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Inhaling the Nation: The Cultural Translation and Symbolic Performance of the Cigar in Cuba

Stephen Cruikshank
University of Alberta, Edmonton

El objetivo es propocionar la experiencia de Cuba, porque el ron es el sabor líquido de la isla y los habanos son el aroma.
— José Pablo Navarro

The brand names likely sound familiar: *Cohiba, Monte Cristo, Romeo y Julieta, Vegas Robaína, Partagás,* etc. These, along with more than fifteen other brands, represent Cuba's most successful exported product next to sugar and oil: tobacco. Ever since Spanish colonialism, tobacco has played an important economic role in Cuba's export market. Its success as an exported good has been supported by its reputation for being a top quality product desired in countries abroad. For the most part, Cuban rolled tobacco is considered to be the Ferrari of cigars in both name, design, and flavour. Throughout the world these aromatic products have become the prized possessions of wedding parties, beachside pastimes, fathers celebrating their firstborn children, celebrities on magazine covers such as *Cigar Aficionado*, and the collector's stamp of prominence and prestige stored away safely within fancy wooden humidified boxes. The importance of the Cuban cigar, however, is more than merely a question of economical utility and marketability. It has also performed a historic and symbolic role in shaping the discourse of Cuban culture and the formation of Cuban nationalism. My objective here is to briefly trace the cigar through various stages of Cuban history and highlight how the cigar has been translated and as a symbol useful to the construction of Cuban nationalism. The cigar, as seen through both a historical and culturally critical lens, has been created, or imagined per say as a symbol "rolled" around the complexities and postcolonial contexts of Cuban culture. As such, the cigar provides a valuable example in Cuban history of how simple objects can be translated over time as a national performance, as an "imagined" symbol, for the cultural ideologies and anxieties surrounding the discourse of national identity. Indeed in Cuba, the cigar is the poetic aroma of history and culture:

SMOKE

exhaled into history.
into the humid air,
Cuba buoyantly floats

drifting into mystery.
into the heart of the Caribbean,
Time is smoked like a cigar

Historically, the cigar in Cuba has tended to carry both a metaphorical and symbolical connection to the political and national discourses of the island. Cuban nationalism, and any form of nationalism for that matter is considered, as Benedict Anderson has notoriously examined, to be "imagined as a *community*, because . . . the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). Take this a step further, and we can understand that Anderson's notion of "comradery" has historically been asserted in the notion of a "homeland" space, an appeal which obviously enough resonates with Cuba's revolutionary cry for *patria o muerte*. Claudio Lomnitz describes it well when he explains that the "ideological appeals to nationhood [in Latin America] are most often coupled with the coercive, moral or economic force of other social relationships, including the appeal to the defense of hearth and home" (336). This is, for the most part, where the cigar fits in as a national symbol. How the cigar has been nationally "translated," or symbolically represented, has often reflected its value as an indigenous resource to the Caribbean. The tobacco of the cigar grows within the humid soil of the *patria*; it is a symbol of the Cuban's "homeland".

Figure 1: A tobacco field in Viñales, Cuba. Photo by author, 2009.

Since the birthplace of tobacco is rooted in Cuban soil, the cigar consequently became an ideal twentieth-century symbol for claiming a postcolonial identity separate from Spain. It could be translated (that is represented) as a symbol for Cuban originality and permanency, something that was always "Cuban" even before the cultural changes brought about by colonialism. Indeed the cigar seemed to direct the national gaze towards the past existence of Cuba's indigenous *Taíno* people who were known to have smoked tobacco wrapped in palm leaves and plantain leaves. In a manner of speaking it was therefore the *Taínos* who first introduced colonialists, such Christopher Columbus, to the first prototype of the cigar. Following the cigar's initial discovery (in what would have been the late fifteenth century) it did not take long before the cigar became a valuable export for colonial business. As quick as the *Taíno* population died off due to the spread of colonial violence and disease, the Spanish had begun manufacturing cigars and selling them in Spain by using tobacco shipped from Cuba. Due to the political and moral controversies over the cigar—only further exacerbated by the Spanish inquisition—it was not until 1731 with the establishment of the "Royal Manufacturers of Seville" that tobacco became a legal industry operating in Spain (Barth 125). Yet the cigar, despite being originally *crafted* in Spain, would always be considered to be "originally" *created* in Cuba.

