
Cuban Intersections of Writing and Space

Colonial Foundations and Neobaroque *Orígenes*

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Cuban intersections of writing and urban space have been apparent since Spanish colonial days. The Spanish *adelantados* and other *conquistadores* brought with them to today's Americas orders to implement Renaissance models of urban planning and defense, based on the public square, gridiron, and fortress, thus creating a space for public discourse and the public display of power. The Baroque aesthetic arrived in the so-called New World about a century after Columbus as *el Barroco de Indias*, and found a fertile ground for a new artistic and urban reality. In the new and marvelous New World combinations resulting from the mixing of cultures and peoples, the Baroque found some of its most compelling and remarkable expressions. Two of the Baroque's most noteworthy modern practitioners were the twentieth-century Cuban writers and intellectuals, José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy—a representative of Neobaroque literary notions. Lezama's use of gnostic gaps married space and writing, or art. He revived the Baroque aesthetic in his work and personified it as the "Señor Barroco," or Sir Baroque. Sarduy represented the Baroque's excess in his novels, as an aesthetic for combining written discourses and cultural spaces. The Baroque was one of the aesthetics most preoccupied with space.

The founding of settlements and cities was synonymous with civilization during the Spanish colonization of today's Americas. The equation of ordered

space with good government cemented the psychology of space in art in the colonies. In general, Spanish colonial urban planning used the gridiron layout and the central *plaza*, elements of space that were prefigured and prescribed in written laws issued by the Spanish crown during successive periods of colonization. Empire, for Spain, therefore hinged on a conception of writing and town planning.

The Grid

The origins of the urban grid are tied to its ancient functions.¹ The grid was significantly used in some of the world's most important cities, including in pre-Columbian Mexico's major cities, where it was quite well developed by 150 C.E. Gridiron benefited the economy and warfare as well. From the seventh-century B.C.E. on, various Greek cities in the Asia Minor city-states of Ionia developed into commercial outposts, which found the regular and systematic pattern of an orthogonal grid both economically beneficial as well as easy to replicate quickly after numerous destructions in cyclical wars. This layout was known as the Milesian layout, after Miletus, in southwest Asia Minor.²

The Miletus plan introduced streets of uniform width and city blocks of fairly uniform dimension—certain blocks were left empty to serve as an agora (open assembly place, marketplace) or temple. The agora was a rectangle surrounded by a wall of shops on at least three sides. In later centuries, the plan provided an easy and fare way to divide land in a newly colonized city.

The Roman Empire also used this method of dividing the land in its military encampments, or “castra,” which were later transformed into cities. This layout was used as well during the European Middle Ages in southern French garrison towns or “bastides,” and later in the numerous Spanish garrison towns, or “bastidas” of the so-called “Reconquest,” through the fifteenth-century (Santa Fe de Granada, Spain was one of the most famous and historically important of these garrison towns). In all of these cases, the speed and ease with which the grid could be laid out was what determined its use. In the case of the garrison towns in particular, these settlements often were dismantled and moved closer to the enemy as victories were won.

It was also on the basis of the gridiron plan, with an open square in the middle—as prescribed in *The Laws of the Indies* (*Las Leyes de Indias*) that the Spaniards laid out their colonial towns in the Americas, beginning in the sixteenth century. In 1573, King Philip II of Spain began compiling these laws as a guide to the construction and administration of colonial communities. The laws specified a square or rectangular central plaza with eight principal streets running from the plaza's corners.

Las Leyes de Indias

The town-based conception of empire in the Americas, however, predates the first versions of Philip II's laws by more than seventy years. Already in 1501, Spain's Queen Isabel "instructed Fray Nicolás de Ovando, the first royal governor of the island of Hispaniola, to establish towns (*'facere algunas poblaciones'*) on the island so that the Christians living there did not live *'derramados,'* scattered about."³ The papal bull of 1493, *Inter Caetera*, allowing the Catholic Monarchs to exercise temporal authority over the islands encountered by Columbus, certainly influenced the queen's orders, but so did the notion that an empire of towns would be tantamount to peppering the new realms with Spanish ideas of "law, order, justice, religion, an entire way of life" (Kagan 28). Consequently, within slightly more than ten years of Isabel's instructions to Ovando, the Iberian colonizers had founded more than a dozen towns throughout the Caribbean alone, and Havana would prove to be just about the most important and the longest-lasting one.

If Queen Isabel issued instructions establishing the Spanish colonial enterprise on a town-based model, then her great grandson, Philip II, multiplied and codified those and other plans in a series of ordinances that would lead to the groundbreaking Laws of the Indies of 1680. The Ordinances Concerning Discoveries (*Ordenanzas de descubrimientos, nueva población y pacificación de las Indias*) of 1573 were the first draft, as it were, of the Laws of the Indies to come. These 148 ordinances provided a normalized and overarching template for colonial settlements and city planning. This "most representative [document] of urban theory" established "the siting of a main square [as] the foundational act for any new town" (Escobar 194). This is why cities and towns that were established prior to 1573 sometimes deviated from Phillip's ordinances.

