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Introduction: Other Identified-Issues of Alterity in Hispanic Literature

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Other Identified: Issues of Alterity in Hispanic Literature

INTRODUCTION

WHEN BEGINNING TO think about this special issue of the *Colby Quarterly* which we were invited to edit, we thought about our peculiar position at Colby College, a predominantly white, upper middle-class school in rural Maine. Being among only a handful of faculty of color, we confront questions of identity, marginality and alterity every day. The challenging and often conflictive dynamic among various groups invariably raises questions of power, perception, and positionality—questions that have become central to discussions around identity politics across the disciplines.

We chose the title of our issue, *Other Identified*, aware of its ambivalent meaning: either to be identified as “other” by, or to identify oneself as “other” within and/or against, the dominant culture. The space between these two poles paradoxically becomes a position at once marginal and central, resulting in what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls a “life on the hyphen.” It is precisely from this in-between space that our contributors, like us, live, work and write. By fortuitous coincidence, each of them, all three academically trained and professionally affiliated with academic institutions in the United States, has a Cuban connection. Thus, we have asked each of them to reflect upon their own sense of otherness.

Islands, be they real or imaginary, populate Diana de Armas Wilson’s personal and intellectual geography:

Although I grew up in a *barrio* in New York City, I spent most of my childhood summers in Cuba, in San Antonio de los Baños, where my parents had a small *finca* that produced giant avocados. Although its topsoil has long been removed and its old stone fences demolished, I revisit it often in my mind’s eye. In Cuba I was always regarded as an “other”: as either a *gringa* or an *isleña*, both of which terms confused me. Our ancestors were *canarios*, the paternal side from La Gomera, the island where Columbus refurbished his ships en route to the Indies. One of my grandfathers fought in Cuba, in a motley battalion of *gomeros*, on the losing side of the Spanish-American War, and then (having become “other identified”?) married a Cuban woman. My last visit to Cuba was in 1958. It was a summer of legendary sunsets and, still unknown to our family, the end of an era. Although I have lived much of my adult life in the North American prairies, my imagination seems to be haunted by tropical islands. This may explain my need to locate Cervantes’s islands—Barataria and Isla Bárbara—in the New World.

Roberto Ignacio Díaz, a traveler like the nineteenth-century writer about whom he writes, meditates upon the complexities of his situation as a Cuban residing outside his homeland:

Writing about one's perceived alterity is a risky proposition, for it may lead into certain traps, such as self-pity or self-exoticism, or, what's worse, a bipolar view of the world. So I'm loath to identify myself as an "other," ever, though I'm sure others would readily identify me as one. I was born in Santiago de Cuba and raised in San Juan de Puerto Rico, and now I spend many an afternoon biking in and near Santa Monica, California. I like to imagine that James, John and Monica, those remote people now transmuted into oceanside toponyms on this continent, miraculously communicate my former and present habitations. Like Julio Cortázar, the Argentinian novelist, I cherish the notion of bridges. Years ago, I used to write travel guidebooks. Having collected maps and memories of many a distant city, I once sadly realized that I had never seen a map of my hometown, had no real memories of Cuba. Then once, on Prague's Charles Bridge, a baroque masterpiece, I saw and heard a group of Cubans who, unlike my parents and myself, were not exiles but actual residents of their (our?) baroque island. Could I identify myself with them, or was I an "other"? I'm happy to report that I cannot answer that question.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat, a Carolina-Cuban (as he calls himself in one of his poems), imagines Cuba as his true home despite the fact that, paradoxically, he cannot imagine living in a place other than the United States:

I'm Cuban-American, a member of what has been called the "one-and-a-half" generation, that is, Cubans who were born on the island and came to the United States as children or adolescents. I arrived in this country thirty-four years ago, when I was eleven years old, after the triumph of the Castro Revolution. As a one-and-a-halfer, I'm too old to be entirely American, but too young to be anything else—a condition that I share with many other Hispanic Americans as well as with immigrants from other cultures and lands. Born in Cuba but made in the U.S.A., I can no longer imagine living outside American culture and the English language. And yet Cuba remains my true home, the place that decisively shaped my character and my values. My life is a delicate balancing act between two countries, two cultures, two languages. Ask me where I really belong, in Cuba or in America, and I wouldn't be able to tell you, because I belong in both.¹

Because each of our contributors is in varying degrees "other identified," they all have scholarly interests that go beyond the rigid boundaries that have traditionally defined their disciplines. Diana de Armas Wilson, in "'Ocean Chivalry': Issues of Alterity in *Don Quixote*," examines the intersection of two discursive domains: chivalry and imperialism. Basing her reading of the novel on postcolonial theories, she argues that by parodically deploying the commonplaces of both books of chivalry and historiography, Cervantes destabilizes the authority of both discourses. Roberto Ignacio Díaz, in "Paratextual Snow; or, The Threshold of Mercedes Merlin," discusses the phantasmatic presence of Cuban-born but French-writing Merlin in the literary history of her native country. By examining the paratexts—titles, dedications, book covers, illustrations, blurbs—that accompany *La Havane*, her most famous work, he demonstrates how these

1. In response to our request, Pérez Firmat sent us this passage from his *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 1–2.

so-called marginal texts influence her and her *oeuvre*'s ambivalent status within the Cuban literary canon. Gustavo Pérez Firmat, in "Richard Rodríguez and the Art of Abstraction," explores the paradoxical subject position of the autobiographical narrator. Discussing Rodríguez's uses of reticence in *Hunger of Memory*, a narrative strategy that departs from the genre's promise for self-disclosure, Pérez Firmat calls attention to the tacit personal conflicts (primarily the clash or interference between Spanish and English) from which Rodríguez's provocative opinions about bilingual education and affirmative action arise.

As we were preparing this exciting volume of essays, we found ourselves reflecting more deeply upon our own otherness. In the process of our reflections and discussions with one another, we began to put down on paper our own responses to some of the same questions and issues raised and explored in the three invited essays. As we were bringing our project to completion, we realized that we each had written a personal essay which we thought could serve as a relevant postscript to the more scholarly meditations on the issue of alterity by Wilson, Díaz and Pérez Firmat. Thus, the volume closes with "The Others in My I" by Jorge Olivares and "Now You See Me, Now You Don't" by Betty Sasaki.

Betty Sasaki & Jorge Olivares
Guest Editors