo sus doctrinas, hay jóvenes que en magnífico desagravio vinieron a morir junto a su tumba, a darle su sangre y su vida para que él siga viviendo en el alma de la patria. ¡Cuba, qué sería de ti si hubieras dejado morir a tu Apóstol!

---

19 Cabrera Infante, *Tres tristes tigres*, 403. This can similarly be perceived as a scornful attack on Fidel Castro, whose venerating references to Martí in his 1953 defence speech published as *La historia me absolverá*, set the scene for the national adoration of Martí, and the positioning of Martí as the father of the Cuban Revolution. When Cabrera Infante claims in the Guibert interview that there is not a more apolitical book in the history of Latin American literature (Guibert, *Siete voces*, 416), it is possible to perceive numerous subtle political attacks within the work. For an analysis of the dimension of politics in *Tres tristes tigres*, see *Structures of Power*, ed. Terry J Peavler (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).
Here it is clear how the construction of the image, in this case the deifying of a historical figure, is instrumental in revising not simply the way the past is perceived, but in revising the actual details of the past. One need only witness the proliferation of Martí veneration in today’s Cuba to understand the pragmatic application of this process. In this revised history, the death of Martí is narrated as the glorious death of the warrior in battle, charging valiantly forward on his white horse towards the enemy lines. Cabrera Infante, then, takes this mythically embroiled history and analyses the stark reality of the situation. Martí was no soldier, he argues, ‘nunca había estado en el campo cubano, mucho menos en una Guerra de guerrillas, hombre de ciudad siempre, civil de vocación, mal jinete y peor tirador’.21 His death was a suicide, he continues, essential in the self-creation of the myth of the warrior:

Este indudable suicidio, político o personal, fue siempre escamoteado por los historiadores cubanos y todos los libros de historia presentan a Martí como un patriota que murió heroicamente combatiendo al enemigo en el campo de batalla.22

Indeed, he suggests, the suicide of Martí put the entire campaign in jeopardy, causing turmoil right at the tremulous beginnings of the struggle: ‘La muerte de Martí [. . .] fue casi fatal para una campaña de independencia que acababa de comenzar’.23 Once again, Cabrera Infante charts a process akin to the Barthean one, whereby historicity (biography of Martí) has been ‘robbed’ from the appropriated signifier,24 and a new select signification (form) has been returned to it, in this case the heroic, apostolic, patriotic, martyred warrior. Cabrera Infante then deals his hardest blow to the myth of Martí, claiming that Martí was consciously aware of his own image as a romantic warrior akin to Fray Servando or Byron: ‘Martí, romántico retrasado, escogió una de las muertes posibles al poeta del siglo xix: la tuberculosis, el láudano, la sífilis, el ajenjo o la bala certera’.25 In a style reminiscent of Borges’ story Tema del traidor y del héroe,26 wherein the protagonist organizes his own death as a politically-charged and dramatic gesture, Martí, in Cabrera Infante’s analysis, chose to die in order to give birth to this image of the noble warrior, in order to strengthen the cause of the struggle for independence: ‘Poético o político, el suicidio de Martí fue histórico’.27 In the same essay, Cabrera Infante elaborates similar forces at work in the nature of Guevara’s death, also suggesting the spirit of suicide:

---

21 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 166.
22 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 166.
23 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 167.
24 ‘Myth is always a language-robbery’ (Barthes, Mythologies, 131).
25 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 167.
27 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 168.
Y suicidio fue. Guevara en Bolivia, como antes en Cuba, se había comportado como un suicida y entre un ser fatigado y héroe político o mártir de una religión nueva, escogió el martirologio. El apocalipsis luego, ahora la inmolación.28

Where historical accounts of Guevara’s Bolivian exploits may recount the ceaseless struggle, the heroism, the fighting in the barranco, the capture and the murder, Cabrera Infante resolutely labels the entire episode to have been a suicide mission, instrumental in the creation of the image that now surrounds the guerrilla warrior. Indeed, Cabrera Infante explores this image further, implicating Guevara to a highly complicit level in the fostering of his own (immortal) image, declaring to Guibert that Guevara was ‘preocupado por su puesto en la historia […] me pregunto si este estoicismo no forma también parte de la mitología del guerrero’.29 In suggesting Guevara’s self-awareness of his own image, Cabrera Infante elaborates further how successful this image-creation has proved to be, likening Guevara to popular figures of Hollywood:

En la historia contemporánea Guevara ha terminado formando parte de la hagiología del Loser, junto a Jimmy Dean—es decir, el mito del joven rebelde fracasado en su inútil rebeldía—y Jean Harlow—el mito de la belleza que desaparece en la muerte: no queda de ella otra cosa que su imagen,—, y de Humphrey Bogart—el duro a quien su blandura interna convirtió en falso duro—: en todo actor hay siempre una actriz luchando por salir. El Che Guevara, contradicción de contradicciones, ha venido a formar parte de la misma decadente cultura de masas que él personalmente tanto despreció, esa cultura occidental, frívola y determinada por la moda: el culto de la personalidad reducido al culto a la imagen. Me pregunto si esa profusión de postres, retratos y camisetas con la vera efigies guevaransis hubiera sido posible si se tratara de un hombre menos bello, si él hubiera tenido, digamos, la desagradable cara de roedor de Raúl Castro. Guevara, el guerrilla, ha terminado por verificar el aserto de Wilde, el esteta: más vale ser bello que ser idóneo.30

The inclusion of Wilde’s aphorism is significant in the acknowledgement of the power of the image akin to Lezama’s theoretical argumentation. Lezama, for example, argues: ‘Pertenecer a una imagen es uno de los más provocativos destinos. Hacer de la imagen una divinidad que ordena […] es vivir un destino como una futuridad que regala su granada’.31 Cabrera Infante shows

28 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 174.
29 Guibert, Siete voces, 374.
30 Guibert, Siete voces, 373.
31 José Lezama Lima, Diccionario—vida y obra de José Lezama Lima, ed. Iván González Cruz (Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana, 2000), 207.
himself fully aware of the power of the image (in this case the beautiful face) in the creation of a mythical and bewitching aura that can eclipse any more prosaic, mundane or even brutal realities of the figure.

Rhetoric, according to Borges, is language employed to ‘persuadir’. To be swayed by the rhetoric, to fail to perceive either the bias or the motive behind the creation of the text, as Borges elaborates in many of the tales of El informe de Brodie, is to be manipulated by the text. It is upon this premise that Cabrera Infante attacks substance of rhetoric and persuasiveness in the foreign press when writing about Cuba. Moreover, belief in a text is belief in a fiction; and where the fiction is parading as truth, as in the case of newspaper articles, this uncritical belief can have far-reaching practical implications.

In 1957 Herbert Matthews, correspondent for the New York Times, was invited by Castro to the Sierra Maestra when the rebel base was slowly gaining power. Matthews returned to this period, and to its resultant article, in his work The Cuban Story. Cabrera Infante states that ‘el primer contacto entre la revolución—o mejor aún, entre Fidel Castro—y la prensa americana fue un fraude. Es decir un engaño de parte de Castro’. Cabrera Infante quotes Hugh Thomas in describing this interview between Matthews and Castro in the Sierra. Matthews is said to have believed that he saw some eight hundred soldiers in the rebel camp. It was, declares Cabrera Infante, a set-up ‘tan vieja como la historia’, and Matthews ‘se tragó el anzuelo y la carnada y hasta el curricán’. In reality, Raúl Castro had repeatedly paraded a handful of men through the camp to give the impression of the multitude of rebel soldiers. Duping Matthews, claims Cabrera Infante, was no more than a joke, if a cruel one, ‘pero la crueldad no era sólo con Matthews, sino con nosotros, los cubanos, también’.

By returning to the States ‘para dar a Fidel Castro la gacetilla más adulatoria que había recibido nunca’, reporting on the quantity of loyal men and praising the magnetic charm of Castro, Matthews was highly instrumental in bolstering the image and power of Castro especially within Cuba itself. It is fascinating to note how all three levels of this narrative—the Castro brothers, Matthews, and Cabrera Infante—are highly conscious of the constructive power of fiction to condition the readers’ perception of reality, and as such affect reality itself. Raúl Castro, according to Cabrera Infante, laughed ‘como una hiena joven mientras contaba la historia de cómo su hermano y él habían engañado

