On (Our) American Ground

Caribbean-Latino-Diasporic Cultural Production and the Postnational “Guantanamera”

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[At] Guantánamo Bay, Cuba . . . contemporary empire building in the Middle East meets the history of imperialism in the Americas, pointing to an ominous transnational future. If homeland names a place that doesn’t exist on a map, Guantánamo is a place for which there are no adequate names. Where is Guantánamo? In America, yes; in the United States, yes and no; in Cuba, well, sort of.

—Amy Kaplan, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today”

Guantánamo manifests the materialistic, and militaristic, US presence in the “black Atlantic”: it is attained and reinforced through imperialistic transatlantic routes, yet these routes become historically rooted or reterritorialized. Guantánamo concretizes a militaristic presence that is forever being reinforced or overdetermined; the military site Guantánamo became sedimentalized (and continues to be sedimentalized) through coercive forms of power—soldiers, weaponry, prisons, detention camps, and other military apparatuses—contributing to an overly present, if also transnationalized state apparatus.

—Jana Evans Braziel, “Haiti, Guantánamo, and the ‘One Indispensable Nation’”

This essay makes a strategically provisional attempt to trace some variously relevant genealogies and itineraries of a song and a site whose various constructions, deconstructions, and deployments, both discursive and practical, point to a postnational (and perhaps less imperial) American future. The song, “Guantanamera,” may be familiar to many of us in
one particular manifestation as a quasi-officially Cuban cultural and national artifact, though in fact its history of composition, performance, and recording reveals it to be a remarkably unstable and fluid text. It is still undergoing significant and strategic forms of expressive, critical resignification in a bracing variety of contexts and venues. The site, the U.S. naval base situated on Guantánamo Bay, on the island of Cuba, though perhaps politically and legally not “on Cuban ground,” continues to this day to challenge political and legal theorists in particular to worry the limits of what is (currently) politically thinkable and doable. Together, as I will argue from various angles below, these two decidedly “local” institutions have drawn into themselves an impressive procession of public figures and equally public figurations. They represent the complex and simultaneous careers of the nation, the transnation, and the postnation in ways that belie their origination in any one locality, and in ways that resist their definitive reduction to the terms, and the claims, of any one nation. The procession includes, in no order that can respect the demands of either chronological or geographical logics, such historical figures as the Cuban national hero José Martí, the Cuban-exile salsa queen Celia Cruz, the Haitian American hip-hop impresario Wyclef Jean, and some notable literary writers, such as the Cuban American poet Rafael Campo and novelist Cristina García, as well as the Guatemalan American novelist and journalist Hector Tóbar. I hope to implicate in this discussion whole populations that bear no simple or even coherent relationship with any of the more available categories (national, racial, cultural) according to whose terms we conventionally organize ourselves and others. Through such a gathering I hope, in turn, to demonstrate what can come not only from the kind of critically engaged postnational American studies represented here by the authors of the two epigraphs, but also from a postnational Latino studies that understands its own organizing category as exclusively but emphatically historical, contextual, and critical.

My frequent half-joking response to the question “What do you think will happen with Cuba once Fidel Castro dies?” was, “Nothing compared to what’s likely to happen when Celia Cruz dies.” Then, of course, she did die, in the summer of 2003, and for all the understandable grief with which Cubans, other Latinos, and salsa lovers everywhere very publicly mourned her, nothing (at least nothing political) came of her passing after a valiant and public battle against cancer. The half-serious side of my remark, of course, had to do with the fact that Celia embodied perhaps better than any other public figure the intensely contradictory conditions that the post-1959 diasporic experience had visited upon all Cubans who either chose or were chosen to undergo it. My thinking went, no other death would embody more poignantly the utter futility of the exile con-
struction of post-1959 off-island Cuban existence; along with their very stagy farewell(s) to Celia (in both New York and Miami), wouldn't more of her fellow Cuban exiles, especially those with any power or influence over U.S. policy toward Cuba, want to bid farewell to those policies and to the exile fantasies that sustained them, given their utter failure in restoring their quasi-official cultural patroness to her homeland before her demise? As of this writing, nearly four full years into the post-Celia moment in Cuban diasporic history, the answer to that question remains a resounding and depressing “no.”

This intransigency may, on the one hand, have been consistent with Celia’s own political views; it may not, however, have been completely consistent with her expressive practices, practices dedicated to a vision of a world where reified, naturalized categories of nation, race, and even gender give way to the irresistible force of a cultural movement, or set of movements, that scarcely acknowledged let alone tolerated any conserving, paralytic demands based on the authority of these categories. Witness, for example, Celia’s own account of her experiences as both a political and cultural subject in the years following her departure from Cuba in the early 1960s. “Sadly,” she tells us, in the English translation of the autobiography she collaborated in writing in her last years of life, “my own country stripped me of my citizenship and erased me from its history, but I found a new country that has allowed me to flourish and granted me the honor of becoming a citizen.” Not only that, she goes on, but “in exile, I have learned to be Cuban in a way that might not have been possible if I had stayed in Cuba. . . . being an exile has taught me to love my country even more, and as a result, I am preoccupied with what the future may hold for the land of my birth.” Celia does not restrict this condition of exile, which compensates for the loss of her homeland with the opportunity to become Cuban-in-excess, more-Cuban-than-Cuban, to herself and her countrymen. In the same passage from the autobiography, she goes on to claim that “we Latin Americans [in general] have gathered in this great nation,” which in turn “has given us the opportunities denied to us in the lands of our births without demanding that we lose our identities. That is truly one of the remarkable things about this nation.”

There are many ways to interpret Celia’s remarks; clearly it would be difficult (and pointless) to question her clear sense of gratitude and loyalty to the United States, but it would be just as difficult to claim here that this gratitude is merely passive, servile, and happy to concede cultural superiority to the United States. The paradox that Celia more eloquently acknowledges here is that, in its most complex, culturally heterogeneous operations, the United States has functioned for her less as a nation than as a transnation, one that has not only not obligated her to sacrifice anything of her Cuban identity, but indeed has allowed that identity to flourish in
ways it might not have, especially if (she surmises) she had stayed in Cuba. This attitude may have to do with the general Cuban-exile argument that what remains of an authentic cultural *cubanidad* on the island is deeply compromised by what that community takes to be the political illegitimacy of the current Cuban state; it may also have to do with the way that exile forces that hypereconomy of sentimental overcompensation that makes one love one’s country more in absence than in presence. The attitude also has to do with the way in which life in the United States has allowed Celia to complicate and enrich her sense of her own *cubanidad* by putting it in such close and productive proximity with other forms of cultural practice and identity in which she might claim some legitimate belonging, including especially forms of Latin American, African diasporic, and Caribbean diasporic cultural and musical practices, all of which have had a profound influence on her own performance and recording styles, especially in the last decades of her life.

I would take as my prime example of Celia’s bracing transcultural optimism her appearance on Wyclef Jean’s 1997 CD, *Carnival*, where she introduces listeners to a track titled “Guantanamera.” That title, of course, should immediately provoke an association with one of Celia’s signature songs, oft performed and oft recorded, the unofficial national anthem of all Cubans everywhere. The first issue that Wyclef’s rerouting of the song’s genealogical line in a strategically transcultural and *post*national direction raises has to do with the common but forceful misconception that the most familiar version of “Guantanamera,” the one taken indeed to serve as an “unofficial Cuban national anthem,” has existed in that familiar form at least as long as Cuba has been independent from Spain. In fact, as a long footnote in a recently translated collection of José Martí’s *Selected Writings* makes clear, the song itself in its current form is at most fifty years old—only as old, in fact, as the national bifurcation of Cuba into revolutionary and exile factions occasioned by the 1959 revolution. According to Martí’s editor and translator Esther Allen, the chorus of “Guantanamera” was first composed to accompany a jingle for a 1940s Cuban radio show called *La Guantanamera*, whose “star was Joseito Fernández, a well-known singer of guajiras,” the latter of which in turn could refer to “either a typical girl from the country or a certain kind of country song with a characteristic alternating rhythm.” In the 1940s and 1950s, the song featured a melody of possibly much older composition, and lyrics that celebrated in fairly conventional terms the life and work of the Cuban peasantry. Lines from the first of José Martí’s *Versos Sencillos* were added to the jingle only later (in the late 1950s); the resulting hybrid composition is traditionally credited, Allen tells us, to “the Spanish composer Julián Orbón (1925–1991) who lived in Havana between 1940 and 1963.” Orbón, Allen goes on, then “moved to New York and taught at the Manhattan School of Music,” and it was there
that “Orbón’s student, Héctor Angulo, gave Orbón’s version” of the song “to Pete Seeger . . . who first popularized the version of ‘Guantanamera’ . . . that is famous today.”