Later, during the onset of discussions revolving around Cuba's postcolonial identity in the first half of the twentieth century, the Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortíz quickly realized the potential that the Cuban cigar had as a powerful symbol that could be used to appropriate a national Cuban identity, what he termed as *la Cubanidad*. His book *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y azúcar* [Cuban Counterpoint of Tobacco and Sugar], published in 1940, infamously placed the postcolonial condition of Cuba's diverse cultural and racial groups onto the metaphors of tobacco and sugar. Tobacco, brown and native to the country, became the symbol of the lost indigenous *Taíno* population and the darker *mestizo* and African racial integration in the country. Meanwhile sugar, the white product industrialized by the Europeans, became a symbol for the colonial influence and European heritage in the island. For Ortíz, both sugar and tobacco are infused into the Cuban economy like cultures and races are infused into the national character of the island. The word that summarizes this cultural infusion process, according to Ortíz, is "transculturation". The term advocates for a cultural diversity in Cuba that has historically avoided the acculturation of one culture into another. Instead of acculturation, transculturation implies that Cuba's cultural diversity is transferred, transgressed, and we may even say "translated," into a unified and ideal national character of *Cubanidad*. Tobacco, as Ortíz claims, "ofrece uno de los más extraordinarios procesos de transculturación" [offers one of the most extraordinary processes of transculturation] (204; my trans.). Symbolically tobacco is the *natural* Cuban product that is *nationally* grown and at the same time has been historically industrialized, sold, and consumed by a single culture of many races, peoples, and backgrounds.

Figure 2: At a cigar factory outside of Santiago de Cuba, a man washes off tobacco leaves before they are sent to be rolled. Photo by Author, 2009.

The cigar, since Ortíz's theory of transculturation, has historically acted as a key player in the discourse of national identity in Cuba. Neither can one forget that Ortíz grounded his work in the previous writings of the nineteenth century revolutionary forefather of the island José Martí. Martí's advocation for a nationally independent Cuba, in a manner of speaking, was the figurative match that lit the national cigar. His ideal of *mestizaje* [miscegenation], as emphasized in the work *Nuestra América* (1891), saw Cuban races and cultures molded into a single national character. Since the writings of Ortíz this national *mestizo* character has been balanced against the symbolic representation of tobacco. As the national character of Cuba sought to eliminate colonial tensions towards race through a social ideology of racial hybridization, the cigar resultantly became a racial symbol for the permanent belonging of dark skin on the island. Race became nationally consumed into the ideal of *cubanidad* like the cigar is consumed into the lungs of Cuban nationals.

CIGARUBA

Cig
ar,
Tab
aco,
Haba
nero,
Puro
de Cuba,
fidgeting in the
mouths of culture
& penetrating the
lungs of the nation
that breathes deep
into the *patría*, the
***mulato* soil of isle &**
sea bleeding tobacco
fields into the hearts
of homes and history.
Breathe in, inhale slow
to gather all the robust
aromas of *Taíno* habits,
of bold African labour,
of inventive European
agriculture, & fuming
transcultural smoke
rising into the humid
Cuban air. *Respiralo.*
Respire the heat, the
soil, and the tropics.
Taste the *pueblo* in
in the soggy leaves
molded to your
***yuma* mouth,**
In and out.
Así es.

When the political discourse shifted in Cuba from the early Republic (1902-1959) and the corrupt dictatorship of Batista to the revolutionary endeavours of Fidel Castro so did the image of tobacco. Tobacco, as originally appropriated by Ortíz, once again became "translated" into a national symbol, this time taking on the novel performance of "*la revolución*". It was well known that Fidel Castro smoked *Cohibas* and his Argentinian compatriot Ernesto Che Guevara smoked *Monte Cristos*. Basically stated, the true Cuban revolutionary smoked the most authentic of Cuban cigars. Consequently, throughout the sixties the Cuban Revolution quickly became a sign of masculine determinacy and political victory—of Che's *hombre nuevo*— symbolized in the figures of beards, rifles, and last but not least, cigars. The representation of the cigar as "revolutionary" was furthered when American president John F. Kennedy implemented the United States Embargo against Cuba which consequently led to the illegal status of Cuban tobacco throughout the United States. In the aftermath, the cigar became the all-desired product Americans wanted that they could not have. The value and desire of the cigar therefore increased along with its political stigmas. Following the initiation of the embargo, the cigar had become an anti-imperialist symbol, a product disappointedly shunned by American capitalists and proudly smoked by Cuban communists.

