

LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Before the Thaw: The Transnational Routes of Cuban Popular Culture

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Years before Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro announced a “thaw” in US-Cuba relations on December 17, 2014 (17D), Cubans were intensifying ties through the transnational circulation of popular culture. To understand Cuba and its diaspora in the twenty-first century, it is essential that we attend to the transnational networks in place before 17D that continue to shape quotidian life for people on and off the island. I begin in Miami, with the “afterlives” of a comic variety show called *Sabadazo*—popular on the island during the 1990s—to illustrate how what it means to be Cuban, politically and culturally, has shifted away from the exile generation that arrived in the 1960s and 1970s. I complement this analysis with attention to generational tensions within the diaspora and representations of race and sexuality. I then move to the island to examine *el paquete* (the package), a terabyte’s worth of mostly foreign media updated and distributed across the island weekly. I contend that the economic and cultural impact of *el paquete* cannot be fully understood without careful consideration of the role of the Cuban diaspora.

Años antes de que los presidentes Barack Obama y Raúl Castro anunciaran un “deshielo” en la relación entre Cuba y Estados Unidos el 17 de diciembre del 2014 (17D), los cubanos ya intensificaban los lazos por medio de la circulación transnacional de la cultura popular. Para poder comprender a Cuba y su diáspora en el siglo XXI, es esencial que prestemos atención a las redes transnacionales establecidos antes de 17D que continúan moldeando la vida cotidiana de las personas dentro y fuera de la isla. Yo comienzo en Miami con los “ultratumbas” de *Sabadazo*, un show de comedia y espectáculo muy popular en la isla en los años 90, para ilustrar cómo lo que significa ser cubano política y culturalmente, se ha desviado de la generación de exiliados que llegaron en los años sesenta y setentas. Yo complemento este análisis poniendo la atención a las tensiones dentro de la diáspora y las representaciones de raza y sexualidad. Prosigo hacia la isla para estudiar “el paquete”, un terabit de medios de comunicación extranjera actualizados y distribuidos semanalmente por toda la isla. Yo sostengo que el impacto económico y cultural del paquete no se puede comprender en su totalidad sin antes considerar cuidadosamente el papel que juega la diáspora cubana.

Before President Obama’s landmark trip to Cuba in March 2016, he successfully laid the groundwork for his warm reception from the Cuban people by reaching out to one of the most beloved figures on the island today—Pánfilo. But Pánfilo is not a government official, athlete, or musician—the usual ambassadors who come to mind when we think of Cuba’s visibility on the world stage. Instead, Pánfilo is a character played by actor and comedian Luis Silva and the protagonist of the most-watched television show in Cuba today, a sitcom called *Vivir del cuento*. The White House and the team at *Vivir del cuento* orchestrated what seemed like a live phone conversation between Obama and Pánfilo by having each separately record semiscripted parts and then editing them together. Although just a footnote in US coverage of Obama’s trip to the island, the sketch was one of the most talked about aspects of his visit among Cubans.¹

¹ Many Cubans were so surprised at the Obama-Pánfilo “conversation” that they did not believe it was real. When Obama visited in person, he recorded another sketch in which he played dominoes with the show’s cast. See Embajada de Estados Unidos en Cuba, “El Presidente Obama visita a Pánfilo en Cuba,” 2016, YouTube video, March 23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qasUhKHTq6A>.

The premise of the sketch was simple. Pánfilo, calling the White House for a weather report before the baseball game between the Cuban national team and the Tampa Bay Rays, is shocked when Obama answers the phone and recognizes who he is. Obama is pleasantly surprised to be talking to the “real Pánfilo” and reacts with a line straight out of Cuban vernacular speech: “¡No me digas! ¿Qué bolá?” (No way! What’s up?). The rest of the exchange is an exercise in Obama ingratiating himself with the Cuban people through a performance of familiarity with quotidian life on the island. He asks Pánfilo for a ride from the airport in an *almendrón* (prerevolutionary American car) and even delivers Cuba’s unofficial national phrase, “No es fácil” (It’s not easy), when Pánfilo tells him about the sorry state of his mattress.² The sketch was a shrewd bit of cultural diplomacy. Here was Obama, president of a nation long portrayed as the enemy, engaging in a comic exchange with a comedian in a country where the leadership has historically lacked a sense of humor. More significantly, the sketch aligned Obama with humor’s central role in narrating daily life on the island. As a result, Obama was able to harness humor and popular culture to connect with the Cuban people on a quotidian level—a feat difficult to achieve with remarks from behind a podium at an official press conference. The Cuban people enthusiastically received the video, which spread quickly throughout the island.

But the exchange between Obama and Pánfilo is not the first time ludic popular culture has been mobilized to draw the United States and Cuba closer in the postrevolutionary era. Years before Obama and Raúl Castro announced the “thaw” in relations between the two countries on December 17, 2014 (17D), Cubans on and off the island were intensifying ties with each other through the transnational circulation of popular culture. By using the term *transnational* here, I mean to address the “dense social fields” constructed “through the circulation of people, ideas, practices, goods, and information” between Cuba and the United States (Duany 2011, 20). The circulation of popular culture through the travels of artists and the more sophisticated and available technology on the island has played a significant role in facilitating shared cultural vocabularies, business opportunities, and “cross border collectivities and identity formations” that extend beyond the boundaries of the nation (Chuh 2003, 62).³ The transnational circulation of popular culture has assisted in making the growing rapprochement among Cubans on and off the island possible. To understand Cuba and its diaspora in the twenty-first century, then, it is essential that we attend to the transnational networks in place before 17D that have and continue to change both quotidian life for people on and off the island and, to an extent, what it means to be Cuban. I show in this article how the study of ludic popular culture is an especially productive means for understanding these shifts.

