

## JOSEFINA TARAFÁ: PHOTOGRAPHY FOR UNDERSTANDING

During the 1970s, the photographer, editor, and philanthropist, Josefina Tarafa y Govín (born Havana, Cuba, August 27, 1907–died Miami, Florida, September 30, 1982), also known as Fifina or Fifi, created an exceptional body of photographs that picture Miami transformed by the arrival of her fellow Cuban immigrants. The first exhibition dedicated to Tarafa’s photography, *Remaking Miami* includes thirty posthumous prints, made from photographs in an archive of approximately one hundred and fifty original images, now preserved in postcard-size format and held by the Lydia Cabrera Papers at the Cuban Heritage Collection of the University of Miami Libraries. The prints were produced in collaboration with MDC Special Collections.

Despite her many accomplishments, Tarafa remains a forgotten character in the history of Cuban culture. Her presence in written accounts registers as slight, nearly marginal, and confined almost entirely to academic writing in the United States. In Cuba today, she is absolutely unknown.

### TARAFÁ IN CUBA IN THE 1940S AND 1950S

We generally link Tarafa’s name to that of another Cuban woman banned for decades from the country’s cultural history: her close friend Lydia Cabrera (1899–1991). The two collaborated on some of Cabrera’s most crucial projects in the field of anthropological research. Even outside of Cuba, however, Tarafa’s participation in these projects often goes unnoticed, as if the intellectual and cultural heft of Cabrera’s extensive work fenced off her achievements from the contributions of others.

We associate *El Monte*, that fundamental book for understanding Afro-Cuban culture, published in Havana in 1954, with Cabrera, its author. But who remembers the names of the photographers who took the images that illustrate it? Among them are María Teresa de Rojas (1902–87), Cabrera’s life-partner, as well as Tarafa. In the 1940s and ‘50s, Tarafa accompanied Cabrera as a photographer on what Cabrera called her “folkloric excursions.” The predominance of Tarafa’s images among the book’s illustrations attests to this activity.<sup>1</sup>

In the winter of 1956, Tarafa and Cabrera—accompanied by two illustrious guests, the anthropologists Pierre Verger (1902–96), a Frenchman who lived in Bahia, Brazil (an outstanding photographer himself), and Alfred Métraux (1902–63), a Swiss man who resided in France—joined the annual pilgrimage of Santería officiants to the lagoon of San Joaquín de Ibáñez in the province of Matanzas to

celebrate Yemayá, the main deity of the area, and the other Orishas. The event took place in the vicinity of the Central Cuba sugar mill belonging to the Azucarera Central de Cuba, S.A., a company that Tarafa co-owned. Cabrera and Tarafa recorded this event in their respective mediums, resulting in a book, *La Laguna Sagrada de San Joaquín*, for which the two shared authorship.<sup>2</sup> And from 1955 to approximately 1957, in Matanzas and Havana, Tarafa, accompanied Cabrera and used her portable Ampex recorder to tape Afro-Cuban ritual songs performed by the practitioners themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Before the establishment of the Castro dictatorship forced Tarafa into exile in Rome in 1960, she developed another photographic project in Cuba, extensively documenting the residential and industrial architecture of twenty nineteenth-century sugar mills still in existence at that time in the province of Matanzas. The thorough study includes records of both the exteriors and interiors of the houses and barracks, as well as of the production facilities and other buildings.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1950s, Tarafa also occasionally made incursions into book publishing and, far more consistently, acted as a benefactor. In this latter role, she provided financial support to her close friend, the Spanish philosopher and writer María Zambrano (1904–91) between 1947 and 1962.<sup>5</sup> Yet Tarafa never joined writers or artists groups, or even photography associations, despite the fact that mid-century Cuba had a great number of professional photographers, as well as one of the most important amateur movements in all of Latin America. She had considerable wealth and a busy life dedicated to attending to her siblings and nephews, her businesses, her intellectual pursuits, her creative work, and frequent trips abroad. Her intimate and deep relationship with culture, understood in its anthropological sense, centered mainly around her close circle of female friends.<sup>6</sup>

