

The Cuban Diaspora and the Question of Nostalgia

by

Virginia Camila Tuma

Graduate Program in Literature  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Michael Hardt, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Grant Farred

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ranjana Khanna

\_\_\_\_\_  
Antonio Viego

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in the Graduate Program in  
Literature in the Graduate School  
of Duke University

2017

ABSTRACT

The Cuban Diaspora and the Question of Nostalgia

by

Virginia Camila Tuma

Graduate Program in Literature  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Michael Hardt, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Grant Farred

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ranjana Khanna

\_\_\_\_\_  
Antonio Viego

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program  
in Literature in the Graduate School  
of Duke University

2017

Copyright by  
Virginia Camila Tuma  
2017

## Abstract

*The Cuban Diaspora and the Question of Nostalgia* explores the dominant nostalgic politics of memory prevalent in post-Revolutionary Cuban-American cultural production. Since the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the question of longing has weighed heavily on the hearts and minds of Cuban and Cuban-American exiles and immigrants living in the United States. Drawing on theories of nostalgia, literary criticism, and postmodern theory, this study argues that there exists an alternative narrative to the discourse of nostalgia in Cuban-American texts. Offering readings of works by five prominent Cuban-American authors, all born in Havana between 1949 and 1958 and who emigrated to the United States in the early 1960s, I begin my dissertation by interpreting the autobiographies of Carlos Eire and Gustavo Pérez Firmat as exemplary of Cuban-American nostalgic reconstructions of Havana; I then offer a reading of Achy Obejas's early corpus as a critique of the nostalgia paradigm that nonetheless reveals its enduring power and the impossibility of reaching into the past other than through commodities and simulacra; finally, I delineate alternative discourses of memory that allow for a radical rethinking of the nostalgic impasse present in Cuban-American cultural production in the works of Cristina García and Alina Troyano.

# **Dedication**

For my family.

## Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	vii
Introduction: Nostalgia in and out of Cuba .....	1
The Discourse of Cuban Exceptionality .....	7
The Cuban Diaspora and Theories of Nostalgia.....	15
Chapter One. Yearning for Cuba: Idealized Recreations of Place and Space .....	42
Nostalgic Reconstructions of Havana .....	50
Conflict-free Memories of Pre-Revolutionary Cuba .....	63
Chapter Two. The Predicaments of Critical Nostalgia: The Commodification of Things Past.....	94
Attempting Alternate Memory Practices.....	99
Searching for the Truth.....	111
Connotations, Simulacra, and the Commodification of Stories .....	130
Chapter Three. Breaking with Nostalgia: Engaging Revolutionary Cuba Otherwise....	167
The Fracturing of a Paradigm.....	168
Lesbian Camp Memory Practices.....	194
Conclusion: Nostalgia, Between What Was and What Lies Ahead .....	216
Bibliography .....	228
Biography .....	240

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation could never have been completed without the help and inspiration of numerous people during my graduate work and beyond. First, I would like to thank my committee members: Michael Hardt, Grant Farred, Ranjana Khanna, and Antonio Viego. Each of them has left an indelible mark on my intellectual project. Michael Hardt stepped in and guided me when I was at a crucial impasse. His generosity and support of a project that was still in its infancy is a testament to his dedication as a teacher and his excellence as a mentor. Grant Farred constantly reminded me that my project was interesting and worth writing. He cheered me on, even when I was no longer living in Durham, made me see connections between texts that were not always readily apparent, and asked me pressing questions that strengthened my critical framework. Ranjana Khanna, with her calm demeanor and astute readings, pushed me to better understand the psychoanalytic underpinnings of my work and helped me appreciate the value of studying nostalgia as the central theoretical question in my dissertation. Antonio Viego offered unflagging belief in my project. I still remember the first day that we discussed my interest in nostalgia in Cuban-American cultural production and how that was developing into the crux of my theoretical pursuits. His probing questions pushing me to clarify my thoughts and the ensuing conversations that we had were always in the back of my mind as I wrote.

I would also like to express my immense gratitude to the various professors who have shaped my thinking and helped my project along at different times. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Fredric Jameson, and Alberto Moreiras: each of them, in different ways, made me see the value of my perspective and pushed me in ways I was not always initially receptive to, but ultimately always grateful for. Many thanks also go to Tiwonda Johnson-Blount in the Graduate Program in Literature who helps the graduate students in more ways than she can imagine.

It would be remiss if I did not mention my heartfelt thanks to my friends and family. Throughout the long process of writing this dissertation, Amy Sara Carroll, Desirée Martín, Jorge Marturano, and Tabea Linhard offered friendship and support; they helped me in ways they do not even realize. Thank you to my parents, parents-in-law, brother, and siblings-in-law, who never doubted that I could write this dissertation, even when I doubted it myself. And finally, to Javier and our two children, Sebastián and Beatriz. You cannot imagine how important your unfaltering support and love mean to me. I would never have made it this far without you. This dissertation is as much for you as it is for me.

## Introduction: Nostalgia in and out of Cuba

In its beginnings, this project started as an attempt to bring together two varied sets of intellectual interests: a commitment to Latina/o cultural production and a fascination with the emotional aspects of memory. My initial corpus had a comparative focus and comprised a wide range of texts spanning Cuban, Mexican, and U.S. Latina/o literatures. I had included Cuban classics such as José Martí's *Nuestra América* (1891), Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953), and Reinaldo Arenas's *Antes que anochezca* (1992); Mexican canonical works such as José Vasconcelo's *La raza cósmica* (1925), Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), and Ángeles Mastretta's *Arráncame la vida* (1990); and major works in U.S. Latina/o literature such as Richard Rodríguez's *Hunger for Memory* (1982), Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Gustavo Pérez Firmat's *Next Year in Cuba* (1995), and Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996).

The theme that sparked my initial interest was the relationship between the ideas of self and home as they were represented in a wide array of U.S. Latina/o texts. The recurrent portrayal of characters that grappled with a sense of longing for home and imagined return trips to their homeland, one that many characters paradoxically had not had the opportunity to experience in any meaningful way, helped further focus my project around theories of nostalgia. As I will explain further along in this introduction, nostalgia names as its most basic an aching for a lost home (from the Greek *nostos*, return

to home, and *algos*, suffering or grief). Theories of nostalgia allowed me to make sense of the characters' actions in the texts while at the same time they helped me to understand the nature of the losses and displacements endured. The characters that interested me were essentially mobile, characters who in one way or another grappled with the loss of a sense of place. In this precise sense, they all shared a fractured sense of self for, as Edward Casey explains, "the sense of self, personal or collective, grows out of and reflects the places from which we come and where we have been" (*Getting Back* 38).

Within the field of contemporary U.S. Latina/o Literature, I began to discover different modes of nostalgic recollections, from angst-ridden accounts of what might have been (as in Cesar and Nestor Castillo's nostalgic waxing about the past in Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* [1989]), to seemingly perfect recollections about what was (see Ana Menéndez's *In Cuba I was a German Shepard* [2001] where characters believed that in Cuba "life was good and pure" [11]), to pedagogical narrations, where nostalgic recollections flow freely in order to emphasize a particular legacy or tradition (see the weaving together of the Reyes family's life stories in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo, or, Puro cuento* [2002]). Frequently, these nostalgic recollections were voiced by recent immigrants or exiles. As these individuals attempted to begin their new lives in the United States, they often focused on family stories and memories to create and foster a continued and intimate relationship with their past as well as with their

homeland. And, it is this nostalgic retelling of past events that ensured that the past stayed alive in the hearts and minds of every family member.<sup>1</sup> These images and stories allowed these individuals to keep their beloved homeland alive and shatter the unbearable reality that they no longer lived in their homeland.

As I began narrowing my corpus, I found it increasingly difficult to make connections between the Mexican-American and the Cuban-American traditions. The ideas of home and self represented in these two traditions were too divergent to trace meaningful connections between them through the lens of nostalgia. Perhaps the problem had to do with the nature of the losses and displacements endured by the protagonists, which were too dissimilar. Consider, for instance, Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* and Gustavo Pérez Firmat's *Next Year in Cuba*. To be sure, these texts share several significant features. From a generic perspective, they are both autobiographies. Thematically, they both narrate the protagonists' childhood in the first

---

<sup>1</sup> Focusing on examples where nostalgic recollections dominate the landscape is not an attempt to claim that all U.S. Latina/o writing is highly nostalgic for previous times or places. For an excellent example of non-nostalgic recollections or non-idyllic representations of the past, see Mirta Ojito's non-fiction description of Cuba in *Finding Mañana: A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus*. See also Esmeralda Santiago's autobiographical account of her journey from Puerto Rico to the United States in *When I Was Puerto Rican*. For a fictionalized account, see Elías Miguel Muñoz's *Brand New Memory*. In this novel, the main protagonist's mother, Elisa Rochart de Domingo, complains that her daughter, Gina, traumatizes her by asking incessant questions about Cuba and their past on the island. While Gina feels that she is "contaminated by nostalgia for a land she never saw" (150), her parents, and in particular her mother, clearly try to repress those feelings. Elisa tells Gina: "Respect our wish to forget that inferno. Respect it!" (50). Elisa wants nothing other than to forget her past because "she hates that 'inferno'" (67). She "sought a vacuum, emptiness of history, because that void meant peace [. . .] meant freedom" (215). Ojito, Santiago, and Muñoz offer the reader powerful accounts of individuals that skillfully avoid the potential pitfalls of nostalgic recollections.

person. And yet, these two autobiographies about what one could call the “Latino experience” in the United States are vastly different. While Rodriguez’s autobiography focuses on his assimilation to mainstream U.S. culture, Pérez Firmat’s wistfully recalls his Cuban childhood. In his quest to become an educated, public persona, Rodriguez sacrifices his connection with his parent’s home and his family, with tradition, religion, and even the Spanish language.<sup>2</sup> The protagonist’s past and sense of home is glossed over in *Hunger of Memory*, which explains why most interpretations of this text tend to focus on Rodriguez’s stance on Affirmative Action, his latent homosexuality, or questions of social mobility and class. In sharp contrast, in *Next Year in Cuba* the past and the sense of home take center stage. Rather than sacrificing the idiosyncrasies that mark the protagonist as unequivocally Cuban, he highlights them. The past becomes the central focus as he strives to make sense of his life and why his family suddenly left its homeland, Cuba. As these distinctions emerged, I began to take stock of the important differences between literature written by immigrants (*Hunger of Memory*) and literature written by exiles (*Next Year in Cuba*). Furthermore, I realized how effectively nostalgia captures the tone and affective state of Cuban exile literature.

---

<sup>2</sup> One need only look as far as Rodriguez’s name—he has chosen the anglicized spelling of his last name, Rodriguez instead of Rodríguez—to see just how far “Rich-heard Road-ree-guess” (11) has tried to distanced himself here from his Mexican roots. Rodriguez does eventually address his relationship with his Mexican roots in a later work, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*.

At the same time, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 began to emerge as a decisive historical experience, one that obsessively recurred in my Cuban and Cuban-American corpus and set it apart from the Mexican and Chicana/o texts that sparked my initial interest. For this reason, I chose to focus on Cuban-American texts by authors who emigrated to the United States as part of the first wave of Cuban exiles immediately following the triumph of the revolution. All of the authors studied herein were born in Havana between 1949 and 1958 and came to the United States in the early 1960s (Carlos Eire was born in 1950 and arrived in the United States in 1962; Gustavo Pérez-Firmat was born in 1949 and came to the United States in 1960; Achy Obejas was born in 1956 and left Cuba for the United States in 1963; Cristina García was born in 1958 and emigrated to the United States in 1961; and Alina Troyano was born in 1957 and moved to the United States in 1964). But despite the fact that they were born within nine years of each other in the same city (Havana), and despite the fact that they all came to the United States when they were still young children, their reactions to the losses caused by exile were vastly different. The texts I have chosen by these authors, who are among the most well-known Cuban-American writers, are representative of these differences. As such, they all express nostalgia in varying degrees and forms, but some of them are able to displace the main tenet of Cuban exile discourse that binds together the ideas of self and home as if they were indivisible entities.

The main argument put forth in this dissertation is that there is an alternative to the nostalgic paradigm prevalent in post-Revolutionary Cuban-American cultural production. Chapter One, "Yearning for Cuba: Idealized Recreations of Place and Space," delineates the main aspects of the dominant nostalgic paradigm through a reading of two autobiographies, Carlos Eire's *Waiting for Snow in Havana* (2003) and Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's *Next Year in Cuba* (1995). More than exiled writers, Eire and Pérez-Firmat are true *desterrados*, uprooted people who in their memoirs try to make the link between self and home whole again. To this end, they recreate an idealized Cuba in their narratives, one that is as aesthetically appealing as it is devoid of historical struggles. In Chapter Two, I explore how Achy Obejas's early corpus (*We Came All the Way from Cuba so You Could Dress Like This?* [1994], *Memory Mambo* [1996], and *Days of Awe* [2001]) highlights the possibilities and limitations of finding an alternative to nostalgic reconstructions of Cuba within Cuban-American cultural production. Entitled "The Predicaments of Critical Nostalgia: The Commodification of Things Past," this chapter looks at how home and self do not always align. Throughout *Memory Mambo*, the protagonist engages in a process of self-reflection that allows her to critically engage with the nostalgic constructions painstakingly crafted in exile by her extended family. Instead of the fluid and uncritical coming together of self and home that the nostalgia paradigm encourages, the reader is presented with a protagonist that questions the

veracity of familial nostalgic tales and, along the way, highlights the commodified nature of the nostalgia paradigm so commonplace in Cuban-American discourse. The disruption of the dominant nostalgic paradigm enacted in Chapter Two is taken one step further in Chapter Three, where Cristina García's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and, above all, Alina Troyano's performance pieces *Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution* (1987) and *Milk of Amnesia/Leche de Amnesia* (1994) completely undo it. "Breaking with Nostalgia: Engaging Revolutionary Cuba Otherwise" looks at how both García and Troyano destabilize the foundations of the dominant nostalgic paradigm and imagine an alternative to it. These texts go one step further than Obejas did in order to offer a way to fracture the dominant politics of memory in Cuban-American cultural production.

### ***The Discourse of Cuban Exceptionality***

One of the features shared by all of the texts analyzed herein is that they form part of a cultural milieu heavily invested in the notion of cultural exceptionality. As Rafael Rojas explains "the discourse of insular exceptionality" is a powerful trend in Cuban letters that seeks to define "island culture from within, from without, in the margin, and sometimes even in counterpoint to Latin America" (*Essays* 95). This discourse, he adds, is more anthropological than sociological and "assumes that, even if Cuban society shares characteristics of Latin American postcolonial societies, its people,

social composition, and historical experience are quite different” (95). According to Rojas’s account the discourse of insular exceptionalism, which can be traced back to the works of nineteenth-century polymath José Antonio Saco (1797-1879), is most clearly seen in Fernando Ortiz’s reflections on cultural *mestizaje* in his famous work *El contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940).

Importantly, this belief in the uniqueness and exceptionalism of Cuban culture is not limited to the literature, anthropological or otherwise, produced on the island, but also constitutes a strong tendency in the culture of the Cuban Diaspora. As Román de la Campa notes in the Introduction to his memoir *Cuba on My Mind*:

‘Salsa’ and ‘Latinos’ are two terms that Cubans reject with a vengeance, ostensibly on the grounds that they are mere American marketing ploys, although this rejection might well amount to a preemptive strike against the tendency to subsume all Hispanic groups in the United States as one ethnic entity. Such associations erode claims to being unique, a major concern for exiles [. . .]. (10)

Thus, the Cuban-American Diaspora, particularly those individuals that came to the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s immediately following the Cuban Revolution, fiercely holds on to this idea of exceptionalism precisely because it defines them within and against the melting pot cultures of the larger Latina/o community in the United States. Although the Cuban-American experience shares some features with the experience of Mexicans, Dominicans, or Puerto Ricans in the United States, Cuban-Americans adhere to the idea that their culture remains fundamentally different and

unique. Gustavo Pérez Firmat articulates this idea in *My Own Private Cuba: Essays on Cuban Literature and Culture* when he writes: “most Cuban exiles reject hyphenated or pan-ethnic labels—Cuban-American, Hispanic, Latino—in favor of the designation of nationality” (229). The Cuban sees himself as fundamentally Cuban, regardless of where he happens to live his life. As Fernando Ortiz puts it in “Cubanidad y Cubanía:”

La cubanidad para el individuo no está en la sangre, ni en el papel ni en la habitación. La cubanidad es, principalmente la peculiar calidad de una cultura, la de Cuba. Dicho en términos corrientes, la cubanidad es condición del alma, es complejo de sentimientos, ideas y actitudes. [. . .] La cubanidad plena no consiste meramente en ser cubano por cualesquiera de las contingencias ambientales que han rodeado la personalidad individual y le han forjado sus condiciones; son precisas también la conciencia de ser cubano y la voluntad de quererlo ser”

[For the individual, Cubanidad is not found in the blood, nor on a piece of paper, nor where one lives. Cubanidad is, principally, the peculiar quality of a culture, the Cuban culture. Simply stated, Cubanidad is a condition of the soul, it is the complex coming together of sentiments, ideas, and attitudes. [. . .] The most complete sense of Cubanidad does not consist simply in being Cuban because of whichever environmental contingencies have surrounded a particular individual and have shaped him; the awareness of being Cuban and the desire to be Cuban are also fundamental elements]. (94)

Cuban-Americans not only possess this Cuban consciousness, but they also have this deep-seated desire to be Cuban and to be recognized as such within the United States.

The case for the Cuban-American claim to cultural exceptionality relies, in part, on a historical event that recurs like an obsession in the novels, performance pieces, and memoirs studied in this dissertation: the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Whereas Carlos

Eire's and Gustavo Pérez Firmat's memoirs—*Waiting for Snow in Havana* and *Next Year in Cuba*—offer a harsh indictment of the Revolution, which is seen as an eminently violent and illegitimate event, Juani Casas, the protagonist of Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo*, seeks the truth about her family's life in Cuba and how the Revolution negatively altered it forever. In contrast, Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* and Alina Troyano's *Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution* and *Milk of Amnesia/Leche de amnesia* offer a more nuanced account of the Revolution and the post-revolutionary period, which appears as a historical process rife with contradictions. In all of these texts, the Revolution is a rupture of cataclysmic proportions, one that sets the experience of Cuban-American characters, performance artists, and authors apart from that of other contemporary Latinas/os.

Another major source for the belief in Cuban exceptionalism resides in the strong national sentiment that is cultivated both within and outside of the island. In *Cuba on My Mind*, de la Campa offers a useful synthesis of the variegated roots of Cuban national pride: from colonial constructions of the island's privileged geographical location as "the Pearl of the Antilles, or the Key to the Gulf" (10) and the nineteenth-century figure of the *cimarrón*, "a runaway slave tradition that may have engraved a sense of fierce individualism on a culture whose African roots run very deep" (11), to the powerful presence of Spanish traditions in post-independence Cuba (11) and the privileged

relationship Cuba historically has established with the United States by which “Cuba’s own sense of self-importance could be said to derive as a progression, or an echo, of its northern neighbor’s” (12). Combined with the effects of the Cuban Revolution, this intense national pride has reinforced the discourse of Cuban exceptionalism both in Cuban and Cuban-American cultural production.

