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Dreaming (in) the Republic: Reassessing Enrique Labrador Ruíz’s Trailer de sueños

by Yvette Fuentes

Poet, novelist, short story writer and journalist, Enrique Labrador Ruíz (1902–1991) was perhaps one of the most important writers of the Cuban Republic. The son of a carpenter, this self-taught writer was born and raised in the town of Sagua la Grande, in the central province of Las Villas. He began working as a journalist at the age of 16, serving as a correspondent to several Havana newspapers (Sánchez 10–11). In his 20s he lived and worked in the southern coast city of Cienfuegos before finally settling in the capital city of Havana. At odds with the Castro government, Labrador Ruíz went into exile in 1976, living briefly in Spain and Venezuela, before settling permanently in Miami in 1978, where he spent his last years (Fernández & Labrador Ruíz 267).

Though few know his work today, during his long life, Labrador Ruiz was the recipient of various literary and journalistic awards. The most important of these are the 1946 Hernández Cata Prize for the Short Story, the National Prize for the Novel in 1950 for La sangre hambrienta, and the 1951 Juan Gualberto Gómez Journalism Award, given to him by the National School of Journalists for his lifelong work in the field. Though barely 20 years have passed since his death, Enrique Labrador Ruíz remains an obscure writer, not only because of the difficulty in obtaining copies of his work (most are out of print), but also because of the linguistic complexity attributed to his narrative. Moreover, unlike other Cuban writers of his generation, such as Alejo Carpentier, few of Labrador Ruiz’s works have been translated into English, further narrowing his readership. The one exception is the fantastic short story “Conejito Ulán,” translated in English as “The Little Rabbit Ulan,” which has appeared in various anthologies, including A Century of Cuban Writers in Florida: Selected Prose and
Poetry, edited by Carolina Hospital in 1996. “Conejito Ulán” considered Labrador Ruiz’s finest, and for which he won the 1946 Hernandez Cata Award, has frequently appeared in its original Spanish in anthologies on Latin American literature. This story, however, is but one of the many that this Cuban author wrote during his lifetime. The remainder of his works, which include novels, poetry and essays remain out of print and/or are difficult to track down.

Ironically, although scarcely known today, Labrador Ruiz and his work were recognized and respected throughout Latin America during the first half of the 20th Century. In his exhaustive study on the history of the Latin American novel titled Breve historia de la novela hispanoamericana, published in 1954, the Venezuelan writer and critic Arturo Uslar Pietri included a brief but thorough entry on Labrador Ruiz and his narrative, specifically the novels Laberinto (1933) and Gaseiforme (1936), and analyzed the innovative techniques the Cuban writer employed in his work. As Uslar Pietri explains, the Cuban writer “ha ensayado muchas novedades técnicas para crear en su obra la impresión directa de la vida y las acciones simultáneas” [has implemented many new techniques in his works in order to create a unswerving impression of life and simultaneous actions] (146–47). Over 20 years later, in 1977, literary critic Rita Molinero published La narrativa de Enrique Labrador Ruiz, delving completely into the Cuban author and his novels. Since then, however, few scholars have chosen to study this once famous Cuban writer and his works. Two notable exceptions are Adis Barrio Tosar’s Realidad, fantasía y humor en tres escritores cubanos (Editorial Oriente, 2008) a comparative study on the use of humor in works by Labrador Ruiz, Enrique José Varona and Alfonso Hernández Catá, and Edwin Murrillo’s Uncanny Periphery: Existential(ist) Latin American Narratives of the 1930s (University of Miami, 2009) which analyzes Labrador Ruiz’s El laberinto de si mismo (1933) and novels by María Luisa Bombal and Graciliano Ramos.

One reason for the aversion to analyzing Labrador Ruiz’s work lies precisely in the complexity and almost Baroque nature of his narrative. Though his works were published and read, even during his lifetime some critics considered Labrador Ruiz and his literary works as marginal, particularly because of the difficulty in classifying his eclectic narrative style and the impossibility of situating his work into a specific literary school. In a 1984 interview with Florida International University professor Reinaldo Sánchez, Labrador himself commented on this very issue stating: "Por ahí han dicho que no pertenezco a ninguna; que soy contemporáneo de los monolitos, las pirámides y de ingenuas imágenes que me confortan en momentos de depresión" (46) [Everywhere, they have said that I don’t belong to any (movement); that I’m contemporaneous to monoliths, pyramids, and naive images that serve to comfort me during moments of depression]. And later added: "no me parezco ni a mi sombra, con lo cual elogio a tanta gente de buen gusto que se ríe de las clasificaciones" [I don’t even resemble my shadow, and by saying this I praise those people of good taste who laugh at classifications] (46).