Another reason for such deviation is the admiration indigenous American cities and towns inspired in the Europeans who spent time in them and beheld them as symbols of good government; the Aztec's Tenochtitlan with its "straight streets and canals, and a vast market square lined with an arcade" (Escobar 196), as we are also told in Hernán Cortés's second letter to the Emperor Charles V, being the most obvious example. The Spanish wonderment at these cities influenced their view of the built environment. In any case, Isabel's 1501 orders to Ovando had already laid the framework for the type of town planning that was to come.

As the historian of Spain, J.H. Elliott, tells us, Philip II of Spain's empire resulted from a government by paper.⁴ The literary critic, Roberto González Echevarría also suggests this when he quotes the visitor's guide to Seville's General Archive of the Indies (*Archivo General de Indias*) as

referring to the Spanish Habsburgs, Charles V and Philip II, as well as to their forebears, the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel, as “papermonger kings” (*Myth and Archive* 30). It is well known that Philip, in his Escorial, infamously ruled his far-flung possessions on the basis of *consultas*, advice in the way of reports and memoranda written to him by his ministers. The Spanish Habsburg’s penchant for recognizing claims of merit or solicitation by subjects via written *realciones* or depositions of sorts, established writing as the medium of power in the Spanish empire. Therefore, written orders, contracts, and the like, often prefigured colonial realities, especially when it came to creating the built environment as an extension of Spanish power and social intercourse in the colonies.

Much as *Las Capitulaciones de Santa Fe* (1492)—the negotiated document drawn up by the Catholic Monarchs Fernando and Isabel, and agreed to by Columbus to signify the official contract between the explorer and the Crown—prefigured what the Europeans would end up finding in the Americas, Queen Isabel’s and her great grandson, Philip’s, legalistic writings would prefigure the shape and nature of Colonial Latin American town planning. Written laws, as well as empirical observations of native urban planning, were the genesis of a built environment in the aid of the colonization effort itself. Writing and art came together in the earliest of phases of the European invasion of the Americas, in the service of good government and social control.

The Founding of Havana

La Habana, a town first founded in 1515, was not located where present-day Havana is located. Even when Hernán Cortés arrived in Havana in 1519 on route to what would be the conquest of Mexico, it was still a settlement located significantly further south than today’s Havana (on the southern coast of the island) and possibly even further west as well, according to some historians. The first settlement in the area that would be located within present-day Havana was established in 1519 near today’s Almendares River. Finally, according to most historians, what would become today’s Havana was established yet again in 1519 as San Cristóbal de La Habana, near the bay. In late 1556, the Spanish king designated Havana (now, on the northern coast of Cuba) as “la escala principal de las Indias, a donde los navíos que vienen de ellas así del Nombre de Dios como de la Nueva España y otras partes para venir a estos reinos vienen a parar” (qtd in Weiss 36). With this designation came the need for adequate fortification (Havana became the most heavily fortified city of the Americas) of the newly designated premier settlement of the Spanish Caribbean, and, later came the official title of “city” by Philip II in 1592.

Havana's layout did not conform to the Laws of the Indies as strictly as the layouts of many other Latin American cities, partly because of its early origins and partly because of the difficult topography and competing interests of preexisting landowners. Once the town was founded, for the third and final time, by the bay, the first thing its settlers wanted was a proper public square and houses. Havana's early essence is concentrated in the history of its squares, each one with a distinctive character, but all of them the sites of politics, parades, markets, and fiestas.

Havana's Squares

Today's Plaza de Armas became Havana's first square, originally created in the first third of the sixteenth century but finding its definitive location only around 1580. It was initially situated partly on land currently occupied by the Castillo de la Real Fuerza (1558–1577). Located at the end of Obispo and O'Reilly streets, the square was lined with various powerful symbols of Havana's origins and essence: The tremendous Palacio de los Capitanes Generales (1776–1779) represented the show of power, where the governors imposed Spanish authority over the whole city and island; the old church on the corner of the square symbolized religious authority, but was knocked down in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, after both the explosion of a ship in the nearby harbor and the Santa Teresa hurricane of 1768 seriously damaged it; the aforementioned Real Fuerza fortress reflected not only military might, but also Havana's preeminence among Spanish colonial towns deserving of such protection; and, later, but still within the colonial period, the Templete (1828) commemorated both the first mass and first town council meeting held in Havana in 1519, supposedly in this same spot, under a silk-cotton (*ceiba*) tree, thus providing tangible artifacts of Havana's founding and cultural essence, where there had been none. The early development of Havana's first square, today's Plaza de Armas, rehearses the irrecoverable touchstones of colonial Havana.

Rather than sparking the creation of straight roads, issuing from the square on a gridiron, as prescribed in Spanish town-planning laws, Havana's first square spawned a tangle of streets shaped by landowner interests and topographical challenges. Oficios (Craftsmen) and Mercaderes (Merchants) were the first streets laid out, followed by streets perpendicular to them. This maze-like layout would be corrected after events such as the British invasion and partial destruction of the city, in the eighteenth century. According to the Laws of the Indies, streets should have been straight and very narrow in warm parts of the city, in order to maximize shade being thrown off the roof line, and wide in cool parts to benefit from the sun's warmth.