What’s initially striking, of course, about this account of the song’s history is that it provides compelling evidence for making the case that the song as we know it today was actually finally “born,” like so much that’s defining about Cuban culture, in exile, and under a decidedly, complexly transnational set of conditions. Celia herself remembers it as “a classical Cuban song,” perhaps because she remembers hearing one version of it from her youth in Cuba; her relationship with the song, however, is also decidedly an American, exilic, and transnational phenomenon. Nothing in her memoir indicates that she sang the song in Cuba before the Revolution, but by the time she writes the memoir, she can exclaim that only “God . . . knows how many times I’ve sung that song accompanied by drums while dreaming of again seeing Cuba’s green royal palms.” The song and her relationship with it very powerfully inform two telling anecdotes from her life that bear further discussion here before turning to her collaboration on it with Wyclef. The first has to do with her one and only visit to the island of Cuba in the course of her forty-year exile; this was a 1990 visit to the U.S. naval base on Guantánamo Bay, where she’d been invited to give a concert. The trip was emotionally difficult for Celia because, as she tells it, “I was returning to Cuba, but not the Cuba I left. My Cuba was still enslaved, and all I was visiting was a small piece of my country’s territory, occupied by an American naval base.” In a gesture that seemed to understand something of the ambiguity regarding Guantánamo’s meaningful complex of locations, upon arriving on the base Celia made her way to the fence marking the border between the American territory of the base and Cuban territory proper, reached her hand through the fence, grabbed a fistful of Cuban soil, and deposited that soil in a bag to carry with her back to her home in New York City. In the epilogue to the memoir, Celia’s manager and friend Omer Pardillo-Cid confirms that “As per her final request, we placed in her casket [that] bag of Cuban soil.” Celia, then, while not buried in Cuban soil, was buried with it.

The other anecdote worth recounting here involves Celia once again being invited to perform “Guantanamera” in another public, and politically charged, context, this time at the first Summit of the Americas, held in Miami in 1993. As Celia tells it, “Quincy Jones . . . asked me to perform [the song] . . . at a show he was producing in Miami for the first Summit of the Americas, a meeting of all the democratically elected leaders of the Western Hemisphere” (Celia’s emphasis). Apparently, Celia goes on, the show’s producers made a point of telling “all the vocalists . . . not to make political statements during our performance,” but (and in what can only be called a bold gesture of “diva citizenship”) Celia, again as she tells it,
“just couldn’t control myself. During the violin interlude of my traditional ‘Guantanamera,’ I turned to all the leaders and said, ‘Your excellencies, I implore you, in the name of my fellow Cubans, please stop aiding and abetting Fidel Castro. If you stop helping him, he’ll have to give up power, and only then will Cuba be a free country. Please, help my people.”

Regardless of whether one agrees with either the substance or the logic of Celia’s argument, one can certainly appreciate the audacity and the courage it took for this daughter of the Afro-Cuban-Caribbean-American diaspora, herself a naturalized American citizen with profoundly exilic subjective ties to her lost homeland, to so address President Bill Clinton and his fellow heads of American states, and in defiance of a prohibition handed down through, if not by, a figure as formidable as Quincy Jones.

These two anecdotes will help me to underscore the depth and complexity of Celia Cruz’s relationship, not to say identification, with the song, and the matter, of “Guantanamera” by the time she appears on Wyclef Jean’s subversive and transforming critical resignification of both (song and matter). While both these anecdotes may happen to take place on more recognizably (if in both cases still ambiguously) “Cuban” ground, for having occurred respectively in Guantánamo and Miami, it matters that the Celia/Wyclef collaboration should transport us back into that even more ambiguously, heterogeneously transcultural and transnational space of metropolitan New York City, that outpost of a larger Caribbean archipelago currently in the process of definitive rearticulation and reimagining, where José Martí lived out the major part of his exile (and where in the 1880s and 1890s he penned, among many other pieces, both his “simple” verses and the “Our America” essay), where Celia lived out the major part of her exile and was eventually buried, and where our “Guantanamera” came into being as we know it, as the 1960s love child of at least a quintet of composing fathers, from Martí, to Fernandez, to Orbón, to Angulo, to Pete Seeger.

I’m not the first to notice, of course, that New York City has historically served as the key site for an ongoing elaboration of a displaced Cuban and certainly Caribbean culture, but I hope at least to make the claim for how Wyclef’s critical reconception and performance of his “Guantamama” participates directly in an elaboration at least as old as the work of Martí’s that he has Celia sing, and cite, in his remarkable track. I want to use the events of Pete Seeger’s “original” North American recording of the song in its now-conventional form in 1960s New York and Wyclef’s reappropriation of the material three-plus decades later to resituate strategically something of an off-island Cuban experience since 1959 in ways that dislodge it not only from a too-defining reliance on the conventional temporality of postrevolutionary Cuban “exile” experience in the United States, but also from an equally confining reliance on the conventional geo-
graphic spatiality of any imagined coherence between national and cultural spaces. I am as interested in pulling conceptions of post-1959 off-island Cuban experience away from their conventional orbit around Cuban-exile Miami as I am in pulling some more complex, trans- and postnational construction of a Caribbean diasporic Guantanamerismo away from the song’s conventional orbit around an exclusively Cuban nationalism. The long, intervening history of U.S. Cuban experience has thus been in part shadowed and in part defined by Celia’s history of recording and performing a version of “Guantanamera” that suggests a history for both the song and the nation it invokes that has no actual historical referent beyond the phantasmatic one invoked precisely in, and through, the song’s own lyrical and musical terms. The actual history of the song emerges instead as an effect of displacement and bifurcation; it is emphatically a diasporic, postnational artifact, nothing less and nothing more.

Celia does not, it bears noting here, appear among Wyclef’s band of “Refugee All-Stars” merely to reproduce a performance that she’d already recorded a number of times; instead, she appears primarily to ratify, and underwrite, the authenticity or legitimacy of a performance, while titled “Guantanamera,” that belongs entirely to Wyclef. Celia introduces herself, declares her enthusiasm in joining the celebration of Wyclef’s carnaval, sings the opening lines of the song, from the verses originally penned by Martí, yells her trademark “¡Azúcar!,” and then fades, gracefully and seamlessly, into Wyclef’s rap:

Hey yo I’m standing at the bar, with a Cuban cigar
Hey yo I think she’s eyeing me from afar
Yo, I wrote this in Haiti, overlooking Cuba
I asked her what’s her name, she said, “Guantanamera”
Remind me of an old Latin song, my uncle used to play
On his old 45 when he used to be alive . . .

Like most of his compositions, Wyclef’s “Guantanamera” is busy, featuring an array of pop-cultural allusions (from Madonna to “The Rose of Spanish Harlem”) and concluding with a feminist rap by fellow ex-Fugee Lauryn Hill to complement his playfully salacious own.9 What Wyclef’s track first stages as a sexual encounter between the male rapper and some female object of his desire telescopes pretty rapidly, however, into a meditation on, and critique of, the sexualization and fetishization of the woman of color in the North American pop-cultural imaginary. Wyclef’s disseminating appropriation of Martí’s, Celia’s, and Cuba’s beloved Guantanamera, and his resituation of that Guantanamera in a more explicitly North American, trans-Caribbean, late-twentieth-century
context, does less, I would argue, to de-Cubanize her than to situate her diasporically in a manner that is perhaps more congruent with what I want to describe and analyze in these remarks as the diasporic condition of some considerable part of a still-emerging Cuban-Caribbean–Latin American postnation.  