I begin in Miami with performers associated with the most popular television show in Cuba during the 1990s, *Sabadazo*. Through attention to the “afterlives” of this show in Miami, I examine how what it means to be Cuban, politically and culturally, has shifted away from the hard-line stances of the exile community that arrived in the 1960s and 1970s (García 1996; Torres 2001). Postrevolutionary popular culture, long seen in Cuban Miami as tainted by communism, is now pervasive and has helped build bridges between generations of the diaspora and back to the island. I then move the spatial focus to Havana to analyze one of the most important developments in the consumption of popular culture in Cuba in the twenty-first century—*el paquete semanal*. *El paquete* refers to the compilation and distribution of mostly foreign film, television, music, and more across the island to the tune of an updated terabyte every week. Analyzing *el paquete*’s material existence and the programming produced by Cubans in Miami available on it demonstrates how popular culture has functioned as a way to skirt government regulations in relation to censorship and economic activity. Through *el paquete*, Miami has become more “present” in Cuba than ever before.

The Afterlives of *Sabadazo*

In the mid-1990s, a comic variety show called *Sabadazo* was the most popular television show in Cuba. On the air from 1993 to 1996, *Sabadazo* featured the island’s hottest musical acts and a recurring cast of comic characters. But to say that the show was popular does not adequately capture the role it played in Cuban society during its run. When *Sabadazo* premiered in 1993, Cuba was in the midst of what Fidel Castro called “the Special Period in Times of Peace”—a euphemism that would come to represent the crushing scarcity produced by the loss of subsidies from the Soviet Union. Food shortages were routine and the rationing of fuel and electricity became commonplace. Cutbacks in television broadcasts and “organized

² Embajada de Estados Unidos en Cuba, “Pánfilo conversa con el Presidente Obama,” 2016, YouTube video, March 19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRC9NegSqE>.

³ I have chosen to focus on the transnational dynamic between the island and the United States because South Florida has the largest population outside of the island. With that said, more work is necessary on relationships between Cuba and diasporic communities outside of the United States, such as Spain. For more scholarship that privileges a transnational approach in relation to Cuba, see Duany (2011, 2013); Fernández (2005); López (2015); Mahler and Hansing (2005).

entertainment” were also instituted (Hernández-Reguant 2009, 4). For many, *Sabadazo* was a bright spot during an exceedingly difficult time.⁴ The show thrived by successfully employing *choteo*, that aspect of the Cuban ludic tradition that essayist Jorge Mañach ([1928] 1991, 85) described as an “escape valve for all kinds of anxieties ... an extremely effective decongestant.” *Choteo*, deployed through the use of Cuban idiomatic speech and a refusal to take people, situations, or institutions seriously, functioned as a means to frame the stress of the period through a ludic narrative lens. *Sabadazo* became yet another example of how artists have drawn on the *choteo* that marks quotidian Cuban life to narrate social realities in their work.⁵ The Cuban government could perhaps appreciate the need for an outlet in the worst years of the Special Period. In 1994, El Centro Promotor del Humor—a government agency charged with training comedians and funding projects—was established.

The comedy of *Sabadazo* could not diffuse growing tensions on the island. In the summer of 1994, discontent reached its height with boat hijackings and, most notably, a spontaneous antigovernment demonstration that saw thousands of Cubans take to the streets in a protest later called El Maleconazo (Pérez-Stable 2011, 30). In response, Fidel Castro once again used migration as a means to export dissent. He ordered the Cuban coast guard not to intercept citizens fleeing on homemade rafts and thus inaugurated the *balseo* (rafter) crisis. In 1994, more than thirty thousand Cubans took to the sea on rickety rafts bound for the United States. The Clinton administration and the Cuban government eventually negotiated an end to the crisis. The migration accords stipulated that the United States would accept a minimum of twenty thousand Cubans each year with legal visas. Those intercepted at sea would be sent back, whereas those who set foot on US territory would be allowed to stay under the “wet-foot, dry-foot policy” (Henken 2005).

Although much has been written about how the Special Period changed Cuba, much less has focused on how these years fundamentally changed the diaspora in the United States—especially Miami. For decades, the narrative of Cuban Miami has focused on Republican politics, anti-Castro demonstrations, and a valorization of Cuba’s prerevolutionary past with an “affective patina” of nostalgia seemingly built into the community’s institutions and visual culture (Price 2007, 92). But beginning with the rafter crisis, increased migration would fundamentally shift the demographics and culture of Cuban Miami. According to Jorge Duany (2014), “From 1994 to 2013, the greatest wave of migrants from Cuba arrived to the United States since the beginnings of the Cuban Revolution (563,740 Cubans legally admitted to the United States).” For the first time in the history of Cuban Miami, those who came of age under the Cuban Revolution, the audience for *Sabadazo*, outnumbered those born in prerevolutionary Cuba.

In general, these “New Cubans” differ a great deal from earlier exiles on the topic of Cuba (Eckstein 2009). Instead of advocating for travel restrictions and the embargo, recent arrivals are more likely to build and strengthen connections with the island. Although the Cuban diaspora across the generational spectrum has grown more open to engagement in the twenty-first century, the widest gap between supporters and detractors has predictably fallen across generational lines, pre- and post-1980 arrivals (Girard, Grenier, and Gladwin 2010; Grenier et al. 2007).⁶

As the twenty-first century has progressed, arrivals since the 1990s have been at the forefront of developing and maintaining transnational relationships with the island culturally and economically. Approximately four hundred thousand Cuban Americans visited the island in 2014, many of them arrivals since the 1990s with strong kinship networks (Burnett 2015). Remittances to Cuba have surged into the billions of dollars. Stories of parents sending their children to Cuba for the summer to spend time with family have become more common. People even conduct transactions in Miami for goods and services delivered in Cuba: from houses and motorcycles for sale to spa treatments. Stores sell items in high demand in Cuba at bargain-bin prices such as mosquito nets, school uniforms, and even minutes for the cellphones of families and friends on the island.

These changes did not occur overnight. The afterlives of *Sabadazo* in twenty-first-century Miami provide a means for understanding not only this intensifying transnationalism but also the increasing acceptance of a postrevolutionary popular culture that becomes more influential in South Florida with each passing year.