---

33 See, for example, how the Gutres are blinded by the rhetoric of realism in ‘El evangelio de Marcos’ and are driven to brutal crime through this dangerous lack of critical power or cynicism.
35 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 259.
al periodista americano con su falso desfile’. Castro, meanwhile, thanks to the Matthews interview ‘was, much to his surprise and even for a time his anger, a North American hero’. Their creation of a fiction, once accepted by the journalist of self-professed ‘reputation for never writing anything that is not true—or to the best of my knowledge true’, becomes fact through its ‘factual’ rendition in a realist text that is a newspaper article. Matthews, however, at once perceived the conditioning power of his own writing, stating that as a journalist his aims had never been to sway opinion or veil rhetorical persuasion within the writing. The very first lines of his work The Cuban Story appear as an exoneration of his reporting from the Sierra:

Journalists rarely make history. This is not our function. We are the chroniclers of our times; at best we provide material for history. It was an accident that my interview with Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra of February 17 1957 should have proved so important. There was a story to be got, a censorship to be broken. I got it and I did it—and it so happens that neither Cuba nor the United States is going to be the same again. I am not accepting, for myself or the The New York Times, either blame or credit for having started Fidel Castro on his meteoric rise to fame and power.

Matthews’ motivation, therefore, comes from a steadfast desire to create a piece of writing of mimetic value, maintaining the clear distinction between fact and fiction. Nevertheless, he is fully aware of the ability of a text to have a conditioning power over the readership, but also that this is inherent in the nature of reading, not in that of writing. And yet, in exonerating his own conditioning power as a writer of texts, his declaration that ‘at best we provide material for history’ appears as a clear example of the nature of narrative that Borges described. The narrative, in this case of the newspaper, is creating history, since, through alerting Havana’s public to the power of the fidelistas in the Sierra, this ‘accidentally’ increased their belief and support for him. In a manner that ironically reverses the process by which Lezama outlines the development of history, Matthews claims that by reporting on Castro, he was converting a myth into a reality, and not the opposite: ‘For the Cuban people, Fidel was a myth, a legend, a hope, but not a reality’. In reporting, he would claim to have been merely revealing the truth about a historical event that was shrouded in secrecy, censorship and

36 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 259.
37 Hugh Thomas, Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971), 919.
38 Matthews, Cuban Story, 50.
39 Matthews, Cuban Story, 15.
40 Matthews, Cuban Story, 18.
myth. But as Hugh Thomas explains, his article ‘helped to attract urban Cubans to his cause’. Matthews defends himself stating: ‘[Fidel] was Cuba’s man of destiny. All I did was recognize these facts. By my interview I turned the spotlight on him’. So what are the implications of these conflicts between fact and fiction, myth and reality, in Matthews’ article and subsequent account?

In the first place, the episode of the exaggerated numbers of Castro’s troops demonstrates that although Matthews claims to write the truth, he is by no means a sufficiently critical reader of the text created before him to be able to discern the manipulative designs of the text’s author, in this case the Castro brothers. Nor was he able to discern the exaggeration of the number of guns nor the exaggerated power of the rebel forces. He claims in The Cuban Story that ‘anyone who thinks that Fidel Castro did not passionately believe every word he said to me would completely fail to understand him’ mere paragraphs before admitting that the size of Castro’s forces ‘was swelled’, and that ‘in the next two years the size of Fidel’s forces was greatly exaggerated’.

At the same time, he cannot accredit his readership with any degree of discernment or critical reading of a text any greater than his own, and for that reason he would argue that his reports could not have been instrumental in fomenting any support that was not justified through the honest truth of the situation. Despite his claims to impartiality, by employing such terms as ‘destiny’, by labelling the July 26th Movement as ‘the flaming symbol of opposition to the regime’, and by describing the process of the Cuban Revolution ‘in terms [that] can be expressed in very old words from the “Magnificat” of Luke: “He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree”,’ his language cannot be claimed to be free of the persuasive idiom of rhetoric, or even bombast. This is the paradox that is identified by Cabrera Infante, who argues that Castro deceived Matthews even as far as the immediacy of danger in which they were surrounded, suggesting that ‘la palabra tropa le da al lector la impresión de que el enemigo ad portus es numeroso y hasta formidable’, and asserting that Matthews was highly successful in building a myth and a romantic narrative, akin to the legend of Robin Hood, out of the events:

Fidel, nunca llamado Castro (se trata, evidentemente, de un tuteo), es el bueno de la película. Hasta su uniforme verde (olivo) sugiere a un Robin Hood, mientras que la Sierra es ahora el bosque de Sherwood: Fidel roba