Certainly, the discourse of Cuban-American exceptionalism can be seen as a collection of myths, that is, of powerful stories about the glorious origins of the national community that command a strong following among writers of all ideological stripes.<sup>3</sup> Scholarly depictions and folklore of the sociocultural location of Cuban Americans, however, insist on the way in which their historical specificities—especially after the Cuban Revolution of 1959—have set them apart from the pan-Latino experience in the United States. When Cuban Americans are grouped together with other Latino nationalities, they are usually seen as part of a wider Caribbean Latino community with a strong Afro-Latino background. But even when the Cuban experience in the United States is seen as similar to that of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, it is important to be mindful of their respective cultural and political discontinuities. As Juan Flores explains:

The anachronistic direct colony [Puerto Rico], the beleaguered neo colony [the Dominican Republic], and the foundering experiment in dependent socialism [Cuba] issue markedly divergent diasporas, whose principal

---

<sup>3</sup> Here I appropriate Robert Segal’s preliminary definition of myth (4-6).

commonality would seem to be the degree to which their current configurations mirror, and are defined by, the status of their home countries in world affairs. Despite their obvious affinities within the full Latino composite, and despite the long-term historical congruencies that underlie the persistent Antillean ideal, no facile assumption of intimate family loyalties or automatic political cohesion among U.S. Cubans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans is in order, at least for the foreseeable future. (70-71)

The Cuban-American difference is addressed even more forcefully in Earl Shorris's *Latinos: A Biography of the People*. In "Fulano de Cuba," his chapter focusing on the cultural distinctions of Cubans and Cuban-Americans, Shorris asked members of the community to encapsulate, in one word, "the essence of the Cuban character" (64). Responses varied slightly, but the most common adjectives used were "Atrevimiento" [boldness or daring] "aggressive," and "hard-working" (64). Shorris asserts that "the Cubans rose quickly to become an elite among Latinos" (66), striving to show a different side to the stereotypical image North Americans had of Latinos. Thus, they formed part of the larger Latino community, but attempted to distinguish themselves by highlighting their bourgeois values such as success and hard work.<sup>4</sup> As Lisandro Pérez states to

---

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Achy Obejas offers a fictional critique of how the Cuban community valorizes itself above other Latino communities in *Memory Mambo*. In one scene, Juani, the main protagonist, argues with Gina, her lesbian, Puerto Rican, *independentista* lover. Gina was frustrated by the fact that Juani's relatives made "Puerto Rican jokes all the time, acting like Cubans were god's gift to the world" (122). One joke that Juani's family told was "What's the difference between a Cuban and a Puerto Rican? A Cuban's a Puerto Rican *with a job*" (122). Juani attempts to brush off her family's comments by claiming that "it was just a Cuban cultural thing, a generational thing" (123), but the truth of the matter is that this joke is representative of the fact that Cuban-Americans time and time again proclaim themselves as culturally and socially exceptional *vis à vie* other Latino groups within the United States. Through Juani and Gina's tumultuous relationship, Obejas

Shorris, “Cubans have a very high self-concept—at times there is a certain arrogance—that’s very different from the self-conception of Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans” (Shorris 74). He goes on to further distinguish Cuban-Americans from the rest of the Latino community by claiming: “I’m not sure that Cubans feel a brotherhood with other Latin Americans. The Cuban connection was more with Spain and the U.S.” (74).<sup>5</sup>

Another example of how the Cuban-American community views their exceptionality can be found in the commonly told joke within the Cuban-American community about the mangy, Cuban mutt disparaged by the glorious, refined pure breed American dog. As recounted in the title story of Ana Menéndez’s critically acclaimed collection of short stories *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*, a dog who recently immigrated from Cuba is walking along a city street when he stumbles upon a beautiful poodle and instantly falls in love. When he declares his feelings, the indignant poodle questions his gall and harshly claims, “you are nothing but a short insignificant mutt”

---

addresses this exceptionality and critically echoes Ortiz’s notion that Cuban exceptionality is a cultural thing carried within the soul of the Cuban people.

<sup>5</sup> While this exceptionality and ties to Spanish tradition were particularly strong for the first two waves of exiles to the United States in the 1960s and 70s, more recent exiles, those designated the *Marielitos* and *Balseros* who came to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, are perhaps slightly less boisterous about their self worth. Thanks to life in post-Revolutionary Cuba and the discrimination and racism suffered in the United States, to a large extent at the hands of Cubans who had previously immigrated, these later immigrants have a slightly different relationship to Cuban exceptionality. They do not live it in quite the same way.

(28). In shock, the “proud [Cuban] dog” responds: “[h]ere in America, I may be a short, insignificant mutt, but in Cuba I was a German shepherd” (28). This joke, almost always told by a Cuban-American struggling to define who he is and what he is worth in the United States and against the stereotypes that abound regarding Latinos, highlights two important details. One, how the Cuban-American remembers his life prior to emigrating to the United States; and two, how the Revolution forced a reconceptualization and an entrenchment of Cuban exceptionalism. As Shorris analyzes the joke:

It is not a humble tale. No Mexican would tell such a story. The Cuban dog knew who he was [. . .]. Unlike other Latinos, the Cuban has nothing of the supplicant in his culture; he has been wronged, and he means to set the world aright. The nature of the immigrant is to flee the past; the exile seeks only the return of his former glory; he wants only the opportunity to act upon his nostalgia. (65)

The merits of the belief in Cuban exceptionalism notwithstanding, Shorris points to a crucial fact: the Cuban-American community views nostalgia as a particularly significant cultural strategy not simply a “social disease” as some critics have claimed (Stewart ix). Nostalgia helps tie the exile to his “former glory,” a glory that is at the same time fueled by national pride and threatened by the effects of the Cuban Revolution of 1959. In this precarious historical juncture nostalgia emerges as a strategy that offers a distinct repertoire of historical and theoretical possibilities. As more and more Cubans emigrated after 1959, they began to rely heavily on nostalgia as a way to create a connection to their cultural roots.

## *The Cuban Diaspora and Theories of Nostalgia*

In his book-length study on nostalgia, *Yearning for Yesterday*, sociologist Fred Davis writes that nostalgia is called upon when there is a “search for continuity amid threats of discontinuity” (35). He further explains:

(1) the nostalgic evocation of some past state of affairs always occurs in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties or uncertainties, even though they may not be in the forefront of awareness, and (2) it is these emotions and cognitive states that pose the threat of identity discontinuity [. . .] that nostalgia seeks, by marshaling our psychological resources for continuity, to abort, or at the very least, deflect. (34-35)

Nostalgia is one of many tools Cuban-Americans employ to imagine, reconfigure, and reaffirm their *Cubanidad* because nostalgia “is deeply implicated in our sense of who we are, what we are about, and [. . .] whither we go. In short, nostalgia is one of the means—or, better yet, a readily accessible psychological lens—at our disposal for the never[-]ending work of constructing, maintaining and reconstructing our identities (Davis, “Nostalgia” 419). According to Davis, nostalgia continually puts the past into conversation with the present. He identifies three distinct types of nostalgia. The first order, simple nostalgia, is when the nostalgic subject sentimentally and uncritically longs for the past because it was somehow better than the present, which is cast in a rather unfavorable light when compared to the plenitude of the past. Davis’s second order, reflective nostalgia, questions whether things really were better before and if the sentimental reminiscences felt are truthful, accurate, complete, and representative.

Finally, Davis's third order, interpreted nostalgia, reveals a deeper and more theoretical interrogation of the use of nostalgia, its function, and the roots of why an individual is nostalgic at all (*Yearning* 17-26). Regardless of the particular order of nostalgia, the process of "constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing" identities that the Cuban-American nostalgic individual undergoes became all the more important as Cubans fled for the United States after the revolution. "Nostalgia rises to importance as a cultural practice as culture becomes more and more diffuse, more and more a 'structure of feeling' (Williams n.d.), as culture takes on the power of 'distance' that comes of displacing speakers" (K. Stewart 227). Nostalgia is, to use Fredric Jameson's words, a marker of "a painful straining towards a wholeness or unity of experience which the historical situation threatens to shatter at every turn" ("Walter" 53). Although Jameson was clearly referencing the works of Benjamin as a whole, his description aptly depicts what the nostalgic subject is undergoing. Jameson goes on to assert: "Psychologically, the drive towards unity takes the form of an obsession with the past and with memory" (53). What does the nostalgic subject do if not long for and obsess over the past in an attempt to confront the realities of the uncertain, incoherent, and ever-changing present in order to mold it into a unified experience?

Although numerous scholars throughout the years have addressed the issue of nostalgia, the first official recorded use of the term appears in Johannes Hofer's 1688

“Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia.” Prior to Hofer’s work on the topic, nostalgia had been considered by some to be an ailment, a “Wasting disease” or a “*Maladie du Pays*” (380) that certain physicians had discussed, but that no one had given a proper medical terminology. After much deliberation, Hofer settled on the term nostalgia, “Greek in origin and indeed composed of two sounds, the one of which is *Nosos* [sic], return to the native land; the other, *Algos*, signifies suffering or grief” (381). According to Hofer, this nomenclature helped define “the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one’s native land” (381). Hofer’s dissertation addressed the clinical aspects of the disease, focusing on how nostalgia generally afflicted “young people and adolescents sent to foreign regions” (383), and entailed psychological and physical ailments such as “continued sadness, meditation only of the Fatherland, disturbed sleep either wakeful or continuous, decrease of strength, hunger, thirst, senses diminished, and cares or even palpitations of the heart, frequent sighs, also stupidity of the mind — attending to nothing hardly, other than an idea of the Fatherland” (386). Hofer goes on to enumerate more dire consequences of suffering from nostalgia if left untreated and then makes suggestions for curing the disease, which included purging, prescription medicines, the promise of a speedy return to the homeland, and frequent companionship so as to help distract the patient from thinking about his homeland.

This initial act of naming is particularly important because, as Jean Starobinski claims in "The Idea of Nostalgia," "[n]o facet of an emotion can be traced before it is named, before it is designated and expressed. [. . .] [A]s soon as the name of an emotion is brought to light, the word, through its very efficacy, helps to fix, to propagate, to generalize the emotion which it represents" (81). In his brief history of the term nostalgia, Starobinski highlights how Hofer put "a particular feeling (*Heimweh*, *regret*, *desiderium patriae*) into medical terminology" (84) in the seventeenth century and how that simple act of naming led to a universal recognition of the powerful emotion. Starobinski goes on to explain how during the eighteenth century, intellectuals sought different clinical explanations of the roots and causes of nostalgia, including mechanical and purely physical explanations. He cites various studies that addressed the complex theory of associated ideas that led certain individuals to feel nostalgic when, for instance, a certain song, tune, tonal inflection, or sound was played. Throughout the Romantic period, nostalgia was considered a "painful experience, provoked by the uprooting of the conscience from its familiar surroundings" (95). Thus, nostalgia was directly tied to a physical and psychological connection with the homeland. But nostalgia also "became the metaphorical expression of a much more profound rupture, the separation of man from the ideal" (95). Throughout the eighteenth century, nostalgia as a clinical disease was universal: "all doctors recognized nostalgia as a frequently fatal

disease; they were agreed that all peoples and all social classes were vulnerable to it” (95). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the status of nostalgia as a disease changed: “As a result of progress made in pathological anatomy and in bacteriology, little by little nostalgia lost the important status which doctors of the Romantic era had given it” (99). It then became an area of interest for psychiatry, which no longer emphasized “the desire to return but, on the contrary, the failure of adaptation” (101). This means that the study of nostalgia, as a branch of psychiatry, shifted its focus from the loss of the individual’s original environment to the need of the individual to adapt to her existing environment: “The theory of nostalgia put the accent on the original environment (on the *Heim*); the theory of inadaptation accentuates the paramount necessity of reintegration into an existing *milieu*” (101). When nostalgia came to evoke more a feeling of social malaise, its cure consisted in adapting to one’s new environment—as opposed to returning to one’s (lost) homeland.

As we have seen, medical discourses on nostalgia have provided an array of clinical descriptions starting in the seventeenth century up through the nineteenth century. These different descriptions, as Filiberto Fuentenebro de Diego and Carmen Valiente Ots show, reflect changes in clinical paradigms over time. At the end of the seventeenth century, interpretations focused on the character of the nostalgic subject, who was seen as someone with an “aversion to foreign customs, [a] propensity to

isolation, a notable sensitivity to injustice, frustration and excessive tendency to praise the native country and denigrate other cultures or countries” (405). Throughout the eighteenth century a series of clinical studies of conscript soldiers and military officers carried out during the Napoleonic campaigns emphasized the physiological alterations of the nervous system, surmising that “the obsessive idea caused by nostalgia creates a cerebral injury or irritation which results in a series of visceral damage” (406). Nostalgia was considered “a mental disorder, a form of melancholic insanity resulting from several factors” (407). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, “nostalgia was seen as another variety of melancholy” (408). As Edward Casey puts it, nostalgia became a “state of mind all by itself, without attachment to the particularity of place and without specific bodily symptoms of the sort that first drew Hofer’s attention in 1688” (“The World” 371).

What is fascinating about these clinical descriptions of nostalgia—including Hofer’s pioneering work—is that they all relate the condition to one form or another of forced migration, social uprooting, dramatic historical change, or cultural displacement. Significantly, these material pre-conditions of nostalgia also appear in current cultural descriptions of the phenomenon. The difference, however, resides in the content of nostalgia itself, in the desires nostalgia expresses. Starobinski highlights that by the twentieth century nostalgia completely “ceased to designate a place and a history” (101).

Dominic Boyer takes this argument one step further in "From Algos to Autonomos: Nostalgic Eastern Europe as Postimperial Mania," when he points out that "in the postmedical era of nostalgia [. . .] we confront a less corporeal notion of grief and obsession" that is also "a less territorialized one" (18). "Today," he goes on to argue, "nostalgia most often appears discursively not as a search for a place, home, or nation, but as a sociotemporal yearning for a different stage or quality of life (as Kant put it, for our youth)" (18). Thus, the study of nostalgia moved from the realm of the physician to the realm of the philosopher or cultural critic. According to Boyer, current understandings of nostalgia temporalize desires that had a strong geographical component in the medical era of nostalgia. His main examples are derived from post-Socialist Eastern Europe where nostalgia "is most often interpreted not literally as a desire to return to state socialism per se. Instead, it is understood as a desire to recapture what life was at the time, whether innocent, euphoric, secure, intelligible" (18).

In this respect, Cuban-American nostalgia offers an interesting contrast. Certainly, there are many aspects of the nostalgia performed by Cuban-Americans that belong to what Boyer calls "the postmedical era." Especially in the memoirs by Carlos Eire and Gustavo Pérez Firmat, two authors who left Cuba in 1962 and 1960 respectively, nostalgia expresses a desire to recapture the life of their youth, one that was marked by a distinct sense of innocence, security, privilege, and aesthetic pleasure.

But at the same time, the titles of these memoirs—*Waiting for Snow in Havana* and *Next Year in Cuba*—foreground the importance of place and suggest the possibility of return. This points to a fact that Boyer seems to overlook: even in the postmedical era, nostalgia can retain a strong territorial component. When Cuban-Americans see themselves as exiles, their nostalgia is strongly territorialized. In fact, while one “can wax nostalgic over particular people and ‘past times’ [. . .] It is exceedingly rare that we are nostalgic about something that is unplaced or placeless” (Casey, “The World” 363). It is for this reason that perhaps the Cuban-American condition is better described by a Spanish word that has no exact English equivalent. Rather than exiles, the authors and performance artists addressed herein are better described as *desterrados*, as people who have been uprooted from their home, their land, their place of origin and who, in their writings, not only express an intense longing for place, but also contemplate the possibility of return. Place, then, retains an importance among Cuban-American expressions of nostalgia that seems to have vanished in Eastern Europe. Place is an indispensable aspect of the nostalgia studied herein.

Interestingly, what post-communist Eastern European societies and the post-revolutionary Cuban-American community both share is the fact that they are a product of a world-historical rupture, namely the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Cuban Revolution of 1959. It is difficult to provide a succinct, complete description of the vast,

radical changes undergone by Cuban society in the aftermath of the events of 1959. When popular mobilization under the leadership of Fidel Castro toppled the Batista dictatorship in late 1958, a revolutionary process was set in motion that dramatically impacted all aspects of state and society during the 1960s and thereafter.<sup>6</sup> What began as a series of moderate socioeconomic reforms in 1959—a limited agrarian reform, the implementation of rent-control measures in urban areas, the reactivation of local industries—was soon transformed into a full-fledged social revolution. Because these initial, widely popular economic reforms damaged U.S. interests in Cuba, President Eisenhower’s administration interpreted them as a broader challenge to U.S. hegemony in Latin America and threatened to suspend Cuba’s sugar import quota for the U.S. market. This tactic, which in the past had proven successful in forcing Cuba to fall in line with U.S. desires, failed this time around because in early 1960 the Soviet Union intervened and offered to buy Cuban sugar, altering the political game forever. As a result, the nationalist, anti-imperialist components of the Cuban Revolution, which were so decisive in its beginnings, rapidly evolved into a series of measures that were based on Soviet models.

Informed by Marxist ideology, and amid the difficulties resulting from the U.S. economic blockade, the Cuban government further radicalized the revolutionary process

---

<sup>6</sup> The following account of the historical effects of the Cuban Revolution is based on Halperín Donghi 287-307.

and swiftly replaced the structures of Cuba's market economy with those of a socialist economy (expropriation and consolidation of rural properties into state farms, nationalization of the industrial sector, state takeover of retail commerce, etc.). The result was the creation of a more egalitarian, more sovereign, and less corrupt social and political order that profoundly unsettled the lives of ordinary Cubans. For some, these radical changes certainly had an exhilarating effect in that the revolution was aligned with the needs, interests, and aspirations of a sizable part of the Cuban people:

Social welfare programs had achieved impressive advances in public health and, especially in rural areas, the availability of decent housing. In addition, early literacy campaigns had been followed by the creation of an educational system that opened to all Cubans professional opportunities formerly available only to the elite—opportunities that were all the more numerous in the 1960s because of the departure of so many middle-class professionals. (Halperín Donghi 306)

But, as this last sentence suggests, the radical changes brought about by the Revolution also had a less-than-exhilarating effect, especially for large sectors of Cuba's upper and middle classes. For those individuals, particularly those who emigrated to the United States shortly after 1959, the Revolution was an experience of destruction, dispossession, and loss. The statistics available on Cuban immigration to the United States in the wake of the revolution paint a staggering picture in which one can discern four main immigration waves. The first occurred between 1960-1962 when approximately 230,000 Cubans entered the United States. The second wave occurred between 1965-1973 when

the United States granted asylum to 330,000 Cuban immigrants. The third, and perhaps most dramatic immigration wave, nicknamed the *Marielitos*, began in the Cuban port of Mariel in 1980 when 123,000 Cubans came en masse on boats to the United States. Finally, the fourth immigration wave in July 1994, commonly known as the *Balseros* (rafters), was much smaller and only resulted in approximately 37,000 Cubans emigrating into the United States. Regardless of the size of each immigration wave, the result is that by 1997 there were 1.2 million U.S. residents of Cuban origin in the United States, 60% of which lived in Miami-Dade County (Lisandro Pérez 19-23).

For many of these 1.2 million Cubans, among which are the families of the writers and performance artist examined in this dissertation, the Revolution shattered all lines of cultural and social continuity. Gustavo Pérez Firmat in his memoir *Next Year in Cuba* eloquently depicts how the Revolution completely altered his reality: "After the triumph of the Revolution we lived under siege, in a kind of residential or inner exile" (30). And this metaphoric exile was quickly transformed into a literal one when Pérez Firmat left Cuba for the United States after his family's *almacén* was confiscated by the state, thereby fracturing his sense of self: "A strong and stable sense of identity does not come easy for people who are forced to leave their country and straddle cultures" (45). Much like Pérez Firmat, Carlos Eire lived the Revolution as a blow to his sense of self. His memoir also opens with his recollection about January 1, 1959. This was the "day

when the world changed" (*Waiting for Snow* 3), the day when his mother advised him, much like Pérez Firmat's mother, to stay indoors (2), the day when, as Eire puts it, "we would lose our place, lose our world" (5). For both Pérez Firmat and Eire, the Revolution highlights an important interruption in the family's trajectory and marks a traumatic absence.

In Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo* the Revolution no longer wields the same destructive power. Whereas Pérez Firmat and Eire are most clearly marked and defined by the Revolution, Juani Casas, the protagonist of the novel, lives the effects of the Revolution vicariously through her family's memories and stories. For instance, Juani tells the story of how her mother, "a *café con leche mulata* from Guanabacoa" (32) who had struggled "to pass her entire life" (35), saw the Revolution's attempt to promote racial equality as a blow to the social status she has so ardently worked to achieve. Throughout the novel, Juani relays family stories about how the Revolution led them to flee the island. Thus, for Juani the Revolution is not so much a foundational event in her life as much as the catalyst for the stories her parents relay. For all of its destructive effects in the lives of her parents, the Revolution is somewhat removed from her life and thus its effects are also somewhat muted.

Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* offers a more intimate perspective on the shattering effects of the Revolution for the Revolution bitterly divides the del Pino

family, whose saga is the main element of the novel's storyline. The matriarch of the family, Celia del Pino, is an ardent revolutionary who completely and utterly worships Castro and "keeps a framed photograph of him by her bed, where her husband's picture used to be" (110). In sharp contrast, her eldest daughter Lourdes del Pino fervently despises the Revolution, which for her is associated with two traumatic events that permanently scarred her body and soul: she loses an unborn child in the early days of the Revolution and a week later she is raped by two soldiers. The Revolution is the wedge that divides Celia and Lourdes, one stayed in Cuba and actively participated in revolutionary life while the other moved to New York and fully embraced the American way of life. For Celia, imbued as she is with socialist values, freedom "is nothing more than the right to a decent life" (233). In contrast, for her daughter immersed in capitalist individualism, "money is the bottom line" (234).

Finally, for Alina Troyano in *Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution* and in *Milk of Amnesia/Leche de amnesia* the revolution plays a different role. It was the catalyst for Alina Troyano's departure from Cuba to the United States when she was 7 years old, a country where everything was radically different and that she did not even really like at first (*I, Carmelita* 52). Once she was in the United States, it was her initial lack of assimilation and her ultimate desire to "embrace America" that caused her amnesia (53). In order to cure her amnesia, she returns to post-Revolutionary Cuba

during the Special Period in the early 1990s. While Alina Troyano, through Carmelita Tropicana, never describes in detail the Revolution itself, she does address some of its effects as well as the harsh realities of the post-Revolutionary Special Period. She describes the dislocating effects of the Revolution and the inherent contradictions that abound in a country with a socialist system and the limited resources resulting from the U.S.-imposed embargo.

In short, the revolution for these authors was a radical experience, to use Fred Davis's words quoted above, of "identity discontinuity" for it inaugurated a displacement that was spatial as much as it was temporal, continually pushing the (real or imagined) past of the Cuban diasporic community away from their (real or imagined) U.S. present. These temporal and spatial displacements are certainly specific to the Cuban Revolution, but one can also understand them as participating in a larger experience of loss that, according to Peter Fritzsche, can be traced back to the French Revolution and the ensuing European Wars of 1789-1815. In *Stranded in the Present*, Fritzsche helpfully explains how at the turn of the eighteenth century Western notions of time and history were dramatically altered. The destruction, discontinuity, and dispossession generated by the Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had a twofold effect on perceptions of time and history, which Fritzsche sums up as "the eruption of the new" and "the irretrievability of the past" (9). The "eruption of the new" refers to the

fact that, under modern conditions, the present is seen as a temporal plain qualitatively different from the past, as disconnected from it, as a period in which “the intimacy of human beings and the translatability of knowledge across time and space” (6) is no longer available. The past has little to teach the present because the present is where the new relentlessly erupts. Consequently, the past is conceived as something lost and foreign, a temporal plain in which losses are irreversible—hence the “the irretrievability of the past.”

Fritzsche goes on to argue that it is the irreversibility of the losses of the past that explains the rise of nostalgia as a specific mode of historical sensibility. According to this account, the disposition toward nostalgia is a function of a specifically modern type of perception that equates history with dispossession:

Nostalgia is therefore a product of a shared historical consciousness of general displacement that is able to make parochial misfortunes and individual losses socially meaningful. It provides to lonesome stragglers a common refuge in history, even while it says that their losses are irreversible. Although the virtues of the past are cherished and their passage is lamented, there is no doubt that they are no longer retrievable. There can be no nostalgia without this sense of irreversibility, which denies to the present the imagined wholeness of the past. [. . .] In other words, nostalgia yearns for what it cannot possess, and defines itself by its inability to approach its subject. [. . .] The historical consciousness on which [. . .] nostalgia depends thus creates both intimacy, in that it gives social recognition to the memories of loss, and distance, in that it determines those losses to be permanent. (64-65)

This “dialectic of closeness and distantiation” (K. Stewart 228), this paradoxical combination of intimacy and distance, of yearning for an impossible object, is taken up by Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia*, one of the most important studies on post-communist nostalgia that has emerged in recent years. Like Fritzsche, Boym understands nostalgia as a delicate balance between intimacy and distance, however she articulates this in slightly different terms. According to Boym, “[n]ostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii). Echoing Davis’s idea of searching “continuity amid threats of discontinuity,” Boym claims that nostalgia is an “affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world” (xiv). “Nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (xvi). This delicate balance between intimacy — one’s own fantasy, an affective yearning, a longing, an individual biography — and distance — the sentiment of loss and displacement, one’s existence in a fragmented world — is the most salient feature of nostalgia. “Nostalgia tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence; it is about the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial” (xvii).

Boym, like many critics who write about nostalgia, starts with a brief history of the term. She begins in the late seventeenth century describing nostalgia as a “disease of an afflicted imagination” that “incapacitated the body” (4). She then goes on to explain

the differing moral evaluations triggered by nostalgia: while some in Europe, such as Hofer, considered nostalgia a supreme expression of patriotism and national pride, others such as Theodore Calhoun a military doctor in the United States thought that nostalgia “was a shameful disease that revealed a lack of manliness and unprogressive attitudes” (6). Regardless of whether nostalgia was viewed in a positive or negative light, Boym, much like Fritzsche, notes that nostalgia became more commonplace throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. At that time, “the spread of nostalgia had to do not only with dislocation in space but also with the changing conception of time” (7). As we have already seen in Fritzsche, the concepts of both time and history underwent radical changes between the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thanks in part to both the French and Industrial Revolutions. The newfound focus on progress changed the way both time and history were understood and therefore how nostalgia, “a historical emotion” (Boym, *Future* 10), was understood. Nostalgia no longer was simply about longing for the local, the particular, but instead was the “result of a new understanding of time and space that made the division into ‘local’ and ‘universal’ possible” (11). The nostalgic individual, faced with progress and the ever-changing landscape of society, looks towards the past, longing for the local, for the particular; she is a “displaced person who mediates between the local and the

universal" (12), between her individual, personal memory and her nation-state's collective, official, cultural memory.

Boym later goes on to elucidate two different types of nostalgia, both of which address the relationship between individual and collective memory (41). The first type, restorative, "puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" (41). The restorative nostalgic wants to "return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment" (49). She does not see herself as nostalgic because her project is about "truth and tradition" (Boym, "Nostalgia" 41). The past is of utmost importance for the restorative nostalgic and must be pristine, with no signs of decay or deterioration. This idealized view of the past as a paradise lost, as the locus where wholeness and unity of experience once existed, is most clearly seen in the memoirs by Carlos Eire (*Waiting for Snow in Havana*) and Gustavo Pérez Firmat (*Next Year in Cuba*). The past, which is constituted as much by the authors' youth as by their respective experiences of pre-Revolutionary Havana, is what they relentlessly obsess over in their memoirs. As "restorative nostalgics," Eire and Pérez Firmat reconstruct elements from their past through invented traditions, emblems, and rituals that purportedly depict the original as it was exactly. These invented traditions and restorations, which are highly symbolic and ritualized, create "a comforting collective script for individual longing" (Boym, *Future* 42). In this sense, the memoirs by Eire and Pérez Firmat can be

understood as contributions to the collective narrative produced out of the ideological trenches in Miami, one that seeks to restore a sense of origins and thus quell the ache that the nostalgic individual feels due to “temporal distance and displacement” (Boym, *Future* 44)—in this case, the temporal distance and displacement effected by the Cuban Revolution. Significantly, this collective narrative that seeks to establish a shared frame of reference for Cuban exiles combines works of “high literature” with popular cultural artifacts—from Gloria Estefan’s songs to the historical memorabilia sold on the streets of Little Havana and at the annual CubaNostalgia Expo in Miami.<sup>7</sup> The result is a powerful narrative in which “[d]istance is compensated by intimate experience and the availability of a desired object” (Boym, *Future* 44) and in which “[d]isplacement is cured by a return home, preferably a collective one” (44). Hence the numerous fantasies of return to (a no longer existing) Havana enacted in the above memoirs, in a myriad of popular cultural artifacts and, more largely, in the political narratives of the most conservative elements in Miami. When Cuban exiles engage in restorative nostalgia, they seek to appease the anxiety surrounding, in Boym’s words, “those who draw

---

<sup>7</sup> Currently preparing for its nineteenth incarnation in May of 2017, CubaNostalgia is an annual three-day expo dedicated to remembering and recreating the glory days of Cuba prior to the Cuban Revolution. According to the website, “CubaNostalgia, celebrating its 18th year as the premier Cuban event outside of Cuba, is a journey back in time for those who remember the island’s glorious times—and for those who never experienced them. There will be Cuban-themed exhibits, artists and vendors, traditional Cuban foods, and of course, live music.” See the official website of the expo for more detailed information: <http://www.cubanostalgia.org/english/index.html>.

attention to historical incongruities between past and present and thus question the wholeness and continuity of the restored tradition" (45). It calls forth a highly idealized past in order to envision a (different but equally idealized) future.

The second type of nostalgia that Boym elucidates is reflective nostalgia, which "dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance" (*Future* 41). This type of nostalgia, in contrast to restorative nostalgia, "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (41). It is not concerned with reestablishing or rebuilding what already existed. Instead, it focuses on "the meditation of history and the passage of time" (49). The reflective nostalgic is not concerned with a return to the homeland as much as with the space and distance between herself and home. This type of reflection on the past opens up "possibilities of historical development" and "has a capacity to awaken multiple planes of consciousness" (50). Reflective nostalgia is about personal and collective memory. According to Boym, "perhaps what is most missed during historical cataclysms and exile is not the past and the homeland exactly, but rather this potential space of cultural experience that one has shared with one's friends and compatriots that is based neither on nation nor religion but on elective affinities" (53). One becomes aware of collective memories when one no longer has a connection to them, either because of exile or because of a historical and catastrophic change within a given community. "Reflective

nostalgia is a form of deep mourning that performs the labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future" (55). Reflective nostalgia allows for critical reflection and "reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another" ("Nostalgia" 15). Importantly, the distinctions between restorative and reflective nostalgia "are not absolute binaries," (13) and thus there exist grey areas wherein these different types of nostalgia can potentially overlap or intersect.

The relevance of Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia to my corpus is evident when one realizes that the storylines of both Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo* and Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* revolve around the importance of the process of remembrance. *Memory Mambo's* protagonist, Juani, is obsessed with her family's nostalgic narratives about life on the island, narratives that make clear to her the space and distance that exist between her experience in the United States and her parents' home in Cuba. In a similar vein, *Dreaming in Cuban* is a novel that seeks to construct—not recuperate—the "potential space of shared cultural experience" that Boym sees as central to reflective nostalgia. In *Dreaming in Cuban* this shared space of cultural experience is certainly fragmented by the Cuban Revolution and its effects, but García seeks to mourn that loss by reconstructing the saga of the del Pino family, by mediating on the historical reasons for the loss, and by reconstructing the "elective affinities" that one day may generate a cultural framework shared by Cubans both on and off the

island. Interestingly, the other two central texts in my corpus, Alina Troyano's *Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution* and *Milk of Amnesia/Leche de amnesia*, do not completely fall in line with either restorative or reflective nostalgia. In fact, these performance pieces are important because they displace the nostalgic paradigm that has informed the majority of post-Revolution Cuban-American cultural production.

While keeping in mind these important distinctions about the discourse of nostalgia, I believe it is important to avoid the reduction of all expressions of nostalgia to a simple yearning for the past. In this regard, scholarship about Eastern European countries once again offers some instructive similarities and differences when compared with the case of Cuba. In contrast to neoliberal histories that cast Eastern European nostalgia as a fictional coping mechanism of backward and past-oriented societies always ready to fantasize about life under Communist rule, Dominic Boyer points out that it is possible to identify a wealth of other sentiments, interests, projects, and obsessions behind the discourse of nostalgia. This is what Boyer refers to when he offers his first thesis on nostalgia claiming that "nostalgia is heteroglossic" (19-20).

In other words, nostalgia is not one thing but many, and its expression seems far from uniform or unitary. Boyer concedes that in some cases nostalgic discourse "may represent precisely a grief for a faded past," but he also readily points out that "there are other times when it is deployed [. . .] to mobilize a present- or future-oriented project of

identification and belonging” and still other cases “when such talk is less about transacting meaning and more about coordinating or cultivating intimacy through shared expression” (20). This cautionary approach to the discourse of nostalgia is important because the Cuban-American texts examined in this dissertation fall into one (or more) of these three categories. In Carlos Eire’s *Waiting for Snow in Havana* and Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s *Next Year in Cuba*, for instance, we will largely encounter the first—and more intuitively familiar—type of nostalgia referenced by Boyer, nostalgia as an obsession with an irretrievable past. Written in an elegiac mode, these two memoirs articulate numerous fantasies about life in Cuba prior to 1959, a sort of paradise lost that is associated with the author’s youth. At the same time, they also articulate a future-oriented project of belonging to a political community in which Fidel Castro’s regime never existed. The second type of nostalgia, which attends to the political potential of nostalgia, is more readily present in texts such as Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*, Alina Troyano’s *Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution* and *Milk of Amnesia/Leche de amnesia* and Achy Obejas’s *Memory Mambo*. Although the past and the unsettling effects of the Cuban Revolution weigh heavily on the characters and themes of these pieces, here nostalgia is a strategy that clearly intervenes in the present and future. In García’s novel, it articulates a sense of community that goes beyond the conventional Cuban-American narrative that demonizes the revolution while idealizes

pre-revolutionary life; in Troyano's performance pieces, her nostalgia leads her to travel to post-Revolutionary Cuba to remember (and rediscover) her identity and thus recognize the positives and negatives of the Revolution. Finally, in Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo* one of the functions of nostalgic memories of Cuba is to create community effects, as when the protagonist, Juani, redefines her ties to her family by questioning (and to a certain extent reproducing) their nostalgic narratives about life on the island. In this precise sense, *Memory Mambo* exemplifies Boyer's observation that nostalgic discourse can sometimes cultivate intimacy through shared expression.

Also of interest to my corpus is Boyer's second thesis on nostalgia, which proposes that "nostalgia is indexical" (20). By this he means that nostalgia is "an indexical practice, a mode of inhabiting the lived world through defining oneself situationally and positionally in it" and, therefore, a practice that "can never be entirely separated from ongoing politics of identification and belonging" (20-21). This is particularly true within the politically fractured Cuban-American community. While writers and texts cultivating pre-revolutionary nostalgia—for our purposes, Eire and Pérez Firmat—are immediately situated within Miami's anti-Castro exile ideology, those writers and texts questioning conventional nostalgic narratives about Cuba's past—Obejas, García, Troyano—are seen as promoting some kind of dialogue between Miami and Havana. This is an often-disregarded dimension of nostalgia that makes my

dissertation an intervention, certainly modest and limited in scope, into Cuban-American cultural politics. Nostalgia, or rather the presence or absence of nostalgia in a text, is a powerful way to position authors within the politics of the Cuban diaspora.

The last insight of current scholarship on Eastern European nostalgia that is relevant to my argument is Boyer's fifth thesis on nostalgia, namely that "nostalgia always carries with it a politics of the future" (25). Deeply dissatisfied with the reduction of nostalgia to a mere "sign of pastness," Boyer forcefully argues that nostalgic sentiments and discourses have "no more to do with the past than with the future, no more to do with the return to a remembered or idealized past than with the project of defining and claiming autonomy in the present" (25). As other critics have pointed out, nostalgia often goes hand-in-hand with the concept of utopia. Fredric Jameson, for instance, has written a propos Walter Benjamin's nostalgia that "there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other" ("Walter" 68). Relatedly, in the Introduction to *The imagined past: history and nostalgia*, Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase explain that "nostalgia becomes possible at the same time as utopia. The counterpart to the imagined future is the imagined past. But there is one crucial respect in which the power of the past is different. It has generated objects, images and texts which can be seen as powerful

talismans of how things used to be” (9). This dissertation looks precisely at these powerful talismans of how Cuba used to be—the various autobiographies, novels, and performance pieces addressed—in an attempt to better understand the import of nostalgia in contemporary society and what utopian impulses—if any—such nostalgia points towards.

One of the main arguments put forward in this introduction is that the Cuban Revolution, in addition to setting my corpus apart from other U.S. Latina/o texts, was one of the material pre-conditions for the nostalgic narratives examined herein. The Cuban Revolution not only inaugurated a cultural and geographical displacement of cataclysmic proportions for a sizable part of the Cuban population, but also contributed, at least in part, to a U.S. narrative about Cuba that casts the island as backward and pre-modern, as stuck in the 1950s. It is as if the Revolution, for all of its radical changes, managed to spare Cuba some of the destruction that is inherent in capitalism. According to this narrative, Cuba, and especially Havana, is the place where colonial buildings stand proud despite their ruined façades, where 1950s Cadillacs roam the streets freely, and where people socialize in the streets listening to music and playing domino. Given the lack of capitalist progress on the island, it is not difficult to see how nostalgic narratives could be projected upon such a space, and how such narratives reinforce, and

in turn are reinforced by, this narrative about Cuban pastness. Let us turn now to the memoirs of Eire and Pérez Firmat to see how exactly this nostalgia plays out.

## Chapter One. Yearning for Cuba: Idealized Recreations of Place and Space

Siento la nostalgia de volver a ti  
mas el destino manda y no puede ser.  
Mi Habana, mi tierra querida  
¿cuándo yo te volveré a ver?  
[.....]  
Habana  
A pesar de la distancia no te olvido  
Habana  
como siento la nostalgia de volver.

[I am nostalgic to see you again  
but destiny dictates and it cannot be.  
My Havana, my beloved homeland  
When will I see you again?  
[.....]  
Havana  
Even though we are apart, I do not forget you  
Havana  
How I am nostalgic to go back.]  
(Collazo Peña)

I have lived in Cuba through the auspices  
of memory. By this I mean to say that  
exilic memory has reproduced Cuba for  
me. [. . .] The ephemeral and personal  
narratives that signify “Cuba” for me resonate  
as not only possessing a certain materiality,  
but also providing a sense of “place.”  
(J. Muñoz, “No es fácil” 76)

These two quotations, one a ballad written by Roberto “Robby” Collazo and popularized by Celia Cruz and the other a personal statement by leading queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz, highlight how nostalgia for place and space often plays a

central role in the Cuban-American experience. In order to deal with the anxiety and longing for homeland that diasporic or exilic communities often grapple with, these individuals find ways to create and recreate Cuba in their daily lives. In this manner, they develop a sense of place, a sense of Cuba for themselves and their extended families. Muñoz later adds: “memory has a strange *spatiality* for the Cuban exile who inhabits North American territory but, [who] nonetheless, has powerful associations, identifications, and affiliations with the island. Or, more nearly, a memory of the island” (“No es fácil” 76, emphasis added). I begin this final chapter with these passages precisely because they call attention to the “materiality,” the “strange spatiality,” and the “sense of place” associated with a nostalgia for Cuba. Throughout the chapter, I analyze various examples of the Cuban diasporic community’s nostalgia for homeland wherein individuals create a sense of Cuba, a sense of belonging and home, through images, rituals and cultural symbols. I also analyze how different Cuban-American exiles recall pre-Revolutionary Cuba. Specifically, I look at how the memories recalled in Carlos Eire’s *Waiting for Snow in Havana* and Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s *Next Year in Cuba* depict a conflict-free, idealized pre-Revolutionary Cuba. Through a close analysis of Eire’s and Pérez Firmat’s memories of the island, one can see that Cuba is offered as a tempting albeit illusory alternative to both Revolutionary Cuba and present day realities in the United States. Interestingly, by focusing on pre-Revolutionary Cuba and ignoring the historical reality of the island, Eire and Pérez Firmat shift the focus of their

discussions of Cuba from history and politics—two perennial topics within the exile community—to place. In the end, as we shall see, these authors attempt to move toward an understanding of their present and future selves—a resolution to their nostalgia for Cuba—by focusing on an irretrievably lost past that most probably never even existed as they remember it.