One can only imagine how any of the remaining members of the first and definitive Cuban-exile generation would respond to this appropriation by a black Haitian rapper with a political agenda decidedly different from their own, even with Celia’s indelible stamp of approval. But (as Jana Evans Braziel has already observed) that appropriation is anything but casual, or expedient; couched in Wyclef’s claim to have written his song “in Haiti, overlooking Cuba,” the situation actually parallels José Martí’s own when, at the start of his final, fatal campaign to liberate Cuba from Spain in 1895, he spent time preparing for that campaign in Haiti, keeping a diary that today stands as one of his most important, and importantly literary, compositions. In addition to the biographical parallel, I would want to suggest something of an ideological parallel as well; that is, that if a statement as programmatic and still influential as Martí’s famed 1891 essay “Our America” could be termed “the theory,” then in some ways Wyclef Jean’s transnational, polyvocal, polymorphous, critically perverse homage might be termed its most appropriate, and appropriately congruent, “practice.” Wyclef’s postnational “Guantanamera,” according to this argument, no longer merely substitutes for Celia’s, or anyone’s, nationalist version of the same figure. She metamorphoses, instead, directly from Martí’s “América,” whose own traditional allegorizing, fetishizing discursive anthropomorphism Martí plays against as much as with in his 1891 essay.

Indeed, if we follow the (free?) play of allusive associations from Wyclef’s rap to Lauryn Hill’s, we find an explicitly figural sequence of metamorphoses:

The lexicon of Lexington, parents came from Cuba
Part Mexican, pure sweet, dimes fell to her feet
She like Movado and move her hips like Delgado
And broke niggaz down from the Grounds to Apollo . . .

Thus in Wyclef’s and Hill’s capable hands, “our” Guantanamera, like “our” America, finds herself as legitimately at home on the streets of Harlem as in the eastern provinces of Cuba. Following this associative logic, she might also be said to reappear two years later, in Wyclef’s much more commercially successful (hence widely familiar) collaboration with Carlos Santana (on 1999’s Supernatural CD), as the character in the song “Maria, Maria,” who begins her career as the Puerto Rican heroine of
West Side Story only to find herself forty years later surviving poverty and violence on the streets of East L.A. Across at least these two songs, but really in all of his work (think even more recently of his hugely successful collaboration with Shakira on 2006’s “Hips Don’t Lie”), Wyclef is clearly and explicitly developing an extraordinary expressive critical practice out of his own diasporic experience. The practice pays significant homage to a trans-American vision at least as old as Martí’s essay, addressing an American challenge at least as current as the one formulated in the two epigraphs from contemporary scholars with which this discussion began.

I want to return briefly to those epigraphs as I make a fairly significant transition in the discussion already under way. First, I would like to underscore the critical function of the project undertaken here to trace the various itineraries and genealogies of all the nationalist, transnationalist, and postnationalist “Guantanameras” currently in play by recalling the warning sounded by Amy Kaplan’s analysis (and considerably broadened by Jana Evans Braziel’s) of the U.S. naval base on Guantánamo Bay (especially in its post–9/11 permutation) as an imperialist, and therefore problematically trans- and postnational, space. In these terms, Kaplan’s observation that in Guantánamo “contemporary empire building in the Middle East meets the history of imperialism in the Americas” not only begins to answer her more-than-rhetorical question regarding “where” in the world Guantánamo is, but it also participates in resisting any simple celebration of the more general condition of an imperial postnationalism for which Guantánamo serves as a more-than-telling symptom, one that, again as Kaplan tells it, “point[s]” primarily “to an ominous transnational future.” Kaplan has had occasion to return to (and to elaborate on) the argument she first fielded in her 2002 presidential address to the American Studies Association conference (from which the epigraph is taken) in a much more recent article (which appeared in American Quarterly in late 2005) titled “Where Is Guantánamo?” I will return to Kaplan’s account in this more recent piece of how what she calls “the ‘legal black hole’ of Guantánamo” is actually, and significantly, “filled with a long imperial history.”

Here I want to draw from one brief but recent moment in that “long imperial history,” as traced by Kaplan, to measure the degree of complexity of Wyclef’s trans- and postnational cultural practice as a critical practice, and again with specific reference to his “Guantanamera.” Beyond the song’s lyrical interest in deconstructing as long a history of national and nationalist phantasmatics organized around eroticized, fetishistic invocations of otherwise subaltern female bodies via the figures conventionally deployed to represent them, the song also sounds with some other contex-
tual resonances, also organized around actual bodies and embodied forms. As both Kaplan and Braziel remind us, in the years immediately following Celia’s visit to Guantánamo and immediately preceding the 1997 recording of “Guantanamera,” the United States used its naval base as “a site of detention camps for blocking Haitian and Cuban refugees from entering the United States.” In fact, as Kaplan goes on to explain, “many [Haitians especially] were held up to three years in makeshift barbed-wire camps . . . [and] a separate camp was built for those who, through forced testing, were found to carry HIV.”14 As Braziel persuasively argues, an artist as politically engaged as Wyclef Jean certainly had this situation in mind when he decided not only to resignify in such a pointedly sexual way upon the conventional operations of the “Guantanamera” material, but also to Haitianize what had previously been so decidedly a matter of Cuban (and Cuban American) provenance.

One can only speculate here, however (and in contradistinction to what Braziel in glancing claims in her article), about the degree of awareness and intentionality driving Celia’s collaboration with Wyclef on such a project. The only mention of it in her Life occurs when she lists it first as the occasion for one of her many Grammy nominations, then a bit later as “a beautiful rendition of the song,” thanks to which “many young people began to know me.”15 The rhetoric that Celia uses in related passages to describe the degree of political repression in Castro’s Cuba could also be used to describe the nature of political operations in Guantánamo, but on arguably American ground. In addition to her very pointed description of the Cuban people as “enslaved,” Celia also calls Castro’s transformation of the entire Cuban polity into “a prison . . . a heartbreaking reality.”16 The sincerity of her charges against the Cuban state notwithstanding, Celia’s claims resonate quite differently when we take into account the uses to which the U.S. base in Guantánamo itself was put around the same time. These infamous “detention camps,” as Kaplan tells us, “were shut down in 1995,” but they left, as a “legacy of Guantánamo’s unclear sovereignty,” the fact that “Haitians in the United States who were born in detention there [have] remain[ed] ‘effectively stateless, since the camp authorities would not give them US birth certificates, and Haiti has not extended citizenship rights to them either.’”17 In the face of such an example of the radical political disenfranchisement of some people in our world from all available forms of citizenship, it becomes more difficult to accept charges, against even a regime like Castro’s, that claim anything like an extreme (let alone exceptional) guilt in its practices of political refusal and privation.

Amy Kaplan asks provocative questions about how the current status and function of the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo reopens the question of its most meaningfully political and practical “situation(s).” I see
this as in turn a question regarding its ideological rather than geographic “location(s),” and I want those questions to resonate as fully as possible through this historical retracing of some of the most critically relevant genealogies of “Guantanamera.” As such, however, it has also, ironically, consequently spawned another, perhaps less visible but no less emphatic postnational “Guantanamerismo” on the part of a number of some very contemporary off-island Cuban-identified writers who have (in the near-decade since Carnival) continued Wyclef Jean’s work of mining the symbolic territory of an utterly imagined “Guantánamo” for more insights into the postnational, diasporic Cuban/Haitian/Caribbean American condition.