---

41 Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*, 920.
42 Matthews, *Cuban Story*, 53.
43 Matthews, *Cuban Story*, 40 and 42.
44 Matthews, *Cuban Story*, 105.
Here is the essence of Cabrera Infante’s attack on Matthews. It is not the support that Matthews offers Castro from the early days in the Sierra that angers Cabrera Infante (we must remember that Cabrera Infante himself was a supporter); it is the role of Castro as manipulative author of manipulative fictions and the uncritical reading of Matthews of these events. The process of devoted faith that Cabrera Infante identifies in Matthews serves as a clear example of the discourse of myth, fiction and fashion upon which he composes the essays of Mea Cuba. Indeed he continues in the same essay to analyse further means by which levels of fiction generated from official Cuban sources are instrumental in appealing to outside readers through the force of the attractive narrative, and in doing so in manipulating the readership into believing a particular line. ‘Le Monde es otro periódico que bien baila al son del flautista fidelista’ he claims, adding that their correspondent’s ‘relato fue un retazo de medias verdades y medias mentiras’; and he declares that The Times of London was deceived by the false title of Dr accorded to Castro, which ‘induce en los ingleses una suerte de respeto académico, como si Castro fuera un médico eminente o un genio de la física’. The semiotic value of the title ‘Dr’ thus, according to Barthes’ model, gains wide mythical signification beyond the semantic, which ascribes to Castro authority, respectability and eminence. The press, he continues, can always be easily deceived by the promise of a good scoop, and a scoop implies a gripping narrative. Yet the source of these narratives, he argues, is a man ‘capaz de confeccionar una poción de tóxico carisma a la segunda potencia: los que se beben sus palabras se intoxican de por vida’.

The result of this, as examined in the episode with Matthews, is a deception that occurs with the readers of these media. It is for that reason

---

45 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 260. It is important to note that Cabrera Infante’s comparison of the Castro of Matthews’ reports with Robin Hood was pre-dated by the US ambassador in 1960, redacted by Matthews in The Cuban Story: ‘MR. SMITH: In February, 1957, Herbert L. Matthews wrote three articles on Fidel Castro, which appeared on the front pages of The New York Times, in which he eulogized Fidel Castro and portrayed him as a political Robin Hood’ (70). Ironically, Matthews agrees with Smith, claiming that Smith’s ‘was accurate testimony’ (71). He qualifies this by stating that where Smith had been labelling Castro a ‘ruffian’ and a ‘bandit’, these terms, rather than being detrimental, were in reality highly in keeping with the outlaw figure of Castro at the time.

46 ‘Participe en la redacción del periódico clandestino Revolución, estuve en contacto con diversos grupos revolucionarios, trasegué armas para el Directorio y explosivos para el 26 de Julio, mi casa sirvió de refugio de revolucionarios y terroristas, traté de organizar una o dos organizaciones clandestinas, una de jóvenes intelectuales, otra de periodistas, y poco más’ (Guibert, Siete voces, 370).

47 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 261.

48 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 262.

49 Cabrera Infante, Mea Cuba, 261.
that Cabrera Infante is unconcerned whether Matthews as an individual was affected by the rebels’ theatre, but is deeply troubled that Matthews as a writer was then able to reach a widespread and acceptant readership with the same fictionalized accounts, and hence his feeling that the joke was harmless enough for Matthews, but highly damaging for the Cuban people through its effect on the passage of history.

The essence of this argument, therefore, is not one of politics, but one of hermeneutics—of the manner in which the relevant text is interpreted. To be a critical reader is not only to be capable of discerning the force of persuasion, rhetoric or distortion beneath the text, but also to be aware of the consequences of the inclusion, and omission, of material. This exigency of interpretation is accepted as a norm when the target text is one of a symbolic, metaphoric, allegorical or poetic construct. Such a reader of Lezama’s novel Paradiiso is compelled to employ full creative and critical perception in order to understand the obscure symbolic elements of the text. Where the target text is proposed and created according to the norms of mimetic representation (i.e. of realism), this demand upon the reader is lessened, if not dispelled. Accordingly, the reading of certain texts like newspaper articles, television documentaries, biographies etc. is generally considered to be of an uncritically bound nature. Yet it is upon this accepted norm that certain texts are capable of exercising the power of persuasion and rhetoric upon the uncritical reader. This, therefore, introduces the problematics inherent in attempting to create a balanced ‘true’ understanding of Cuban revolutionary history.