Importantly, the emphasis on the significance of space and place is not limited to the angst-ridden musings of the Cuban diasporic community in contemporary society. Since at least the seventeenth century, the meanings of these complex, fluid terms have been continually contested along social, cultural, political, economic, and disciplinary lines. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Newton, Descartes, and Kant, and human geographers such as Tuan, Relph, and Harvey have grappled with these inchoate terms and yet there is still not a consensus as to a precise definition of either space or place.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A brief sketch of how each of these philosophers understood space and place demonstrates the extent to which this controversy is unresolved. In Aristotle's *Physics*, written around 200 BC, place was a fundamental, non-reducible feature of the physical world. He conceived of place as pervasive and did not pay particular attention to the concept of space. Almost two thousand years later, philosophers were still grappling with what space and place meant, but now the emphasis was more on the concept of space as opposed to place. Newton believed space was absolute. He subsumed place under space and denied place any autonomy. Within Newton's framework, place becomes, at best, a subdivision of space. Descartes echoed Newton's focus on the primacy of space and the subordinate status of place. For Descartes, space was relational and therefore its power derived from the relations between objects and events within space. Late in the eighteenth century, Kant took up the discussion of space emphasizing the importance of place through his focus on the mind (body). Thus, over the course of two thousand years, different philosophers grappled with the importance of space and place without ever coming to a definitive conclusion as to a definition of either term. For a detailed history of the definitions of place in relationship to both time and space, see Edward Casey's *Getting Back into Place* and *The Fate of Place* (particularly "Place as Container: Aristotle's *Physics*" 50-74; on Newton and Descartes, see "The Supremacy of Space" 133-96; on Kant see "By Way of Body: Kant, Whitehead, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty" 202-42).

Before delving into how constructions of the space and place of Cuba play a fundamental role in understanding the U.S. Cuban diasporic communities' desire to return to their homeland, it seems prudent to briefly sketch out a working definition of the terms.

In broad strokes, one could state that there have been two major strains of thought with regard to space and place in recent years, the humanist and the materialist.<sup>2</sup> The humanist approach, such as that offered by Yi-Fu Tuan, privileges the notion of place as something bounded, specific, and defined by lived experience. In the late 1970s, Tuan published *Space and Place*, a pioneering book about the human element inherent in the formation of place. Tuan described the distinction between space and place as the difference between the abstract, which has no specific human element, and the particular, something created by human experiences and endowed with value and deep emotional attachments. According to Tuan, "place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" (3). Thus, the abstract concept of space allows for openness whereas place calls for specificity. Place offers a sense of familiarity, permanence, and meaning that space does not.

---

<sup>2</sup> There have also been numerous other strains of thought such as the positivist, feminist, poststructuralist, and performative perspective to understanding space and place. I have narrowed my selection to the humanist and materialist perspectives because the definitions these scholars have offered are the most productive to my analysis of the Cuban exile community in the United States. For a more detailed description of these different conceptions of space and place, see John Agnew's "Space and Place" in *The Sage Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*.

In contrast to this, materialist accounts offered by Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey focus on the concept of space as something abstract, but that is not in any way neutral. In his influential text, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre insists on the primacy of space as opposed to place. According to Lefebvre, every society produces its own space and spatial practices. He defines space as a three-way dialectic between the perceived, conceived, and lived space or, as he tries to clarify, the physical, mental, and social components of space: “we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias” (11-12). He asserts that space is socially produced and consumed and that it “serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (26). According to Lefebvre, the processes involved in the production of space wield enormous power over the choices individuals can make in their lives, the opportunities afforded them, and how those individuals understand the world and themselves.

Echoing Lefebvre’s emphasis on the *production and power* of space, David Harvey offers a nuanced account of place and space within postmodernism and globalization in *The Condition of Postmodernism*. Harvey conceives of space as a social construct produced by economic forces. “Space cannot be understood [. . .] independently of the qualities of material processes” (203). Conceptions of space “are necessarily created through

material practices and processes which serve to reproduce social life" (204). Places, on the other hand, are locations constructed and imbued with meaning. They connote territorial and material specificity. In his work, Harvey also emphasizes the "time-space compression" that occurs in postmodernism as a phenomenon where the pace and speed of daily life and the altering of space due to technological advances radically modifies how "we represent the world to ourselves" (240). In a later text, Harvey further explains that as "[s]ocieties change and grow, they are transformed from within and adapt to pressures and influences from without. Objective but socially given conceptions of space and time must change to accommodate new material practices of social reproduction, new ways of assigning value" (*Justice, Nature* 222). As capitalism continually changes the economic conditions under which spaces are produced, historically and culturally specific places become more and more important.

Lefebvre's and Harvey's focus on the social production and consumption of space is radically different from that of Tuan's humanist approach in that it emphasizes the economic conditions that determine a socially produced space as opposed to the emotional attachments that define a place. However divergent the definitions, both approaches have conceived of space and place as contingent configurations. While the humanist approach has focused more on the concept of place, the materialist approach has emphasized the concept of space. Keeping in mind the most general working definition of space and place offered by both the humanist and materialist approaches,

space being an abstract, infinite, socially produced and consumed entity that wields power and place being a site, a location created by human experiences that invoke emotional attachments, a material artifact, let us turn our attention to the Cuban and Cuban-American diasporic community in the United States.

Since the Cuban Revolution in 1959, travel to and from the island has often been a contentious issue. In 1961, Cuba passed an immigration law (Ley 989) that instituted the need for a visa for any Cuban resident wanting to travel abroad. The law stated that if a Cuban citizen left and did not return to the island within the 60-day limit stamped on the exit permit, the state could confiscate all property of that individual and he or she was considered to have definitively abandoned Cuba. Those individuals were, for many years thereafter, not even allowed to visit the island. The United States, for its part, prohibited all travel to Cuba in February of 1963. More recently, travel restrictions have been significantly loosened and both the United States and Cuba have allowed more fluid travel between the two countries.<sup>3</sup>

However, because of the strict limitations placed on travel to Cuba over several decades, Cuban exiles in the United States devised various means of keeping Cuba alive

---

<sup>3</sup> In fact, in April of 2009 the United States government lifted travel and gift restrictions on Cubans and Cuban-Americans living in the United States thus allowing exiles and their families to visit Cuba more freely. In January of 2013, Cuba changed its immigration laws to fall more in line with what was actually happening with regards to Cuban citizens and travel abroad. The law eliminated the need for a tourism visa and extended the number of days Cuban citizens are allowed to travel. Ley 989 originally limited travel to 60 days. This was extended to 11 months in the 70s and then in 2013, the 11-month restriction was extended to 24 months, thus facilitating travel and extended stays in other countries for Cuban nationals without risking their citizenship or property.

for themselves and their families. According to María de los Angeles Torres, this occurred because the Cuban exile community ardently insisted that “[t]heir “Cubanness” would not be taken away from them by the government” (44). Through the associations created, perceived, and embodied in the space of Cuban exile, these individuals socially and culturally constructed the place of Cuba in the United States. Within the diasporic community, “Cuba *is* very much an idea, much more than a reality; it is an idea that no Cuban takes for granted, but nurtures, cultivates, defends, possesses, [and] celebrates” (129). It is precisely this space between reality and fantasy, between the actual material Cuba and the Cuba of the imagination that we will be interrogating here. In order to do so, we must look at how these individuals create the place and space of Cuba in the United States.

Recalling Lefebvre’s definition of the space of social practice, I aim to analyze the complexities of the spatial practices enacted by individuals in the diasporic community in their struggle to continually invent and reinvent their homeland. Specifically, I analyze the products of “*imagination*” that they created, the “symbols,” the paintings and physical representations of Cuba that hovered over and shaped the daily lives of these individuals, the “projects and projections,” the imaginary trips so many Cuban and Cuban-American exiles make that magically take them back to pre-Revolutionary Cuba, and the “utopias,” the future in Cuba that allows certain individuals to cast the island as

their potentially perfect future, as the answer to their identitarian angst.<sup>4</sup> The spatial practices addressed herein are those that “ensure continuity and some degree of cohesion” (Lefebvre 33) within the diasporic community, they are the guarantee of participation in the fiction of pre-Revolutionary Cuba as home, and what creates, fosters, and perpetuates a notion of nostalgia for Cuba in their everyday lives. Through these spatial practices, Cuba was transformed into a paradise lost, a myth, a utopian homeland just 90 miles out of reach. And it is this mythical, utopian Cuba that defines the choices and opportunities the community members have and how they understand the world and themselves.

### *Nostalgic Reconstructions of Havana*

Let us begin by looking at the symbols created and recreated by the Cuban and Cuban-American diaspora in the United States. Well-known Cuban scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat defines the phenomenon of recreating the lost homeland in exile in his now

---

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note here that this nostalgic reconstruction of homeland and the spatial practices involved therein are not an exclusive phenomenon within the Cuban and Cuban-American diaspora. Within the larger Latino Studies corpus, writers such as Julia Álvarez (*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, *Yo*, and *Saving the World*), Angie Cruz (*Soledad*), and Junot Díaz (*The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao*) portray characters that grapple with a sense of longing for home and return trips back to their homeland. In addition to writers from the Dominican Republic diasporic community, Chicano Studies theorists also have addressed the issue of nostalgia and the construction and reconstruction of homeland in their theorizations of Aztlán. Ranging from Gloria Anzaldúa to Emma Pérez many have commented on this imagined space and place. Aztlán is a “[. . .] mythic homeland [that] is longed for, constructed, and rewritten through collective memories. Time is traversed, and a mythic past entwines with a future” (E. Pérez 78). This explanation of Aztlán echoes precisely the nostalgia for Cuba addressed herein. Cuba becomes a mythical homeland constructed and rewritten through the imagination. And this constant invention and iteration of Cuba through symbols and projects becomes projected as a potential solution to their troubled present that will lead them to a perfect utopian future.

classic *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. He writes that immigrant groups go through three stages of adaptation to a new homeland: the substitution, the destitution, and the institution stages. The substitution stage is precisely this “effort to create substitutes or copies of the home culture” (7). Although Pérez Firmat goes to great lengths to explain that this substitution or recreation is always necessarily faulty, he stresses that the Cuban exile strives to “*reproduce, rather than recast, native traditions*” (8, emphasis added). He understands this stage as compensatory for it is what allows individuals to grapple with their deep nostalgia for homeland and their sense of displacement. Eventually, when the illusory quality of the substitution stage dissipates, the destitution stage begins. This process entails an overwhelming sense of loss of place. These exiles feel “estranged and disconnected” (10) from everything. Finally, the institution stage involves “the establishment of a new relation between person and place” (11), a sort of acceptance of where one is located in exile. Importantly, Pérez Firmat notes that while it would seem that these stages would be progressive, in fact, they are constantly in flux. “What changes is the relative prominence of these attitudes” (11).

For Cuban exiles living in the United States, the 1960s “was a time of nostalgia and substitution” (11). For many, Cuba became “a collection of snapshots” (Muñoz, “No es fácil” 76) and images that were strategically placed throughout homes and businesses in the community. Angeles Torres notes that “[i]n the early 1960s, painters such as Felix

Ramos *made a living* recreating the pictures of lush and colorful “framboyanes” (tropical mimosa trees), which hung in the living rooms of Cuban families throughout the United States alongside the overreproduced iconographic photo of the *Malecón*, the Havana seawall” (45, emphasis added). The simple fact that an artist could “make a living” painting a tree commonly found in Cuba and that the photo of the *Malecón* was overproduced indicates just how popular these images were.

Another example of the preponderance of Cuban imagery in the Cuban exile’s home can be found in Richard Blanco’s acclaimed collection of poetry, *City of a Hundred Fires*. In the prose poem “Los Santos of the Living Room” Blanco describes how alongside a picture of his cousin Susana’s *quinceañera*, hung “flea market oil paintings of palm tree landscapes and ink sketches of La Habana Vieja—La Catedral, El Capitolio, El Morro” (15). By highlighting that his mother purchases these images of Cuba at the flea market, Blanco stresses just how commonplace these paintings and sketches were and implies that anyone could pick one up. The poem continues, enumerating the various religious figures displayed in the china cabinet: “*Santa Bárbara* [. . .] *San Lázaro* [. . .] and the patron of the homeland—*La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*—floating above a mystic sea, protecting our island” (15). From their perched positions in the cabinet these *santos* protect the family as they live in their insular exile community, their “island” in the

United States.<sup>5</sup> Time and time again, similar, if not identical, images are repeated throughout the works of various Cuban and Cuban-American writers and critics. Between the paintings on the wall and the *santos* displayed for all to see, Cuban iconography hovered over the daily lives of Cuban exiles and shaped the way that they understood themselves.

These visual reminders of Cuba constantly demanded attention by their mere presence and were not limited to private dwellings. The community also attempted to recreate the landscape of Cuba in cities and local businesses. As José Quiroga explains in *Cuban Palimpsests*:

[T]he first generation [of exiles] set itself about producing memories: albums, picture books, postcard collections, records and record covers, restaurants named after streets, corners, city blocks, natural landscapes. Toponyms were decorated with all sorts of authentic motifs, naming illusory or real sites and giving reality [. . . to stores] that in turn had matte reproductions of the Capitol building, of the Morro Castle, of the bay of Manzanillo, of the Valley of Viñales, of orchids near the waterfalls in Soroa. It was an unreachable, other landscape because of the political situation, but it became as real as *fact*. It created a place to live by alongside whatever flattened scenery was actually lived in Miami, and they were real fragments of something that intervened within the tenement in upper Manhattan, that surrounded you during the snowstorms of Iowa, or that created an uncanny sense of reproduction in Puerto Rico. (xv)

Through images, toponyms, and reproductions Cuba was being strategically placed for all to see. Cuba wielded a powerful hold over the imagination of all of those

---

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, *San Lázaro* and *la Virgen de la Caridad* are perhaps the two most revered saints in Cuban culture.

living in exile. Being surrounded by these symbols fostered a sense of belonging to Cuba and made Miami, Manhattan, Iowa, Puerto Rico, or any other Cuban community in the United States resemble home. As Tuan puts it when discussing how homelands have visible landmarks that wield significance, “[v]isible signs serve to enhance a people’s sense of identity; they encourage awareness of and loyalty to place” (159). Thus, the Cuban and Cuban-American community used a plethora of visual signs to foster a sense of *Cubanidad* and construct the space of Cuba in exile. If, as Edward Casey claims, “bodies build places” out of spaces (*Getting Back* 116), then a series of questions arise. What kind of places were these bodies building during what Pérez Firmat has designated as the substitution stage, the stage when Cuban immigrants reproduce their home culture in exile? And, why exactly were they reproducing them? What political or historical purposes were served by reproducing such places and traditions?

María Cristina García addresses some of these questions in *Havana USA*—a telling title in itself as it highlights just how effectively the construction of Cuba in the United States has been. In her comprehensive study about the first three waves of Cuban émigrés since the Cuban revolution in 1959, García highlights the differences in how each group has adapted to U.S. culture and, with each passing wave, has more readily accepted the status of immigrant versus exile. For the first wave of émigrés, those who came to the United States in the 1960s and early 70s, “maintaining a sense of *cubanidad* [. . . was] crucial” (83), and for many, even became “an obsession” (90). In order to create

this sense of *cubanidad* while living in exile, these individuals worked passionately “to preserve those customs, values, and traditions that they associated with being Cuban” (83). To this end, Cuban exiles did things such as reproduce the same *municipios* (townships) that existed in Cuba in Florida with the exact same names. These *municipios* became sites of information and places that offered cultural and recreational programs for exiles thus fostering a sense of Cuban community. The exiles also did things such as choosing names for businesses that evoked places in Cuba. David Rieff, in *The Exile: Cuba in the Heart of Miami*, explains that in Miami, the supreme haven for the early wave of Cuban exiles in the United States, “[t]here was a supermarket chain called *Varadero*, there were any number of cafeterias called *Flor de Camagüey* [. . .] and there was even [a restaurant called] *La Habana Vieja* [. . .]” (125). The simple use of neighborhood, *municipio*, and city names for businesses in Miami instantaneously evoked Cuba for the patrons of that establishment. Much like in the classical *ars memoriae*, which was supposedly invented by Simonides of Ceos “by visualizing the places occupied by the victims of a disaster of which he was the only survivor” (Davis and Starn 3), place names help organize and categorize memories. Rieff later adds that “[s]ome businesses had simply been started up by their exiled owners in Miami once again, and these were often graced by signs making their original date of establishment in Cuba in the nineteenth century rather than their reestablishment in South Florida in the latter half of the twentieth” (125). The sum effect of all of these actions was the creation of the space

of Cuba in the United States, but it was not just any reproduction. It was a recreation of the very specific cultural and historical space of pre-Castro Cuba.<sup>6</sup> Within this artifice, a business that was established in Havana in the nineteenth century could easily exist again in Miami, without any overt reference to the fact that the Miami establishment was not the original nor to the fact that the original, in all likelihood, no longer existed under Castro or at the very least no longer existed in the same way under Castro's rule. This type of manipulation of facts attempted to create a seamless sense of geographical and historical continuity between pre-Revolutionary Cuba and the Miami of the 60s and 70s.<sup>7</sup>

The reiteration of names and *municipios* throughout Florida was greatly facilitated by the deep emotional attachment the Cuban exiles had to these symbols that

---

<sup>6</sup> One interesting aspect of these recreations of Cuban space in the United States is that they satisfy the need to validate one's memories by sharing and comparing them with others. Take, for instance how Sandra Oldham, a physician now living in Miami, explains her decision to move from Pittsburgh to Miami as a desire to find comfort in the collective. She states: "it wasn't a question of going somewhere like New York, or L.A., or even Philadelphia, where there are a lot of Spanish-speaking people; it was a question of my heritage, of my Cuban culture. I know there were so many people here who shared the same past that I did. [ . . . ] [N]obody outside of Miami could possibly understand what it was like to grow up in Havana in those days, or to have been a member of the Vedado Tennis Club, or to have gone to the Phillips School [ . . . ]. Here there are people within a four-block radius of this house who can understand perfectly what it was like for me, whose memories complement mine" (Rieff 55). Oldham's desire to move to Miami was based on a clear and strong desire to find a community that would sharpen and promote the recall of her memories of Cuba.