The city's first public square was short-lived, as such. In part, the Plaza Nueva was created because the first square's proximity to the Castillo de La Real Fuerza gave it a less casual atmosphere. It was not the ideal place for amusement and social interaction. Another reason for the creation of a new public square was that government officials recognized the primacy and strategic importance of Havana. They repurposed the public square, converting it into a plaza de armas, or parade ground, where they could perform military exercises. Eventually, other government buildings, such as the Palacio de los Capitanes Generales (comprising three functions: governor's residence, chapter house, and jailhouse) and next to it, the Palacio del Segundo Cabo (the post office and tax office), would flank the Plaza de Armas. The Templete, a monument to Havana's founding, was opened to the Plaza's side and with it came the didactic representation of the ephemeral and intangible experiences or performances documented in the early documents of the city's history. That same year, 1828, nearby streets were drained and better leveled by the laying of flagstones.

Havana's second square, the Plaza Nueva, between Teniente Rey, Muralla, San Ignacio, and Inquisidor streets, came into being in the second half of the sixteenth century to replace the old square, or Plaza de Armas, after it had been commandeered for military drills. By 1587, the town decided to use the residential space behind the projected Convento de San Francisco for a public square. Although in close proximity to the future convent, the Plaza Nueva was unusual in that it was not fronted by any government or religious buildings, but by domestic architecture instead. Many of these residences were equipped with wooden façade balconies that allowed people to have a more direct sense of civic engagement while remaining within the domestic sphere. This square was interchangeably used as a public salon and a center of commerce. In 1835 Governor Tacón built a formal market, the Mercado de Cristina, in the square. It lasted until 1908 when it was demolished. Well into the eighteenth century, this square came to be known as Plaza Vieja (in contradistinction to the new square—Nueva Plaza del Cristo).

Although there are several other important squares in Havana, such as the Plaza del Cristo or Nueva Plaza and the Plaza de San Francisco, no other square is as prominent as the Plaza de la Catedral, also known as Plazuela de la Ciénaga, the last square to be built within the city walls. As its earliest name suggests, the area where the current square is located used to be marshland, often overflowing during the rainy season. Partly for that reason, the land was not developed into a proper public square until the first quarter of the eighteenth century. The church built on the north side of the square would eventually become Havana's cathedral and would give the square its new name, Plaza de la Catedral.

Havana's Cathedral Square, opening out from the corner of San Ignacio and Empedrado Streets, is remarkable for several reasons. The earliest reason is that it represented the people's will to put into effect the Laws of the Indies

and hold on to open spaces within the city that could be turned into public squares. Initially, the area's swampy qualities naturally staved off development. When talks by some of draining the area and building houses on it grew louder, however, the crown finally complied with the general populace's will in 1632, officially disallowing full construction on the site. Instead, the area functioned as a market and meeting place in the early 1600s, with primitive buildings put up around it.

Foremost in importance in Cathedral Square, however, is its anchor structure, the cathedral itself—the *Catedral de la Virgen María de la Concepción Inmaculada*. Begun in 1748 and completed in 1777, the cathedral is the greatest example of the eighteenth-century aesthetic known as the “Cuban Baroque.” The alluringly strange architectural orders on the cathedral's façade are signposts of a Cuban aesthetic unlike its Mexican or Spanish counterparts. This Baroque is more subdued and not excessively ornamented. The main, central portion of the façade is sinuous and contoured. It is clearly Baroque in its organic movement, yet seems rather squat and underwhelming with respect to its counterparts in New Spain. Its façade plays with light and shade instead of being excessively adorned. Its flowing wave-like skin seems made for the Caribbean's hot and humid climate, creating movement through architectonics and volume. This more restrained Baroque defines the Cuban variety, can also be seen in the major buildings in this square and in the Plaza de Armas, and verges on the inclusion of neoclassical elements.

This square is also significant, however, because it combines the monumentality of several buildings with the familiarity and intimacy of a small space. Uniformity of structures and materials lends this space charm and coherence. The houses belonging to the Marqués de Arcos (1746), the Marqués de Aguas Claras (1751–1775), the so-called Conde de Casa Lombillo (first quarter of the eighteenth century), and the Conde de Casa Bayona (1720) also evince a subdued Baroque aesthetic, with specific elements highlighted with adornments, rather than the visual field of the edifice entirely highlighted. This grouping around the square achieves coherence by the series of portals and the encrusted stone skin on the façades of the houses. Although monumental, these buildings are smaller than the cathedral, which is itself relatively small by cathedral standards, even for Latin America. The dialogical play between the monumental and the subdued in the square's built environment lends the Plaza de la Catedral human, coherent, and unique dimensions.