⁴ My understanding of the popularity of *Sabadazo* is drawn from conversations with writers and comedians active in 1990s Cuba, such as Pablo Garí, Angel García, Baudilio Espinosa, Zulema Cruz, and Ramón Fernández-Larrea. Anecdotally, Cubans I have talked to remember the show fondly. In addition, performers from *Sabadazo* have been able to build careers on characters that debuted on the show.

⁵ Artists like Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Ena Lucía Portela, Mirta Yáñez, and Reinaldo Arenas, to name just a few, have all used *choteo* in their work. Intellectuals since the founding of the republic have studied *choteo* as a means for thinking about the Cuban national character (Duany 2000; Hidalgo 2012; García Borrero 2004).

⁶ The best source for tracking shifting opinions in South Florida’s Cuban American community is Florida International University’s Cuba Poll, conducted nine times from 1993 to 2016. For more information on the poll, see the website of the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs, at <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/>.

By examining the impacts and legacies of *Sabadazo*, I also move away from the historical privileging of Cuban music as the primary border crosser. Music has been crucial for imagining a Cuba outside the boundaries of the nation (Gámez Torres 2014; Vazquez 2013), but humor has also played a critical, understudied role in strengthening transnational ties through its cross-generational appeal. Since Cubans started arriving in South Florida after the Cuban Revolution, ludic cultural production in the form of satirical tabloid newspapers, a vibrant theater culture, radio, and stand-up comedy has functioned as a means to narrate both the past and the present of Miami and Cuba (Laguna 2017). In twenty-first-century Cuban Miami, comedians are narrating a community increasingly connected to the island culturally and economically.

In December 2007, Carlos Otero, the host of *Sabadazo*, crossed the Canadian border into the United States. After a career that spanned twenty-eight years as one of the most popular personalities on Cuban television, Otero was on his way to Miami. Upon arrival, he was greeted by a reporter from América Tevé, a local channel with an audience composed largely of Cubans living in South Florida. Introduced by the reporter as “the best entertainer in Cuba,” Otero wasted no time using the moment to connect with the audience watching at home: “Good evening, Miami. I’m here. Thank God, I’m here.”⁷

Otero’s arrival followed a familiar script used by high-profile artists who have decided to settle in the United States. While making the rounds of the Miami media, he frequently mentioned his children and their futures as reasons for leaving. Tapping the narrative of immigrant bootstraps, Otero declared he was ready to work in any capacity, even carrying cables in a television studio. He condemned the Cuban government, especially in relation to the lack of investment in the media. Finally, in perhaps the most critical move in his conversion to diasporic subject, Otero assured Cuban Miami that he was never “a party liner” (Pérez 2008).

Thoroughly vetted in the arena of public opinion, Otero was cleared not to rig lights in a studio but to perform in front of the cameras. Less than two months after arriving, he became host of his own show on América Tevé called *Pellízcame que estoy soñando* (*Pinch Me, I’m Dreaming*). Like *Sabadazo*, early episodes of the show featured sketches and musical performances. But the show went beyond similarities in format by frequently employing characters, gags, and even the set design of the Cuban *Sabadazo* of the 1990s: the audience huddled around the performers, with frequent shots of their smiling faces, and the description of the set as *la azotea* (the roof) was exactly like the *Sabadazo* of old, complete with hanging laundry lines. Alongside Otero appeared Conrado Cogle, an Afro-Cuban cast member from *Sabadazo*, reprising the role of Boncó Quiñongo that made him famous.

The duo was not shy about deploying nostalgia for *Sabadazo* as a means to engage its audience. On one episode, Otero and Cogle talk sentimentally about the good times in Cuba despite all the difficulties people faced. Otero explains that “those who lived that era of *Sabadazo* are enjoying this show immensely from their homes.” Cogle complements this by explaining that the show holds something for all Cubans: “And the people that came [to the United States] in the 1980s and 1960s, everyone, is receiving an injection of *cubanía*, also remembering, that’s who we are!”⁸

This was certainly not the first time postrevolutionary popular cultural figures were featured prominently on Miami television.⁹ But for a generation of Cubans who endured the difficulties of the Special Period and migration—both physical and emotional—this “new” version of *Sabadazo* was a means to reconnect with the island they left behind through a comic narrative that explicitly validated their Cuban identity through nostalgia. Nostalgia is certainly not new among Cubans in the United States; it is a dominant affective mode for representing Cubanness in both art and scholarly writings (Kandiyoti 2006; Ortiz 2007). But the dominant nostalgia narrative in Miami has focused on prerevolutionary Cuba as the ideal. Postrevolutionary popular culture was more difficult to celebrate, seen as tainted by communism. With this restaging of *Sabadazo* in 2008, postrevolutionary popular culture—the Cuba that newer arrivals lived and knew—became available as a means for nostalgic reconnection in mainstream media that specifically targeted Cuban Americans.

Otero’s remarks about connecting with a Miami audience familiar with *Sabadazo* needed to be qualified by Cogle to build the kind of big, inclusive Cuban tent that attracts an audience across generational cohorts and generates advertisement revenue. Cogle declared that the restaging of *Sabadazo* would function as an “injection of *cubanía*,” of a Cuban cultural identity, for previous waves of Cuban migration unfamiliar with the show. By making a cultural argument, Cogle attempted to work around how cultural production before and after the Cuban Revolution has been politicized in Miami historically. The argument that *Sabadazo* and

⁷ “Carlos Otero en Miami 1era parte,” 2007, YouTube video, 4:16, posted by “Rocker081,” December 11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMa0GC3zcho>.

⁸ “Sabadazo Miami 11 Parte 3,” YouTube video of *Pellízcame que estoy soñando*, posted by “fglt,” August 3, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gqd2e3u-vCA>.