Cabrera Infante declares that historical accuracy is to be his weapon in reclaiming the truth of Cuban history. As a result he alerts the reader to numerous aspects of distortion and myth-making that occur within the sphere of the revolutionary period. In so doing, he argues that one must remain a critical reader in order to be able to perceive the distorting forces at work beneath the selected source texts. Yet, in proposing himself as an author of mimetic qualities, is he asking his reader to abandon the powers of critical perception that must be employed when dealing with other texts?

In Mikhail Kalatozov’s startingly persuasive film Ya Kuba, which charts the misery and poverty of the large Cuban underclass in a series of powerful images, the feminine voice of Cuba herself asks at one stage where the blame for this misery lies. The immediately ensuing frame is one of Batista, followed by a series of images of Batista in opulent surroundings with US oligarchs. These images, clearly and with no degree of narrative obfuscation, answer the question of the female Cuba. The rhetorical sequence of question and answer is blatant, and is followed ultimately by the episode of the alzamiento of an urban student to join the heroic rebels in the Sierra and

50 Ya Kuba/I am Cuba, dir. Mikhael Kalatozov (USSR/Cuba, 1964).
his gradual awareness of the pitiful conditions of the guajiros and the promise of better things to come with the revolution.

Cabrera Infante, working in a style apparently radically opposed to the propagandist techniques of the Soviet film, nevertheless often operates very similar narratives of rhetoric and metonymy in his essays. The constant comparisons made between Castro and Hitler or Goebbels are of sufficient emotive power to affect even the most resistant reader. The connections drawn between the economic failure of Cuba and the name of Castro are rendered on an almost metonymic level, often excluding rational analysis. Such is the force of Cabrera Infante’s perspective that despite discussing the brutality and hardship under Batista’s regime in certain essays, in other essays he counteracts Castro’s demonization of Batista and his regime by lightening the darkness of the pre-revolutionary period: ‘Castro, maestro de la propaganda, ha creado mitos perversos: La Habana, es decir, Cuba, no era más que un burdel y un casino para los americanos’.51 Although, as Cabrera Infante discusses, the gambling and prostitution of Havana were taken by Castro as symbols of decadence in justification of the new order, it is interesting to note that Hugh Thomas reflects the perspective espoused by Castro, albeit without the position of moral rectitude: ‘Batista enjoyed the sympathy of many North Americans […] Gambling had taken on a new lease of life, with a large number of casinos opening. Pornographic films could now be seen in the Shanghai cinema. The Havana Post described Cuba as bidding for the title of “The Las Vegas of Latin America”.’52 It can be noted that where Cabrera Infante highlights the nature of myth that Castro builds up over pre-revolutionary Havana, he chooses not to include the historical situation upon which Castro’s myth creations were based. This can be observed, moreover, in Cabrera Infante’s claim, in the Rita Guibert interview, concerning his novel Tres tristes tigres: ‘No puede haber libro más apolítico en la historia de la literatura latinoamericana’.53 In depicting Havana’s pre-revolutionary night life according predominantly to the drunken verbosity and failed love affairs of Silvestre and Cué, or the fashion photography of Códac, with scant reflection on the political crises that were taking place, Cabrera Infante can be observed to be counteracting the forces of demonization through textual representations of what appears to be a far from turbulent period in history.

The reader similarly needs to maintain a level of critical awareness when reading further texts of self-determined mimetic nature. Reinaldo Arenas declares in the prologue to Antes que anochezca that the ensuing work is to be his autobiography, recounted according to veracity, dedicated to explaining the situation as it was. As mentioned earlier, the reader’s natural degree of critical discernment operates according to the medium,
or the style of the text. A newspaper article would be held to be more ‘reliable’ or factually accurate than a poem. Where Arenas sets out to write autobiography, the reader would not at once approach the text with the critical attention necessary to perceive the linguistic tricks that may appear in other texts. Arenas, moreover, enforces this acceptance of reality in the reader by outlining that even the more outlandish elements of his narration are reality, and as such do not belong to the realm of fiction. When discussing his childhood habit of eating soil, he declares, ‘Debo adelantarme a aclarar eso de comer tierra no es nada literario ni sensacional […] no pertenece a la categoría del realismo mágico, ni nada por el estilo’.54

