

Introduction

Feeling Cuban

By not opening with a joke, I heed a valuable lesson learned from the many comedians I write about in this book. Any good joke, like any introduction worth reading, requires a solid setup. Moments of humor will come—however fraught—as I discuss political and generational shifts within the Cuban diaspora in the United States from the 1970s to the 2010s while at the same time pointing out what ludic popular culture can tell us about community formations, performance, and race. But before I can get to these points, I need to provide you with some of the details, the context, that will make the purpose of this book clearer.

Think of it as my own setup.

I grew up in and around Union City, New Jersey, affectionately referred to as “Havana on the Hudson” because of the large Cuban population that settled there in the years following Fidel Castro’s rise to power in 1959. My family had all the exile street cred: unfair imprisonments, seizure of property, the high-ranking family member whose loyalty to the Revolution trumped family ties. While these stories framed angry and explicit anti-Castro sentiment, they were largely overshadowed in both frequency and intensity by the ludic in quotidian life. Jokes about bumbling communists. Trips to the bathroom prefaced with “voy a mandar una carta a Fidel” (I’m going to send a letter to Fidel). My grandfather’s *guajiro* sayings marked by double entendre and filtered through the symbolic economy of the farm he worked—plenty of *gallos* and *yeguas*. From an early age, this is what it meant to be Cuban in my mind. Not the rumba or roast pork but *la jodedera*, “perhaps our only national sport” as Enrico Mario Santí has suggested—the joking, wordplay, and comic barbs aimed at anyone who needed to get knocked down a peg.¹

In making my way through the bibliography on Cuban America, I found the affective emphasis inverted. Most scholarship on Cuban America equated exile with melancholy, anger, and bitterness.² Where was the focus on the kind of quotidian pleasures that are the reward for a long workweek—the bawdy satirical comedy playing at a local theater in Little Havana, the latest joke about Fidel a friend shares over a *cafecito*? To be sure, life in the exile community wasn't one big conga line down Calle Ocho or Bergenline Avenue. But popular culture was always there to inspire not only the laughter that keeps you from crying but also a ludic sociability that helped shape narratives of a community. Searching for a way to make sense of what felt like a profound disconnect between scholarly focus and lived experience, I started listening to jokes, lots and lots of jokes, in an attempt to laugh my way to greater clarity.

After hours of listening to the comedy of Guillermo Alvarez Guedes—one of the most beloved figures in the history of Cuban popular culture—I came upon a moment from his eleventh standup album recorded live in 1980 that would become the point of departure for this book. Innocently enough, Alvarez Guedes begins the second half of this album with some observational humor about people's obsession with putting on weight. But before he can provide his insight into corpulence, a man in the audience interrupts the crowd's attentive silence by directly addressing the comedian: “¿Y no va a hablar del Mariel?” (Aren't you going to talk about Mariel?).³ At the time of the recording, Miami was a city in chaos roiled by racial tension and the Mariel boat crisis.⁴ Cubans had stormed the Peruvian embassy in Havana in hopes of securing political asylum. In an effort to take control of the narrative, Fidel Castro allowed people to leave via the port of Mariel—in fact openly insisted that anyone who wanted to leave the country could do so. Castro claimed that he was ridding Cuba of its “undesirables”—criminals, drug abusers, homosexuals, and others he categorized as socially deviant.⁵ The *Miami Herald*, voice of the white establishment and hostile to the Cuban population at the time, played a key role in disseminating these characterizations. The depressed state of the Miami economy, conflicting opinions about the *marielitos* within the exile community, and the backlash by the white establishment due to the “uncomfortably large Cuban population” created an atmosphere of heightened tension for *all* Cubans in Miami at the time.⁶

So when a man in the audience prompted Alvarez Guedes to address the unfolding crisis in the middle of his set, the air was instantly sucked out of the room, leaving an anxious silence in its wake. The interjection seemed to catch Alvarez Guedes off guard. All of his standup performances were well planned, and this is the only album out of thirty-two in which the comedian can be heard breaking his routine and interacting with his audience in a direct, seemingly unscripted dialogue.⁷ After some hesitation, he replied:

“No chico, lo del Mariel es, no le veo el ángulo humorístico a eso. Eso es muy dramático. Porque están utilizando a los cubanos otra vez, los comunistas. Están aprovechándose. Saben que los que son amantes de la libertad son también amantes de la familia. Entonces están aprovechando esas circunstancias.” (No man, I don’t see the humorous angle to that. That is very dramatic. Because they are using the Cubans again, the communists. They are taking advantage. They know that the lovers of freedom also love their families and so they are taking advantage of the circumstances.)⁸

Remarkably though, despite the disruption of his usual performance practice, Alvarez Guedes successfully reverses the building tide of tension through a seamless shift back into his comic persona. He ends his commentary on the boatlift with the following quip about the difficult conditions Cubans endured while awaiting passage: “Lo que cobran es una barbaridad para las cosas: un galón de agua diez pesos, una cerveza quince pesos, un filete treinta pesos. ¡Pa’ cagar hay que pagar siete pesos allí! ¡Dos pesos por la bolsa y cinco para el que lo va a tirar!” (What they [Cuban price gougers] charge is outrageous: ten dollars for a gallon of water, fifteen for a beer, thirty for a steak. Even to take a shit you have to pay seven bucks! Two for the bag and five for the guy who has to get rid of it!).⁹ This unexpected comic shift instantly dispels the unease in the room. All at once and for a full twenty-four seconds after the punchline, the audience communicates its relief with bursts of laughter accompanied by clapping, moans, and screeches of delight that can be heard on the track even as Alvarez Guedes attempts to segue back into his routine. Audience members can be heard exhaling, feeling saved from a potentially unpleasurable turn to the evening. One man lets out a prolonged “ayyyy” as he sighs in comic relief. Another audibly declares, “Está muy

bueno,” as the men and women around him catch their breath. In a span of fifty-five seconds, Alvarez Guedes successfully reroutes his audience’s affective bearing toward Mariel from anxiety to a state of relieved comic pleasure.

When prompted to engage the topic of Mariel, the comedian first responds with a serious, grave tone consistent with exile political talking points and complete with a reference to the family-crushing *comunistas*. Indeed, the initial tone and language Alvarez Guedes deploys in his response are consistent with dominant representations of the exile community. They reflect the Cuban America chronicled so elaborately in the media: rowdy protests in the streets denouncing Fidel Castro and the Clinton administration during the Elián González saga come to mind. It was the Cuban America of presidential elections—an irascible bunch easily provoked, a Republican voting bloc that supports the candidate with the hardest line on Cuba, or put more appropriately, the candidate who can most passionately parrot the same empty anti-Castro rhetoric and punctuate it with a final, triumphant, English-inflected *Cuba Leebray!*¹⁰

But the wheezing of audience members catching their breath and the high-pitched staccato chuckles in response to Alvarez Guedes’s comic twist communicate an intensity of experience that demands attention. I imagine people drying their eyes, faces reddening, and doubled-over. There is a choral quality to the laughter, which produces an invitation to the listener that says, “Join us.” Though I have heard this recording dozens of times, I cannot help but be affected by laughter’s contagious properties. I close one eye, my chest begins to quake, and I become part of the chorus of laughers “responding to an exigency of life in common.”¹¹ This life in common is marked by the shared understanding of that historical moment, the setup and twist, and a recognition of how Alvarez Guedes’s performance *feels* Cuban—a feeling triggered by his accent, tone, the words he chooses, and the scatological framework for his punchline. This moment signals to me another way for thinking about the relationship between affect, politics, and everyday life. What if, instead of quickly moving from the humor to the somberness surrounding Mariel, we lingered on that ludic intensity? What if we followed Alvarez Guedes’s lead, laughed along with the audience, and listened to the rest