

Introduction

Seen in an aerial shot, the main island of Cuba curves sinuously through an expanse of blue sea. With fin-shaped outcroppings of land jutting out from below, the elongated shape of Cuba's best-known landmass suggests a maritime creature making its way through the surrounding Caribbean waters. Just below the main island, a smaller spot of green is visible: the Isla de la Juventud, or, as it was once known, the Isla de Pinos. Multi-hued, aquamarine water cuts between this Isla and its larger neighbor; wisps of white clouds stand out against the darker backdrop of land and water.

In common parlance, an archipelago is defined as a "group of islands," or as "any sea, or sheet of water, in which there are numerous islands."¹ Based on this definition, Cuba *is* an archipelago from a geographic standpoint: although it is frequently thought to be a singular island, it is in fact composed of some 1,600 islands, islets, and keys. In this book, I show that these Cuban islands not only form part of a geographic archipelago, but that they are part of a larger, transnational constellation, and that the landmasses and the waterways that connect them comprise a transnational archipelago.

Employing an archipelagic approach to analyze the work of writers who have remained in Cuba alongside that of those who are in exile, this book proffers a new lens on Cuba's multiplicity, bringing texts that are often not considered together into conversation. Although their perspectives (and politics) differ in myriad ways, the Cuban writers whose work I analyze converge in implicitly contesting any attempt to limit the space of the nation to the space of the island(s)—or, indeed, the Caribbean. Suggesting the larger contours of a constellation that continues to shift and morph, the writers highlight the transnational ties that increasingly join Miami and Havana, Madrid and Matanzas, Nueva York and Paris;² and, in so doing, craft spaces that—as is true of the constituent

islands and waterways of an archipelago—offer a glimpse of a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts.

Utilizing the trope of the archipelago throughout the book illuminates Cuba's plurality of islands. The book's title, *Writing Islands*, refers not only to the multitude of spaces that construe Cuba as archipelagic in world atlases and cartographies, but also—and more metaphorically—to seemingly disparate writers' creation of spaces that are both scattered and interconnected. By bridging seas and surpassing sightlines, these spaces together comprise a transnational archipelago, underscoring the connections (rather than the divisions) between spaces and individuals separated by geopolitics.

With the concept of the singular island no longer adequate to describe the spaces inhabited by transnational communities in the 1990s and 2000s, new hermeneutics are necessary to better understand the rich histories of the interconnections that exist between them.³ Cuba is, of course, already known by many names that draw attention to these interconnections. In cogent studies of Cuban culture, for instance, Rachel Price writes of *Planet/Cuba*, Marta Hernández-Salván refers to *Mínima Cuba*, and Ruth Behar and Lucía M. Suárez describe Cuba as *The Portable Island*. In my own analysis, I use the neologism *arcubiélago*: the term riffs on the Spanish *archipiélago*, at the same time that it incorporates a reference to *Cuba*, writ large, and invokes the spaces that writers craft both on the ground and in print.

In coining the term *arcubiélago*, combining *Cuba* and *archipiélago*, I provide a shorthand for easy reference to Cuban writers' creation of a transnational, archipelagic space that functions both materially (or *in situ*) and metaphorically (in poems, blogs, essays, novels, and songs). As a portmanteau, the term embodies the concept it denotes: in the same way that *arcubiélago* is simultaneously two (truncated) words and one (combined), the transnational Cuban archipelago exists both as a singular entity and a multiplicity. More broadly, the term *arcubiélago* also evokes the plurality of dimensions in which space and time are negotiated throughout the transnational Cuban archipelago, and points to the need for a decolonizing methodology that unwinds the fantasy of insular singularity that persists from the colonial era on. As poets, authors, and essayists write islands, they work in two dimensions to create a space out of time; as they walk the streets of Havana or gather in New York, they work in three, connecting in real life as well as on the page. Be it in writing or in traversing islands, moreover, the poets, authors, and essayists whose work I analyze signal the array of perspectives implicit in the multifaceted cube or *cubo*, including the six-sided

“Rubik’s Cuba” invoked by Cuban author Gustavo Pérez-Firmat in his poem “Bilingual Blues”; and the Cubist paintings of twentieth-century artists who sought to portray three dimensions in two, such as Cuban Wifredo Lam (1902–1982) or Spaniard Pablo Picasso (1881–1973).⁴

Endeavoring to reimagine the possibilities of space and time across the *arcu-biélago*, I employ a decolonizing approach in my work. Following scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Decolonial thought tends to demonstrate the importance of interstitial spaces, edges, borders, diasporas, migrations, archipelagos, ancestral territorial relations, and connections of peoples through spaces and times that resist incorporation into a continentalist geopolitical imaginary [. . .].”⁵ More specifically, my approach stems from the work of scholars in the nascent, interdisciplinary field of Archipelago Studies. With its origins in the Italian “*arci-chief, principal*” and “*pélago deep, abyss, gulf, pool*,” the term *arcipelago* first appeared in print in a 1268 treaty between the Venetians and the Byzantine Emperor Michael Palaeologus: “Item, quod pertinet ad insulas de Arcipelago” [Also, as regards the islands of Archipelago].⁶ As its etymology makes clear, the term is thus tied to the long history of European colonialism. Indeed, following scholar Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, archipelagos remind us of the need for the decolonizing methodology referenced above, as they may be construed, historically, as “grupos de islas, puertos, ciudades y lugares en los que se articulan formas de poder colonial/imperial sobre zonas que ostentan discontinuidad territorial” [groups of islands, ports, cities and places in which colonial/imperial forms of power are articulated over zones that hold territorial discontinuity].⁷ The transnational Cuban archipelago that I describe here is no exception, and, as I will show in the chapters that follow, the legacy of Cuba’s colonial history (and postcolonial present) reverberates through works published in the 1990s and 2000s.