<sup>7</sup> Another example of a symbol, a spatial practice, employed to evoke Cuba in the United States can be found in the use of a *lector* (reader) in Nilo Cruz's play *Anna in the Tropics*. Although the work is set in a cigar-rolling factory in 1929 Tampa, Florida, and thus long before the Cuban Revolution, the use of a *lector* still highlights the desire to recreate elements of Cuba when living outside of the confines of the island. Ofelia, the wife of the owner of the cigar factory, imports Juan Julian directly from Cuba to serve as the factory's *lector*. According to Ofelia, she was trying "to create a little city that resembles the ones we left back in the island" (22) and thus a simulacrum of life in Cuba in Florida. By employing Juan Julian, Ofelia is creating a sense of Cuba through the recreation of a social practice. She is negotiating her nostalgia for Cuba as she tries to make her new home resemble Cuba in some fashion.

represented pre-Revolutionary Cuba and their staunch insistence on maintaining a sense of *cubanidad* while in exile. They saw these reconstructions and reproductions as a way to recreate the lives from which they were displaced, the lives that they believed were rightfully theirs, and that they nostalgically longed to recapture. Whether a painting on the wall, the *santos* that watched over the family from the living room china cabinet, the names of streets and restaurants throughout Florida, or the existence of *municipios* and other cultural activities that promoted a sense of Cuban community and identity, these symbols cast a shadow over the daily lives of anyone living in the community and affected how these individuals understood the world and themselves. These physical reminders of Cuba were particularly important because there exists an affinity between our identities and where we live. “Built places, [. . .] are extensions of our bodies” (Casey, *Getting Back* 120). In the relationship between place and bodies, “our very identity is at stake. For we tend to identify ourselves by—and with—the places in which we reside. [. . .] [W]here we reside comes to exist in our image, but *we*, the residents, also take on certain of *its* properties” (120). In other words, as the exile community created the simulacrum of Havana in Miami, the shiny mirror image of pre-Revolutionary Cuba, the simulacrum itself shaped and fostered a sense of *cubanidad* in the community. As

Silvia Spitta explains:

nuestras casas—y por extensión los barrios y las ciudades donde vivimos—no sólo contienen, sino que también sirven de índice de lo que somos: son parte constitutiva de nuestra identidad [. . . En una ciudad,] cada esquina, cada parque, cada sala de concierto es un palimpsesto de

memorias sucesivas con un valor muy personal y privado a la vez que contingente e inconsciente . . . Buscamos [ . . . un] efecto “marcador” a través de los objetos con los que decoramos nuestros hogares. (746-47)

[our houses—and by extension the neighborhoods and cities where we live—not only contain, but also serve as an indicator of what we are: they are a constitutive part of our identity [. . . In a city,] every street corner, every park, every concert hall is a palimpsest of consecutive memories with a very personal and private value while at the same time being contingent and unconscious . . . We search for [ . . . a] “marking” effect through the objects with which we decorate our homes.]

The palimpsests of memories created in pre-Revolutionary Cuba were simply transplanted to the United States with the repetition of street and restaurant names, with the *municipios* and the cultural events and recreational programs afforded the exiles, and with the iconography that surrounded the exiles. Ironically, the exiles *consciously* were attempting to create memories of pre-Revolutionary Cuba that are usually “contingent and *unconscious*” throughout the landscape. These individuals were grappling with a profound sense of placelessness and their nostalgic reproductions of home allowed for a sense of rootedness, familiarity, and protection. They created the space and place of pre-Revolutionary Cuba in their daily lives fostered by both commodities that evoked the image and imaginary of their homeland and the “symbolic imaginings and national longings that produce and reproduce homelands” (Naficy 5).

Strikingly, the exiles did an amazingly effective job reproducing pre-Revolutionary Cuba in Miami. So much so that by 1979, Miami was, according to sociologists Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, “in effect Cuba’s second-largest city”

(104) and was considered “a transnational clone of Cuba” (Rubio, “Discourses of/on Nostalgia” 15). María Cristina García echoes this sentiment when she writes that “Cubans who arrived in Miami during the Mariel boatlift of 1980 often joked that they had entered a time warp and stepped back into the Cuba of the 1950s” (93-94). Thanks to the diligent, imaginative work of many exiles, Miami was magically transformed into “la Cuba de ayer” (yesterday’s Cuba)” (Pérez Firmat, *Life* 8), thus fostering a sense of pre-Revolutionary *cubanidad* in the United States for the exile community. But, if the transformation of Miami into a specter of Havana was so successful, what drives so many Cubans and Cuban-Americans to contemplate a return to their island paradise?

Perhaps the beginning of an answer to this complex question can be found in an interrogation of the term *destierro* versus exile. “In English *destierro* always converts to exile. But it is not quite the same thing. Exile is *exilio*, a state of asylum. But *destierro* is something else entirely: It’s banishment, with all its accompanying and impotent anguish. Literally, it means to be uprooted, to be violently torn from the earth” (Obejas, *Days* 309). *Destierro* necessarily implies a violent separation of body from place. Because Cuban exiles were for so long denied even the possibility of returning to Cuba, *destierro* is perhaps a more accurate term for their circumstance. As Oliva Espín aptly notes, “[t]he pain of uprootedness is also activated in subtle forms by the everyday absences of familiar smells, familiar foods, familiar routines for doing the small tasks of daily life” (156). Thus the community worked hard to assuage the feelings of *destierro* by

reproducing these spatial practices. The specificity of the rich term *desterrado* reveals the importance of *tierra* for the Cuban exile. The feeling of being “violently torn” away, of being “uprooted” and unearthed, is precisely how many exiles conceived of their separation from Cuba. The savage uprooting is what fosters the Cuban exile’s nostalgia for her homeland, what allows the apparently seamless reproduction of Havana in Miami, and what plants the seed of a possible return trip that would heal the wound and ease the pain. Even though Miami (and other cities with large Cuban and Cuban American communities) was abundant with symbols and spatial practices that fostered the presence of Cuba in its absence, for many the lingering question remained as to the potential of a return voyage to their homeland to get to the root of who they really are.

If nostalgia is a longing for home and if, as J. Macgregor Wise states, “home is always movement” (305), then it seems prudent to trace the movement that nostalgic Cubans and Cuban-Americans psychologically and physically make when attempting to create an identity for themselves. Much of the inculcation of *cubanidad* in the United States is done through symbols, stories, memories, pictures, recreations, and reproductions. But those signifying practices alone do not constitute culture, one’s *cubanidad*. “Culture is a way of behaving, of territorializing. We live our cultures not only through discourse, signs and meaning, but through the *movements of our bodies*” (303, emphasis added).

The possibility of a trip to Cuba, a project that physically displaces the body in an attempt to perform one's cubanness, creates much division among the exile community. Given the drastic political and social changes that have transpired in Cuba since the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, one might ask if a *return* to Cuba is even possible for exiles that fled during the early stages of the Revolution for as the famous saying popularized by writer Thomas Wolfe goes, "you can't go home again." The authors considered herein very well may acknowledge the veracity of this sentiment. However, they still express a variety of projects, of ways of returning, literally and figuratively, to their longed-for homeland. Although both Eire and Pérez Firmat are completely entrenched in nostalgic longings for their homeland and want to return to Cuba, their political commitments prevent them from seriously contemplating a physical return while Castro is still in power. And so instead, they must settle for pining nostalgically for Cuba. Interestingly, when they remember Cuba or fantasize about a hypothetical return trip, they present conflict-free memories of pre-Revolutionary Cuba that are radically and clearly outside the realm of historical reality. But, what can one make of such memories that are so divergent from reality, especially considering that both Eire's and Pérez Firmat's texts are considered memoirs and thus implicitly convey the notion that what they are relaying is factually true? As Isabel Alvarez Borland writes in *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*, within the Cuban and Cuban-American community, there

has been a “predominance of autobiography and autobiographical fictions” (157) as writers

struggle to understand themselves. Because of the loss of community and culture inherent in the exile experience, the Cuban-American writers’ attempt to replicate their community in their works is based on their individual experience. To a large extent, the Cuba that these writers have discovered is really the Cuba within themselves [because] [a] literature born of exile is a literature that by force has to rely on memory and imagination more than any other since the cultural reality of an exiled writer is no longer available to fuel his or her creativity. (157)

Guillermo Cabrera Infante echoed this sentiment when discussing his own depictions of Cuba in his writing. In an interview with Jacobo Machover in 1984, Cabrera Infante speaks to how his memories of Cuba are more important than the reality of the island:

es que es ese recuerdo [de La Habana] lo que a mí me interesa. No La Habana física particular. [. . .] Entonces esa Habana [castrista] para mí no existe, esa Habana yo he decidido olvidarla. Ahora la que existe es otra. Y La Habana del recuerdo es más física, es más real para mí que La Habana verdadera. (226)

[it is this memory of Havana that interests me. Not the real, physical Havana. [. . .] Castro’s Havana does not exist for me, I have decided to forget that Havana. Now the one that exists is another. And, the Havana of my memories is more physical, more real than the true Havana.]

Autobiographical writing, as we know, is a project to delve deeper into the self. It indicates a desire to examine one’s origins or a transforming life experience in order to better understand the present and future. Much like Cabrera Infante, both Eire and Pérez Firmat rely heavily on their memories and imagination in order to reconstruct the

Cuba of their childhood. They attempt different ways to perform their *cubanidad* through their texts and to grapple with their nostalgia for Cuba, and in doing so, they each produce a conflict-free version of the space and place of pre-Revolutionary Cuba in their writings, one that lies outside of the historical and cultural reality of the island.

### ***Conflict-free Memories of Pre-Revolutionary Cuba***

Let us first turn our attention to Carlos Eire. In 2003, Eire won the National book Award for Nonfiction for his first memoir, *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy*. A full Professor of History and Religious Studies at Yale, Eire was unaccustomed to writing about himself. However, during the midst of the Elián González crisis in 2000,<sup>8</sup> when critics were vociferously debating the possibility that Elián might be separated from his father for political reasons, Eire grew irate both because of the political rhetoric and because of the lack of understanding of Cuban history. He was particularly bothered because he and his older brother Tony had been physically separated from their parents in the early 1960s because of political reasons. The two children had come to the United States on April 6, 1962 as part of the now controversial U.S.-sponsored *Pedro Pan* Operation that brought over 14,000

---

<sup>8</sup> Elián González, a five-year-old boy, his mother, and twelve other Cubans attempted to cross the Straits of Florida by boat in November of 1999. Unfortunately, during the trip the group encountered a storm and their boat suffered engine failure. These tragic events eventually claimed the lives of eleven of the fourteen refugees, including Elián's mother. When the U.S. Coast Guard rescued Elián and two other refugees, bringing them to the United States, Elián's exiled family members in Miami requested asylum for Elián. However, his father, who still lived in Cuba, requested that Elián be returned to him. A huge political controversy ensued, which only came to a conclusion when Elián González was forcefully returned to his father against the wishes of his Miami-based extended family.

unaccompanied young Cuban children to the United States over the course of 20 months supposedly to free them from Castro's communist Revolution. Up until the time of the Elián González custody battle, Eire had mostly buried his deep emotional attachment to Cuba. But, watching the heated situation unfold inspired him to write his memoir. He states: "My mind was flooded with images, once I started. It was like I opened a door, and all this stuff was in there, and it just kept coming out, rushing out like lava. [. . .] All of this had been locked away in what I call my Vault of Oblivion" (Paterostro). For decades, Eire had tried to forget about his past, but the Elián González affair made everything come to the forefront, in wave after wave of memory. He states: "As much as I have tried to escape, to obliterate what I was and ceased to be, I've been as successful at that as I've been at turning myself into a corn-fed, redheaded, freckled, Scotch-Irish farm boy from Indiana" (Eire, *Waiting* 51). In other words, his transformation into a stereotypical North American from the heartland of the United States fails. He cannot define himself in those terms. Instead, through the process of writing his memoir, he finally embraces his true identity: "I yam what I yam. *Soy Cubano. Cubanus sum*" (223).

In *Waiting for Snow in Havana* Eire psychologically ventures back to the island of his youth as he nostalgically chronicles his experiences before and during the first years of the Revolution.<sup>9</sup> Switching between his adult life in the United States and his idyllic

---

<sup>9</sup> Eire's second memoir, *Learning to Die in Miami*, was published in 2010 and focuses on Eire's process of assimilation and acculturation in the United States. To use Pérez Firmat's terminology, Eire's second memoir could be said to chronicle the institutional stage of his exile.

childhood in Cuba, "Mr. Memory" (248) interweaves vivid recollections of his time in Havana with poignant glimpses at his present reality. In Havana, Eire was a part of the elite upper-middle class. His mother was a housewife and his father was a municipal judge in Cuba who "had power. Real power, the kind that makes other men grovel" (20). His family's privileged position within society can be seen throughout his memoir in the descriptions of his home in Miramar filled with mahogany furniture, maids, and nannies; in the fact that he attended the finest, private primary school in Havana along with Batista's children; in his chauffeured car rides to school; and in the family's extensive art collection.<sup>10</sup> Even the way that the memoir begins highlights Eire's sense of privilege as a child. Describing January 1, 1959, the day Batista fled Cuba and Castro began his socialist state, Eire narrates, "[t]he world changed while I slept, and much to my surprise, no one had consulted me" (1). The sentiment expressed here is both amusing and disconcerting. Eire was barely eight years old when Castro took control of the government, an event that radically altered the course of his life, and yet his first reaction was that no one had asked him for permission to change the world. Only a child or a person of privilege and status could imagine such a thing.

---

<sup>10</sup> According to Eire, this art collection "consumed" (154) his father and was the reason his father stayed in Havana instead of emigrating to the United States with his wife and children. "The plan called for King Louis to stay home to guard the precious art collection from the Cuban People. He wouldn't give that up, not even to be with his real sons. He did keep us in mind, though: he repeatedly said, as the years dragged on and we all got older, and Fidel got more deeply entrenched in power, that he was staying behind so we wouldn't lose our inheritance" (342).

At times, from his privileged vantage point, Eire recognizes the “world of hierarchies” that existed in Havana and understands that he “was on top of the heap” (21). At these moments, he is aware that racism existed in Cuba or, as he puts it, “that there was something awful about being black in Cuba. African Cubans weren’t too lucky” (152) because they are not seen at the elite schools where he studies, at the exclusive beach clubs where he is a member, at the movie theaters where he goes, or at the church where his family prays. He recognizes that “whatever work needed to be done in the house was done by African women. And whatever hard work needed to be done in the world, that is, my world, always fell to African Cubans, men and women alike” (159). However, although he acknowledges this racial discrepancy, he never decries it. Instead, when Eire mentions the racial and social conflict he does so not “for the sake of some principle,” but rather “out of fear” of losing his own position in society (159).

Eire expresses this same fear when, shortly after the triumph of the Revolution, his family hires Caridad a maid who “taunted” Eire by telling him that she looked forward to the day he would be made to clean her house (299). This threat, coupled with the uncertainty he witnessed all around him during those turbulent years led him to have “night terrors” that were “smothering the life out of” him (299). Although Eire recalls being fearful and feeling threatened, the manner in which he presents his memories of his privileged position in Cuba does not do justice to the historically rich,

tension-filled situation leading up to and during the early stages of the Revolution. Instead of questioning the social and racial inequalities that surrounded him, his version of Cuba is presented in terms of an emotional conflict that, in effect, naturalized the social tensions prevalent in Havana in the 1950s and early 60s. The social unrest, government-sponsored repression, and economic instability that prevailed during Batista's government in the 1950s, as described in Louis Pérez Jr.'s now classic *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture*, is privatized and smoothed over in Eire's memoir. According to Pérez, "the 1950s were years of deepening crisis, of disquiet and despair, of disappointment and disillusionment. A pall of uncertainty settled over Cuban households" (455). Once the Revolution triumphs, it became "at one and the same time the means and a mandate for change" (478). Strikingly, while this call for change is the reality that hangs in the air around Eire, what defines the majority of his memories is the image of Cuba as an idyllic place, as an unchanging paradise:

Havana by day. Hot, yes, and radiant. The sunlight seemed at once dense and utterly clear. The shadows were so crisp, so cool. The clouds in the blue sky, each one a poem; some haiku, some epic. The sunsets: forget it, no competition. Nothing could compare to the sight of that glowing red disk being swallowed by the turquoise sea and the tangerine light bathing everything, making all of creation glow as if from within. (Eire, *Waiting* 12)

These types of memories of Cuba celebrate and highlight the natural characteristics of the island, thereby silencing the political and social tensions that abounded.

In *Place in Literature* Roberto Dainotto analyzes this tendency to displace historical reality by focusing on place. According to Dainotto, the “discourse of place” that is prevalent in contemporary society leads to a loss of “historical perspective. Place [. . .] is fundamentally a negation of history” (2) because “to claim that culture springs from a place [. . .] negate[s] the historical forces, struggles, and tensions that made a culture what it is” (2). A focus on place is a focus on a world outside of the confines of class conflict, of social strife, of history itself. Thus, literature that focuses on place becomes an “alternative to a Marxist sense of history centered on the very notion of class conflict” (28). Its goal is “to replace the ‘insufficient’ historical remedy with the geographical cure—a cure that, without ‘pietistic clichés,’ will let a tradition survive and be honored, sheltered in the boundaries of place” (14).

In his memoir, Eire clearly remembers and makes reference to “the historical forces, struggles, and tensions” before and during the Revolution when he writes of the explosions, bombs, and gunfire he heard in his neighborhood, of his cousin’s and uncle’s imprisonment, of the executions following the Revolution’s triumph, or of standing in long lines to exchange money or with ration cards. But, to focus positively on these events or to mention them in a more substantive fashion would lead Eire to affirm a Marxist sense of history based on class struggle, something that he simply cannot allow himself to do given his principled opposition to the Cuban Revolution. Instead, he internalizes and naturalizes the conflict leading up the Revolution and thinks that the

Revolution works to erase his past and his culture. He laments: “[a] lifetime of memories gone in less than a year. An entire culture pulled up by the roots” (276). Because of this erasure, Eire feels compelled – albeit perhaps unwittingly – to recuperate memories of a conflict-free Cuba and thus hopefully recuperate his culture that was “pulled up by the roots” by focusing on place. Eire tries to “unthink” as he recalls Cuba. He tries to imagine “the sound of memories that have nothing to do with Batista or Fidel” (98).

With this intention in mind, throughout the text Eire magically brings the conflict-free world of his childhood in Cuba to life. He speaks of the joys of growing up in Havana, the car surfing, firecrackers, parties, and reckless childhood games, but he also details Cuban cultural traditions, how neighbors always helped each other out and how religion – both iconographic and dogmatic – loomed over his daily life. He recalls the beauty of the landscape, the always-perfect weather, the ocean, and the sunlight in Havana comparing them to “a lover’s caress, an untiring embrace, an endless shower of kisses” (12). Eire himself highlights the romantic, nostalgic element of this description by quickly clarifying: “[o]f course, I didn’t think of it that way back then. Get lost. I was a boy. Images of hugs and kisses were unspeakably repulsive” (12). As a child, Eire was not nostalgically looking at the Havana landscape, but he was taking it all in. He was told that “Cuba is a paradise, and it very well might have been the original Paradise, the Garden of Eden” (25), but not until Eire himself was banished from this paradise, miles and miles away from his homeland, does he agree as he wistfully recalls those images of

paradise. The beach and the sea in particular are a favorite memory of his. The “fine white sand, with the turquoise sea as a backdrop. And those clouds, those never-finished, ever-changing poems; and the blazing sunshine, that transfiguring everlasting kiss; and those waves, those endless caresses [. . . ] Not even Fidel could make that beach vanish” (137). What is significant about this quotation is not only the nostalgic diction, tone, and rhythm of Eire’s prose, but the fact that the object of nostalgia—the beach—is seen as being potentially threatened by “Fidel,” by the fact of the Cuban Revolution. Eire’s focus on the beach and nature itself demonstrates, to use Dainotto’s words, “a certain impulse to invent a better world outside of “history” and its most immediate signs of social decay” (9). Castro and the Revolution cannot take the beach away from Eire because his recollection of events does not take into account the social reality of the Cuban Revolution. Instead, Eire’s beaches are free from the “social decay” (as Eire would most probably describe it) that is the Revolution. His memories of the beach are presented as if they were “free from historical and political impositions” because they are “the expression of a sensibility bounded to the local” (Dainotto 11), bounded to place and outside of history and the progression of time.

In addition to these recollections of Cuba, there are two particular images of nature that Eire continually associates with his homeland. The first is bright red hibiscus blossoms, the flower of a common tree native to Cuba that is prominent throughout the island. Eire repeatedly references these blossoms throughout his memoir to describe a

range of events, from the topic of his mother's dreams (1), to how a squashed mosquito stain resembles the pattern of the flower blossoms (147), to how the city streets were lined with "cigar-shaped, blood red hibiscus blossoms" (167). The blossoms also frequently appear when Eire is in trouble. When he is running away from a shootout during the first years of the Revolution, he describes the "blood red hibiscus blossoms, fully open, partly open, and not yet open" on the fence that he jumps over (303). Later, when he is escaping a potential sexual assault in an alleyway, he runs "past the blood red hibiscus blossoms, oblivious to them" (320). While it is curious that Eire would note the bright red flowers as he is running for his life on two separate occasions, his cognizance of them and their incorporation into Eire's accounts mark them as symbolic of Havana. The bright red blossoms are a constant, vivid background image throughout his memoir.