Precisely because of this so-called marginality, Labrador Ruiz’s work deserves reassessment, especially at present when the idea of what constitutes the (Cuban) Canon is being redefined and/or contested. It is for his marked narrative techniques, his disdain for categorizations, as well as for his unconventional worldview regarding Cuban society that Enrique Labrador Ruiz’s work needs to be analyzed and considered an important precursor of the contemporary Cuban literature being produced on and off the island. In this study, I turn to the short story collection Trailer de sueños (1949) to explore the textual and discursive strategies Enrique Labrador Ruiz
deploy to represent pre-revolutionary Cuban society. I specifically focus on how Labrador Ruiz reflects the frustration his characters face within their particular surroundings through dream narrations and through the juxtaposition of reality and fantasy. I argue that through these apparent “personal” dream narrations, Labrador Ruiz reveals both the personal and the collective frustration present in the Cuban Republic, and in addition, presents readers with his worldview regarding the possible future of the nation. Moreover, Labrador Ruiz’s works turn to the phenomenon of Cuban identity, a recurrent theme in Cuban literature, past and present.

In his essay "La diferencia cubana," historian Rafael Rojas argues that Cuba has always lived with the question of “being” or as he states, “Cuba siempre ha vivido en la pregunta por el ser” (Rojas 105). Undoubtedly throughout Cuba’s history, statesmen and scholars have returned numerous times to the idea of what constitutes Cuban identity. The father of Cuban anthropology, Fernando Ortiz, for example, used the term cubanía to posit that Cubanness stems from the heartfelt desire to be Cuban, rather than from birthplace or origin. As is the case with all ethnicities and/or nationalities, Cuban identity has and most probably will always be complex, intricately tied to the turbulent history of the nation. Since the encounter between the native peoples and the Spanish in the 15th Century, Cuba has suffered violence, political instability, and economic highs and lows. In the 20th Century alone, following independence from Spain, Cuba experienced a series of upheavals, commencing with U.S. intervention and the Platt Amendment, and continuing through the Republic and Revolutionary periods. No doubt that these social, economic and political disturbances helped shape the Cuban character, propelling Cubans to continually question their place in society, and in a sense, spawning individuals who “double” as way of surviving specific situations. Historian Louis Pérez posits that this turmoil is tied to competing versions of cubanidad, and argues "this dualism has been one of the principal sources of tension in Cuban history, for it has served to give content and context to rival versions of liberty, equality and justice" (Pérez viii).

In other studies, I have looked at the idea of doubling, the notion that individuals divide, or split, in a sort of societal schizophrenia as a result of political/social conditions faced on and off the island. Indeed, one finds numerous examples of splitting or doubling in Cuban literature, especially in the literature produced by Cuban exile and Cuban-American writers. I would add, however, that "doubling," intricately tied to the notion of "ser/no ser" (to be/not be) to borrow from Rafael Rojas, predates contemporary literature to be found in much of the work produced in the Cuban Republic. Enrique Labrador Ruiz’s Trailer de sueños is but one work from the period that is concerned with identity, and in particular, the way in which conditions in society manifest themselves in the lives and dreams of various Cuban characters. In several interviews, Labrador Ruiz made reference to "esa dualidad transitoria" (“that transitory duality”), which he believed stemmed from the fact that Cubans have always lacked a clear or focused government. Or as he said, "governados mal o bien, u otras veces mediocremente o con tirantez, no hemos sido gobernados—en ese país que tanto amamos—por un pensamiento central" (Sánchez 35) [governed well or badly, or other times with mediocrity or tyranny, we haven’t been governed—in that country we love dearly—by a central thought]. And furthermore: "El cubano es un angustiado y no sabe por qué; es un ser crítico y no sabe por qué. A veces se hostiliza a sí mismo y otras veces a sus vecinos; en el fondo hay una carcoma, una angustia secreta que funciona de manera obsesiva" (38) [The Cuban is an anguished soul, and doesn’t know why; he/she’s a critical being and doesn’t know why. Sometimes he/she is hostile to him/herself and other times
to his neighbors; deep down there’s something eating him/her up, a secret anguish that works in an obsessive way]. In the three stories that comprise *Trailer de sueños*, Labrador comments upon those frustrations, the anguish, facing his individual (Cuban) characters, and I contend the nation as a whole, and the way in which these individuals “split” as a means of surviving their particular situation.