Havana's Fortresses

Perhaps the antitheses of these spaces for social discourse in Havana are its fortresses. As the “Pearl of the Antilles,” Cuba, and Havana, were targets for

pirates, corsairs, and other such brigands. The Bay of Carenas, as Havana's bay used to be called, was the main stopover for Spanish galleons on the way to and from the Americas. The Spanish Crown recognized this liability very early on and, therefore, had a series of fortresses built to protect its premier city in the Americas. Havana's fortresses spoke the language of power and military discourse, yet had a charm all their own. Their primarily trapezoidal ground plans, bastions dominating the (four) corners, and layouts around a central square evoked recurrent models of Renaissance fortresses. The first three and the most emblematic castles of Havana are the Real Fuerza (1558–1577), the Tres Santos Reyes Magos del Morro (1589–1630, 1763–1767), and San Salvador de la Punta (1589–1630). Although there are several other fortresses, the next most significant one is San Carlos de la Cabaña (1763–1774), built on the eastern part of the bay after the British's successful takeover of Havana for seven months.

La Real Fuerza was constructed near the site of the Fuerza Vieja, an older fort that existed around 1540, as the first pirate attack on Havana took place in 1537. The old fort withstood three pirate attacks, but its crumbling structure was finally dismantled in 1582. The Real Fuerza was the safest building of its time. It became the residence of the Spanish governors, many of whom added domestic or ceremonial changes such as a room overhanging the seaward side with a wide balcony and a watchtower crowned with a bronze figurine in the shape of a woman—la Giraldilla. This figurine was a copy of the Giralda of the Seville Cathedral-mosque and worked as a weather vane. Holding a palm tree in its right arm (only the trunk remains), in its left arm a staff with the Calatrava Cross, symbol of the military and knightly order, and a medallion on its chest, La Giraldilla is now a symbol of the city. La Fuerza's various functions included the venues of the National Archive in 1899 and the National Library between 1938 and 1957; the offices of the National Commission of Monuments and Center of Preservation, Restoration, and Museology after 1959; and the Museum of Arms most recently.

The fortress San Salvador de La Punta, along with El Morro on the other side of the bay, was built to protect the mouth of the harbor. In 1559, lookouts were posted at La Punta, the land on which the fortress would be built, to guard the entrance to Havana by water. Work on the structure started in 1589–1590 and progressed slowly until 1630. That year, with the fortress mostly complete, a heavy copper chain was stretched across the bay's short distance between La Punta and El Morro to increase the protection of the entrance into the harbor.

El Morro fortress rests on the natural rocky elevation that lies at the entrance to Havana's bay. This naturally advantageous point, called El Morro, by Havana's dwellers, had lookouts since the sixteenth century. Authorities built a stone and mortar watchtower in 1563 and in December 1588 the

Spanish king appointed a keeper in charge of the fortress, to be called “de los Tres Reyes.” Throughout the sixteenth century, El Morro was often fortified, with construction coming to an end by 1630. Its iconic lighthouse was erected in 1845 in the way of a tower that was thirty meters in height. This fortress was where the main battle took place when the British took Havana in 1762. It was rebuilt the following year.

After regaining the city from the British, the Spanish transformed Havana into the most heavily fortified city in the Americas. As a result, construction began on what was to become the vast Fortress of La Cabaña, the biggest Spanish fortification in the New World. The work extended for eleven years and was enormously costly, but on completion the fort was considered an unassailable bastion and essential to Havana’s defenses. It was provided with a large number of cannons forged in Barcelona. In the eighteenth century a cannon was fired, first from a fleet ship and then from La Cabaña, to warn the townspeople that the city gates were about to close. The scheduled time for the shot has changed over time. Today, a shot fired by one of the several Spanish guns that the castle has kept since the eighteenth century can be heard every day at 9 p.m. Other fortifications were constructed, as well: among them, the castle of *Atarés* (1763–1767) defended the shipyard in the inner bay, while the castle of *El Príncipe* (1767–1779) guarded the city from the west.

In 1674, the works for the city walls (*La Muralla de La Habana*) were started, as part of the fortification efforts to complete the plan for the defense of Havana after the system of coastal protection was in place. They would be completed between 1740 and 1797, by which point the city had already overgrown its boundaries into what would become Centro Habana. In 1863, the demolition of the city walls was begun so that the metropolis could be enlarged. At the end of the century, the well-off classes moved to the quarter of Vedado. Later, they emigrated toward Miramar, and today, evermore to the west, settling in Siboney.

If writing in Renaissance Spain prefigured spatial order in its American colonies, then the later adaptation of the Baroque to American soil prefigured twentieth-century writers’ vindication and exploitation of the strangeness and colonial quintessence of the aesthetic. Twentieth-century Cuban writers (and many Latin American writers in general, for that matter) inserted their work within the Baroque tradition. These writers and intellectuals saw in the Baroque the perfect intersection of writing and space.

José Lezama Lima: Conjuring a Culturo-Spatial Image

José Lezama Lima (1910–1976), co-founder in 1944 of the art and literature magazine *Orígenes*, examines Cuban space and culture through its literature,

while simultaneously making that literature and literary history the Cuban cultural space itself. It was Cintio Vitier (1921–2009), one of Cuba’s most important critics of poetry and the Cuban literary canon, who proclaimed Lezama as heralding the “beginning of a new poetic discourse,” with a sense of impulse (*The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature* 342). A distillation of Lezama’s critical method is found in his essays *La expresión americana* (1957) and *Las eras imaginarias* (1971), while the apotheosis of this same method is his *magnum opus*, *Paradiso* (1966).