The other image within nature that evokes Cuba for Eire is clouds. This image is so important that Eire dedicates an entire chapter of his memoir to discuss the clouds in the shape of Cuba that have marked his life:

They appear suddenly, out of nowhere, when I least expect it. They float into view, and linger there longer than all the others, without changing shape, or changing so slowly as to fool me into thinking they can't change at all. They claim a lot of sky, always making sure that there is plenty of blue between them and all the others. [. . .] They come in all sizes. [. . .] What to make of these clouds I see so often? These clouds in the shape of Cuba? [. . .] In the past thirty-eight years I've seen eight thousand nine hundred and seventeen clouds in the shape of Cuba. I know this because I keep count, and the number is always etched accurately in my brain and in my heart. When I die, feel free to saw open my skull and paw through

my brain. I bet you'll find a spot that looks like a cloud in the shape of Cuba. Feel free to open my chest, too. I bet you'll also find a scar on my heart that looks like a Cuba cloud. (148-49)

These clouds in the shape of Cuba pursue Eire. He has "seen them everywhere" (*Waiting* 149) and the very first one that he saw was while he was living in a *Pedro Pan* Refugee Camp in Florida. Once he was no longer on the island, he began to see these clouds, the representation of the space and place of Cuba, everywhere. Cuba is in the sky above Eire, it is etched on his brain and has left a scar on his heart. He describes the clouds: "So sublime, so ethereal, so far from reach, so clever and unfathomable, so supercharged with the power to enchant and annihilate me at the same time" (*Waiting* 151). This imagery literally and figuratively marks the importance of Cuba, of place, for Eire. Castro, the Revolution, and everything that led up to his exile are supplanted by nature, by his desire to hold on to his culture, by place. These conflict-free images of Cuba allow him to carry the island within him, etched in his mind and his heart, while negating the social and cultural reality of the island. What lives in him and what hovers above him wherever he goes is a fantasy world where the Revolution and its subsequent consequences never transpire.

The place of Cuba devoid of any conflict, social or otherwise, shapes this memoir. Eire was most definitely not nostalgic while living in Cuba, even when he was aware of his immanent plans to leave, but what brings his memories out of his "vault of oblivion" is his nostalgia for the life that could have been his. As he carefully unleashes

his memories from the recesses of his brain, he realizes how much they have shaped how he has lived his life. For instance, although as a child in Havana he “loved to steal [and was a] [b]usy little kleptomaniac” (122) stealing mostly toys, when he was “slowly starving in Miami” (126) he never stole because “[s]tealing was an affront to [. . . his] mother and father [. . .]. Stealing was a betrayal of those memories that mattered most” (127) to him. His memories of Cuba, of his parents as they taught him that stealing was wrong, a mortal sin, were precious to Eire. In exile, even when faced with desperate times, Eire clung to his conflict-free memories as foundational for his present self, and those memories dictated his actions.

Although Eire spends much of his memoir retelling stories of his youth, what he most desperately desires is to return to pre-Revolutionary Cuba and have pre-Revolutionary Cuba returned to him. When Castro’s troops stop the Bay of Pigs invasion, Eire’s future is forever changed. He laments: “[t]he future—my future—defeated, captured. All hope lost” (288). Later, when fantasizing what would have been if the Bay of Pigs invasion had been successful, he imagines: “staying at home in Havana, with no Revolution left to chase me away, free to apply Brylcreem to my hair and dance the night away at a thousand and one nightclubs. I see myself leading a better, sweeter life than the one God has graced me with” (297). He also fantasizes about having “movie parties in palatial homes with statue-ringed swimming pools” (350). That is what his “adult life in Cuba might have been, if the world hadn’t changed” (341). But

that was not what happened. Those images of a carefree life in Havana where he would worry about his hair, go out to clubs, and watch movies in palatial houses are of a future that was forever lost. Instead, his *destierro* was a sort of death, and his life in the United States was “life after death” (348).<sup>11</sup> According to Eire, it is not his elite status that he misses, but rather the life that he was destined to live in Havana: “I pine not for what I lost but for what I’ve never had and perhaps shall never have” (150). But, what exactly does he mean? His status was an integral part of his life in Cuba and when he imagines what life would have been like, he imagines privilege. Yet again, as Eire depicts his family’s elite status, he emphasizes the conflict-free aspect of his situation. Instead of focusing on the rich, historical reality of the time, he zeroes in on the more abstract concept of his life of privilege in Cuba and his sense of *cubanidad* that certainly would have been different had he lived out his life on the island.

Eire’s life of privilege in Cuba was spectacular and spectacularly inflated in Eire’s mind thanks in part to his father’s fantasy that they all had an aristocratic French lineage. According to Eire’s father, everyone in his family was the reincarnation of French royalty: “My father [. . .] vividly remembered his prior incarnation as King Louis XVI of France [. . .]. My mother [. . .] had no memory of having been Marie Antoinette” (1). Eire later continues stating that according to his father:

---

<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the photographer that chronicled Eire’s entire life in Cuba, Puentes Pi, was also a crime scene photographer who had “captured a thousand images of people [. . .] murdered or run over by cars” (Eire, *Waiting* 307). The same man and camera that captured the images of corpses was responsible for taking Eire’s passport picture that allowed him to leave Cuba, something Eire experienced as a sort of death.

My older brother and my adopted brother had both been Bourbon princes in a former life. My adopted brother had been the Dauphin, the heir to the French throne. [. . .] I was the outsider. I alone was not a former Bourbon. My father wouldn't tell me who I had been. "You're not ready to hear it," he would say. "But you were very special." My father's sister, Lucía, [. . .] had once been a Bourbon princess." (3)

While at times Eire seems to question this royal lineage his father so ardently professes, throughout his memoir he still refers to his father almost exclusively as Louis XVI, King Louis, or the former King of France and to his mother as Marie Antoinette. Importantly, this family genealogy erases all Cuban conflict and history and affords no progression of time. It traces the family back not only to a pre-Revolutionary Cuba, but also to an aristocratic, pre-bourgeois France. Cuba does not even exist in this version of the past much less the social and political strife that lead to the Cuban Revolution.

Even though Eire might want to physically return to Cuba, he cannot. Because of his opinions about the Revolution and his open criticism of Castro in his memoir, Eire claims that he is now considered an enemy of the Cuban state and therefore not allowed to return. Eire writes: "Fidel drove me out of Eden [. . .] and he stands there still, clutching a fiery sword, to keep me from reclaiming the knowledge that should be mine" (248). A return would be a return to a different historical reality than he has allowed himself to envision. Given that he cannot physically return, he instead takes a psychologically journey back to Cuba through his memories and his imagination, through the clouds in the shape of Cuba that "are not so much reminders of [. . . his] past as omens for the future" (150). His recollections and his "living room time capsule of

sorts [. . .] mimics the style of Cuba before Fidel. Havana, 1958" (380). These are the spatial practices that he enacts to keep a conflict-free, idealized, pre-Revolutionary Cuba alive.<sup>12</sup>

Much like Eire, Gustavo Pérez Firmat also ventures a return trip to Cuba through memories and imagination. In 1995 he publishes his memoir, *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America*, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in non-fiction. Pérez Firmat, a well-known poet and cultural and literary critic, is a full Professor of Humanities at Columbia University. Throughout his career, he has spoken about and analyzed the Cuban and Cuban-American community in the United States. He was born in Havana and came to the United States when he was the exact same age as Eire, eleven years old. However, unlike Eire, Pérez Firmat left Cuba in October of 1960 to settle in Miami with his entire family after Castro nationalized his family's wholesale food business. Thus, his attachment and allegiance to Cuba that developed while he was living in the United States was constructed very differently than Eire's. Bouncing from one foster home to the next, Eire and his older brother Tony spent three-and-half years alone in the United States until his mother was finally able to emigrate, something which facilitated the creation of his "vault of oblivion." In contrast, Pérez

---

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that according to Eire's narrative, his forced exile was not entirely negative because he equates his exile in the United States with freedom of thought. He states: "I was one of the lucky ones. Fidel couldn't obliterate me as he did all the other children, slicing off their heads ever so slowly, and replacing them with fearful, slavish copies of his own. [. . .] Thanks to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, I was spared the head transplant" (87). Eire appreciates his parents' sacrifice of sending him to the United States, but he also felt *desterrado*, as if a part of him had been amputated when he left Cuba.

Firmat grew up in Miami, the simulacra of Havana, surrounded by his immediate family and all of the Cuban cultural and spatial practices that existed there. "Talk of Cuba was constant, and constantly wistful, for *regreso* was always around the corner" (Pérez Firmat, *Next Year* 74). Pérez Firmat "grew up in a foreign land, but was surrounded by the language and culture of [. . . his] birth. Cuban culture runs deep" in him (10). Regardless of whether he was living in Havana or Miami, Pérez Firmat witnessed and felt Cuba all around him throughout his adolescent life.

In *Next Year in Cuba: A Cuban's Coming-of-Age in America*, Pérez Firmat deftly chronicles his life's trajectory once he came to the United States with brief, poignant references to his memories about life in Cuba. Throughout, he narrates how his life has been a long, tortuous process of negotiating and balancing "two countries, two cultures, two languages" (2). His memoir is an attempt to understand himself and this process better. He wants to recapture the Cuban boy he left behind and compares his loss with the phantom limb sensation an amputee sometimes feels after losing a body part:

Just as people who lose limbs sometimes continue to ache or tingle in the missing calf or hand, the exile suffers the absence of the self he left behind. I feel the loss of that Cuban boy inside me. He's my phantom limb, at times dogging me like a guilty thought, at other times accompanying me like a guardian angel. I need to bring him out of the shadows. I need to grow him back. (22)

While Pérez Firmat recognizes the importance of his Cuban self, he also acknowledges the impact the United States has had in shaping his life. The place of both Cuba and the United States mark his text from the very first words. He begins his prologue with the

following declaration: “Places. Strange and common places. Places you visit and places that you can’t go. Distant places and places close to home. Mine is a life in places, and a life out of place” (1). Places have marked Pérez Firmat’s life, determining how he understands the world and himself. Miami is a place “close to home,” close to Cuba, but since he cannot return to Cuba, he feels that his life is “out of place.” While he can no longer imagine living outside of the United States, he still considers Cuba to be his “*true* home, the place that decisively shaped [. . . his] character and [. . .] values” (2). The fact that he immigrated to the United States on the cusp of adolescence makes both Cuba and the United States central to his development. He is emotionally tied to Cuba while physically present in the United States. Pérez Firmat continues a few pages later: “Even if in the end I’m one of those people who don’t know their place, I want to believe that not knowing your place doesn’t have to leave you placeless. [. . .] I write to become who I am, even if I’m more than one, even if I’m *yo* and you and *tú* and two” (8). The place of both Cuba and the United States have wielded power over the choices Pérez Firmat has been able to make and the opportunities afforded him. His entire book is “about the marriage of person and place” (13). He longs to discover and define a place “that spans more than one country, more than one culture, more than one language. A place that is two places at once” (13). This focus on place as central to his identity leads Pérez Firmat to shape his memories blinded to the social and class conflicts that existed in Cuba during his childhood. As he admits, his “recollections of the island are an indeterminate

mix of eyewitness and hearsay” (12). This ambiguity between truth and rumor coupled with his own nostalgic longings for the island facilitate his creation of a conflict-free history, a history of Cuba that erases or overlooks the triumphs of Castro’s Revolution.

For Pérez Firmat, Havana is a world of wonder, delight, and privilege. There, his family formed part of the elite upper class, lived in Reparto Kohly, a neighborhood where the aristocratic and upper echelons of Havana society had houses, and was a member of the exclusive beach club, the Casino Español. As a young child, Pérez Firmat recalls travelling to the United States at least once or twice a year with his father when he bought merchandise for the family’s wholesale business. He relays how the family *almacén* (storehouse) was “a huge, hangar-like structure with an attached office building that occupied a block of land” (26) and how the *almacén* allowed his family to live “in grand Cuban style” which meant “big houses, big cars, a big yacht, big jewelry, big furs, big cigars” (27). He also recounts how his family managed to leave Cuba with thirty-two suitcases filled with their belongings and how his mother smuggled out much of her jewelry by painting it with nail polish and hiding it throughout their suitcases—both rare occurrences that only the privileged few who left in the first months after the Revolution’s triumph can claim. Throughout each of these accounts, Pérez Firmat makes reference to the supreme privilege and wealth his family enjoyed.

Significantly, according to Pérez Firmat, when he arrived in the United States, he stopped thinking about the intricacies of his life in Havana. Although he lived

“dreaming about the island across the water” (77), “Cuba quickly became abstract” (33). However, this does not mean that Pérez Firmat escaped his Cuban roots. His parents dedicated much time and effort to “trying to recreate in exile the habits and routines of [. . . their] life in Havana” (61). Thus, Pérez Firmat was enrolled in the private La Salle High School in Miami, “an exile franchise of [. . . his] old Havana academy” (67). There, Pérez Firmat and his Cuban exile classmates “Cubanize[d]” everything they came in contact with, spoke mostly Spanish and thought of themselves as “unassailably Cuban” (69). By recreating Cuban traditions and customs, by attempting to recreate their culture through an emphasis on place, the family was “defying distance, denying discontinuity” (69). But, as they did so, they were also defying and denying the historical reality of Revolutionary Cuba.

This creation of a conflict-free history where tradition can survive through place instead of historical reality can also be seen in Pérez Firmat’s description of Little Havana. Pérez Firmat eloquently recalls how “one tended to think of this neighborhood as a mirror image of its Cuban original. Cuba was everywhere—in the taste of the food, in the sound of the voices, in the drawings on the place mats” (84). Little Havana was an opportunity “to breathe, to inhale Cuban oxygen” (252). It “was much more than a substitute city. [. . . It] didn’t just emulate Havana, [. . . it] completed it. Engendered by the coupling of memory and imagination, Little Havana was not only a copy but an alternative” (84). The fact that Little Havana was a continuation of and an alternative to

Havana facilitated the creation of Pérez Firmat's conflict-free version of Cuban history because the Revolution does not and could never have happened in Little Havana. Instead, Little Havana is simply the continuation of Cuba after January 1, 1959. It is the "alternative" history that is available to all exiles based on the concept of the recreation of place.

Strikingly, this idea of a Revolution-free Havana is echoed in a museum exhibit that Pérez Firmat recalls took place in Miami. The exhibit detailed the history of "the Cuban capital from its foundation in the sixteenth century," but in the exhibit the history of the city stops in 1958. "There wasn't one artifact, one photograph, from the last thirty years, as if Cuba's largest city had disappeared from the face of the earth the day Fidel's *milicianos* marched in. To judge by the exhibit, on January 1, 1959, Havana vanished" (84). According to Pérez Firmat, this end point makes sense because "in certain, substantive ways the history of Havana [Cuba] ended with the Revolution" (85). He justifies the curator's, and thus his own, conflict-free version of history by claiming that after the Revolution, Havana had a radically new identity, that the Revolution had completely severed Havana's ties with its own past. Instead of a post-Revolutionary Havana, post-1958 Havana could be found "in the very neighborhood where the museum was located" (85). It was transplanted, thanks to the tireless effort of the exile community, to the greater Havana of Miami. This move facilitates the curator's and, in turn, Pérez Firmat's creation of a conflict-free version of Havana's history.

Once in the United States, as Pérez Firmat's parents lost themselves in memories of their homeland, listened to nostalgic programs on the radio to recall Cuban places and street names, and waited with bated breath for news of Castro's fall, Pérez Firmat became angry: "As I grew up, I also grew tired — tired of hearing about our maids, our Cadillacs, the pricey restaurants and fashionable hotels. I was angry that this life had been promised me, that this life was still being promised me, but could not possibly be granted. Since Cuba wasn't where I was, I began to put it out of my mind" (34). Thus, he claims that he placed an "embargo" on his Cuban memories (35). However, the memories of exile are foundational memories for exiles as they struggle to reconcile their identities. Once Pérez Firmat divorces his Cuban wife, Rosa, and marries his American wife, Mary Anne, he realizes that his "hold on Cuba is now more precarious" (224) because his immediate family unit was no longer entirely Cuban. And thus, he became "intent on lifting [. . . his] mental embargo, prying open the gates of memory, allowing [. . . his] childhood to trickle back" (37). Slowly, memories of Cuba and his life there were brought to the forefront of his mind. Pérez Firmat writes: "Gustavo [his father], Gustavito [himself], Cuba, *el almacén*: they're all coming back, but not with a vengeance. They come back like a gift, a gift I didn't know had been given me, but which has been in my possession all these years. I spend hours now mining my memory" (111). These memories of Cuba are a gift because they allow him to continue his erasure of history,

they allow him to continue to weave a version of his past that lies outside of history and time, outside of the social and political reality of post-1959 Cuba.

One of the first memory exercises Pérez Firmat undergoes to remember about his past is the making of lists of “words, names, and places” (37) from his childhood. And strikingly, one of the first words that he recalls is *hollín*, the Spanish word for soot. This leads him to recount how “*hollín* was everywhere” (37) in his house in Havana, a fact that his parents deny, but about which he is absolutely convinced. The symbolism of the black soot covering his memories is accentuated on the following page when Pérez Firmat ponders the root of the word *hollín*, suggesting various possible options ranging from “*olla*” (a cooking pot) like “the black scum that sticks to the bottom of the pan,” to “*hoyo*” (a hole) like “the dirt that accumulates inside an *hoyo*,” to even “*orín*” (rust) (38). Regardless of the actual origin of the term, all of the imagery Pérez Firmat offers associated with *hollín* are negative images of decay, things charred, soiled, or in disrepair. According to Pérez Firmat, “*hollín* sticks to my memories of Cuba like black fairy dust” (38). Perhaps, by presenting his memories as tainted with soot, Pérez Firmat is hinting at how he views the historical reality of post-revolutionary Cuba—a negative reality that drastically and definitively altered the course of his life.

That is why, when undergoing another memory exercise to remember his house in Havana, he wonders if he can remember it perfectly, “the way it was the last time” he saw it, not the way it is today, “practically a shambles” (38). In order to remember the

house the way it was when he was a child, he needs to remove the *hollín* that sticks to his memories, he needs to remove the historical reality of post-Revolutionary Cuba to go back to when the house belonged to his family. Once he does that, he is able to embark upon his “imaginary visit” that involves recalling his family’s “manservant” Vargas and Caridad “the *mulata* cook;” the dining room where he and his brothers regularly watched their “favorite American programs;” the pantry, “a household cornucopia” where the family’s wealth and prosperity was on display thanks to the family business; the formal parlor and living room that housed “the most elegant furniture in the house;” and the house’s patio and servant’s quarters, where one day, a young Pérez Firmat looked up a maid’s skirt as she climbed a tree to pick fresh mangoes—a fruit that he still to this day associates with primal sexuality (39-43). After Pérez Firmat does the mental work of removing the *hollín* from his memories, he surprises himself at how easily he remembers details about his life in Cuba. He writes: “[p]erhaps [. . .] I don’t need to travel to Havana to visit our house. The floor plan I drew for myself contains renderings of the furnishings in nearly every room [. . .]. If I can do this for our Cuban home, perhaps I could also reconstruct other segments of my childhood” (43). Importantly, his recollections are of material objects and interactions with the domestic help that lived with his family. Pérez Firmat’s *hollín*-free memory revolves around the wealth and privilege that he lost when he left Cuba. It bears no markings of the social or political unrest that was brewing on the island in the years leading up 1959.