One such writer is the Cuban American poet Rafael Campo, who refers to the province of Guantánamo in one of the earliest in a cycle of sonnet-style lyrics that more or less trace what he’s called elsewhere his own “patriarchal past.” It’s striking that, in the way Campo has constructed his public persona, the Cuban heritage bestowed on him by his father matters so much more than the Italian heritage he can attribute to his mother. This may in part be because Campo was born (in the 1960s) and raised (through the 1970s) in the Cuban-exile enclave that had established itself in and around Union City and Elizabeth, New Jersey. Campo, who has never been to Cuba, nevertheless powerfully identifies with, and claims for himself, a cubanidad that often bears highly (and ironically) conventional nationalist qualities. Indeed, as early as the 1993 publication of The Other Man Was Me, Campo’s poems’ obsession with his Cuban “patriarchal past” was already in full view, as were the rather perverse particulars of that obsession, not only as it related to his feelings toward both his grandfather and father, but also as it related toward what these figures who embodied his past could determine about his expectations for his own future.

The “Song” for his grandfather, comprised of sixteen sixteen-line stanzas, inaugurates the longer cycle in the elegiac mode, as his grandfather is described mostly in the process of dying and being mourned. This is, of course, true to the spirit of the Cuban-exile experience as undergone by the grandfather’s generation; everything begins with mourning, in the moment of awakening to a loss impossible to recover precisely because of the impossible temporal and spatial logics of exile itself, the loss having occurred before the beginning, and somewhere beyond any accessible elsewhere. Campo thus begins with a piece titled “Guantánamo,” suggesting that this is the part of Cuba where his family lived, but also inescapably invoking “Guantanamera” and José Martí, who looms here as a different but equally significant embodiment of Campo’s “patriarchal past.” Guantánamo is for this reason, according to the poet, “the town / My oldest country will forever mourn,” but also the town where everything begins for him, since there, he claims, “I was born when he was born.” What’s born
here, too, is the series of lyric meditations on precisely how the poet will not only rescue through his work the specific memory of his grandfather, but will also bear and breed the legacy of his grandfather’s (hence his own) cubanidad past even the point of the older man’s final passing.

Flash forward a decade to the appearance of Campo’s fourth collection of poems, 2002’s Landscape with Human Figure, where we find Campo writing the companion elegy to his grandmother, who may in part figure as already included in the patriarchal past the poet mostly organizes around his male progenitors, but who occasions nevertheless some interesting instances of symbolic slippage. The poem, titled “Guantanamera” and appearing as the third of five pieces in what Campo calls a “Cuban Canticle in Five Parts,” strongly if somewhat paradoxically identifies the resilient national figure from the song with the poet’s dying grandmother, observing how a collective “they” that presumably refers to varying collective formations of Cubans, on and off the island, all nevertheless might commonly see “her as an emblem of a nation that / was lost, of all that never was regained.” The poet then implicates himself in the scene, invoking her role in inspiring him to take up his vocation because her “humming in the kitchen,” as he explains, “was music that I’d always keep.” As the poem narrates and marks the grandmother’s passing, it also recedes progressively further into a past that renders the old woman younger with each line; well before her final years, the poet recalls,

she would weep,
predicting that the time for her to die
would come before she could return.

By the last line, she is transformed into “the girl who danced to Guantánamera,” just as her grandson the poet “leaned to kiss” her one last time. This line, I would argue, makes little historical sense in any factual way, since the “Guantanamera” that circulated as a song when the grandmother was a young girl in the Guantánamo where she presumably met his grandfather was a different “Guantanamera” than any the poet might know. What the poet can perhaps claim to remember is his grandmother as a younger woman, but already living in exile Miami where, by the 1970s, there would be every chance that she might have hummed, and danced to, the only “Guantanamera” with a historical life available to her grandson: the one born not in Guantánamo, or even in Cuba, but in a New York that lay so much more closely near to the poet’s own hometown than the poet himself might imagine, especially if he associates any “Guantanamera” with a Cuba that is actually primarily made (because first remembered and imagined) in the United States.

While Campo’s more conventional, and admittedly sentimental,
deployments of the “Guantanamera” figure still produce, against the logic of their very conventionality, effects that expose the mostly phantasmatic and ideological operations of a figure otherwise taken to be historical, the Cuban American novelist Cristina García manages in her third novel, 2003’s *Monkey Hunting*, to produce even more forcefully critical effects, precisely by rejecting these traditionally nationalist conventions when she takes another kind of recourse to the elements of *Guantanamerismo* under discussion here. One of the claims I want this argument to make, in perhaps too-precious rhetorical form, is that the geographic “province” of Guantánamo bears no logical relation to the phantasmatic “province(s)” of either “Guantanamera,” or a postmillennial, postnational *Guantanamerismo*, beyond some strongly associative connections evoked primarily by the familiarity, and the seductiveness, of a certain synthesis of “simple” poetic lines wedded to a commercial jingle and set to a nostalgically folksy tune.

García, who unlike Campo was born in Cuba and has visited often as an adult, like Campo did grow up in 1960s and 1970s New York, outside the exile outpost of Cuban Miami but even nearer to the eventual birthplace of what we now know as “Guantanamera.” *Monkey Hunting*, which is already well known for its depiction of the history of Chinese migration to Cuba in the nineteenth century and of the establishment in that century of Havana’s Chinatown, actually extends its narrative well into the twentieth century as it follows descendants of its chief protagonists to places as far-flung (and, taken together, admittedly globalist) as New York City, Shanghai, and Saigon. It gets to two of these destinations, however, by way of Guantánamo, where the grandson of Chen Pan, the novel’s Chinese Cuban protagonist, and his mulata wife, Lucrecia, finds himself working in the 1940s and 1950s as a cook on the U.S. naval base. Pipo Chen marries an Afro-Cuban woman named Idalia Quiñones, and together they have a child named Domingo; Pipo and Idalia part ways when the revolution forces the couple to take opposite sides in the emerging Cuban national divide, and Pipo eventually leaves Cuba with their son, an already nearly grown Domingo, in tow. Father and son head to New York, and for some brief passages García gives her readers a glimpse into an alternative Cuban America, one emerging alongside a Chinese and African America in the city and decade where she herself grew up.

Pipo and Domingo survive very briefly in that polycultural American idyll, however; Pipo, already psychologically damaged by “treatments” inflicted on political prisoners in the revolution’s hospitals for social undesirables, throws himself under a Bronx subway train and dies. A distraught and disoriented Domingo enlists in the U.S. Army and is shipped off to Vietnam, in whose jungle trenches García stages some scenes of potent remembering, scenes where Domingo resurrects Guantánamo and his
family’s life there in ways that in turn allow the novelist to participate in what I would like to call a critical Guantanamerismo intent on not just resisting, but productively deconstructing, the conventionally nationalist functions of most invocations of Guantánamo, or of any Guantanamera, in most Cuban contexts.

For one thing, García makes the only literal Guantanamera to appear in her novel a Communist, one devoted enough to the revolution that she sacrifices her marriage and her maternal responsibilities in its name. In one scene García pushes these associations pretty emphatically; sitting in a darkened trench in Vietnam listening to “the usual anthem of jungle noises,” Domingo, she tells us, “remembered his own mother . . . in her militia uniform, marching off to fight in the Bay of Pigs. People said that she’d killed a man, shot a gusano in the back who’d tried to escape. There’d been a parade for Mamá and the other veterans when they’d returned to Guantánamo.” Clearly Idalia Quiñones is meant to counter every sentimental association in the Cuban-exile imagination that an invocation of a Guantanamera might provoke. García’s portrayal of Domingo’s father, Pipo, is perhaps more affectionate, but it, too, leaves little question about how García means to play to the conventional sympathies of her Cuban-exile audience. In an earlier scene, while he is still in New York, García has Domingo remember that, when he was a child, his father would “bring Domingo to work, usually on the Fourth of July,” and that “the Americans had looked gargantuan to him, another species altogether. Still, he’d liked their uniforms and their parades and the chocolate-filled lollipops everyone gave him” (54–55). I hear in García’s references to North Americans as (in Domingo’s eyes) “gargantuan” and identified with “their uniforms and their parades” echoes of Martí’s reference in a famous letter to the “monster” in whose entrails he had lived; I also hear in these references a profound ambivalence regarding, rather than an outright rejection of, the mixed legacy of a U.S./Cuban historical and political collusion that has led to an equally if not more mixed destiny. “Domingo,” García tells us, “had used his father’s contacts at the US naval base to get Papi and himself out of Cuba. Finally, they’d left the island behind like a rainy season. But what was their world now? What belonged to them? Was it possible, Domingo wondered, to be saved and destroyed at once?” (56–57).