⁹ A popular example is the Cuban comedian Alexis Valdés and his show *Seguro que yes*, which began in 2005. Valdés was extremely popular as an entertainer in Cuba before leaving the island for Spain and eventually Miami.

its comedy is deeply Cuban and thus worthy of celebration is an indirect way of approaching tensions and differences between generations of Cubans in Miami (Eckstein 2009, 36; Pedraza 2007). Cubans who left shortly after Fulgencio Batista's fall in 1959 questioned the anti-Castro credentials of those who arrived during the Freedom Flights of the 1960s and 1970s. This pattern has persisted, with more recent arrivals since the 1990s called *balseros* regardless of whether they came on an improvised raft. Like the pejorative moniker of *marielito* reserved for arrivals during the 1980 Mariel boatlift, *balsero* is meant to communicate a perceived unwillingness to assimilate, an inability to "shake off" a communist upbringing. These so-called *balseros* often represent a Cuban culture alien to earlier arrivals and somehow "less" Cuban in a Miami where an idealized narrative of the island before the revolution has long been a cornerstone of exile culture and politics. With this restaging, Cogle and Otero assert the *cubanía* of *Sabadazo*, of those Cubans watching at home in Miami with more recent and extensive ties to the island, and the potential of Cuban humor as a bridge builder between generations of the diaspora.

Cogle and Otero made an argument for the broad relevance of their fresh "injection of *cubanía*" by leaning heavily on the performative repertoire of Cuban comedy. Elements like gesticulation, the use of double entendre, the pronunciation of particular words, and the general comic irreverence of Cuban *choteo*—what Enrico Mario Santí (2005, 22) has called "perhaps our *only* national sport"—can all make a performance legible as Cuban. But this legibility goes beyond the waving of hands and wordplay. Cogle and Otero also joked about subjects that have long resonated in Cuban comic performance, especially along the lines of race and sexuality. Although the Afro-Cuban Cogle does not wear blackface to play Boncó, his character draws heavily from Cuba's blackface minstrelsy tradition, *teatro bufo* (Lane 2005).¹⁰ The mischievous Boncó is mocked for his poor command of Spanish and consistently hypersexualized as he tries to outwit other characters. In a telling example from the same episode, a white Cuban character named Chano tells a story about how he was robbed by a man with "tremenda bemba" (huge lips) and *bastante oscuro* (very dark).¹¹ The dangerous black subject, long part of the Cuban comic and broader social imagination, reappears in a way that would be recognizable across generations of Cubans (de la Fuente 2001). The cast immediately looks to the Afro-Cuban Boncó and "punishes" him for being in league with the black attacker who mugged Chano by having him run around Little Havana proclaiming his love for Marytrini—a character played by Afro-Cuban Alexis Fernández in drag.¹² At this climactic moment, the violation of norms related to gender and sexuality is the final punch line and functions as yet another recognizable thread in Cuban comedy.

In the sketch, the palatability of postrevolutionary popular culture represented in the staging of *Sabadazo* could be improved across the generational spectrum by deploying recognizable comic techniques and dependable themes—racist and homophobic comedy. Although references and some vocabulary have changed, many performative aspects and topics taken up in Cuban comedy remain identifiable whether one left the island in 1968 or in 2008. Because of this, ludic popular culture and its evocation of "broadly shared feelings" (Jenkins 2006, 4) have proved more successful in reaching Cubans across generational cohorts in a way that more celebrated and discussed cultural forms like music have not. A joke and its performance can be entertaining across age groups and generations in a way that the latest Cuban reggaeton hit from Havana cannot be—especially when age is considered a factor.¹³ In this way, ludic popular culture becomes a way to transcend the politics of division among generations of Cubans in Miami, but perhaps most pressing, it creates the possibility of a bigger audience. Older Cubans watching television at home are an important demographic for local television shows so calibrating performances that are legible as Cuban is not only an artistic choice but also an economic one.

In addition to Otero and Cogle, several other artists from Cuba settled in Miami during the 2000s. As were the stars of *Sabadazo*, they were largely welcomed in the same way, with their decisions to stay framed as a condemnation of the Castro government consistent with hard-line political positions that have dominated Miami for decades. But a challenge to this narrative emerged in 2009, when Obama reopened the door to cultural exchange with Cuba. Instead of choosing to settle in Miami, artists began to visit South Florida for performances and then return to Cuba. Such cultural exchanges were not new. Under the Clinton

¹⁰ It would be impossible to fully unpack the dynamics of racial representation in the popular culture of Cuban Miami in the space of this article. For readings of race across Cuban America culture in Miami, see Hernández-Reguant and Arroyo (2015); Laguna (2017); López (2012). For scholarship on *teatro bufo*, see Lane (2005).

¹¹ "Sabadazo Miami (8) Parte 6," YouTube video of *Pellízcame que estoy soñando*, posted by "fglt," July 20, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieEqWfTo7nc>.

¹² For a reading of Marytrini's drag performances in Miami, see Peña (2013).

¹³ Outside of television, humorists target more specific segments of the Cuban diaspora for shows at local clubs and auditoriums. The humor here is often more relevant to the lives of recent arrivals from Cuba, with stories that speak to quotidian life in revolutionary Cuba with greater specificity.

administration in the 1990s, island-based musical acts performed all over the United States but were often cautious in Miami, where they were often perceived as propaganda agents for the Castro government. Many exiles reasoned that if these artists were allowed to travel and chose to return, then they must be supporters of the Cuban government. Performers did play in Miami during the 1990s but did not get much in the way of mainstream exposure in television and the media (Navarro 1999). Performances were often low-key, so as not to attract protestors or even bomb threats. Things came to a head in 1999, when Los Van Van, arguably the most popular international band from Cuba at that time, played the Miami Arena. Protestors numbered well more than three thousand, denouncing the group with chants, signs, and violence in the form of thrown bottles, rocks, and food (García, Levin, and Whoriskey 1999). Shortly thereafter, cultural exchanges were curbed considerably under President George W. Bush.