First published in 1949 by the Alameda Publishing House of Havana, *Trailer de sueños* is composed of three untitled short stories. According to Jorge Mañach, who critiqued the work in the newspaper *El Diario de la Marina* on October 16, 1949, Labrador's work is not easy reading ("no es lectura popular") (Mañach VII). It is, moreover, a work that requires, despite its apparent brevity, in-depth reading for its baroque narrative style. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that these stories have rarely been read or studied. Only 300 copies were originally printed, and the work was only reedited in the year 2000 in Miami under the editorial eye of Carlos Espinoza. What these stories do well is present us with a look into pre-revolutionary, republican Cuba, a period of instability, frustrations and uncertainty.

The first story centers on the character Lorenzo and his struggle within a dream with a phantom alter ego. The story is a continual dialogue between the two—Lorenzo and the phantom—over life’s difficulties, including solitude, sin, extremism and failure. Through his dreams, Lorenzo makes sense of his haphazard life and the right and wrong choices he’s made. The language, as with most of Labrador Ruiz’s narrative is ornate and difficult to follow, and there are several references to Dante’s *Inferno*. The second story, on which the remainder of this paper focuses, centers on a young man and his wife Petruca and the various problems they face while returning home from a party. And finally, the third story, like the first, centers on a young man, Juan Antonio and his constant desire to remain in a dreamlike state. Like the character of Lorenzo, in his dreams Juan Antonio is repeatedly faced with struggles and battles over what is right and wrong. Through his dreams, Juan Antonio is able to achieve what he’s unable to in the real world. As the narrator explains, “llegó a descubrir la importancia de muchas ansiedades menesterosas...” [he came to discover the importance of so many cumbersome anxieties] (Labrador Ruiz 30). Although the first and third story center on the particular frustrations individuals face, only the second story offers an in-depth criticism of Cuba’s pre-revolutionary Republican society.

Although untitled, this story is, in fact, a rewriting of the short story "Petrusca," which first appeared in a Colombian magazine in 1939. Unlike the first and third stories that are narrated by omniscient narrators, this second story is narrated in the first person by the main character. Like in the other two stories, the character in this story is a young man, although nameless, who is inundated with self-doubts, questions, and is anguish with what occurs around him. The story begins with the young man and his wife Petruca at a banquet, and the young man's subsequent narration centers on the couple's failed attempts to return home at the end of the evening. As already mentioned, unlike the other stories in *Trailer de sueños*, in this story there are direct references to political and social problems facing Cuban society, specifically the rampant corruption and "amiguísmo" (or nepotism) present in the Republic. Early on in the narration, the narrator explains:
... ese banquete que nos ofreciera un político amigo de la familia y el repórter beneficiado de la situación; ese banquete donde intervino cierto arrogante militar y los recuerdos de los años mozos del político y del repórter cuando ellos se hicieron de la poderosa amistad del filósofo—amistad que nunca les valió para nada, según ellos, a fuerza de comprarles billetes enteros cada sorteo (21).

... that banquet that a politician friend of the family offered us, and from which the reporter benefitted; that banquet where a certain arrogant military man intervened, and where the politician and reporter reminisced about their youth, recalling the time when they became friends with the well-known philosopher—a friendship which, according to them, never earned them anything, except the compulsory responsibility of buying raffle tickets from him.