Figure 3: Bundles of newly rolled cigars are compiled on the front row of a cigar factory. Photo by author, 2009.

The symbolic translation and national performance of the cigar did not stop, however, at its "revolutionary" status. As the previous discourses of Cuban nationalism and revolution have been subjugated to intense criticism and amendment, the symbolic translation of tobacco has responded. Ironically the Cuban cigar has recently become a symbol used to unravel the past "imagined" developments of culture, identity, and nationalism that swept much of the twentieth-century. Today, tobacco remains the symbol that once helped to reconcile a postcolonial counterpoint in Cuba's history and, at the same time, has become the symbol of a growing dissident subculture defined in Cuba by the term *jineterismo*. Briefly explained, *jineterismo* has to do with the informal "black-market" of the country including the business of prostitution (prostitutes are known as *jineteras*) and street hustling (hustlers and street sellers are known as

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jineteros). Tobacco, in particular, has become a useful commodity for the underground markets of *jineterismo*. Cuban cigars, one of the most desired tourist commodities, has given way to a profitable black-market item to be sold in the Cuban streets. The informal dealings of cigars outside of state-mandated cigar shops places tobacco as a symbol caught between the metaphor of Cuban nationalism rooted in the political measures of Socialism developed in the 1960s and a capitalist commodity sold in the informal market which boomed in the 1990s during Cuba's so-called "Special Period." The Special Period came into fruition after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 which, due to the removal of Soviet exports, led to a drastic economic downfall in the country and the concurrent need for the Cuban government to rely on tourism to boost the failing economy. The reliance on the tourism industry also necessitated the legalization of the U.S. dollar in 1993 and the replacement of the equivalent Cuban currency CUC (convertible pesos) in 2004. This currency change consequently divided the Cuban economy between the lower-valued national peso which paid Cuban salaries and the CUC which primarily operates in the tourism sector. In the late 1990s, this led critics to see Cuba's economy and society as giving way to an "apartheid turístico" [tourist apartheid] (Campos; 316) where tourists had access to a higher currency, more expensive social venues throughout the country and, of course, higher quality goods including the all-desired Cuban cigar. As a result, Cuban cigars have become an ideal "black-market" good to be sold by Cuban *jineteros* to tourists in exchange for CUC dollars not accessible in their state-mandated salaries. In a rather ironic series of events, the cigar has become a carnivalesque symbol of Cuban nationalism. What was once performed as a national, trans-cultured symbol of Cuba's *mestizo* nation has now become the dissident symbol of capitalist commodification found stored underneath old mattresses and handled in worn down back alleyways.

A NEW AROMA

Twenty-Five Monte Cristos line this rectangular box
bought in a bathroom stall in Santa Clara by some *h-*
***ombre* named *fulano*. It's a good deal, a mighty barg-**
ain in the capitalist storefront of shit and toilet paper,
hidden behind the socialist walls of salsa clubs and r-
evolutionary billboards. I said thank you to *señor fu-*
***lano*, while he bid *adiós* with a tip of his green beret**
with a small red star illuminating the trail of his exit.
How clandestine: rows of tobacco sticks distributed
behind baroque doors, and Hemingway's sun (always
rising) piercing through the window, stabbing *jineteros*
and dazed *yumas* with heat n' hustle— *la aroma nueva.*

From the early stages of Cuban nationalism, through Fidel's push for Socialism, and to the subsequent developments of *jineterismo,* the cigar seems to keep burning and leaving a strong aromatic scent throughout the island's cultural identity. In this, I have only briefly and rather hastily traced the cigar's symbolic performance throughout Cuban history. The real question that pervades this brief historical analysis is how the cigar has come to be "translated". How exactly does a simple object of rolled tobacco become translated throughout Cuban history, changing its symbolic role through various performances: as a national counterpoint, as revolutionary, and lastly as politically dissident? The answer to this question begins by acknowledging the difference between translating meaning and translating language. Since the "cigar" refers to a physical object rather than a specific unit of speech or writing this must imply a translation, not of words, but of a perceived meaning associated with the object itself. We are therefore dealing with the question of physical representation of an object/symbol rather than the linguistic interpretation of words. What is translated is the meaning of the object, not the morphemic units of a text.