The response to renewed cultural exchange with Cuba under Obama would look very different in Miami just ten years after the raucous protests against Los Van Van in 1999. Musicians and comedians visiting from the island had become part of the Cuban cultural mainstream in South Florida.¹⁴ There was little in the way of public outcry against what one journalist called an “avalanche” of Cuban artists (Cancio Isla 2009). Talk-radio programs, historically where the most hard-line approaches have been articulated, attacked the new wave of visiting artists, but even radio was mellowing in the 2000s (Alvarado 2012; Laguna 2014). Artists from Cuba have continued to arrive and perform throughout the 2010s for audiences in Miami who are plugged in to the contemporary popular culture scene on the island. Heightened exchange resulting from increased travel, more recent waves of migration to Miami that retain a strong interest in cultural life on the island, and laws in place to facilitate artistic exchanges have assisted in the production of transnational “simultaneity” whereby Cubans in the diaspora continue to engage with cultural and social life on the island (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Reggaeton artists like Gente de Zona and Jacob Forever draw large crowds in Havana and Miami, often mentioning both places in their lyrics. Comedians like the aforementioned Pánfilo appear on local television and sell out performances at clubs in South Florida. Those in the diaspora can also practice this transnational cultural “simultaneity” online, where many Cuban television programs are available for free.

Visits from Cuban artists cannot simply be explained by demographic shifts in Miami. In the early years of the Obama presidency, restrictions on travel to Cuba were relaxed substantially. Cuba has also made travel simpler for its people in the twenty-first century. In 2013, the government suspended the need for the much-maligned *tarjeta blanca* (exit visa). Under this reform, Cubans are also allowed to stay outside of the country longer while retaining their rights as Cubans. But money is the most powerful motivating factor for understanding increased engagement with artists from the island. The anti-Castro politics that made visiting artists to Miami a controversial, if not dangerous, proposition have given way to the realities of the market. Entertainment companies in Miami fund and contract visiting artists from the island, promote their shows on local television, and secure performance venues. This is in keeping with the interests of newer arrivals, who want to be engaged with the island’s cultural production. But it is perhaps ironic that older generations of Cubans who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s, long suspicious and critical of culture produced under the revolution, are now exposed to more of it because of moneymaking opportunities available in South Florida. US-style capitalism opened the door to postrevolutionary popular culture.

Where does this leave visiting artists? Under the rules of cultural exchange and the US embargo against Cuba, visiting artists cannot charge for their performances. The money they make should be limited to a per-diem allowance in keeping with US law. But this is not being enforced. Visiting artists often make more than the per diem (Polo and Tamayo 2010) and return to Cuba with hard currency that goes a great deal further on the island than it would in the United States. By returning, comedians preserve their novelty in Miami but—perhaps most important for the consideration of the transnational circulation of popular culture—bring stories of their experiences in Miami back to Cuba, where they inform their stand-up routines. This connection between capital and culture is not without problems. Companies in Miami, factoring in profit, often invite single performers instead of larger theater companies in order to reduce overhead. This has limited the range of cultural production arriving from Cuba and opportunities for performers on the island.

In December 2014, the afterlife of *Sabadazo* reached its spectacular height at the Miami-Dade County Auditorium. For the first time outside of Cuba, the entire central cast came together for a reunion show called *Sabadazo USA*. One of the original writers for *Sabadazo* who now lives in Miami, Pablo “El Pible” Garí, even collaborated to write the script for the reunion show. I was in attendance and could feel the anxious energy in the crowd as they waited for each character to make an entrance. People yelled out punch lines

¹⁴ Cultural exchange has not been limited to music and comedy. Artists like Leonardo Padura, Manuel Mendive, Leonardo Padura, Raquel Carrió, and Wendy Guerra visited more frequently during the Obama administration.

and catchphrases before they were delivered reveling in the nostalgia prompted by old routines that made the show such a hit during the difficulties of Special Period Cuba. In addition to striking nostalgic notes, there were plenty of jabs at life in Cuba today and a number of bits structured around the incongruity the characters experienced in their movement from the lack of Havana to the excess of Miami.¹⁵ But the cast members based in Cuba also performed a fluency with life in Miami representative of heightened connections and shared cultural vocabularies. Geonel Martín, in character as Gustavito, made jokes about watching Carlos Otero performances on Miami television on the island via *el paquete*. He also joked about Miami not “really” being part of the United States because of the high concentration of Cubans—a common quip in South Florida. Together, the physical presence of the cast and the routines they performed captured transnational continuities between Miami and Cuba through a combination of island popular culture from the 1990s and perspectives on contemporary life.

Not everything went smoothly that night. Because most of the cast was visiting from Cuba, collaborating to work on the script was no easy task. Communication between the United States and Cuba is still complicated and expensive. The comic timing of some sketches was off, and there were routines that were too long—a result of not having sufficient time to rehearse. The show was initially slated to happen in November but had to be delayed when the island-based cast members ran into trouble with the visa process. In this way, the show was emblematic of the starts and stops, the unevenness, that characterizes twenty-first-century US-Cuba relations. Nevertheless, the audience received the staging of *Sabadazo USA* with a great deal of enthusiasm, indicative of an increased desire to engage with Cuba’s postrevolutionary past and present—a desire that has generated conflict throughout most of the history of Cuban Miami.

Four days after *Sabadazo USA*, Barack Obama and Raúl Castro announced that diplomatic relations would be reestablished between the two countries. Although there were certainly protests in Miami, they did not come close to the kind of demonstrations seen during the Elián González affair or when Los Van Van visited in 1999. The afterlives of *Sabadazo* help explain why. In addition to demographic shifts and changing opinions among older Cubans, the popularity and presence of postrevolutionary popular culture was providing, as Tara McPherson (2003, 125) explains, “emotional ‘paradigm scenarios,’ inculcating particular ways of feeling, emotive modes that have political and social consequences.” The transnational circulation of popular culture, especially in the context of an inviting and familiar comedic frame, helped lay the foundation for this reception—the “particular ways of feeling”—17D.

El paquete

When I visited Havana in October 2014, my preteen cousin Frank got to work catching me up on the hottest pop songs. But it was not Gente de Zona or some other popular Cuban group he was dancing to. Instead, he chose to perform his best rendition of the 2014 hit “Wiggle” by American pop star Jason Derulo. He was shocked to learn that I had never heard the song and quickly escorted me to the television, where he plugged in his USB thumb drive and introduced me to his favorite US pop-music videos in high-definition quality. Frank did not have some secret, high-speed internet connection or one of the clandestine satellite connections on rooftops in Havana. His access to the US popular culture industry was made possible by *el paquete semanal* (the weekly package) and—I argue—the Cuban diaspora.