### EXILE: EUROPE AND MIAMI

Tarafa seems not to have undertaken any photographic work during the 1960s, when she left Cuba and settled abroad. We can hypothesize that, living in Europe at the time, with occasional travel to Miami, she was far from the elements that had given form, content, and density to her photography of the previous two decades. In the Miami of the 1970s, however, she again found motivation to continue her exploration of *lo cubano* (Cubanness), probing its forms of visibility in the city brimming with immigrants from the island. We can see this re-encounter with photography as an ambitious visual practice in the overwhelming inclusion of all kinds of signs written in Spanish and placed in public spaces, especially adver-

tisements for businesses or service providers. Tarafa’s extended visual essay is preserved in small volumes of images, all of them likely printed in a consumer photo lab in the city.

By the time Tarafa made her photo essay, Miami had already emerged as the center of Cuban immigration. Between 1959, the year of Fidel Castro’s rise to power, and 1962, around 250,000 Cubans came to the United States as exiles. From January 1961 until the Missile Crisis in October 1962, when that first migratory flow was interrupted, most of those who came settled in Miami, the arrival point of flights from Cuba during that period. The second wave of migration, from 1965 to 1973, brought about 300,000 more to the country, many of whom also stayed in this city.<sup>7</sup> By the early 1970s, the Cuban community comprised a majority of Miami’s Latino population, and of immigrants in general. According to the 1970 census, immigrants—that is, people born abroad—made up 41.8% of the local population, for a total of 140,207 inhabitants. Of these, 107,445, or about 75%, were Cuban.<sup>8</sup> Not only did this flood of immigration drastically change the composition of the city’s population, but its urban physiognomy was also reshaped.

### JOSEFINA TARAFÁ’S PHOTOGRAPHY

Despite her professionalism, many regarded Tarafa as an amateur photographer because she did not depend on the creative practice for her income. Yet she combined an understanding of photography as an instrument for cultural interpretation with a growing interest in the artistic treatment of representation, always taking care that the documentary function of the image in her projects remained unhindered.

Remarkably for a wealthy white Cuban landholder with a cosmopolitan background, Tarafa consistently explored Afro-Cuban cultural manifestations in a way unequaled by any other photographer on the island at the time. She achieved a perceptible degree of closeness and familiarity with her subjects. Certainly, Cabrera initially influenced Tarafa as a visual anthropologist, and others, such as Verger and Métraux may have as well, but she ultimately developed her own sensibility largely by intuition. Her photographic work effectively represented and valorized elements of Cuban culture that were despised, neglected, or unknown to her contemporaries, but of great importance in the configuration of a national identity. A similar commitment to the photographic image guided her work in Miami.

At various times throughout the 1970s, in her endeavors to take stock of the great impact that her compatriots were having on the city previously known chiefly as a

beach resort, Tarafa traveled with her camera throughout the urban space of Miami. She found most of the subjects she photographed in Little Havana and its surroundings, which together with Hialeah had at that time one of the most numerous populations of immigrants from the island.

Tarafa’s explorations brought together the interests and approaches of urban and visual anthropology. Unknown until now, her work represents a pioneering effort in broadening the horizons of both disciplines. As much as the object of her study, Miami formed the setting for her research. Immigration, little studied at the time, was her topic, but Tarafa emphasized the transformative cultural aspects of the relationship between immigrants and their environment. Her work pictures how Cuban immigrants generated the necessary conditions for their constitution as an extended community visible in the space of the city, and how they contributed to transforming it culturally, as well as economically and socially.

While today we see these issues as intrinsic to urban anthropology, we must remember that, using photography as her medium of evidence gathering, Tarafa focused on the recording of linguistic signs as primary vehicles for the configuration and communication of identity. In this way she revealed her major research interest: the processes of cultural transference, which, in this case, comprised the translocation of those cultural elements brought by Cuban immigrants as they resettled in Miami. But, just as the city incorporated traditions, customs, and habits brought from Cuba, others were transculturated there with the continuous invention of community, something to which Tarafa was also alert.

In Tarafa’s Miami work, the predominant use of Spanish in the various types of advertisements, sometimes written alongside English versions of the texts, reveals cultural, as well as economic and social dimensions of the life of the then-young Cuban exile community. The products and services promoted were mainly directed at the local Cuban community, as evinced by the multiple variants of several categories of signage.