While García’s narrator never explicitly mentions “Guantanamera” the song, it is clear from other references in these scenes involving Domingo and his parents that she wants her readers to have it in mind. Not only does she set his flashbacks in Vietnam to “the usual anthem of jungle noises,” but she foregrounds elements of Cuba’s traditional musical culture in what she imagines of Domingo’s family’s history in Guantánamo. She tells us that Domingo considers one of Communist “Cuba’s most
ludicrous thefts” the confiscation of his Tío Eutemio’s congas, which were taken because the “authorities in Guantánamo had decided that the drums were cultural artifacts” and hence belonged “on display at the folklore museum where el pueblo could admire them but never hear their boom-tak-tak-a-tak again” (56–57). I hear in García’s invocation of these drums an echo of the drums that Celia mentions accompanying her countless performances of her far more conventional and nostalgic “Guantanamera,” and while I would not because of this echo claim anything like a congruence or even comparability between Celia’s politics and García’s, I do think that in some ways they respond in chorus to the call of an anthem addressed to what might remain of their common cubanidad. As García tells it, Domingo too can remember that in “Guantánamo, the drums were everywhere,” and because of this, “when he listened to the drums, he felt right in his own skin” (57). I also hear, however, an elided signification of both American and Cuban political operations in García’s indeterminate reference to the “authorities in Guantánamo.”

By the time García published Monkey Hunting in 2003, the American-controlled Guantánamo had been redeployed as a detention center, this time for the so-called enemy combatants captured first in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. While García does not push her narrative past the historical moment in the late 1960s in which Domingo Chen finds himself stranded and despairing on the streets of Saigon, she does suggest with that same narrative gesture that she understands something of the argument that Amy Kaplan was by 2002 already making about the Guantánamo where American authority still prevails.

By concluding her novel’s Chinese-Cuban American historical narrative, which she strategically detours through Guantánamo, on Vietnamese ground, and by setting that conclusion in the context of what some of us might call a failed American imperial campaign, García offers her historical version of what Kaplan terms our “ominous transnational future.” She clearly has in mind what Braziel describes as Guantánamo’s function as “militarized, . . . transnationalized state apparatus.” In this moment, and in what we can foresee of the immediate future, Guantánamo will certainly continue to occupy (here in Kaplan’s terms) “a transitional political space, where a prison housed in a communist nation against whom the US is still fighting the cold war has become an epicenter in the new ‘war on terror.’” As such, and because (again in Kaplan’s terms) it lies “not clearly under the sovereignty of either nation, nor seemingly subject to national or international law,” it will also continue to lie “at the heart of the American Empire, a dominion at once rooted in specific locales and dispersed unevenly all over the world.”

These dispersals may be occurring, and may have occurred for some time now, in directions that go beyond what either Kaplan or Braziel have so far documented in their otherwise
invaluable work. That work, however, offers an indispensable frame in terms of which to think about the various cultural invocations of Guantánamo under discussion here. Celia Cruz, Wyclef Jean, Rafael Campo, and Cristina García, it seems to me, all contribute in both provocative and productive ways to a project, both critical and expressive, for which such a still-possible postnational intellectual frame would be not only useful, but also indispensable. The construction and elaboration of this frame, it also seems to me, is not at all the exclusive purview, or duty, of American studies, but also of its sibling fields and movements, including among them Latin American, U.S. Latino, Caribbean diasporic, and postcolonial studies, all of which are already at work in the ongoing and positive elaboration of any and all Guantanameras to come.

This discussion will now turn a bit further afield of what Braziel would call the U.S.–Cuban-Haitian-triangulated historical and political crucible to consider how a generalized Guantanamerismo might inform other utterly liminal, and utterly local, political practices. It is striking, given the very strong echoes between them, that neither Kaplan’s nor Braziel’s work on Guantánamo ever has occasion to invoke in any detail the theoretical work of the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, especially in 1995’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and 2003’s *State of Exception*, on the function of the concentration camp as (in Agamben’s terms) “the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living.”\(^{20}\) Listen, for example, to the strong echo between Kaplan’s general description of the base “as a territory held by the United States in perpetuity, over which sovereignty is indefinitely deferred, [thereby making] the temporal dimensions of Guantánamo’s location . . . a chillingly appropriate place for the indefinite detention of unnamed enemies,” and Agamben’s argument, in a text published in English the year that Kaplan’s article appeared, that “President Bush’s order [of 13 November 2001] . . . radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnameable and unclassifiable being” who, Agamben concludes, exists exclusively as “object of a pure *de facto* rule, of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well, since it is entirely removed from the law and from judicial oversight.”\(^{21}\)

The uncanny parallelisms extend to each writer’s treatments of even more particular, and analogous, historical examples. Agamben, for example, extends in *State of Exception* his argument from *Homo Sacer* that the Nazi concentration camp figures for him as a paradigmatic, exemplary instance “of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics, and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen” and that by virtue of that confusion are enabled “the juridical procedures and deplo-
ments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime.” Agamben thus goes on to suggest in *State of Exception* that the “only thing” to which the indefinite detention of enemy combatants in post-9/11 Guantánamo “could possibly be compared is the legal situation of Jews in the Nazi Lager [camps], who, along with their citizenship had lost every legal identity” while “at least retain[ing] their identities as Jews.” But we already know, thanks to Kaplan, that Agamben might have found a far more local, and equally evocative, point of comparison in what he would call the “bare life” embodied by those children born to Haitian refugees detained in the same camp a decade earlier, and who in 2005 “remain[ed] effectively stateless, since the camp authorities would not give them US birth certificates, and Haiti ha[d] not extended citizenship rights to them either.” While the legal and political operation of the Nazi concentration camps might exemplify a more generalized operation of a violent political (and imperial) sovereignty that applies as well, and as violently, to the victimization of succeeding generations of detainees within the confines of Guantánamo, that does not suggest that such operations originated in the former, or that they will cease with (or could be contained by) the latter. As Agamben himself argued in 1995, when *Homo Sacer* was published in Italian, “the birth of the camp in our time appears as an event that signals the political space of modernity itself,” and in the course of the late, and long, twentieth century, that political spac[ing] of the camp has become increasingly, unmappably general:

The growing dissociation of birth (bare life) and the nation-state is the new fact of politics in our day, and what we call camp is this disjunction. To an order without localization (the state of exception, in which the law is suspended) there now corresponds a localization without order (the camp as permanent space of exception). The political no longer orders forms of life and juridical rules in a determinate space, but instead contains at its very center a dislocating localization that exceeds it and into which every form of life and every rule can be virtually taken. The camp as dislocating localization is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living, and it is this structure of the camp that we must learn to recognize in all its metamorphoses into the *zones d'attentes* of our airports and certain outskirts of our cities.

Kaplan goes in her essay from arguing first that “to ask about the location of Guantánamo is to ask: where in the world is the United States?” to declaring quite conclusively in closing that from Guantánamo Bay “the borders of the law are redrawn to create a world in which Guantánamo is everywhere”; Agamben, in his book, arrives in the space of an additional page from the argument quoted at length above to the additional, and
crucial, conclusion that the camp, as that “hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living,” can actually no longer be said to occupy some space in any political outskirt, since its definitive location at the heart of the modern polis also finds it “securely lodged within the city’s interior, [as] the new biopolitical nomos of the planet.”