El paquete is the term used to refer to the bundling of mostly foreign popular culture production: the latest blockbuster films, serialized television, YouTube videos, music, sports contests, gossip magazines, educational programming, and soap operas from all over the world, to name a few categories. Much of the international content is from the United States, but material produced in Cuba is also featured in the form of local music, movies, classified ads, magazines, and media related to the nightlife scene. Assembled through a network of people who download content via high-speed internet connections or record satellite television on the island, *el paquete* features a terabyte of new content weekly. Kiosks throughout Havana sell the entire terabyte for as low as 2 CUCs and also offer specific programs like full seasons of *Game of Thrones* on copied DVDs for a cheaper price. Most Cubans do not download the entire terabyte—resellers are often the only customers for the entire weekly package. It would be impossible to consume all the media it contains in time for the next update, let alone have the necessary disk space. Instead, people form their own paquetes with the help of local vendors, family, and friends who swap content with one another (Pertierra 2012). Because of the massive amount of updated content weekly, there is an ephemeral quality to *el paquete*, as people necessarily delete and make space for new content all the time.

¹⁵ I discuss here the nostalgia among Cubans for life during the Special Period, but there was a broader nostalgia for Cuba playing out globally in the context of music and photography during the 1990s (see Quiroga 2005).

Years before 2008, when *el paquete* burst onto the scene, books, cassettes, CDs, Betamax videos, and VHS tapes circulated on the black market (Pertierra 2009). There are two major differences in the case of *el paquete* as compared to previous forms of media circulation. First, selling and distributing it is in fact legal under Cuban law, although doing so has been criticized for the content and threat to revolutionary values. Second, the scale of its circulation, made easier in the era of small, high-capacity drives, is much greater than any previously pirated materials. It is difficult to capture with precision just how far and wide *el paquete* circulates in Cuba. The closest approximation to a statistical portrait comes from journalist Fernando Ragsberg and his team at *OnCuba* magazine. In their 2014 investigatory series, they estimated that thirty thousand Cubans are involved in the creation, curation, and distribution of *el paquete* and that it reaches more than three million people. This, they argue, generates over 1.2 million CUC weekly (Ortiz 2014).

This is a flawed statistical portrait, but one need only look and listen to appreciate the ubiquity of *el paquete* in Havana. Businesses selling it dot the city, especially on heavily trafficked streets. Government officials have even addressed the topic with some ambivalence.¹⁶ Intellectuals have debated it on televised roundtables, in public forums, and in publications (Recio 2014; Iglesias et al. 2012), with Victor Fowler calling it “if not the most important cultural phenomenon in this country in the last twenty-five years, one of them” (Recio 2014). The subject has even attracted the satirical eye of previously mentioned sitcom *Vivir del cuento*, with the show featuring an episode on *el paquete*—an episode censored by the Cuban government. The premise of the episode is that Pánfilo and his neighbor Facundo hear about *paquetes* circulating around the neighborhood. They misunderstand and believe that the *paquetes* are part of an illegal food-trafficking scheme. Although the episode never appeared on national television, it circulated widely on *el paquete*. It is difficult to know exactly why it was prohibited from the air, but it is likely that censors bristled at how the show indirectly made fun of *Mi Mochila* (My Backpack)—an initiative by the government to get young people to download Cuban media that has been far less successful than *el paquete* (Rodríguez 2015).

The failures of *Mi Mochila* would have been a soft spot. Despite having a long-celebrated film and media industry (Chanan 2004), it is difficult for the resource-starved Cuban Institute of Radio and Television to compete with a new terabyte of content weekly. In addition to the pleasures that more varied media content offers, this increase in media choices can also produce more discontent among the many who are already critical of the lack of entertainment options and internet access on the island. As Brian Larkin (2004, 305) explains in relation to piracy in the Nigerian context, “the poor material infrastructure of Nigeria ensures that as the speed of Nigerian life increases, so too does the gap between *actual* and *potential* acceleration ... Thus, even as life speeds up, the experience of technological marginalization intensifies, and the gap between how fast society is moving and how it could move becomes a site of considerable political tension.” For all the excitement and popularity around *el paquete*, it also serves as a foil implicitly pointing to the failures of Cuban government infrastructure to provide twenty-first-century technology to its citizens. The addition of slow Wi-Fi hotspots in major Cuban cities and 3G cellular networks at expensive rates will do little to address the reality of that tension *el paquete* gestures to weekly.

Despite this tension, *el paquete* provides a welcome means to connect with a world outside Cuba, significantly less filtered than what is presented on state-run media. I say this not to reproduce tropes of an isolated Cuba cut off from the rest of the world—a shorthand that usually arises from an imperial narrative of the United States as center of the universe. But it is fair to say that Cuba’s relationship to what Lawrence Liang (2009, 24) has called “technological time” has been defined by waiting, a certain belatedness. “Piracy, Liang argues, has historically been a way to close those gaps created by the uneven and unequal circulation of culture” (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 265). Serialized shows and sports contests are offered as they appear on a weekly basis instead of if and when the Cuban government decides to play them on television years later and censored. Magazines and screenshots from websites allow consumers to keep up with their own interests over time. It is through this piracy that Cubans have been able to engage with the “accelerated circuit of global media flows” (Larkin 2004, 297).

In addition to its cultural influence on the island, it is critical to examine *el paquete* in the context of economic reforms introduced under Raúl Castro (Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López 2013). In 2010, the Cuban government announced plans to reduce state jobs. To address these losses, a list of approved jobs that one could hold as a *cuentapropista* (self-employed worker) was released. Of the 178 occupations listed, one made the sale of audiovisual material legal (Martínez Hernández 2010).¹⁷ The sale of this material is generating money for the people compiling and selling it, but this simple transaction does not tell the

¹⁶ For remarks from Minister of Culture Abel Prieto on *el paquete*, see Aznarez (2015).