Another memory that Pérez Firmat seems to recall vividly relates to spending time in the *almacén*. According to Pérez Firmat, when he was about eight years old, his father began taking him to the *almacén* on Saturdays and all summer. At that young age, he was not asked to work, but instead simply enjoyed the splendors of spending the day in the store. He would play with confetti that he made with a hole-puncher, make forts out of empty boxes, and watch the workers move merchandise around the warehouse. “Nothing was as sweet as the warehouse” (115) for the young Pérez Firmat. Importantly, just like his other memories of Cuba, this memory completely ignores the social and class division between the manual laborers and his family. While Pérez Firmat played, the “workers went about their business” moving merchandise and carrying “fifty-pound sacks of rice as if they were feather pillows” (115). Pérez Firmat’s memory pays little attention to the physically taxing work that was going on around him and thus ignores the historical realities that lead to the Revolution’s triumph. His only concern in relaying this memory is to bemoan the loss of his family’s *almacén*, which was the root of their wealth and privilege.

Interestingly, Pérez Firmat is quite aware of his denial of the historical reality of the Revolution in his conflict-free memories. When his brother Pepe brings back recent photographs of the family’s home and *almacén* in Havana, Pérez Firmat flatly refuses to look at the “heartbreaking photographs,” preferring to keep his memories of those places “intact” (173). The only way to maintain the integrity of his memories is to

completely deny and block out any reference to present day historical reality. Because of his cognizance, Pérez Firmat's conflict-free memories seem all the more heartbreaking. He is aware that he is playing a game with himself, a game of self-denial that ardently refuses to acknowledge or bear witness to Revolutionary Cuba, and yet, for his own survival, he has no choice but to continue playing.

Throughout his memoir, it is clear that Pérez Firmat struggles with his hybrid Cuban-American identity. But, according to him, regardless of where he has lived, he "wouldn't feel any more or less Cuban than [. . . he] does now." (269). He created the place of Cuba in his life through his visits to Miami, his houses filled with old maps of Cuba hanging on the walls, his Cuban music emanating from the stereo, and his Cuban food in the pantry. In the end, for Pérez Firmat, Cuba becomes "a personal possession, an imaginary homeland, a country [. . . he] cannot leave or lose." This Cuba is always with him: "[i]t grows old with me. It gets sick with me. It laughs with me. It dreams with me. It gets angry when I am angry. It gets sad when I am sad. And when I die, it will die with me" (Manzari). His depiction and memories of Cuba based on place belie Cuba's reality and the social and racial conflict that form part of Cuban history and culture. That is why his Cuba is so intimately tied to his emotions and self. That is why when he dies his Cuba will die with him. His Cuba does not exist outside of the confines of his mind.

Much like Eire, Pérez Firmat simultaneously expresses a deep nostalgia for Cuba while rejecting the possibility of a physical return: “I have refused to go back not just because I don’t want to help Fidel out with my dollars, but primarily because I’d find it intolerable to visit places that belonged to us, that were taken from my parents and my family. For me, this amounts to acquiescence and even complicity in the theft” (*Next Year* 36). From this description, one notes that Pérez Firmat’s primary concern has to do with material possessions and lost wealth. A trip back to the island would force him to acknowledge the socialist reality that exists in Cuba and acquiesce to the loss of wealth and property. Instead, Pérez Firmat clearly articulates a visceral and vocal rejection and critique of communist Cuba and the Castro regime. According to Pérez Firmat, “[i]n the 1950s Cuba wasn’t a typical third-world country; it became one only as a result of the Revolution, whose remarkable feat has been turning this formerly prosperous island into one of the hemisphere’s poorest nations” (*Next Year* 86). Here again, Pérez Firmat seems to overlook the social and economic crisis that Louis Pérez explains transpired throughout the 1950s in Cuba, and instead presents his own version and perspective of events. Through his rosy-colored glasses, Pérez Firmat only sees the prosperity that existed on the island. He only sees Cuba from his perched position within the upper echelons of society.

It is precisely thanks to these rosy-colored glasses that Pérez Firmat allows himself, at certain points in his memoir, to fantasize about a return to Cuba. Although he

knows that he could never make the trip while Castro is in power (and, in all actuality perhaps will never make the trip at all given that he struggles to reconcile the social and political reality of the island), “the temptation of return remains strong. Even after all these years, the land of [. . . his] birth beckons with the promise of a different and more complete life” (*Next Year* 9). When Gustavo Sr. asks Pérez Firmat if he would return to Cuba if Castro were to fall, he responds: “[p]erhaps I would go back after all. I’d certainly be glad to get back what was taken from us, as much for the principle as for the money. I’d love to get a chance to *set history straight*. Since Cubans have to eat, it probably wouldn’t take long to get the *almacén* back up and running” (*Next Year* 98, emphasis added). When envisioning his return, Pérez Firmat firmly focuses on material wealth and possessions as well as on history. His desire to return centers on regaining control of what the Revolution took from him and thus altering (or correcting as he would likely see it) the course of history. He imagines setting history straight by setting the clock back to pre-1959 Cuba.

From the first pages of his memoir Pérez Firmat hints at this desire to rewrite history by going back in time when he thinks about whether he could ever return to Cuba. He eloquently ponders:

Could I, who have lived in the United States much longer than I lived in Cuba, actually go back to the Havana of my childhood? [. . .] Could we get our home and our business back? Could we resume lives that had been interrupted for half a lifetime? Caught up in the mood of the moment, I imagine that all these things are not only possible but likely. I

believe that I'm about to find my place, about to recover the life I lost as a child. Yes, I can go home again. (5)

What is most striking about this passage is not that Pérez Firmat wants to return nor that he desires to regain control of his family's business. These, as we have seen, are relatively predictable aspirations given his nostalgic longing for the "more complete life" he lost when he emigrated. What is most striking is the fact that Pérez Firmat fleetingly believes that he can "go back to the Havana of [. . . his] childhood," that when he returns to Cuba, it will be a return to pre-Revolutionary Cuba, as if life in Cuba had been frozen in time, much like his memoirs. This way of envisioning a return hints at Pérez Firmat's conflict-free version of Cuban history tied to place as opposed to social or political reality. When Pérez Firmat fantasizes about returning, his American wife Mary Anne "drive[s] a Lincoln, the way [. . . his] mother used to" and they go to the Casino Español (98-99). Life would simply resume and "everything would go back to the way it was" (120) before the Revolution. Thus, Pérez-Firmat's return would necessarily be a return to the past, to "a fantasy island *untouched by time or history*" (Pérez Firmat, *Life* 8, emphasis added). His trip would allow him to "pick up where [. . . he] left off decades ago" (Pérez Firmat *Next Year* 85).

Ironically, life before the Revolution in Cuba, the Cuba to which Pérez Firmat so desperately would like to return, displayed signs of rampant commodification and closely resembled the United States in many respects. As Louis Pérez describes in *On Becoming Cuban*, after World War I, Cuban culture changed vastly. Suddenly, as opposed

to French or Spanish influences, North American influence dominated and redefined aspects of Cuban culture and social conventions thus changing the way Cubans saw themselves. “Much of what served as the basis of Cuban life—what governed conduct and conventions, what influenced habits and hobbies, behaviors and mannerisms—was derived from North American sources. U.S. holidays and commemorative dates were observed in Cuba” (357). North American influence changed what it meant to be Cuban and penetrated every aspect of Cuban society from which holidays were celebrated, to what merchandise was sold, to what type of food was consumed, and even to what language was spoken. “Cuba became an extension of the North American market” (359). “It was virtually impossible to distinguish the Cuban market from its counterpart in the North” (459). What was popular in the United States thereafter became a mandate for a new Cuban standard of style and culture. And the Cuban people during various decades accepted these changes virtually unquestioningly.

This Americanization of Cuban culture is seen proudly displayed throughout both Eire and Pérez Firmat’s memoirs. Eire repeatedly mentions different aspects of American culture that permeated his daily life in Havana. He describes watching American television shows as “American culture flooded [. . . his] living room with a constant torrent of images” (14); singing Happy Birthday in mispronounced English at birthday parties (70) and eating cakes decorated with American themes (71); playing American games such as Pin the Tail on the Donkey and Tug-of-war (73); and

celebrating Christmas with Santa Claus and a Christmas tree (85). Pérez Firmat, for his part, also proudly describes how Americanized his childhood in Cuba was. He traveled frequently to the United States (17); he ate bacon and eggs every morning instead of *café con leche* (40); he “watched American movies, drove American cars, consumed American products, and listened to rock-and-roll music” (52). Eire and Pérez Firmat unquestioningly display and highlight these Americanized aspects of their childhood in Havana because these things were considered “markers that served to designate and define well-being” (Louis Pérez 356).

If this is how Cuba was prior to the Cuban Revolution and if Miami really was “a city of mirrors and mirages” (Pérez Firmat, *Next Year* 77), an alternative to post-1959 Havana, what exactly are Eire and Pérez Firmat longing for when they fantasize about a return trip? Clearly, a return to Cuba or the promise of return can in no way be effective for either Eire or Pérez Firmat because what they yearn for belongs to a conflict-free past that only exists in their memories. When Castro comes into power in 1959, Cuba radically changes in many ways. He declares a socialist state to ameliorate the chasm between the social and economic classes and calls for an “affirmation of [what is] Cuban, of a Cuba for Cubans” (Louis Pérez 482). The predominance of North American culture and influence, something that both Eire and Pérez Firmat had valued as distinguishing features of their childhoods in Havana, is brought to an end. Castro cubanized Cuba by ridding it of all foreign influences that corrupted Cuban society and that had created a

sense of inferiority within the Cuban people about their own culture and customs.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the only way that Eire and Pérez Firmat can return without compromising their vision of Cuba is to imagine a return to a Cuba without history, without a Revolution, without the passage of time. Any actual return to the island will necessarily fall short of expectations. Perhaps this is one reason why Eire and Pérez Firmat staunchly refuse to return to Cuba until democracy prevails on the island. They long to return, but they are also cognizant of the fact that their return will not fulfill them in the way that they desire. They will never recuperate the life that they lost.

If either Eire or Pérez Firmat were to venture a return trip to Cuba before the fall of the Castro regime (a highly unlikely scenario) or even after, one can imagine that their journeys would resemble the journey of one couple as José Quiroga explains in *Cuban Palimpsests*. According to Quiroga, a couple returned to Cuba in the early 1980s, but only saw a Cuba that fit in with their ideas of what Cuba was. They “insisted on a past that had authority, validity, and ownership; they created picture albums labeled according to what a certain construction used to be, before 1959, instead of what it actually was” (xiv). Thus, this couple, in their delusion to return to pre-1959 Cuba, alters everything they see to fit into their version of the past. Similarly, by focusing on pre-Revolutionary

---

<sup>13</sup> In this way, the popularity of all things Cuban rose. Products were made in Cuba, architects wanted to mark the landscape with a particular Cuban flair, and designers redesigned clothing to account for Cuban weather. Coupled with this newfound enthusiasm for all things Cuba was a rejection of anything that was viewed as a symbol of the corruption of the Cuban culture. Thus, Thanksgiving and other North American holidays were no longer celebrated and Santa Claus and Christmas trees disappeared.

Havana, Eire and Pérez Firmat privilege the 1950s as the heyday of Cuban culture, thereby automatically dismissing any political, social, economic, or cultural advance the Revolution purports to have made. Interestingly, this refusal to reconcile the present day socialist reality of Cuba shapes and determines their memories of Cuba.

To be sure, they are not alone in this endeavor. Indeed, it looks as if Eire's and Pérez Firmat's nostalgic reconstructions of pre-Revolutionary Cuba are part of a larger discourse associated with certain sectors of the Cuban-American community. A case in point is Cuban-American singer Gloria Estefan, who "on a morning show a few years back [. . .] wore a studded top that read 'Havana, BC' (signifying Havana before Castro) and clearly explained the Cuba she loved and cherished was the one before the Revolution" (Rubio, "Materializing" 171). As Raúl Rubio reads this episode, "The 'Havana before Castro' slogan could be considered a promotional anti-Castro propaganda piece and a vehicle by which to sell the nostalgic Havana of the past, one which articulates a socio-political discourse in itself, under the guise of a cultural heritage project" (171). No matter how pervasive this nostalgic socio-political discourse seems to be among the Cuban and Cuban-American community, it is not monolithic. As we shall see in the following chapter, those exiles that are willing to take into account and acknowledge the Revolution are able to envision and undertake a different kind of return trip to Cuba. Their memories of the island, instead of being bound by place and thus conflict-free, are filled with history and the struggles that come with it.

## Chapter Two. The Predicaments of Critical Nostalgia: The Commodification of Things Past

*Vivimos del recuerdo de una vida que  
no hemos vivido y de la esperanza  
de una vida que no hemos de vivir.*

[We live from the memory of a life that  
we have not lived and from the hope  
for a life that we will never live.]  
(Pérez Firmat *Cincuenta lecciones* 33)

Memory is the most potent truth.  
Show me history untouched by memories  
And you show me lies.  
Show me lies not based on memories  
And you show me the worst lies of all.  
(Eire, *Waiting* Preámbulo)

It has been said that we live “in an age that has forgotten how to think historically” (Jameson *Postmodernism* ix). If this characterization of our current situation is accurate, what happens to our relationship with the past? How does one establish a relationship with the past when history is only made available to one through commodified images and mere simulacra? Juani Casas, the main protagonist in Achy Obejas’s 1996 novel *Memory Mambo*, is obsessed with precisely these questions. Throughout the narrative, as Juani searches for the “truth” about her past, she demonstrates an intense dissatisfaction with the predominance of nostalgic tales about Cuba, which are riddled with connotations and simulacra. By closely analyzing Juani’s struggles as she questions her families’, as well as her own, narratives of the past, one

comes to a better understanding of how fiction grapples with the tenuous relationship between history, memory, and nostalgia in the postmodern moment.

This chapter addresses the early corpus of Cuban-American author Achy Obejas (her first collection of stories, *We Came All the Way from Cuba so You Could Dress Like This?* [1994], and her novels *Days of Awe* [2001] and *Memory Mambo* [1996]) so as to explore the possibilities and limitations of finding an alternative to nostalgic reconstructions of Cuba within Cuban-American cultural production. My argument will proceed on two levels. First, I will show how Obejas offers a critical stance with regard to the nostalgic paradigm seen in the autobiographies by Eire and Pérez Firmat analyzed in Chapter One. This critique of the nostalgic mythology of Cuban exile, which is a thread that runs throughout the texts examined in this chapter, is evident in the abundance of characters who actively question their family's tales about life in Cuba. The ideological product of this incessant questioning is a more balanced view of the Cuban Revolution, one that clearly short-circuits its characterization as a cosmic catastrophe that brutally ended the paradisiacal life that existed before the advent of socialism. Second, I will argue that this critique of the nostalgic mythology of Cuban exile does not come to fruition because characters, although constantly questioning, never make a definitive break with a set of familial mythologies that function like, following Karl Marx's definition, commodities. This thoroughly commodified nature of the nostalgic mythology of Cuban exile acts like an inescapable framework for the

characters' memory practices, one in which truth (i.e. a non-nostalgic memory of life in Cuba) seems more elusive than ever.

As we saw in the previous chapter, one way in which individuals today attempt to establish a relationship with the past—albeit a potentially flawed relationship—is through the use of nostalgia. Descriptions of the past often incorporate an idealized idea of what the world was like before and thus both one's memories and history are prone to include a romanticized image, a nostalgic reconstruction, of prior times and places. Whereas memories can be considered a cultural construction in the present about the past, nostalgic memories are a particular modulation of memory in which the past—or at least some aspect of the past—is cast as an idealized, perfect, loved-object lost. But, as we saw in the Introduction, nostalgia is not a uniquely recent or postmodern emotion. Neither is it restricted to fictional or autobiographical texts. In fact, it can be considered a particular type of memory that has permeated every aspect of contemporary, postmodern society, from scholarship to fiction to the most commonplace of conversations between individuals.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A case in point is the introduction to Pierre Nora's edited work *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, in which he analyzes how the relationship between memory and history works in modern France. Nora distinguishes between what he calls "true" memory and "memory transformed by its passage through history" (8). True memory is "spontaneous," "social, collective, and all-embracing," whereas transformed memory is "willful and deliberate," "experienced as duty," "individual and subjective" (8). Modern memory has become a simple recording of events, an archival system, and wholly relies on the specificity of the trace. Nora claims "the trace negates the sacred but retains its aura" (9). If one carefully dissects the structure of Nora's arguments, one notes that they fall in line almost exactly with the four general characteristics of the nostalgic paradigm posed forth by Bryan S. Turner in "A Note on Nostalgia." The four components of Turner's paradigm can be summarized as follows: one, a "sense of historical decline and

After having considered the memoirs by Eire and Pérez Firmat, Achy Obejas's early fictional corpus offers a different understanding of how nostalgia works by making the workings of memory central to her texts. Obejas, one of the most prominent, contemporary Cuban-American Latina writers, was born in Havana, Cuba in 1956. She and her family emigrated by boat to the United States when Obejas was just six years old. Shortly after their arrival, her family settled in Michigan City, Indiana, where Obejas lived and learned about pre-revolutionary Cuba through family stories and memories. According to Obejas, because the family lived in an area where there were no other Cubans, memories dominated her landscape: "it became an even fiercer endeavor for my family to hold on to memories of Cuba. We were in a constant recall mode. Memories became a way of defining who we really were" (Harper 1). For Obejas

---

loss;" two, "a sense of the absence or loss of personal wholeness and moral certainty;" three, a "sense of loss of personal freedom and autonomy with the disappearance of genuine social relationships;" and four, "a loss of simplicity, personal authenticity and emotional spontaneity" (150-51). Strikingly, aspects of Nora's description correspond to each of these four characteristics of the nostalgic paradigm. The change that began to transpire at the end of the Third Republic with the separation of history, memory, and the nation is the sense of historical decline and loss that Turner describes. The somewhat anxious description of the need for *lieux de mémoire* because society has foregone rituals and tradition parallels Turner's description of the loss of wholeness where "human history is perceived in terms of a collapse of values which once provided the unity of human relations, knowledge and personal experience" (150). Nora exemplifies Turner's third aspect of the paradigm, the loss of individual autonomy and the disappearance of real social relations, when he describes the fact that in modern times, memory transforms from a social affair to a more and more individual endeavor; memory "is no longer a social practice, we internalize it as an individual *constraint* [ . . . ]. The atomization of memory (as collective memory is transformed into private memory) imposes a *duty* to remember on each individual" (Nora 10-11, emphasis added). And finally, Turner's fourth component of the nostalgic discourse—a loss of simplicity, authenticity, and emotional spontaneity—is seen in Nora's description of the loss of true, "spontaneous" memories, rituals, and traditions. If one accepts Turner's nostalgic paradigm, then Nora's characterization of modern France is highly nostalgic for a time when memory was not completely subsumed by history.

growing up, "there was always this place, this Emerald City where I believed I would finally belong. I was fascinated by this ultimate place, the Havana of my dreams" (Harper 1-6). In an interview she did with Ilan Stavans in 2001 for the PBS series *La Plaza*, Obejas describes her family household as a personal, Cuban island in the Midwest, where she was immersed in the Cuban culture and language.<sup>2</sup> Like the exile community in Miami, Obejas's family painstakingly and lovingly recreated a simulacrum of Havana in the Midwest. Obejas lived in Indiana until 1979 and then moved to Chicago, Illinois. She is an award-winning journalist who has written for *Vogue*, *The Nation*, *the Los Angeles Times*, and *the Chicago Tribune*, among other leading publications, and currently she is a Distinguished Visiting Writer at the Mills College in Oakland, California where she is the co-director of the master in fine arts program in translation. She also is an accomplished and widely published translator, poet, and prose writer.

In 1994, Obejas published her debut collection of short stories titled *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?*, in which she depicts the marginal existence of various, mostly Latina/o, lesbian and gay characters living in urban Chicago. Two years later, in 1996, Obejas published her critically acclaimed first novel *Memory Mambo*, in which she addresses questions of memory, truth, lies, history, and

---

<sup>2</sup> For the complete interview, where Obejas discusses exile, sexuality, and her personal relationship with Cuba, see "La Plaza; Conversations with Ilan Stavans: Achy Obejas."

nostalgia as they play out in the main protagonist's, Juani Casas's, extended family. Then in 2001, Obejas published her second critically acclaimed novel, *Days of Awe*, in which the protagonist, Alejandra San José, looks at questions of religion, language, history, memory, and ethnic identity as she investigates her family's past in Cuba. Impressively, Obejas's first two novels won the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction.