In a manner very similar to Cabrera Infante, Arenas depicts numerous occurrences in which elements of reality are distorted, suppressed, adapted, mythologized, demonized or fictionalized by the Castro propaganda machine. Like the author of *Mea Cuba*, he sets out to alert the reader not simply to the reality of the situation, but to the forces of lies, rhetoric and persuasion that have fuelled these pernicious narratives. And yet, like Cabrera Infante, Arenas proposes a clear agenda of opposition in the writing of the memoirs—in this case one of revenge: ‘Writing those books kept me alive […] Especially the autobiography. I didn’t want to die until I had put the final touches. It’s my revenge’.55 However, the critical reader can perceive a degree of manipulation of the truth in the process whereby Arenas romanticizes the poverty of his childhood as a means of opposing the later demonization of pre-revolutionary Cuba: ‘Creo que el esplendor de mi infancia fue único, porque se desarrolló en la absoluta miseria, pero también en la absoluta libertad’.56 Similarly, his accounts of the ubiquity of homoerotic encounters, whether it be on buses, trains, parks, streets, could be perceived as a hyperbolic means of attacking the homophobic governance of Castro’s Cuba. Were the reader to discard critical attention in an interpretation of Arenas’ work, he/she would remain undiscerning of the levels of persuasion and selectivity at work within the text.

‘Un mito es una imagen participada y una imagen es un mito que comienza su aventura, que se particulariza para irradiar de nuevo’.57 Lezama outlines the vision of the myth as the figurative element of the poetic imagination concerning the individual and collective knowledge of history. However, in discussing history, Lezama returns time and again, through his poetry, the discussions of Cemí and Fronesis in *Paradiso*, his essays of *la expresión americana*, and his later essays *Confluencias*, to the vision of the distant past. It thus becomes clear that the essence of ‘el mito’ as it appears in the analyses of Lezama remains predominantly on the

56 Arenas, *Antes que anochezca*, 22.
57 Lezama Lima, *Diccionario—vida y obra de José Lezama Lima*, 309.
theoretical plane, even when related to historical events such as the conquest of America or the wanderings of Fray Servando. Lezama's perspective, it could be argued, is ostensibly pre-Barthean, in that the myth remains integrally associated with the poetic image and with imagination, rarely breaching the ideological. Although Lezama examines the development of myth in the creation of historical identity, the nature of the myth remains in the privileged domain of poetic enlightenment, seemingly removed from human design, outside of the practicalities of the present. Thus, in defending pan-American identity according to the culturally dominant poetic image that positions the culture alongside the mythical Egyptian and Carolingian, Lezama is privileging a literary or artistic definition of culture.

The Barthean essence of the mythology takes this theoretical perspective as conceived on a practical plane of cultural creation in the present. It is in this dimension that we perceive the painful motivation of Cabrera Infante. Barthes argues that the myth is defined not according to its meaning, but according to its process and its 'intention'. Accordingly, the myth relies on certain predicated signifying values in order to operate as a myth, and as such his interpretation of the black child saluting can operate as a myth as long as the interpreter takes as predicated the existence of the unseen French flag. This photograph (on the cover of *Paris-Match*) became a mythology, just as now the signifier, 'the black soldier is giving the French salute', and the signified, 'here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness', operate upon the reader (viewer) to form a message of French imperialism: 'that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors'.

This level of signification, therefore, becomes one of mythology where the reader arrives at the meaning without consciously pursuing the above process of semiotic evaluation. Barthes explains further: 'We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature [...] If I state the fact of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and goes without saying: I am reassured'.

It is here that Cabrera Infante perceives the nature of myth as generated around revolutionary Cuban history. The figure of José Martí, according to the outlook of Cabrera Infante (and his character Silvestre) has been abducted from historicity, and thrust into the cult of the *patria*, and as such the heroism of Martí 'is natural and goes without saying'. But Cabrera Infante is not reassured. Martí as a historical figure is, firstly, worthy of unbiased critical analysis, and secondly, worthy of being freed from automated mythical form in connection with Castro's revolution. Similarly, when Cabrera Infante discusses the fashionable image of Guevara as 'Chic

---

Guevara’, he is observing how the signifying process operates mythologically in the Barthean sense to endow Guevara with the predicated and unquestioned status of hero, rebel, romantic warrior etc. Moreover, he determines that Guevara, like Martí, was wholly conscious of this.