Lezama, like Vitier in his *Lo cubano en la poesía* (first published in 1958 in Cuba) recognizes that the act of reading cultural texts, in a canonical grouping, is an act that generates and/or incorporates culture spaces. The contextual space created by the grouping and organization of diverse Cuban texts endows each individual text with a new significance. Alternately, this new corpus of works, like an organic body, is different from its individual parts, but shaped by their synergy. As Julio Ortega describes it, “[I]as imágenes y los textos se desprenden de su museo occidental u oriental, y actúan como el privilegiado significante de un nuevo signo: el signo de una conciencia americana reordenadora” (“La expresión americana: una teoría de la cultura” 69).

Lezama’s literary and historical theories are based on the Spanish Baroque. He is one of the relatively recent torchbearers of the Neobaroque—the patrimony of writers such as Severo Sarduy and Carlos Fuentes. The Baroque has proven to be one of the defining aesthetics of Latin American literature per se. Although the tradition known as *Barroco de Indias* and the Spanish Baroque are coetaneous, the former contributes to an autonomous, if “monstrous,” vision of Latin America. The popularity of the Baroque in contemporary Latin American literature is strongly rooted in the twentieth century’s Neobaroque tradition. Such programs appreciated the lack of moderation or apparent incoherence they saw in the Baroque as a model of pleasure with which to oppose the bourgeois realism of the previous century’s status quo. In the 1920s, criticism and “creation literature” took on Baroque profiles in the works of José Lezama Lima (*Revista de occidente*), Ortega, Spengler, Scheler, Hegel, and others.

Perhaps one of the strongest endorsements for a return to Baroque sensibilities was the Spanish *Generación del '27*. On the tercentenary of Góngora’s death, this group (and especially Dámaso Alonso) revived interest in the Baroque poet. The overall effect was a wave of popularity of the Baroque that carried with it various contemporary Spanish American writers. Among the Modernists were Darío and Martí. Later writers included Borges (writes dedications to Quevedo and Gracián), Alejo Carpentier (declares himself Baroque), Carlos Fuentes (quotes and alludes to Calderón’s works in various writings), Octavio Paz (glosses Quevedo’s sonnet, “*Amor constante*

más allá de la muerte, as his own *Salamandra*), and, of course, Lezama Lima. Lezama proposes that the Baroque is the first American artistic movement, a suggestion that links him to the work of Pedro Henríquez Ureña and Mariano Picón Salas, in the 1940s.

In *Las eras imaginarias*, Lezama expands these ideas, which he had also discussed previously in parts of his *La expresión americana*. At the heart of his writing, he posits the “image,” the poetic crystallization of the signifier, through which all reality can be perceived. Images are ultimately woven into a nexus by a “metaphoric subject” (the poet), generating “imaginary eras.” These eras are described as combinations of “elements in each culture that resemble those in other cultures removed in time and space” (González Echevarría, *Celestina’s Brood* 214). By examining and combining the image of each of various eras, such as the Egyptian, Orphic, and Etruscan, Lezama is able to unfasten the era’s temporal and spatial frames. This allows an image to adopt a new context and/or a new set of relationships with other eras’ images. The imaginary eras are instances in which a historical or cultural archetype is distilled in an image. Lezama is really advocating a new critical apparatus based on the imaginary. He looks for new myths by renovating existing ones:

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. (*La expresión americana* 14)

Lezama relies on the process of erasing in order to reconstruct. He must make his imaginary eras universal and synchronic. By relying on the image of each era, he tries to reconstruct a lost nature.⁵ Without the constraining frames of time and space, Lezama is able to create a field defined by the nine universal images he conjures up. For Lezama, the last imaginary era begins with José Martí. It is that of infinite possibility—*potens*. This is, of course, the era of the Cuban culture with which he deals. This last imaginary era of Cuba, and, by extension, of America will be composed through a poetic method of association: “America will be . . . [for Lezama,] an epoch with a distinctive quality that can be discovered by [the] metaphoric self capable of closing gaps in language” (González Echevarría, *The Voice* 30). The American Baroque is a distinctive style of the culture Lezama handles. The culture of the Cuban nation is an essential part of Lezama’s poetics; in fact, it is Lezama’s poetics, and *Paradiso* is its apotheosis. It is here that we see a living model of his expounded theories. Before looking at Lezama’s magnum opus, let us delve more deeply into Baroque considerations.