Although it is unclear exactly when this particular story is set, this quote, no doubt, reflects the particular social and political problems facing the early Republic, the period when Labrador Ruiz was born and raised. According to Louis Pérez, corruption in Cuban public life, including bribery and embezzlement, was the norm during various presidential administrations including that of José Miguel Gómez (1908–1912), Mario Menocal (1912–1920), and Alfredo Zayas (1920–1924). Although certain reforms did take place under the first Machado presidency, by the late 20s and early 30s the depression had hit Cuba, as well as another serious problem—a full-fledged repressive dictatorship. Thus, the early 1930s saw a growing military presence, military police (La Porra), a death squad and pervasive government censorship of the media. Following the 1933 coup, there was the provisional government under the leadership of Ramón Grau San Martín but it too was short-lived, and by the late 1930s military repression had returned and several puppet presidents came to power under the direction of Batista. Thus, during its first 40 years the Republic was plagued by continuous economic, social and political problems. Labrador's narrator describes this period as "el malestar político reinante," or the generalized political malaise affecting Cuban society (21).

As already mentioned, the characters in this story search for a way home. As the night wears on the young man explains, "Anduve como de costumbre de aquí a allá buscando el sitio en que podía tomar el tranvía cotidiano de regreso..." [I walked as usual from here to there looking for the site from where I could take the daily tram back (home)] As he walks aimlessly, the young man recalls the politician's suggestions to the reporter to open "un salón de barbería en la calle de Obispo, con precios convencionales, pues no se podía seguir cobrando los abusivos precios de lujo en una calle que había venido tan a menos" [a barber shop on Obispo street, with conventional prices since it was not possible to continue charging excessive prices on a street that no longer merited it] (22). But the reporter argued that he intended to "seguir cobrando igual que los otros, caso de que se decidiera a establecer el salón" [continue charging the same as others if he indeed opted to open the salon] (22). By inserting these comments while the young man goes around in circles (como de costumbre, or as usual) on his way home, Labrador underscores, once again, the social and political problems affecting society. The young man searches in vain for a way "home," literally and metaphorically going around in circles. Lacking connections in this society, he is unable to move forward, he appears stuck or stagnant, unable to succeed in this society where corruption is the norm. In fact, although he and his wife wait for a trolley to take them back home, none stop for them, and the only one that does, would take them further out than their home. Realizing that no trolley will stop for them, Petruca and the young
man decide to walk home. He explains their predicament as follows: "Y nos metimos por tierras incultas y caminos fangosos pero todo dentro de la ciudad; un trecho de selva ruinosa con jaramagos donde el perfil de una cornisa demasiado alta incidía con el barro del arroyo evidentemente demasiado bajo; un jirón de luz que escamoteaba tinieblas y las hacía reaparecer...’ (22–23) [And we entered into uncultivated lands and muddy roads, but within the city; a stretch of ruinous jungle where the profile of a very high hedge contrasted with the mud of a noticeable low creek; a ray of light caused the shadows to hide then reappear...]

The city, which thanks to direct references we know to be Havana, appears as a "selva ruinosa," an untamed jungle that takes on sinister characteristics. Labrador's short story reminds readers of the telluric novels of the 1920s and 1930s, yet his character does not travel into the jungle, but rather finds himself trapped inside a city-jungle, a paradoxical space, a place that should offer social movement but fails to do so. Indeed, in Labrador's story, the city-jungle is personified, as when the narrator makes reference to "la cerca de piña" (the pineapple bush fence) that he and Petruca encounter while walking home. As he explains, upon sensing Petruca's desire to knock it down, the pineapple plant "creció ante el impulso abrumador de Petruca con fuerza natural; es decir, se hizo más compacta y defensiva, entretejió sus hojas acantonadas y se armó de irresistibles puás vegetales" (23) [it grew with momentum and natural force before Petruca’s overwhelming impulse; that is, it becomes more compact and defensive, interweaving its confined leaves and arming itself with an irresistible vegetable barbed wire]. This moment in the narration is crucial for up to this point the reader believes the narration to be direct, yet this statement marks a break. The integration of the fantastic into the narration leads readers to hesitate, and hesitation, according to Todorov is a key element in fantastic literature. From this point forward, readers begin to doubt as to whether this tale is real or imagined. More important than the incorporation of the technique, however, is that the use of the fantastic in the narrative becomes a means of commenting upon inconsistencies found in present reality. Or as Todorov posits, "the fantastic permits us to cross certain frontiers that are inaccessible so long as we have no recourse to it" (Todorov 158).

