

THE HYPHEN-NATION OF CUBAN-EDUCATED AFRICANS: RETHINKING THE '1.5 GENERATION' PARADIGM¹

Paul Ryer

University of California, Riverside

Abstract

This article examines the relevance of the often-cited 'one-and-a-half' generation paradigm (Rumbaut 1991; Pérez Firmat 1994) to cultural groups other than those 'born in Cuba, made in the USA'. The thesis, which has been extensively used as a framework for the Cuban diaspora in the United States, argues that when the experience of exile and displacement of long-term cross-cultural migration occurs during adolescence, the resulting hyphenated or culturally intermediate generation forms a distinctive cohort. Importantly, these 'one-and-a-halfers' are partial insiders in two distinct cultural worlds, and become translation artists, balancing their lives 'on the hyphen'.

Considering three illustrative cases – southern Sudanese, Western Saharan Polisario front refugees, and Chanaians – from among the dozens of Cuban-educated African groups, I argue that the '1.5' paradigm is fitting: while it is their age of arrival to Cuba, rather than departure from it that is at stake, all of these students' lives and identities were profoundly hyphenated by their arrival in Cuba as adolescents and subsequent isolation and long-term experiences there. Their preferences in food, sports, language, fashion, as well as beliefs about reciprocity, proper gender roles and sexuality, and their educational aspirations, all uncannily fit the one-and-a-half profile. That they have not been embraced as hyphenated Cubans within the diaspora is likely a matter of scale and distance, but may also speak to a *longue durée* of ambivalence about Africa as well as political factors within the exile Cuban Studies establishment.

Keywords: Migration, education, anthropology, Cuba, Africa, identity

Because of what happened to us we feel more Latino than African, because we were taken there [when we were] young. So we feel more like Latin Americans than African.

Cuban-Sudanese, cited in Berger (2001: 72)

Introduction

In his seminal examination of Cuban-American identity, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, Gustavo Pérez Firmat (1994) adapted, expanded and popularised Rubén Rumbaut's notion of a '1.5' or 'one-and-a-half' generation (Rumbaut 1991) of those, himself included, who 'belong to an intermediate immigrant generation whose members spent their childhood or adolescence abroad but grew into adults in America' (Pérez Firmat 1994: 4). Indeed, he argues, Cuban-American culture is largely the product of the translation artists of this cohort, which is both uniquely liminal and bi-cultural in ways unavailable to either the Cuban parents or American children of the one-and-a-halfers. Originally formulated as part of a sociological study of the effects of exile on Indochinese refugees in the United States, Cuban-born Rumbaut's phrase has not only trickled into other diasporic, ethnic and Latino studies, but has particularly resonated throughout US-based Cuban Studies (e.g., interviews with Francisco Soto and Gisele M. Riquena in Herrera 2001; Hernández Reguán 2004).

Focusing on those 'born in Cuba, but made in the USA', despite his considerable care to not essentialise Cubanness, Pérez Firmat's formulation runs the risk that any theory of 'hybridity' (García Canclini 1995; Ibrahim 2008) does: doesn't a hyphen imply two wholes behind the halves? Leaving aside the American half, and the larger question of what is *not* hybrid (Rosaldo 1995), he addresses the problem specifically in terms of the history of Cuban immigration and emigration, mobile homes and shifting borders. 'Cuban culture has always lacked a stable core or essence,' he says. 'There are no pure people in Cuba....' (Pérez Firmat 1994: 15). He concludes, then, that on or off the island, 'Cubans have always been hyphenated Americans' (Pérez Firmat 1994). Although this perspective rightly mitigates the bald essentialisms of Cuban studies, it leaves other questions unanswered. If all Cubanness is hyphenated and mixed, why stop with just that one Cuban-American hyphen? How many other dashes remain to be located, and what legitimates them? What about diasporic Cubans residing in Spain (Berg 2009a, 2009b), Latin America, or elsewhere? How about Jewish-Cubans, or 'Jewbans' (Bettinger-López 2000; Anders 2005)?²

In this article, I suggest that the '1.5' paradigm can be productively stood on its head: rather than looking at a cohort which *began* as Cuban and acquired a hyphenated, second identity through the dislocation of exile and migration, what about those who began elsewhere and acquired a *Cuban* identity? I am not referring to recidivistic tourists, nor even to those who take up residence in Miami or Havana for a year or two, but rather, to those whose lives, languages, experiences, and fundamental sense of identity are inexorably split, bifurcated, or hyphenated due to long-term dislocation during adolescence – born elsewhere, made in revolutionary