Barroco de Indias

Severo Sarduy, a literary descendant of Lezama's, takes up the mantle of the Neobaroque, from his exile from Cuba, in Paris. Sarduy adopts the Hispanic literary tradition of the Baroque, which had been imported from Spain but adapted to an American perspective. Sarduy's version of this literary movement is known as the Neobaroque, and he elaborates on some of its important notions in his work *Barroco (Baroque)*. Twentieth-century Latin American writers turn to the Baroque and its American version—the Spanish American or the Colonial Baroque—as the first literary “movement” to develop in what is today Latin America. It reflected the first Creole consciousness of being different, of being strange, of being a composite and accumulation of cultures. This so-called *Barroco de Indias* probably took so well in American soil because it could be applied easily to the richness and multiplicity of the American reality, especially because Spain, the Hispanic Baroque's land of origin, had been “homogenized” relatively recently.⁶ The Spanish Baroque of Calderón's *La vida es sueño*, for example, already generated an aesthetic of strangeness and monstrosity, which was metaphorically congruent with the hybrid reality manifest in the Americas (the mixture of European and indigenous elements). The Neobaroque writers take up that thread of hybridity and monstrosity as the signature of their writing, throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.⁷

The Creole consciousness is one of being “Other”—different, strange, a composite of cultures. The Baroque, with its central issue of monstrosity, allows for the self-recognition of these differences. “[T]he monster is at odds with renaissance aesthetics and its ideal of harmony and decorum” (González Echevarría, *Celestina* 84). It is an appropriate apotheosis of the Baroque figure of the ellipse; a figure with no one center, but with two foci instead, which obscure a central origin or identity as in the neoclassical figure of the circle. The monster in Calderón, for example, is a “mixed figure combining conflicting characteristics rendered visible by the outward appearance of the characters, by the costumes they wear” (González Echevarría, *Celestina* 89).

Although the so-called *Barroco de Indias* was imported from Spain, it was an artistic movement that developed in what today is Latin America as it adapted to an environment rife with dualities and pluralities (the Baroque Americas were comprised of urban cultures with large ornate European-like buildings and churches competing with native American edifices, for example), and, as we suggested above, even monstrosities. The rich cultural texture of the New World could be woven into Baroque literature. This culture, hybrid because of its numerous indigenous, creole, and European elements, could find literary enfranchisement within hegemonic forms of the day through the Baroque aesthetic.

In Latin America, José Lezama Lima declares “the Latin American Baroque, the ‘señor barroco’ . . . , the origin of American consciousness and of American art” (González Echevarría, *Celestina* 217).⁸ Similarly, Alejo Carpentier’s essay “El barroco y lo real maravilloso” champions the Baroque movement as the origin of an authentic American artistic expression: “nuestro arte siempre fue barroco: desde la espléndida escultura precolombina . . . hasta la mejor novelística actual de América . . . hasta el amor físico se hace barroco en la encrespada obscenidad del *guaco* peruano” (*Tientos y diferencias* 207). Jorge Luis Borges, in his *Historia universal de la infamia*, characterizes the Baroque as a movement of excess and of a lack of restraint: “Yo diría que barroco es aquel estilo que deliberadamente agota (o quiere agotar) sus posibilidades y que linda con su propia caricatura . . . es barroca la etapa final de todo arte, cuando éste exhibe y dilapida sus medios” (9). The Baroque manifests itself as a reaction against the singularity of focus in classical art. The Neobaroque appropriates the Baroque’s heterogenous aesthetic as it integrates expressions of popular culture and privileges difference. Simulation, that is, representation, is treated on the same plane as reality in the Neobaroque:

se ha expandido haciéndose más complejo, al tiempo que incluye la representación como elemento determinante en la percepción, eliminando la tradicional jerarquía entre realidad y simulación. La teatralidad, el artificio y la representación de la realidad—cuya saturación de códigos significantes la lleva a la hiperrealidad—, son finalmente algunas de las vías hacia el conocimiento y el disfrute estético en nuestro tiempo. (Olalquiaga, “The Dark Side . . .” 25)

Severo Sarduy appreciates the Baroque’s excess as an aesthetic of contamination. For him, the Baroque allows noncanonical elements to combine with canonical culture, and thus to contaminate it: “ser barroco, hoy, creo, significa amenazar, juzgar y parodiar la economía burguesa, basada en la administración tacaña—o como se dice, ‘racional’—de los bienes, en el centro y fundamento mismo de esa administración y de todo su soporte” (Fossey, “Severo Sarduy . . .” 16).

Sarduy and the Neobaroque

In his *Barroco* (1974), Sarduy describes the origins of Baroque sensibilities and examines cosmological theories that were affected by and that influenced the Baroque artistic movement. Specifically, he elaborates on the Baroque’s movement away from the classical circular figure to the elliptical figure (which is discernable in the works of Calderón, Góngora, and their contemporaries)⁹: “El paso de Galileo a Kepler es el del círculo a la elipse, el de *lo que está*

trazado alrededor del Uno a lo que está trazado alrededor de lo plural, paso de lo clásico a lo barroco” (*Barroco* 19). For Sarduy, the Neobaroque is the rebirth of the “geometric figure ellipse, in addition to the corresponding rhetorical figure ellipsis, [which] is projected as the mechanism of the baroque” (Kushigian 73).