¹⁷ The list of legal occupations has grown to 201, but in the summer of 2017, the Cuban government suspended the issuance of new licenses for several lucrative private-sector job categories.

whole story. In my copy of *el paquete* from October 2014, advertisements from local businesses such as sleek commercials for smartphone apps, restaurants like the pirate-themed *La Perla Negra*, photography studios, cell phone repair, and classifieds sites like *Revolico* were scattered among different folders. *El paquete*, then, is another example of how “piracy lays the groundwork for new business models for circulating media content” (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 269). In fact, I was able to buy the external hard drive that I used to copy *el paquete* by browsing the classifieds on my cousin’s computer. So while advertising is still markedly absent from the visual landscape of Havana, consumers of *el paquete* can see commercials for Cuban businesses on their computer and television screens at home. *El paquete* shows how Cubans are taking advantage of recent reforms to promote new kinds of economic growth while simultaneously pushing back against long-standing prohibitions in Cuban society.¹⁸

Another critical policy change that helped make *el paquete* possible came in 2008, when it became legal for Cubans to buy and own home computers, DVD players, and cell phones. With this change, the hardware necessary to produce, circulate, and consume *el paquete* became legal. But this policy shift, much like the 2010 pronouncement meant to encourage *cuentapropismo*, was just that—policy. The Cuban government is not doing much to help small businesses; nor is it making computers and electronics affordable. So although these changes are crucial, they do not tell the full story about the rise of *el paquete*. To understand *el paquete* fully, we must look to the diaspora.

Like the changes in Miami affected through heightened exchange between the island and the diaspora, shifts in Cuban and economic culture must be framed transnationally. *El paquete* as we know it today would be impossible to imagine without the diaspora. Remittances to Cuba have grown significantly in the twenty-first century, providing money to support the production and consumption of *el paquete*, to the tune of US\$3 billion in 2015 (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2016). The arrival of computer hardware from abroad has had an even greater impact. Even with cash, products can be hard to find at state-run stores and are more expensive. Computers old and new, high-capacity disks, and cell phones arrive either through packages or delivery by hand as more and more Cubans visit the island from abroad. The infrastructure of *el paquete* cannot be boiled down to the networks of downloaders, kiosks, and couriers who spread it across the country. Cubans on the island have developed ingenious systems for the creation and dissemination of *el paquete* in response to government reforms, but *el paquete*’s physical existence is unimaginable without Miami and the global Cuban diaspora more broadly.

El paquete’s link to the diaspora goes well beyond economics and hardware. It is also a source for what Juan Flores (2009, 4) has called “cultural remittances,” “the ensemble of ideas, values, and expressive forms introduced into societies as they return ‘home,’ sometimes for the first time, for temporary visits, or permanent resettlement, and as transmitted through the increasingly pervasive means of telecommunications.” In 2014 versions of *el paquete*, cultural remittances were most visible in comic television variety shows produced in South Florida geared toward local Cuban audiences, like *El arañazo*, *El show de Alexis Valdés*, and *TN3*. Episodes of these shows allowed for speech critical of the government to filter in and captured how ludic popular culture can foster, reflect, and stage rapprochement between Cubans on and off the island.¹⁹

On my October 2014 copy of *el paquete*, there is a typical episode of *TN3*, a show in Miami cohosted by Carlos Otero that features plenty of comedy lampooning life in South Florida and Cuba.²⁰ The show addressed the island’s nightly news broadcast and its longtime anchor Rafael Serrano, complete with his iconic mustache. The sincerity and propagandistic tenor of the news in Cuba is ripe for parody. On the sketch in question, the sending of Cuban doctors to West Africa to help contain the Ebola outbreak was the comic point of departure. A reporter interviews a Cuban doctor “on the ground” in Africa and asks if he misses the island. The doctor responds: “Why would I miss Cuba? Do you know how much a pound of beef costs here? One dollar!” When the reporter tells him he won’t be able to return if he’s infected, the doctor yells, “Who told you I want to go back? ... Serrano, say this on the news: Here [in West Africa] there is no fear. *Abajo*,

¹⁸ These prohibitions extend beyond advertisements. The best-represented Cuban cultural production featured on *el paquete* is reggaeton, a music genre that has been banned from Cuban television and radio for its “vulgarity” but is extremely popular among young people on the island (de la Hoz 2012).

¹⁹ Not all programming from Cuban Miami makes it onto *el paquete*. Political talk shows from Miami are often not included. Those involved with putting *el paquete* together weekly are conscious of the need to self-censor (Ravsberg 2014). In 2016, reports began to surface that these comedy shows were being left off of it as a result of government pressure (Fernández Cuenca 2016). More research is necessary on how *el paquete*’s offerings have changed over time, especially since 17D.

²⁰ This is not the first time Cuban humor from Miami has appeared on the island. For decades, the stand-up albums of the Cuban exile comedian Guillermo Álvarez Guedes have circulated clandestinely on the island. Despite never returning, Álvarez Guedes’s comedy is well known, and popular comedians on the island today cite him as a vital influence (Laguna 2010, 2017).

Fidel! (Down with Fidel!). Serrano, back in the studio, is horrified by this outburst and explains to his viewers that the doctor's behavior can be explained only by his being infected by Ebola.

This parody is consistent with how popular culture in Miami has always tried to provide a counternarrative to Cuban government discourse through humor. This is most obvious when Serrano attributes the doctor's exclamation "*Abajo, Fidel*" to the Ebola virus—a critique of the Cuban government's hostile posture toward dissent. But there are also details about this sketch that point to how ludic popular culture and *el paquete* are contributing to what Ana López (1995) calls a "Greater Cuba," one "that exceeds national boundaries and that includes the many individuals and communities outside the national territory that identify as Cuban and contribute to the production of a 'Cuban' cultural discourse." The doctor in the sketch is José Coll Herrera, founder of a comedy group called *Punto y Coma* on the island in the 1990s. Now living in Miami, Coll Herrera, like the doctor, will not return to live in Cuba, but through the distribution of *el paquete*, he reappears in a sketch reminiscent of the social satire of *Punto y Coma* two decades ago.²¹ When *el paquete* is updated with the most recent content from Cuban Miami, those on the island can see this Greater Cuba enacted on shows that feature not only artists who have left permanently like Coll Herrera, Carlos Otero, Zulema Cruz and Alexis Valdés but also those who now visit Miami to perform and return to Cuba like the aforementioned members of the *Sabadazo* cast.