Theories on the translation of objects—that is how a physical object represents different meanings over time—tends to lean more towards the tenants of cultural criticism rather than the field of linguistic translation. Down this road, what has generally been considered as the "social constructionist approach" represents how the changing progression of cultural representation can be socially constructed (that is translated) from the same object over time. Stuart Hall interprets this very approach according to the efforts of a group to conceive representation "as entering into the very constitution of things; and thus culture is conceptualized as a primary or 'constitutive' process, as important as the economy or material 'base' in shaping social subjects and historical events" (*Representation* 5). Similar to the classic notions of Sausurrian linguistics that sees language as an ambiguous structure open to various translations, social constructivism see's cultural meaning to be ambiguous and open to various representations. The object, in a manner of speaking, becomes a language that gives off a specific meaning based on historical and cultural contexts. This meaning is ambiguous and therefore liable to change. Ideologically then, the object is open for cultural interpretation, thus providing a malleable symbol to twist a national identity around a specific temporal and cultural interpretation. A mere tobacco stick in this way becomes more. It becomes a stick of racial hybridity; a weapon of revolutionary identity, and a resource against socialist restrictions.

The cigar's translation is possible as long as it remains "historical," that is, as a symbol connected to past representations. These past representations are often metaphorical connections, for example Ortíz's connection with the cigar and dark-skin. When dealing with symbols it is often metaphorical language that provide the necessary connection between the object and history. Considering the topic of translation and history Walter Benjamin describes translation as a "form" and "[i]n order to grasp it as such we have to go back to the original. For in it lies the principle of translation, determined by the original's translatability" (76). The translation of an object proves no different. "Translatability," as Benjamin claims, is dependent upon the object's ability to "go back," that is, to reference the history of where it came from. In this case, rather than dealing with a word's historical *etymology* we are dealing with an object's historical *signification*. Neither should this be confused with an object's *symbology*. Symbology refers to how symbols are interpreted (eg. number "13" is bad luck) whereas signification deals specifically with the "significance" or meaning of the object that is being represented. It is a difference between interpretation and representation; one tells you what it *is* while the other tells you what it *represents*. If we consider culture as "imagined," then resultantly it would be far too fantastical of a context to "interpret". One cannot interpret what a culture means. However, on the other hand a culture is always open to be "represented."

A last point to acknowledge is that signification arrives before symbology; meaning comes before words. As Stuart Hall exclaims, culture "is inextricably connected with the role of *meaning* in society . . . we give things meaning by the way we *represent* them, and the principal means of representation in culture is *language*" (Italics in original; *Sony Walkman* 13). Language is therefore always a subsequent form of representation which is rooted in a history of meaning. At times language changes with a cultural symbol. In the case of Cuba, this is extremely evident in the historical change of terms concerning a female prostitute. What was once termed solely as a *prostituta* now takes on a new word with a new meaning in the term *jinetera*. At other times, it is the language around the object that changes. Such is what happens in our case with the cigar. The term "cigar" (or "*puro*" in Cuba) remains the same while the culture it represents such as *la patría, la cubanidad*, *la revolución,* or *el jineterismo* changes its terminology over time. Considering the consistent utilization of the cigar as an object of cultural representation in Cuba—not to mention the new developments of Fidel's recent death and Raul's aging presidency—it would not be surprising to see more cultural translations of the cigar added to that list in the days to come. Historically speaking, the cigar has not burnt out yet.

EXHALAR

inhalar.
para
nación
de una
llenas
cajas
vendiendo
jineteros
y ahora
socialistas,
revolucionarios,
nacionalistas,
cabezas de
las
sobre
flotado
que ha
mortal
pero
suave
almohada
una
corazones,
y los
pulmones
los
impregna
que
humo
de
señal
una
presente,
y el
pasado
entre el
fluye
que
cambio
de
un olor
lleva
ESTE puro antiguo marrón

EXHALE

inhale.
to
nation
with a
filled
boxes
selling
jineteros
and now
socialists,
revolutionaries,
nationalists,
heads of
the
above
floated
has
that
pillow
mortal
yet
soft
a
hearts,
and
lungs
the
impregnates
that
signal
smoke
a
present,
and the
the past
between
flows
that
change
of
an odour
carries
THIS old brown cigar

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