Sarduy focuses on the notion of excess in “El Barroco y el Neobarroco” (1972). He calls Neobaroque excess “la apoteosis del artificio, la ironía y la irrisión de la naturaleza . . . la artificialización” (Fernández Moreno, *América Latina en su literatura* 128). Here, excess is linguistically described as the literary displacement of the sign: “La literatura renuncia a su nivel denotativo, a su enunciado lineal; desaparece el centro único en el trayecto, que hasta entonces se suponía circular, de los astros, para hacerse doble cuando Kepler propone como figura de ese desplazamiento la ellipse” (*América Latina en su literatura* 168). The ellipse generates a second focal point, besides the singular one that is used to generate a circle, and so is a metaphor for at least a dual perspective on reality and a lack of an originating center. Sarduy uses this philosophy in his writing to elide the univocal message found in literature before him. But, let us not forget that an ellipse is drawn one circle at a time, after which the excess intersecting lines are removed to reveal the elliptical form. Therefore, although the elliptical form connotes excess and overabundance, it does so by sacrificing a part of each of the circles to create the new form. The resulting form may be that of a Baroque monster or diptych figure is a combination of seeming opposites. It manages both to upset the equilibrium of a patriarchal system based on binary categories and to incorporate itself into a canonical tradition as the progeny of the Baroque.

Paradiso

Lezama’s *Paradiso* is also progeny of the Baroque. *Paradiso* is not only modeled on poetic writing, but it is itself poetic writing. It is also a *bildungsroman*, not only about José Cemí’s education but also about the reader’s education. Lezama constructs a myth out of *Paradiso* in which Cuban icons and rituals meld with the atypical family romance of José Cemí to project a sacred tradition. This tradition, ultimately, is Cemí’s journey toward a poetic understanding of reality, based on debate and discovery. Poetry, or the understanding of the poetic process, is the key to epiphany and hypertelia. Therefore, *Paradiso* traces José Cemí’s learning process, as it presents itself as *the learning process* for the reader. The task ahead is to manage Lezama’s variation on the Baroque. The opening of a gnostic space is itself an image that Lezama uses, which is akin to the analogy or metaphor.

We see Lezama’s illustration of the gnostic space when José Cemí ponders two proximate objects. He realizes that their interstice can be perceived as a third object. It is only when the two original objects are together that the

third one can be perceived. The apparition of the third object is dependent on contact between the first two, for the silhouette of the third object manifests itself only when the first two are together. Lezama's idea of the gnostic space provides an implicit ontological comment. In its search for the answer to the question of "being," "Western" philosophy (Western metaphysics, that is) has determined "being" as "presence." Lezama's gnostic space is just that—a space, or non-being, which, however, conjures an object. Or, at least the gnostic space manifests the perception of an object.

Lezama seems to say that the manifestation of this third object is as significant as the manifestation of the first two. The perception of the first two objects, Lezama might concur, is always already a representation, and no more "being" than the third object. In Lezama's poetic theory, the first two objects may represent one type of linguistic sign, but the third object, although an "image," just represents a different type of linguistic sign. The two types, however, are each still signs, and therefore fungible in his poetic economy. Lezama's poetic elaborations in *Paradiso* manifest a gnostic space, or a missing center that must be recreated through the poetic imagination.

In the essay, "Dispersión: Falsas Notas/Homenaje a Lezama," Sarduy lauds Lezama for creating a collage in his work, or "mirage," as Sarduy calls it. In Lezama's work, things are juxtaposed, creating a gnostic space, as we saw earlier. Sarduy refers to this grouping of disparate things as a dialogic presence: "Cuenta la textura *francés, latín, cultura*, el valor cromático, el estrato que significan en el corte vertical de la escritura, en su despliegue de sapiencia paralela" (*Escrito sobre un cuerpo* 63). Sarduy also comments on Lezama's use of metaphor, a component of his Baroque, which "[crea] infinitas conexiones" (68). Since metaphors are cultural in nature and are extremely wide in reference, "lo cubano . . . aparece descifrado, leído a través de todas las culturas: definido como superposición de éstas" (68). For Sarduy, all of Lezama's work, his *oeuvre*, is an imaginary "Era": "Sarduy encontró en Lezama al visionario estático, ese que casi sin salir de La Habana replantea lo cubano a través de un peregrinaje imaginario y textual basado en una teología necesariamente libresca y literaria" (Cabanillas 11).

Sarduy sees that Lezama reconstitutes Cuban space as a difference of cultures, in his writing. Lezama does not see Cuba's make-up as a synthesis, a syncretic culture, but as a palimpsest. Sarduy, along the lines of Lezama's work, believes that the Cuban novel must highlight the various levels—the "planos 'arqueológicos'" (*Escrito sobre un cuerpo* 69)—of the palimpsest. Sarduy does just that in many of his novels, such as *De donde son los cantantes*. He represents these "planos" (planes) in separate tales (one Spanish, another African, another Chinese) in order to "lograr lo cubano con el encuentro de éstos [relatos], con su coexistencia" (*Escrito sobre un cuerpo* 69) within one textual body, or volume. Sarduy responds to ontological projects and

traditions such as Lezama's and Vitier's by rewriting these. Lezama achieved this same coexistence profile of Cuban reality "en la unidad estructural de cada metáfora, de cada línea" (69). Sarduy achieves it in a textual whole, a collage, without margins and centers.