Some use Cuban place names to define a cultural inscription, such as *View of Pinar del Río Cafeteria*. In other cases, references to businesses or services previously existing in Cuba—*Exterior View of Patronato Teatro Las Máscaras*, *Facade of Gilda Industries, Inc.*, and *View of La Carreta Restaurant*—imply a continuity between the island and Miami. Sometimes, the adjective “Cuban” indicates the cultural particularity of the service, as in *Facade of Academia Cubana de Ballet* or *View of Clínica Cubana*. Often, the ads or signs depicted have a specific, idiosyncratic verbal formulation that refers to the long tradition

of humor in Cuban advertising: *Facade of Chapistería y Pintura 3 Cubanos Refugiados (Three Cuban Refugees Paint and Body Shop)* and *Sign Promoting the Services of a Cuban Mechanic with 105 Years of Experience*.

Tarafa’s tour of the varied small businesses set up by Cuban immigrants shows the entrepreneurial spirit of the exiles, who arrived in the United States as refugees without money or belongings. Her journey does not neglect the elements that impart a political sense of homeland, as we can see in *Bust of José Martí* and *Monument of the Brigade 2506*. From a discursive point of view, however, the most outstanding feature of these images and, more widely, of the essay they compose, may be Tarafa’s visual strategy. In her images, Cubans speak for themselves, enunciating their habits of consumption, their tastes and expectations. They define their ways of becoming an ethnic presence in the city that they will turn into their most important urban center outside of Cuba, the city they will remake.

Tarafa’s discerning eye grasped the communicative requirements of the main elements represented in each image and she framed her pictures broadly to provide the context that conveys their cultural meaning. In the extensive photo-essay in which she compiled more than a hundred images, she displayed her knowledge of the language of photography. She constructed impeccable compositions by carefully attending to the spatial and rhythmic relationships of their components. Her Miami work combined sharp anthropological observation with artistic vision.

—JOSÉ ANTONIO NAVARRETE

1. Lydia Cabrera, *El monte: Igbo Finda, Ewe Orisha, Vitiñfinda (Notas sobre las religiones, la magia, las supersticiones y el folklore de los negros criollos y del pueblo de Cuba)* (Havana: Ediciones CR, 1954). Photographs in the book are credited to Josefina Tarafa, María Teresa de Rojas, Barón J. de Briskei Dobrony, and Teresa de la Parra.

2. Lydia Cabrera, *La laguna sagrada de San Joaquín*, photographs by Josefina Tarafa (Madrid: Ediciones R, 1973).

3. A selection of these was released on three CDs by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings: *Matanzas, Cuba, ca. 1957: Afro-Cuban Sacred Music from the Countryside*, 2001; *Havana, Cuba, ca. 1957: Rhythms and Songs for the Orishas*, 2001; and *Havana & Matanzas, Cuba, ca. 1957. Batá, Bombé, and Palo songs*, 2003. All three CDs are designated “from the historic recordings of Lydia Cabrera and Josefina Tarafa.”

4. This archive is now housed at the Archive of the National Council of Cultural Heritage (ACNHC) in Cuba.

5. See Alicia Berenguer Vigo, *María Zambrano y la raíz desnuda* (Libros.com digital edition, 2016). There is a voluminous years-long correspondence between Zambrano and Tarafa housed in the archives of the María Zambrano Foundation in Málaga, Spain.

6. Mabel Cuesta discusses this issue in relation to the figure of Cabrera. See Mabel Cuesta. “Lydia entre amigas: un tren de sores para una ciénaga cementada.” *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* (Madrid) 779 (2015): 12–23.

7. Jorge Duany, “Cuban Communities in the United States: Migration Waves, Settlement Patterns and Socioeconomic Diversity,” *Pouvoirs dans la Caraïbe*, 11 (1999): 69–103, <https://journals.openedition.org/plc/464>.

8. John L. Martin, Leon F. Bouvier, and William Leonard, “Shaping Florida: The Effects of Immigration, 1970–2020,” *Center for Immigration Studies* (December 1, 1995), <https://cis.org/Report/Shaping-Florida-Effects-Immigration-19702020>.