To be sure, the political sentiments and humor performed by Coll Herrera and others on these shows are not new in quotidian Cuban life. But consuming this parody and others can produce a kind of rhetorical movement for the audience in Cuba. As Jonathan Gray (2006, 105) explains, laughter is a way to "acknowledge having moved with the joke to other territory, and having been treated to an alternative view of that territory." The performance of Coll Herrera and these sketches more broadly can "move" the audience to that "other" territory, to engage with content that is unmistakably Cuban but also outside the boundaries of the nation, the view from Miami. This, too, is a form of transnationalism, in its expansion of one's "transnational social field," the participation in networks or reception of ideas that "connect them to others in a nation-state, across the borders of a nation-state, or globally, without ever having migrated" (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, 1010).

On an episode of late-night comedy program *El show de Alexis Valdés* featured on *el paquete* in 2014, I watched four musicians—Jon Secada, Giraldo Piloto, and the Cuban reggaeton duo Chakal y Yakarta—serve as vivid examples of the past, present, and future of Greater Cuba. Born in Cuba and raised in Hialeah, Florida, from a young age, Jon Secada is celebrated for his international success as a singer and songwriter; he has won two Grammys and has sold more than twenty million albums worldwide. But during the interview, Valdés is more interested in discussing the fact that Secada is the nephew of one of his favorite singers, Moraima Secada, who remained in Cuba after the revolution. Secada identifies as "a Cuban kid" during the conversation, but it is in his declaration that he carries his aunt Moraima's "passion" for music "in his blood" that he makes a claim on the role of Cuba in his trajectory as an artist.

Secada's interview becomes a lesson in Cuban music's movement across borders, an old story—but it becomes something else entirely when Valdés welcomes his next guest, Giraldo Piloto, leader of one of Cuba's most well-known *timba* bands, Klimax, and visiting Miami for the first time. Valdés quickly alerts his audience to the "coincidence" of having these two on stage together. Before the show, Piloto and Secada realized that they were united by music. Giraldo Piloto's father, also named Giraldo Piloto, was half of a songwriting duo named Piloto y Vero. This group wrote a song called "*Perdóname conciencia*" that was made popular in part by Moraima Secada's rendition of it in Cuba. Jon Secada remembers little of his aunt having left Cuba at such a young age, but he recorded a version of the song that did so much for her career for his 1992 Grammy-winning album *Otro día más sin verte*.

Piloto and Secada's presence on the show at the same time represents a reality at odds with the rhetoric of division that has historically come out of both the exile community and the island. Emphasizing political differences between Cubans on and off the island with charged language has been a strategy employed by both sides. Piloto and Secada's appearance demonstrates that Cuban popular culture has always been deeply transnational in the postrevolutionary period. Today, this reality is becoming clearer, mundane even, within a transnational popular culture landscape that increasingly relies on relationships across the Florida Straits. Popular culture in the twenty-first century has had the effect of revealing these links and intensifying them, staging the rapprochement between Cubans. Miami prime-time comedy shows have been vital sites for

²¹ Artists like Alexis Valdés have commented on how gratified they are that audiences in Cuba are tuning in to their work in Miami (Méndez 2013). Dr. Ana María Polo of *Caso cerrado* and the comedic duo Los Pichy Boys (Maikel Rodríguez and Alejandro González) both expressed satisfaction over their material circulating in Cuba during interviews with me in 2014.

staging this reality, as they promise their audience a lightness, laughter, and entertainment, around issues that rarely get discussed in that way—namely the relationship between the diaspora and the island.

To conclude the show, Chakal y Yakarta took the stage and sat next to Piloto and Secada. As representatives of contemporary music and fashion trends, they exemplify a new generation of entertainers who draw crowds in both Cuba and South Florida. Unlike the buried relationship between Secada and Piloto's musical heritages, this duo represents a future in which Cuban artists depend on visibility on the island and in the diaspora. As the interview concluded with easy laughs, conversation, and comedy sketches, the show's house band played a song to segue into commercial. Fittingly, they covered "El negro está cocinando" by Los Van Van—a song Los Van Van themselves played in 1999 when thousands of Cubans came out to protest their concert at the Miami Arena. Fifteen years later, the choice of song was largely forgettable for audiences in both Cuba and Miami as the island and diaspora have drawn closer culturally and economically through possibilities opened by government policies on both sides and, perhaps most vividly, in quotidian life, through the transnational routes of Cuban popular culture.

On June 16, 2017, President Donald Trump, flanked by congressional Cuban American hard-liners Mario Díaz-Balart and Marco Rubio, returned to the combative, Cold War rhetoric that has historically characterized United States foreign policy toward Cuba in the post-1959 era. But while Trump has, without a doubt, reintroduced a chill back into US-Cuba relations, the "thaw" between Cubans is irreversible.²² This reality, documented here through readings of the transnational circulation of ludic popular culture, will continue to shape the quotidian lives of Cubans on and off the island, and ultimately, what it means to be Cuban in the twenty-first century, regardless of the policies put into play in Washington or Havana. And as it always has, Cuban *choteo* will be employed to try and make sense of it all, or, at the very least, to provide a much-needed laugh.

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²² As I edit this article for publication in January 2019, it seems that much of the progress made under the Obama administration, namely the opening of embassies, maintenance of Cuban American family travel and remittances, and the removal of Cuba from the list of countries that sponsor terrorism, will remain. With that said, it is more difficult for Cubans on the island to obtain a visa from the US embassy and travel north because of the lack of staff to process requests. The State Department ordered most embassy staff to leave in 2017 in response to a number of unexplained cases of illness experienced by US diplomats on the island. The combative tone struck by the Trump administration will likely make future progress during his term difficult.

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