The last factor in the equation leading to Cuban reality is what we saw earlier as *choteo*. According to Sarduy, *choteo* results from the impact in collage itself. It is "un elemento de risa, de burla discreta" (*Escrito sobre un cuerpo* 69) inherent in *lo cubano*. In fact, *choteo* is a form of simulation. Sarduy traces the roots of this palimpsest of simulation—Cuban reality/*lo cubano*—back to Silvestre de Balboa's *Espejo de paciencia* (1606), Cuba's "first poem." He quotes Cintio Vitier's appraisal in *Lo cubano en la poesía* of Balboa's poem for what is usually considered an extravagant mistake: "la mezcla de elementos mitológicos grecolatinos, con la flora, fauna, instrumentos y hasta ropas indígenas" (*Escrito sobre un cuerpo* 69). As is well known by now, Vitier believes this element to be what truly links the poem with the history of Cuban poetry. This proto-*choteo*, "un rasgo elemental de lo cubano, . . . es la suave risa con que rompe lo aparatoso, ilustre y trascendente en todas sus cerradas formas" (*Escrito sobre un cuerpo* 70). Sarduy's use of Vitier is an explicit appropriation of Vitier's voice in *Lo cubano en la poesía*. This appropriation is also a seizing of Vitier's canonical discourse. Instead of contradicting or openly challenging the rhetorical thread that runs through *Lo cubano en la poesía*, Sarduy unravels it and uses it to stitch together different texts. For Sarduy, the tradition of collage, on which he has Cintio Vitier weighing in, reaches its ideal form in Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*: "Con *Paradiso* la tradición del collage alcanza su precisión, se puntualiza y define como 'rasgo elemental de lo cubano'" (*Escrito sobre un cuerpo* 70). Sarduy values Lezama's juxtapositioning of heterogeneous phenomena as a violent encounter that manifests Cuban reality. This violent encounter allows for the recovery of "toda extrañeza, toda exterioridad" (*Escrito sobre un cuerpo* 70). It is on this confrontational level that in Lezama's work "la síntesis se ha efectuado totalmente" (*Escrito sobre un cuerpo* 77); that is the synthesis of writing and space.

Notes

1. At least as far back as 2600 B.C.E., the grid was used to build cities in the Indus Valley (today's Pakistan and North India). Not one hundred years later, the grid was used in the workers' village at Giza in Egypt. China, as early as the fifteenth century B.C.E., and its neighbors a bit later, also used the grid for their capital cities. In seventeenth-century B.C.E., Babylon, Hammurabi had the city rebuilt on a grid plan as well. The Greek historian Herodotus speaks about the marvels of Babylon and describes its dimensions in detail. The Greeks were certainly aware

of and admired Mesopotamian civilization. It is not too far a stretch to say that the Greek cities were planned on Assyrian models.

2. The Milesian layout was arguably influenced by the Assyrian and Babylonian cultures. This plan could also be found in other Greek colonies in Italy, for example.
3. "Instrucción a . . . Fray Nicolás de Ovando," 16 September 1501, in *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de América y Oceania* (Madrid, 1970), vol. 31: 17, as cited in Richard L. Kagan's *Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493–1793*, p. 28 and p. 209 n. 42.
4. J.H. Elliott, *Spain and its World, 1500–1700* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 15. See also J.H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain, 1469–1716* (London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1963), pp. 251–2.
5. Ezra Pound, like Lezama Lima, is interested in creating a synchronic space, where he could bring back select historical and literary eras. As a craftsman of literary history, Pound disassembles the Cartesian apparatus of German *romanische Philologie*, and forges a Romance Philology in which all ages are contemporaneous, synchronous. In literature, the real time is independent of the apparent. This transcendental spirit is what Pound believes must be evoked through a virile and fecund living language in order to obviate clichés by using signifiers that will approach the original referents as closely as possible.

In *The Spirit of Romance*, Pound treats only the works that he claims still possess that transcendental spirit; the works that are more than mere artifacts. The atmospheres of these various traditions are continuous with one another (historically and inherently), and that is the effect of the cultural dynasty that Pound is proposing, with himself as its champion and latest apotheosis.

6. The newly consolidated Christian Spanish kingdom officially expelled Jews in 1492 and Spaniards of Arab origins by the early seventeenth century, in an effort to "cleanse" itself of any Semitic, non-Christian "stain." This obsession with *limpieza de sangre* ultimately proves academic because the Arabs and Jews had become inseparable components of the Spanish culture after many hundreds of years of living on the Peninsula. See Riobó's "The Medieval Inheritance of Manuel Puig and Severo Sarduy."
7. According to González Echevarría, "the Latin Americans were able to focus on the bizarre elements of baroque aesthetics and discover in them a source as well as a tradition. . . . Monstrosity appears in the baroque . . . as the image of the self . . . that includes the sense of belatedness inherent in Latin American literature" (*Celestina's Brood* 5).

8. Lezama does not believe that the origin of that which is American can be found in the indigenous cultures or only in simple forms from Renaissance Spain.
9. We will recall, and as I have been alluding to in the text, that in Calderón's *La vida es sueño* Rosaura is depicted as a monster primarily because she is simultaneously man and woman—masculine in her attire as the play opens, and in her thirst for revenge, which she plans to carry out herself. She describes herself as “monstruo de una especie y otra, entre galas de mujer armas de varón me adornan” (III, 2725–27).

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