Following this incident with the pineapple bush, there is a return to a more realistic narration. At this point, the narrator explains that he and Petruca would never be able to reach home before daybreak, "nunca podríamos volver a casa antes que fuese de día en todo el resto de nuestra vida y que la manía destructura en cualquier momento haría lo suyo" (Labrador Ruiz 23) [we would never be able to return home in daylight for the rest of our life and that the destructive force would do whatever it wanted at any moment]. Trudging along, the characters recall their early life, including the death of their baby. Thus the impossibility of return refers not solely to their actual physical home, but to an emotional one as well. There is a hint of nostalgia for an idealistic past long gone, which points to the characters' current personal frustrations as well as to more general frustrations facing the nation. They walk in silence, dreaming about an idealized past to which they can never return. The city and the streets are in decay, reflecting abandonment and corruption, as well as the impossibility of success or movement. Indeed, as the characters reflect upon an idealized past, they walk along a city street that is "hundida, anegada de lodo y podredumbre" (24) [sunken, full of mud and rot]. Finally, as they walk along la Plaza de Albear, a truck passes by and offers them a ride home. The truck, carrying trees, again a reference to plant life, allows them to hop on board. He rides on the back, with the trees, while Petruca sits in the front next to the driver. The calmness they both feel is soon interrupted by the smell of
carburetor fumes. Then, in a vague, almost surreal description, the man describes how he calls out for her and she appears to kiss the driver. Then, Petruca appears to run away, skipping into the forest, and presumably to death. Or as he says:

... se fue esfumando por detrás del bosque, entre los tules y algarrobos, temblorosamente, hacia donde el sol nace, dando saltitos como un pájaro y como un pájaro desflorando aventura infinita del cielo y sus kalpas (27).

... she began fading behind the forest, among the tules and carob trees, trembling, to where the sun rises, hopping like a bird, and like a bird enjoying the infinite adventures of heaven and its kalpas.

The story concludes with the realization that this tale has been a recurring dream, one that rather than recall a happy past with Petruca, points to solitude, death, and failure.

The individual stories that comprise Trailer de sueños may be read on the surface as tales about individual failures and personal frustrations. In each tale, characters fight with their inner selves within their particular dreams. They struggle to make sense of their personal failures, often evading reality and or hiding or escaping behind sleep or dreams. There is a doubling that occurs to the three protagonists in these works that characterizes the Cuban subject. Moreover, a deeper reading of these stories, together with a study of the author's worldview, is revealing because in addition to centering on individual stories about specific characters, they reflect 1930s and 1940s Republican Cuba, a period fraught with instability, as well as points to the possible future of the nation. Although not focusing solely on Cuban society, these stories reflect societal malaise.

Perhaps the most crucial element that points to Cuba, and reveals Labrador's ideas on the present and possible future of Cuban society, rests in the title of the collection, Trailer de sueños. Rather than choosing the common metaphor of Cuba as reptile, as one finds in Nicolás Guillén’s poetry, for example, Labrador opts for a mechanical vehicle, the trailer, to represent the island-nation. His choice of the trailer to hold these stories together is very relevant. For, although a vehicle with wheels (able to move or travel), the trailer needs pulling lest it be perennially parked or stagnant. And moreover, even while moving, if not properly pulled, the trailer can roll along aimlessly into disaster. With these “dreams” or stories, Labrador comments on the political present that was Republican Cuba, a mal-governed society, spiraling out of control, as well as projects a probable future for the island, an island of dreams, frustrations, and unfulfilled promises which inches ever closer to a hecatomb.

In conclusion, in the short story collection Trailer de sueños, Cuban author Enrique Labrador Ruiz juxtaposes reality and fantasy to reveal both the personal and the collective frustration present in 1930s and 1940s Cuba, as well as presents readers with his worldview regarding the possible future of the nation. Though today he is almost forgotten, the works of this once distinguished writer and journalist require reexamination by scholars interested in Latin American literature. Moreover, a return to Enrique Labrador Ruiz is indispensable for comprehending Cuban literature from the past and present. Labrador Ruiz’s baroque style, the incorporation of the fantastic in his work, his unconventional worldview, and his interest in the Cuban subject, all need to be reassessed by contemporary scholars. I’ve barely scratched the surface on the work of this now forgotten writer. However, I hope that this short study of Trailer
de sueños sparks your interest in the work of this Cuban author who was known to his friends simply as “Labrador.”

Endnotes

1. Translations mine, unless otherwise noted

Works Cited