For Agamben, the paradigm of such a camp discovered to have lodged itself within the interior space of that modern polis might arguably resemble the Nazi concentration camp: it retains a fairly direct relationship to a sovereign authority, which ratifies its establishment via some paradoxical suspension of its very authority to do so, and in order to perform a radical political disenfranchisement of the people displaced and to reduce them thereby to the condition of “bare life.” Recent work drawing from Agamben’s insights has begun to suggest that the kinds of official detention centers he mostly seems to have in mind here may not be the only kinds of camps proliferating in the heart of the modern city. I want to move this discussion to another site with an apparently only tangential, if powerfully contingent, relationship with the Guantanamerista genealogy traced thus far, to explore what this kind of postnational critical and cultural study can do for the evolving fields of a U.S.-based Caribbean-Latino diasporic studies bent on mapping new and alternative configurations of “American” cultural, political, and historical ground. That site is downtown Los Angeles, where in 2006 we saw Celia Cruz arrive in a blaze of posthumous glory when ¡Azúcar!, the Smithsonian-sponsored retrospective of her life (complete with footage of the video for the Wyclef Jean–composed “Guantanamera”) made an appearance at the California African American Museum. Earlier that year, according to a report in the Los Angeles Times, Pras Michel, Wyclef’s fellow Haitian American Fugee, “posed as a homeless person and lived on LA’s skid row . . . for ten days to film a feature-length documentary, First Night.”

That year downtown Los Angeles also saw (as did, eventually, the world) some of the most extraordinary demonstrations of public activism around a particular cause, immigration reform, ever staged in the United States, certainly since the heyday of the African American Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century, demonstrations organized and populated by a bracing variety of Latino immigrant communities that had settled in the area over many decades.

The Guatemalan American journalist and fiction writer Hector Tobar has anticipated such developments in U.S. Latino life, as represented but not exhausted by what occurred in Los Angeles in 2006. In 2006 he published Translation Nation, a critical travelogue across “the Spanish-Speaking United States.” As far back as 1998, however, Tobar (who worked for many years as a reporter for the Los Angeles Times and now heads the paper’s Mexico City bureau) had published The Tattooed Soldier, a novel about the Los Angeles that he observed in the run-up to the 1992 riots.
That novel, dedicated to the author’s parents (“two travelers,” he tells us, “among thousands in the Guatemalan diaspora”), includes episodes set in a homeless encampment populated mostly by destitute African American and Latino inhabitants; the camp, as Tóbar has one of his main characters describe it, clearly bears a different relation to state power than the kind mostly emphasized by Agamben, Kaplan, and Braziel. The fact that Tóbar imagines his homeless encampment roughly in the same period, and in a congruently discursive field, as that in which Wyclef Jean and Celia Cruz serenaded an alternatively imagined “Guantanamera” who might have issued from an equally alternatively imaginable (and more desirable than any existing) Guantánamo, opens the possibility that, at least in their commonly fictive, discursive space, these cultural producers and performers have been involved in a process of imagining and exploring what Arjun Appadurai (in another context) might call a kind of “cellular” proliferation of meaningful forms of cultural and political collectivity and belonging. 30

In his novel, Tóbar very effectively avoids the easy tendency toward sentimentality potential in any treatment of homelessness by focusing rather closely on alternative forms of political contextualization marking homeless life in the heart of the late capitalist U.S. metropolis. Tóbar’s protagonist, Antonio Bernal, was a talented university student in Guatemala, where he was born, raised, and educated, until he met, fell in love with, and married the political activist Elena Sosa. Antonio is forced to flee Guatemala after the brutal murders of his wife and infant son at the hands of a right-wing death squad, and he lands in Los Angeles, where he struggles to support himself with menial jobs; the novel actually opens on the day of his eviction from his Pico-Union apartment, and it follows him through deepening stages of homeless desperation, exacerbated by his almost simultaneous discovery of his family’s chief murderer, the tattooed former soldier Guillermo Longoria, who has also made his way to Los Angeles and has installed himself in the same neighborhood. Rather than follow the novel’s narrative arc through to its conclusion in the final confrontation between its two antagonists, played against the backdrop of the 1992 L.A. riots, this discussion will instead conclude with a brief reading of Tóbar’s envisioning of an alternative politics in the informal administration of the homeless encampment that serves as Antonio’s home base for most of the story.

In the chapter “Instant Shelter,” Tóbar suggests that he understands fully the profoundly generalized and heterogeneous functioning of what the Fugees might call the “worldwide refugee camp” in contemporary politics. As Antonio watches “the camp [on downtown Los Angeles’s Crown Hill] come to life,” he first discovers the ways that conventional forms of social, political, and even discursive categorization surrender to
the force of reduction to *bare* life (40). Politically, for example, Antonio realizes that his fellow inhabitants share with him a status that disturbs any simple positioning in terms of their relation to any given (nation-)state: “Refugees. That was the term,” Antonio thinks, “for people who lived like this, in makeshift tents, on barren ground” (41). The barrenness of the ground thus described clearly refers to a generalized deterritorialization that renders all inhabitants of such ground indiscriminately stateless, generally bereft of any meaningful and enfranchised belonging to any given polis. Antonio’s lack of documentation to authorize his standing on U.S. ground does not in this context render him any less legally or legitimately situated than any of his putatively legally American comrades. All on Crown Hill (he observes) sport “the same vacant expression,” a look that in turn makes them all “walking question marks. . . . Skinny question-mark men with dirty bodies and unshaven faces . . . in a lot in the center of the city” (41). As embodiments of both radical political dislocation (refugees) and discursive indeterminacy (question marks), the figures in Tóbar’s camp only secondarily bear the marks of race or ethnicity in any way that matters to Antonio, although he does take notice that in the context of the camp even “gringos could be refugees,” an observation that further problematizes the question of political enfranchisement for people who might bear the status of “legal” citizenship without enjoying almost any but the barest “right(s)” (to *life*?) that might accrue to it.

The other telling observation that Tóbar allows Antonio, and the one with which this discussion will close, has more to do with how the various reductions to bare life he witnesses do not lead him, nor should they lead us, to the conclusion that any “state of exception” is equatable with what Hobbes famously called the “state of nature.” Indeed, as Appadurai has observed regarding what he calls the “nonstate organizations [that] have been harnessing the new means of cellularity to create new solidarities and new strategies to contest the power of the nation-state and global corporations,” one can see in the social and political reformations of Tóbar’s homeless encampment a form of that contestation in the highly potent guise of a critical parody. “Even here in a barren lot,” Tóbar has Antonio observe, “people could settle into domestic routine,” a routine that not only resembles, but in its own way can inhabit in order to deconstruct, both anything resembling “domiciled” domestic habits and all the habits of thought that conventionally allow us to think the domestic, and its other, personally, culturally, socially, and politically (42). Two African American characters, Frank and Larry (though the latter goes by the moniker of “the Mayor”), act in different ways as guides to homeless life on Crown Hill. The former serves mostly a parodic function, having situated his “shelter . . . on a choice piece of real estate, [one] . . . providing a panoramic view of the Harbor Freeway, the Financial District, and City
Hall,” and on which he “and his companions had set up an old couch . . . [in order] to take in the view”; in one scene Antonio finds him there, “leaning back and stretching his legs, like a suburbanite entertaining his guest in his living room” (45).