Barthes questions the process by which a mythology is developed, and he annuls the operative impact of the process:

If I focus on a full signifier, in which I clearly distinguish the meaning and the form, and consequently the distortion which the one imposes on the other, I undo the signification of the myth, and I receive the latter as an imposture: the saluting Negro becomes the alibi of French imperiality. This type of focusing is that of the mythologist: he deciphers the myth, he understands a distortion.60

Cabrera Infante, in a similar position of deconstruction, unravels the semiological process, exposing the signification of the myth and the reality that was obscured by the myth construction. In doing so, just like Arenas, he sought to disabuse his readership of the unquestioning nature of their understanding of Cuban history, and thus enact the revenge against the system that perpetrates such myths. Yet within the fabric of the texts that expose the signifying processes, both Cabrera Infante and Arenas are by no means free of the same process in the construction of their texts. As analysed, sexuality (in particular homosexuality) and eroticism for Arenas can become associated on a predicated mythological level with freedom and rebellion. Both Cabrera Infante and Arenas, meanwhile, assume a signifying process akin to the Barthean in the association of all of Cuba’s social, economic and political problems with the figure of Fidel Castro. Indeed, where the film Ya Kuba operates according to the mythical predicate that all Cuba’s ills lie at the brutal hands of Batista, Arenas ascribes unmitigated blame on Castro for every aspect of his misfortune and for his own approaching death: ‘Sólo hay un responsable: Fidel Castro’.61 It can be observed, therefore, that the deconstruction of one mythological paradigm can involve the construction of another, and that the language of rhetoric that fuels texts of propaganda can be perceived, albeit at a less publicly persuasive level, in the texts that oppose these texts.

The epistemological dimension of this article has concerned the process by which the reader gains an understanding not simply of the events of a historical period, but of the forces that operate in the texts that transmit such knowledge. And thus, as stated earlier, the critical question is one of hermeneutics, concerning the nature of interpretation of the language of the texts. Barthes demonstrates how a seemingly simple image can enact, in the case of an uncritical reader (viewer), a meaning of potentially highly

60 Barthes, Mythologies, 128.
61 Arenas, Antes que anochezca, 343.
charged political, ideological, or merely social implications. Barthes then deconstructs the semiological process by which the image creates this meaning within the reader, and in exposing the process, he annuls the conditioning value of the texts.

Lezama Lima explores the nature of mythology as it appears in the individual and collective imagination, concerning events and figures of history. For Lezama, this mythologised image remains one of poetic and artistic merit, divorced from narratives that represent elements of the present. In the creation of ‘la totalidad’ that he calls his novel Paradiso, or in the depiction of the image-bound historical past of the Americas, Lezama examines a system that remains at all times poetic.

Cabrera Infante addresses the question of interpretation, acting like Barthes as a deconstructor of the myth-embroiled image. He examines the interpretative poverty of Herbert Matthews in his reading of the events in the Sierra. Matthews as a textual creator, however, is highly effective at creating a text that operates upon its readership as a mythology in the Barthean sense, ‘transforming history into nature’. The uncritical reader of Matthews’ text, in pursuing no degree of discernment between persuasive idiom and mimetic reconstruction, is thereby swayed by the rhetoric of the original text—in this case the charade of parading many men before the reporter. Cabrera Infante reveals the process employed to create so many of the mythologies concerning Cuban modern history, whether it be examining the persecution of the writer, of the homosexual, or the absence of freedom of speech. What concerns us here, however, is not the data uncovered by such revelations, although this is of paramount importance to Cabrera Infante, but the process by which the rhetorical texts can be re-examined by him, and the process of mythology deconstructed. The importance of this lies in the fact that Cabrera Infante, like Matthews, like Arenas, and like so many writers who turn their attention to the arena of Cuban culture and politics, is as involved in the emotive argumentation as those in the forces of opposition. Accordingly, the reader must be wary not to be caught in the crossfire and lose sight of this very discipline and exigency of interpretation. Such are the emotive forces at work upon the literature relating to revolutionary Cuba, that works of even supposed mimetic value, such as Matthews, Cabrera Infante as author of Mea Cuba, and Arenas, all build into their texts high degrees of persuasion, metonymic and mythic associations, while operating the process of myth deconstruction that we find in Barthes’ texts. The narrative of Cuban revolutionary history, therefore, is constantly written and re-written, and the reader aware of the mythic process will attempt, through a keen interpretative spirit, to form a balanced view of the historical perspective through deconstructing such a process.