Recognizing the need to rethink the longstanding colonialist dichotomies that privilege continents over islands, land over sea, and singularity over plurality, I join scholars in Archipelago Studies who endeavor to destabilize oft-held assumptions about the relationship of (smaller) islands to (larger) continents, and of terra firma to salty seawaters. What might it mean, for instance, to think of islands as interconnected rather than isolated? What are the implications of contemplating waterways as intrinsic parts of a larger whole? Asking questions such as these, scholars in Archipelago Studies employ a range of disciplinary perspectives in their work. For instance, in Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Michelle Ann Stephens’s recent edited volume, *Contemporary Archipelagic*

Thinking: Towards New Comparative Methodologies and Disciplinary Formations, South Asian literature professor Anjali Nerlekar discusses archipelagos in the context of the Indo-Caribbean; geography scholar Jenny R. Isaacs uses the trope of the archipelago in her study of shorebirds' migration along the Atlantic Flyway; and ethnomusicology professor Jessica Swanston Baker analyzes "archipelagic listening" in the Caribbean.⁸ Considered in concert, these and other scholars in Archipelago Studies aim, in the words of geographer Elaine Stratford et al., "to understand how this 'world of islands' (Baldacchino 2007) might be experienced in terms of networks, assemblages, filaments, connective tissue, mobilities and multiplicities."⁹

While scholars in Archipelago Studies work in a variety of locales, the Caribbean has long been a fecund site for theorizing islands and archipelagos. Scholars Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens signal the importance of the region in this regard, noting, for instance, that as early as the 1950s, "Trinidadian intellectual C.L.R. James was advocating for the federation of the British West Indies around the principle that they too functioned culturally as one interrelated unit."¹⁰ The Caribbean has also been fertile ground for decolonizing projects more generally. As Maldonado-Torres writes, "With the longest history of exposure to modern Western colonialism and the longest history of opposition to it [. . .] it should not be surprising that the Caribbean counts with some of the most important and influential voices in the decolonial turn [. . .]."¹¹

Cuba in particular has been described in a multitude of ways that draw attention to the connections between its often far-flung spaces and peoples, and I build on this scholarship in the pages that follow. Iván de la Nuez reminds readers that Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz described Cubans as "aves de paso" [migratory birds],¹² and that other terms used to demarcate the space of Cuban culture have included "palimpsestos" [palimpsests], as well as "el éxodo, [. . .] el trasiego, o el viaje" [the exodus, [. . .] the movement, or the trip].¹³ In all these instances, writes de la Nuez, there is a recognition of a refiguring of space and identity, as "Se ha perdido el centro" [The center has been lost].¹⁴ Here, as in the transnational Cuban archipelago, or the *arcubiélago*, the nominal center no longer holds.

In my research, I consider how Cuban poets, novelists, and essayists inaugurate new, archipelagic spaces of identity for interconnected communities of readers in the 1990s and 2000s, and I analyze how these spaces function both materially (*in situ*) and metaphorically (in poems, novels, blogs, and songs).¹⁵ It is of course true that all cartographies of material formations are themselves

metaphoric constructions: human minds create, and human hands draw, the lines that divide waters into seas, and land into nations.¹⁶ I use the term *materially*, though, both to acknowledge that Cuba is considered an archipelago, as defined by geographers, and to analyze the ways in which the writers and artists whose work I analyze create interconnected spaces on (or, in some instances, above) the ground in the 1990s and 2000s. I use the term *metaphorically*, by extension, to signal the ways in which writers also create a parallel series of interconnected spaces in their work.

In detailing how Cuban writers and artists underscore what might be described, following Stratford et al., as the “mobilities and multiplicities”¹⁷ of islands and waterways, poetry and prose, I draw as well on Martinican writer Édouard Glissant’s cogent theorization of what he terms the poetics of Relation. As Glissant writes:

What took place in the Caribbean [. . .] approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible. [. . .] a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry.¹⁸

For Glissant, Relation allows individuals to be in more than one place simultaneously, as they inhabit both land and sea. More generally, as is true as well of the archipelago, Relation eschews the *rooted*, with the focus on origins that this implies; and embraces instead the *rhizomatic*, which foregrounds decentered interconnections.¹⁹ Relation also allows (and is predicated on) *errantry*, which, in contrast to what Glissant describes as the “arrowlike nomadism” of conquest and colonization, connotes a decolonizing interdependence with others.²⁰

Living in Havana and Jaruco as well as Madrid and Miami, the writers I study in this book create a transnational, archipelagic space that offers a glimpse of the possibilities of the poetics of Relation. Some of the authors whose work I analyze are well known, and, as such, the islands they write into existence might be considered mainlands (or mainstays) of the *arcubiélago*:²¹ Reina María Rodríguez, Antonio José Ponte, and Zoé Valdés have each received multiple awards, honors, and recognition for their work, and are well known throughout the transnational Cuban archipelago. Others whose work I analyze are less known, and the islands they write might be considered to be emerging formations of the *arcubiélago*: Ramón Hondal, Ricardo Alberto Pérez, and the Grupo de Palenque are key voices of their generations but have received less critical attention to date. While some islands thus receive more ink than others, all are equally important,