The Mayor, on the other hand, is the encampment’s orator because, as Frank tells Antonio, “He makes nice speeches,” but also because he goes “to Board of Supervisors meetings every Tuesday to tell the county to raise the General Relief payments” (46). The Mayor observes the increasing number of “Latinos” in the encampment (“There’s all sorts of Latinos here, more now every day” [47]). The Mayor professes not to mind the demographic shift, however, observing that “they’re good people, the Latinos,” and that life in the Crown Hill encampment allows greater civility among various groups compared to, say, life on Skid Row, because “while in the row you’re just a number, a body on a sidewalk,” on Crown Hill,

“We all got our little piece of earth. I guess you can say we’ve got a small investment in the community.” He laughed at the irony. “And the Man, he leaves us alone because he’s afraid to come in here. The place looks scary to him, all this rubble and shelters and shit. He’s afraid because this is our territory. It’s like a liberated zone. Know what I mean?” (47)

I conclude this discussion with the Mayor’s speech less to highlight the potentially sentimental and always precarious invocation of a kind of homelessness as symbolic of a redemptive transcendence of restrictive social order, and more because of the echo, in the Mayor’s use of the term Latinos to refer to both the Guatemalan Antonio and his friend the Mexican José Juan, of Wyclef Jean’s use of the identical term to describe the presumably Spanish recording of “Guantanamera” that his uncle used to play for him in Haiti.

In both invocations of Latin, we might do well to hear a complex but productive mode of address, one with a great deal to say to the evolving interdisciplines of U.S. Latino, American, Latin American, and Caribbean and African diasporic studies, especially as we continue to explore the borders that both separate and connect our sovereign academic fields. We might begin to understand disciplinary evolutions as increasingly capable of the kind of cellular formation that Appadurai observes in other instances of collective embodiment and practice. The urgent necessity of responsibly reading the historical coincidence of Wyclef’s 1997 invocation of an “old Latin song” (one that allows him to articulate a longing for a somewhat “foreign” latinidad, and that produces a historic collaboration with Celia Cruz, and which in turn resonates as it commemorates the mid-1990s state failures at Guantánamo), and Tóbar’s Mayor’s regard for “Latinos” (which allows the writer to posit an alternatively just political and social order, “a
liberated zone” in which everyone retains “a small investment in the community,” in a 1997 historical novel provoked by the social unrest—another state failure—toward which its narrative inexorably heads) must register itself clearly within all the scholarly fields that this discussion represents and challenges. Thus we can continue imagining the alternative disciplinary formations within which we all might figure, and from which we all might benefit, as we struggle to know a world, and a moment, whose complexity demands no less from us.\textsuperscript{32}

Notes

This article owes its current state in part to valuable, insightful responses to it resulting from public readings at the Universities of Chicago and Michigan, and at Cuban American and Latin American studies conferences, all in early 2006, and at NYU and UCLA in the spring of 2007. It also owes a debt to Jeffrey Stevenson, and to the colleagues and students at Cal State–Los Angeles, with whom I had the honor to share, and to explore, many of its most salient ideas.

1. The term postnational in this article refers directly to its elaboration in the introductory essay to Post-Nationalist American Studies, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), which is credited to a collective of scholars who participated in a Humanities Research Institute seminar at UC-Irvine in 1996. In that essay, Rowe et al. sound a cautionary warning regarding what Amy Kaplan calls the “ominous transnational future” into which certain globalizing forces may be taking us. “If the global is not progressively obliterating the national or the local today,” they argue, “but rather global, national and local forces are articulating with each other in complex modalities, then the elucidation of these articulations rather than a celebration of them is the urgent task before us.” As part of that project of critical elucidation, Rowe and his colleagues urge we who follow them to use post-nationalist to describe not a transcendent escape from the demands, and the dangers, of nationalist thinking, but “a negotiation among local, national and global frames of analysis that seeks its justification neither in objective and progressive historical processes of globalization nor in implicit celebrations of the obliteration of the local and the national. What the result of this negotiation might look like, and how it might authorize itself,” they observe, “are crucial questions to consider. The questions themselves, rather than quick answers to them, would seem to be more fruitful occasions for a new American Studies” (8).


The second epigraph is from Jana Evans Braziel, “Haiti, Guantánamo, and the ‘One Indispensable Nation’: US Imperialism, ‘Apparent States,’ and Postcolonial Problematics of Sovereignty,” Cultural Critique 64 (2006): 148–49. Braziel’s article, which follows the later of Kaplan’s two by a year, makes valuable contribu-
tions to Kaplan’s critique. While Braziel claims that her work corrects a disposition in Kaplan’s to mark Guantánamo as “the site par excellence for imperialist abuses” and hence “exceptional,” Kaplan herself never explicitly makes such a claim (Braziel, “Haiti, Guantánamo, and the ‘One Indispensable Nation,’” 127). Indeed, Kaplan goes to great lengths to clarify that her work seeks to counter the effect of seeing the current political and military uses of Guantánamo as such a recent, unprecedented, and therefore exceptional development, despite its prominence in contemporary legal and political discourse; instead, Kaplan explains, while “Guantánamo lies at the heart of American Empire,” this is “a dominion at once rooted in specific locales and dispersed unevenly all over the world” (Kaplan, “Where Is Guantánamo?” 832).

2. On the matter of the Miami exile community’s anticipation of Castro’s passing, see a 29 January 2007 posting on a local Miami television station’s Web site concerning the city of Miami’s official plan to hold a celebration so large it would need to be staged in the Orange Bowl. See “Miami Planning Orange Bowl Party after Castro’s Death,” www.nbc6.net/fidelcastro/10869691/detail.html, accessed 8 March 2007.

3. These passages appear in Celia Cruz (with Ana Cristina Reymundo), Celia Cruz: My Life, trans. José Lucas Badué (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 124. Braziel also makes mention of Celia’s trip to Guantánamo in the article quoted in the second epigraph opening this piece, and also in the context of Celia’s collaboration with Wyclef Jean on his version of “Guantanamera,” which I also discuss below (“Haiti, Guantánamo, and the ‘One Indispensable Nation,’” 143–44).


5. A similar but slightly more detailed account of the song’s decidedly itinerant composition history appears at www.josemarti.org. The Web site is United States–based and maintained by Cuban Americans; the feature on “Guantanamera” is attributed to Maria Argelia Vizcaino. Page accessed 8 March 2007. Vizcaino calls the composition “la más internacional del cancionero cubano” (the most international of the Cuban national songbook) and later describes it as “esa pegajosa canción que ha viajado por el mundo representando a los cubanos como un himno” (that catchy song that has traveled the world representing Cubans like a hymn); translations here are mine. Braziel also provides a brief and slightly different account of the song’s composition history (“Haiti, Guantánamo, and the ‘One Indispensable Nation,’” 144).

6. Cruz, Celia Cruz, 167.


8. Ibid., 178. For a discussion of the concept and function of diva citizenship, see chapter 6 of Lauren Berlant’s The Queen of America Goes to Washington City (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), esp. 223 and 238–42.

9. Wyclef Jean’s “Guantanamera” is certainly not the first version of the song to subvert its traditional heteroerotic dynamic. Because Martí’s verses explicitly describe the speaker as an “hombre sincero / De donde crecen las palmas,” even Celia’s sung invocations of this guajira Guantanamera might be said to short-circuit the heteroerotics of a patriarchal nationalist desire, instituted (of course) through a loose association with Martí, for a female and darkly earthy embodiment of the motherland; instead, she might be said to offer a kind of filial identification with, rather than an erotic longing for, the figure of a guajira, who (in Celia’s rendering) might also be said to better exhibit the guajira’s presumptive mixed-race status, thereby better symbolizing Cuba in her (that is, both Celia and the guajira’s) embodied joining of all that nation’s races and ethnicities.
10. Readers can consult as well the online exhibition corresponding to the Smithsonian Institution’s historic show celebrating Celia’s life (americanhistory.si.edu/celiacruz); the actual exhibit, which featured footage of the “Guantanamera” video, started at the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, in 2005 and traveled to a variety of other venues, including the California African American Museum in late 2006, and to Miami’s Bass Museum of Art in 2007. The video of “Guantanamera” had for many years been difficult to access, but as recently as March 2007 it had been posted on YouTube.com and will hopefully, thanks to this newfound availability, lead to further critical analysis. My thanks to Albert Laguna for leading me to that posting.

11. Braziel reports that the collaboration began at “the Bouyon Rasin (Roots Soup) music festival celebrating the end of the military regime of Général Raoul Cedras and the restoration of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Port-au-Prince in 1995”; both artists, Braziel goes on to argue, were “aware of the state war machine that Guantánamo represents in the Caribbean . . . arguably one of the most complex sites of US imperialism and militarized power both regionally and globally” (“Haiti, Guantánamo, and the ‘One Indispensable Nation,’” 143–44). Braziel’s observation helps to underscore the complexity and, I would argue, strategic ambiguity of Celia Cruz’s political positions and investments in the course of her long career; any exhaustive assessment of Celia’s politics should certainly rely on more than the version of them related in her admittedly multiauthored and posthumously revised autobiography, but that task is also certainly outside the scope of the present discussion.

12. Readers unfamiliar with this symptomatic tendency in Martí’s writing might want to refer to the following example of the sexualized, allegorical anthropomorphism in a late passage from the “Our America” essay: in addition to its ongoing struggle to liberate itself from the tenacious legacies of colonialism, Martí argues, late-nineteenth-century Latin America also “face[d] another danger . . . coming from the differing origins, methods, and interests of the continent’s two factions. The hour is near,” he goes on, “when she will be approached by an enterprising and forceful nation that will demand intimate relations with her, though it does not know her and disdains her . . . . Th[is] disdain . . . is our America’s greatest danger, and it is urgent—for the day of the visit is near—that her neighbor come to know her, and know her quickly, so that he will not disdain her. Out of ignorance, he may perhaps begin to covet her. But when he knows her, he will remove his hands from her in respect” (Allen, José Martí, 295). Clearly the symbolic sexual dynamic of this encounter as staged by Martí goes well beyond what one might read through Allen’s English translation of the customary gendering of substantives in Spanish. To appreciate fully how characteristic this tropic practice was in Cuban cultural discourse during and after Martí’s time, readers might also refer to Vera Kutzinski, Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993). Finally, while this discussion makes no claim regarding the depth or specificity of Wyclef Jean’s study of Martí, I do want to suggest that Wyclef’s staging of an alternatively sexual but similarly allegoric, anthropomorphic encounter between his Haiti and Cruz’s Cuba (and in more than one possible American context) participates in, as it critically signifies upon, a more pervasive discursive practice, one within which Martí’s work stands as a telling, and informing, precedent.


14. Kaplan, “Where Is Guantánamo?” 839–40. See also Braziel’s much more detailed account of what she calls the history of “international relations between the United States and Haiti as triangulated through Cuba,” and including the period of
“the late twentieth century as Haitian ‘boat people’ were intercepted at sea, detained at Guantánamo, and finally deported back to Haiti” (“Haití, Guantánamo, and the ‘One Indispensable Nation,’” 128, 135–38). Certainly as early as 1996’s The Score, Wyclef and his fellow Fugees were signifying their identification and solidarity with the most vulnerable of those caught up in the general, global crisis in displaced populations: the CD is announced in the intro as a “Refugee Camp Production”; in the track “Ready or Not,” Pras Michel raps from the position of a “refugee from Guantánamo Bay”; and in their strategic reinscription of “No Woman, No Cry,” Wyclef himself dedicates the song to “all refugees worldwide” (all tracks from The Score, Sony Records, 1996).

15. Cruz, Celia Cruz, 192.
16. Ibid., 167, 169.
27. I owe my own introduction to Agamben’s work, and its applicability to a wide variety of contemporary political and urban encampments, to Jeffrey Stevenson and the work that led to his 2006 Georgetown English MA thesis, “Precarious Citizenships: (Exclusionary) Inclusions of ‘The Homeless’ in Contemporary American Identity Politics.” That project uses Agamben’s theoretical elaboration of a different kind of camp to demonstrate persuasively, and brilliantly, how the homeless in the post-Reagan United States “exist impossibly within the city in exclusion from the city, which [in turn] becomes a volatile zone of indistinction as the so-called ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ [of the polis as such] collapse into one another” (5).
28. See Chris Lee, “Give Him Cred, He Hit the Streets,” accessed on www.latimes.com, 16 April 2006. In that article, Lee describes vividly the extent to which Pras committed himself to living as a homeless person: “He panhandled in downtown’s financial district to earn enough to eat, slept in the rain in a cardboard box after his tent was stolen and observed drug addicts buying crack cocaine in front of a police station.”
30. Arjun Appadurai, Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). See especially chap. 2, “The Civilization of Clashes,” 15–33. In contrast to what he calls the characteristically “vertebrate” qualities of such traditional forms of political and economic organization as the nation-state and the conventionally capitalist corporation, Appadurai sees especially in the practices of late capitalism in its most recent (global, speculative, vir-
tualized) forms a “laboratory for new forms of cellularity, de-linkage and local auton-
omy” (28). Provocatively, Appadurai goes on to suggest that this proliferating “cel-
lularity characterizes [not only] both capital and international terror, [but also] . . . nonstate organizations [that] have been harnessing the new means of cellularity to
create new solidarities and new strategies to contest the power of the nation-state
and global corporations,” and he concludes by describing these last as “utopian cel-
lularity forms, devoted to goals of equity, transparency and inclusion” (28–29). The
concluding passage of the present discussion implicitly wonders if Agamben and
Appadurai’s arguments might not be thought productively together, in order to read
in the local instance Tóbar’s vision of the homeless encampment in The Tattooed
Soldier’s Angeleno polis as one manifestation among others (one that’s admittedly
only imagined and discursive) of a “utopian cellular form,” one that finds positive
potentiality in living, as Agamben puts it, impossibly in inclusive exclusion from
the modern polis. That passage does not, however, extend its thinking beyond the
admittedly narrow parameters of literary discourse, cultural practice, and the inter-
disciplinary formations taking it upon themselves to produce alternative, critical
knowledges about the political and symbolic economies shaping our world(s); those
extensions remain to be thought, and done, in future work, and by parties better
skilled in those labors than I.

31. In addition to giving him a meaningful political and national background,
Tóbar also gives Antonio a literary background, which not only marks the degree of
his education and erudition but also poses for the reader the question of the homeless
protagonist’s eligibility (granted, we might say, by the “sovereign,” formal author-
ity of the novel as genre) to so function in the context of the text whose narrative
he himself inhabits. “Voy a ser uno de los homeless,” Antonio thinks to himself, and
the narrator further observes: “It did not seem right to him that a man who loved
to read, a man with Crimen y Castigo and El Idiota and countless other works of real
literature scattered on the floor of his apartment, would be called this ugly word.
And at the same time it made perfect sense, the logical conclusion to years of living
in this cold, alien country. No Spanish equivalent captured the shame and the sooty
desperation of the condition, and so this borrowed, compound word would have to
do: home-less” (5).

32. One telling example of where this set of disciplinary challenges puts us
today appeared in an opinion piece by the Cuban dissident, human rights activist,
and frequent Nobel Peace Prize nominee Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas titled “Four Years
in the Other Guantánamo,” which was published, among other places, in the Wash-
ington Post on 19 March 2007. There Payá marked the fourth anniversary of the
summary capture, arrest, and conviction by Cuban state authorities of a number of
his fellow dissidents; he describes how these “Cuban Spring prisoners were [then]
dispersed to jails around the country, from Pinar del Río in the west to another one
known for its inhumane treatment, the prison of Guantánamo.” In naming this latter
prison, of course, Payá acknowledges the need for the following clarification: “I am
not referring to the detainees of different nationalities who for months [sic] have been
confined by the United States at Guantánamo Bay naval base, a fact that I consider
unjust and which has rightly become a worldwide scandal. I am referring to the other
Guantánamo, which is a scandal because it has not become a scandal.”