### ***Attempting Alternate Memory Practices***

Although Obejas's collection of short stories, *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?*, displays clear nostalgic elements, critics have not dwelled on this aspect of the stories in their various interpretations. The collection encompasses seven pieces that range in theme from the difficulties of exile life in the United States, to death and AIDS, to the heartbreak that comes with the end of a relationship. The title story is a non-linear, first-person account of an exile's life in the United States. The protagonist intersperses her retelling of various important moments in her young adult life, mostly narrated in the future tense, with the memory of her arrival in the United States from Cuba when she was just ten years old.<sup>3</sup> She continually returns to this life-defining moment in her past, narrating it in the present tense so as to highlight the

---

<sup>3</sup> Many of the personal details of this young protagonist's life, much like the details of the lives of the female protagonists in *Days of Awe* and *Memory Mambo*, echo events in Obejas's own life journey. And although some critics highlight these parallels between her work and her life, Obejas firmly asserts in numerous interviews that while certain elements in her works reflect her life, her protagonists are not autobiographical. Her stories are mere fictions. See, for instance, Harper.

immediateness and significance of the event. The story opens with the image of this young girl, sitting in the office of Immigration and Naturalization Services, thinking about the clothes that she is wearing: "I'm wearing a green sweater. It's made of some synthetic material, and it's mine. I've been wearing it for two days straight and have no plans to take it off right now" (113). A short while later, when a woman who works as a volunteer for Catholic Charities offers her "a little gray flannel gym jacket with a hood and an American flag logo" for her to put on instead of her sweater, she ardently refuses: "I wrap myself up tighter in the sweater, which at this point still smells of salt and Cuban dirt and my grandmother's house" (114-15). Clearly, this green sweater holds significance for the young narrator. She tightly grasps the sweater she has been wearing for two days, which is most probably quite dirty from the voyage, and deeply inhales the Cuban scents trapped within the synthetic fibers rather than put on a clean jacket emblazoned with an American flag logo. Years later, when the protagonist returns home from the university, she again notes that the "green sweater will be somewhere in the closet of my bedroom" (121). This sweater, a seemingly insignificant detail in the narration, repeatedly emerges to highlight the protagonist's resistance to forgetting Cuba and simply replacing it with the United States. It is a tie to the place and smells of Cuba. Throughout the story, the sweater remains a constant, symbolic fixture in the narrator's life.

At various moments throughout the narrative, the protagonist asks “What if we’d stayed? What if we’d never left Cuba? What if we were there when the last of the counterrevolution was beaten, or when Mariel harbor leaked thousands of Cubans out of the island, or when the Pan-American Games came? What if we’d never left?” (124). In stark contrast to the conflict free, pre-revolutionary Cuba that Eire or Pérez Firmat fantasize about, the protagonist here engages with the reality of the Cuban Revolution and its effects. Her parents disparagingly state that she “would have been a young communist” and that she “would probably have been used, then betrayed” by the revolution (124). Regardless of the critiques of Cuba and communism offered by her parents, the protagonist allows herself to contemplate a return trip “to Cuba to see, to consider all these questions” (125) and she goes so far as to visit the Cuban Interests Section in Washington D.C. to apply for a visa to travel to the island. Although her trip never materializes because Cuba does not recognize her U.S. citizenship and her father refuses to give her her Cuban passport (126), the fact that the protagonist envisions life in post-revolutionary Cuba makes her nostalgic yearnings quite different than those discussed in Chapter One. The protagonist seeks the truth about life in Cuba and is seemingly open to explore the current political, social, economic, or cultural realities of post-revolutionary Cuba.

One clear example of this arises on the first page of the story when the protagonist states that her family’s arrival to the United States was “evidence that the

revolution has failed the *middle class* and that communism is bad” (113, emphasis added). The mere fact that she specifies that the revolution was bad for the middle class implies that the revolution itself was positive for some. Thus, the protagonist does not have the same staunch anti-Revolutionary stance that Eire or Pérez Firmat seemingly do which blinds them to any positive effects or consequences of the Revolution. Here, the Revolution and its effects, while still cast in a negative light, are not completely discarded as wholly evil. Interestingly, the protagonist goes on at a later point to make a parallel between Castro and her father’s patriotism and pride watching Cuban boxers win while competing at the Summer Olympics in Mexico City: “Later, when the Cuban flag waves at us during the medal ceremony, and the Cuban national anthem comes through the TV’s tinny speakers, my father will stand up in Miami and cover his heart with his palm just like Fidel, watching on his own TV in Havana” (119-20). Such a parallel, a direct comparison between her father and Castro, could never be expressed by someone completely opposed to the Revolution and the work of Castro in Cuba.

While perhaps not as completely immersed in nostalgia for Cuba as her father<sup>4</sup>— for the narrator does show signs of appreciation for her American lifestyle, adopting the

---

<sup>4</sup> The narrator’s father is completely entrenched in nostalgic yearnings for pre-revolutionary Cuba. He lives with the constant desire to return, which the reader notes in various aspects of his life: unlike his wife, he does not become a U.S. citizen and thus cannot vote in the 1968 presidential election because, according to the protagonist, he is “convinced [. . .] Nixon will get us back to Cuba in no time, where [. . . his] dormant citizenship will spring to life” (119); he resists buying a television because it will be “too cumbersome to be moved when we go back to Cuba” (120) only succumbing when the Olympics will be broadcast from Mexico City so that he can enthusiastically cheer on Cuban boxers; he keeps a “faded list of things to take

radical ideals of the 1960s, participating in antiwar demonstrations, consciousness-raising groups and Gay Liberation meetings (121)—she most definitely demonstrates some signs of nostalgia as can be seen when she becomes “overwhelmed by the *treasures*” (130, emphasis added) her mother finally gives her when her father dies: “grade school report cards, family pictures of the three of us in Cuba, [ . . . ] Xeroxes of my birth certificate, copies of our requests for political asylum, and my faded blue-ink Cuban passport (expiration date: June 1965), all wrapped up in my old green sweater” (129). These items all represent a part of her Cuban past, a past that she treasures and wants to explore.

Much of the criticism written about this story focuses on the protagonist’s experience of exile, the relationship between nation and identity, questions of gender and sexuality, and Cuban-American family dynamics. However, in doing so, these critics seemingly overlook or make light of the significance of nostalgia in this story.<sup>5</sup> Some critics such as Isabel Alvarez Borland go so far as to claim: “The story is a political statement of gender rights that connects the central character’s past to her present but

---

back to Cuba (including Christmas lights)” (127); and he ultimately tries to kill himself when he realizes that he is not going to return to Cuba anytime soon (123-24).

<sup>5</sup> For interesting, although sometimes exceedingly brief, studies of Achy Obejas’s *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?* see Alvarez-Borland 113-16, Araújo, Cooper, Embry, and Smorkaloff 3-5, 31-32. This collection of stories, much like the rest of Obejas’s fiction, has received surprisingly little academic attention.

that *does not remain nostalgic or even melancholic about what was left in Cuba*" (114, emphasis added). Pamela Maria Smorkaloff concurs with this interpretation of the text, stating that the story "positions itself as a counterpoint to Cuban-American narratives of nostalgia by confronting head-on the selective, partial rewriting of history" (32-33). Both Alvarez Borland and Smorkaloff, in their deft analyses of questions of gender and sexuality in the story, boldly assert that neither the protagonist nor the story more generally demonstrate nostalgic yearnings for the past, but how do these interpretations—or any other interpretation that undervalues the nostalgic elements of the story—account for the protagonist's highly sentimental relationship with the "treasures" her mother gives her, her questioning of what life would have been like had her family remained in Cuba, or the constant reiteration of the green sweater? What does the green sweater mean in this context? And, why does the narrator continually mention it? Clearly such a central image begs for further analysis.

The question of nostalgia is similarly overlooked in much of the criticism written about Obejas's second novel, *Days of Awe*. Over the years, critics have focused on the issues of sexuality, memory, and history in the main protagonist's quest to understand her own religious past, or the question of language and translation in relation to the protagonist's profession, exile, and dislocation.<sup>6</sup> And while the novel certainly does

---

<sup>6</sup> At present, there have been very few scholarly articles published on *Days of Awe*. For three notable exceptions, see Goldman, Johnson, and Socolovsky.

address these themes in detail, it also comments on the Cuban Revolution as a cataclysmic rupture, one that created radically opposing responses among Cubans and fostered a particular nostalgia for Cuba for those who chose to flee the island. The novel opens with the narrator's thoughts on revolutions:

Revolutions happen, I'm convinced, because intuition tells us we're meant for a greater world. If this one were good enough, we'd settle, happy as hens, and never rise up. But we know better: We feel the urge, ardent and fallible as it may be, for a kind of continual transcendence. [. . .] [R]evolts are inevitable messy and bloody, no matter how just. [. . .] Revolutions, however, are as human as the instinct to breathe. (1)

Immediately following this description, the novel relays how the main protagonist, Alejandra San José, was born on New Year's Day in 1959, the day that symbolically marks the end of the Batista Regime and the triumph of the Cuban Revolution. While one doctor excitedly assures Alejandra's father that she will survive her incompatible Rh factor because "It's a new day, a new day—and your daughter will live because she is the first new life of this new day!" (2), a nurse bitterly states "She is cursed, your daughter, [. . .] for she has arrived on the darkest day in the history of the world!" (3). During the first moments of Alejandra's life, when she is literally struggling to survive due to her Rh incompatibility, she is both blessed and cursed thanks to the Revolution. By including these opposing reactions to Alejandra's birth on January 1, 1959 in the opening pages of the novel, Obejas foregrounds differing responses to the Cuban Revolution. Throughout, the narrative gives voice to characters that "do not assume everything about the revolution is hideous" (52). In fact, at different moments, Castro is

admired and hated. According to the protagonist, for most Cubans “Fidel is the devil,” but this is said “both in hatred and love, in derision and admiration” (127). In contrast to both Eire and Pérez Firmat who can only focus on the negative, here Castro, and by extension the Revolution itself, is seen in its complexity, negatively and positively.

This happenstance of Alejandra’s life, her birth at the precise moment the Revolution triumphs, determines an intimate and life-long connection between Alejandra and the island of Cuba—even if at one point she claims that she “could care less about Cuba” (54), she is, so to speak, one of the renegade daughters of the revolution. In 1961, when she is just two years old, her family emigrates to the United States and settles in Chicago, Illinois. As a young child, Alejandra yearns for Cuba. She claims: “Havana was where I was supposed to have lived, where I should have emerged like Aphrodite from the foam—where my destiny had been denied. [. . .] As a child, I held Havana out to myself like a secret hiding place, a trump card” (54-55). She even goes so far as to “slowly, methodically, memorize the city” (55) from an old map of Havana that she finds. Alejandra feels a strong connection to Cuba and nostalgically fantasizes about what could have been had she remained in Cuba. She states: “I never imagined my parents there, our apartment or the floral shop. *I pictured only me, a Cuban me, wild and free*” (55, emphasis added). She later adds that wondering about what life would have been like in Cuba

is one of the inescapable things about being born in Cuba: the life that was somehow denied by revolution and exile, our lives in the

subjunctive—contingent, emotionally conjured lives of doubt and passion. Everything is measured by what might have been, everything is wishful—if Fidel hadn't triumphed, if the exiles had won at Bay of Pigs, if we hadn't left. (76)

Interestingly, these memories of Cuba and her imagined future parallel the type of memories Pérez Firmat and Eire passionately remember. Her Cuban self was “wild and free” of the constraints of her current life; a way to imagine an ideal life for herself.

However, in contrast to Pérez Firmat and Eire, Alejandra's nostalgic, conflict-free memories slowly wane as she grows accustomed to life in her new homeland: “as the need for refuge became less and less, Havana faded, and my Cuban self vanished” (56). It is only later, when Alejandra's job as an interpreter leads her back to the island that her curiosity and desire for Cuba is piqued again. After all, as Alejandra puts it, it was “my first return to the Land of Oz I'd conjured in my dreams” (54). Although Alejandra reassures her father on the eve of her trip that she “could care less about Cuba” (54), her time there changes her in unexpected ways. At first, Alejandra hides behind her American privilege and actively distances herself from the islanders because she believes that she is “invulnerable” (74) to anything that might happen to her in Cuba, that she is “immune” to the consequences of the revolution and that her “being Cuban is an accident of timing and geography” (67). As this façade slowly breaks down, her ability to see the nuances of the Revolution and its effects increases. Her conflict-free memories and fantasies no longer dominate the landscape of her relationship with Cuba.

It is through various trips back to Cuba and her correspondence with her father's childhood friend, Moisés Menach, that Alejandra is able to acknowledge aspects of the revolution in real terms and see both the splendor and the dilapidation of post-Revolutionary Cuba.<sup>7</sup> She notes how various groups and work environments "were paraded before us as evidence of the revolution's inclusiveness" (57). She attentively listens (with little to no argument) to Moisés and his son-in-law, Orlando, expound on the virtues of the Revolution (80-82). She marvels at Moisés's "unshakable faith in the revolution's ability to come through" (206) even when faced with extreme hardships during the Special Period in Cuba. And, she even idealizes life in post-Revolutionary Cuba. For instance, after visiting her mother's cousin Barbarita, she concludes that their lives are "not so bad. [. . .] I mean, I get it, there are ways in which they are cursed; by the scarcities, the poverty, the limits of their mobility [. . .] And yet, still, there is something oddly paradisiacal about their existence" (244). Alejandra clearly sees aspects of post-Revolutionary Cuba that appeal to her. The inclusiveness, the unshakeable faith in something bigger than oneself, the blissful allure of life on the island, and the inner peace despite the poverty all appeal to Alejandra in some way.

However, Alejandra is not completely blinded by these positive aspects. She also clearly sees the decay and strain the country was under during the Special Period and

---

<sup>7</sup> It would be remiss not to mention that Alejandra's stated purpose in developing a relationship with Moisés was to find out the truth about her family's Jewish heritage. However, by developing this relationship, Alejandra was also exposed to a different way of thinking about the Revolution. It opened the door to seeing both the positive and negative aspects of post-Revolutionary Cuba.

after. She notes how her parents' old apartment is now "green with mold and decay, boarded up as always" and how Orlando's house is "weathered" and "lopsided" (256). Alejandra's views about the Revolution are shaped not only by what she sees, but also by her conversations with Orlando, a one-time "committed young Communist" (222) who eventually becomes disillusioned. He angrily tells her not to romanticize life in Cuba (244) and he calls her out when she expresses her disillusion that her once Revolutionary Cuban friends, Estrella and Johnny Suro, have resorted to pandering to foreigners to make money. Instead of judging Estrella and Johnny, Orlando sees their actions as a means of survival and he suggests that if Alejandra were to live in Cuba, she might feel differently about everything (329). These frank conversations with Orlando help Alejandra keep her romanticism in check and acknowledge a more "real" interpretation of post-Revolutionary Cuba that includes both positive and negative aspects.

In contrast to Alejandra's thick recounting of post-revolutionary realities in Cuba, her father's memories, which play out in a fully nostalgic mode, resemble his notion of what *olvido* means: "olvido is not just a void; but, much like memory itself, it is a place, with dimensions and weight. Rather than holding all we want to remember, it's a repository for what we want to forget" (103). Enrique San José's memories, by never facing the realities of post-Revolutionary Cuba, represent a type of *olvido* reminiscent of Eire and Pérez Firmat. For instance, when the family contemplates leaving Cuba,

Enrique ardently asserts that he did not want his family “to be anything but Cuban” (9). The family eventually accepts emigrating to the United States because, as Alejandra tells the reader: “we would surely return to our sunny island once the United States had toppled Fidel. [. . .] A few months, maybe a year or two, and then [. . .] we’d be back to our normal lives, our real lives, the lives we were destined for in Cuba” (9-10). The San José family wanted to stay in Cuba, their homeland, however in the wake of the revolution and on the eve of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, the “city’s confusion,” the “hysteria,” the “tangible terror in the air” (20-21), and the “panic swirling in the streets” (49) lead the family to hastily embark upon a journey to the United States. During that boat trip, Enrique longingly and lovingly looks backwards towards Cuba not forwards toward the United States and their supposed future. Enrique “simply gazed out past the shadowy waves, past the moonlight to the shivering lights of Havana” (25) and tenderly tells Alejandra “[l]ook, look at the city with me” (26). Enrique, from the first moments of his voyage, waxes nostalgically about leaving Havana and remains fixed on the city’s “shivering” lights; lights that descriptively evoke the trembling fear and emotions Enrique endures as his family leaves their homeland. He felt “irreparably wounded” because he was forced to leave Cuba (214). However, once Enrique arrives in the United States, his nostalgia for Cuba diminishes as his longing and obsession for his Spanish heritage increases. As Alejandra describes it: “[w]hat has taken me a lifetime to understand is that my father reached back for his spiritual inheritance to Spain, as if

Cuba almost didn't exist, because Spain was scar tissue, whereas Cuba was a gaping historical wound" (18). Although Enrique longed for Cuba, he could not fully express his nostalgia for the island because it was simply too painful a reminder of the cataclysmic event, "the gaping historical wound" that led to his forced exile: the revolution. Instead, Enrique longed passionately for his previous homeland, Spain. Nostalgia thus is present throughout the novel as an underlying theme both in Alejandra's inquiries into her religious and historical past and in Enrique's conflicted relationship with Cuba and the Revolution.

### ***Searching for the Truth***

While nostalgia helps us understand certain aspects of *Days of Awe*, in *Memory Mambo*, Obejas fully engages the nostalgic mode, bringing the question of nostalgia and memory to the forefront of the discussion from the opening scenes of the novel. The criticism written about *Memory Mambo*, a complex and nuanced novel, has broached vastly different topics ranging from sexual identity to Cuban-American ethnicity to the significance of memory and history in terms of the nation-state and national belonging. For instance, Kate McCullough uses postcolonial theory to subtly analyze how politics, exile, and the emphasis on memory, loss, and violence that comes with exile impacts questions of desire, race, and lesbian subjectivity in the novel; Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, for her part, asserts that the novel is a dialogue with the larger Cuban canon (on and off the island), and focuses her critique on Obejas's use of memory and racial and sexual

identity formation in the novel; and finally, Maite Zubiaurre provides an interesting postcolonial and feminist reading in Spanish of Juani Casas's journey as a search for a female, lesbian identity that distinguishes itself from the male patriarchal structure and that, through the questioning of memories and history, ultimately challenges the orthodox and masculine concept of the nation.<sup>8</sup>

Although the criticism of *Memory Mambo* ranges broadly in theme, one common element throughout these critiques is their tendency to underplay or ignore the importance of nostalgia in the text. For instance, in their respective readings, Kate McCullough, Linda Craft, and Katherine Sugg cursorily mention the presence of nostalgia in the novel, but never analyze what the nostalgia might signify. McCullough hastily mentions nostalgia in relation to exile stating that the "nostalgic narrative operates [. . .] as a definitive component of exile here" (581), but proceeds to focus her sophisticated and fascinating analysis on questions of desire and sexuality; Craft suggests that Juani Casas lives in "a house that is controlled by nostalgia, lies, and fears" (375), that the "Casas family stories of origins reveal nostalgic longings for a golden age that was Cuba" (379) and that "Juani has distanced herself from the uncritical nostalgia

---

<sup>8</sup> See McCullough, Smorkaloff 30-43, Zubiaurre. There are various other interesting and provocative critiques of *Memory Mambo*, see for instance, Allatson's reading of the novel as a commentary on national and familial belonging, gender and sexual identity, and inter-Latino relationships; Alvarez Borland's focus on questions of sexual and ethnic identity; Craft's article on questions of truth and lies in the novel; Y. Flores's commentary on the complex relationship between history, memories and sexual identity; Lorenzo's look at the effect of shame and shaming in the novel; or finally Sugg's analysis of the complex relationship between sexual and cultural identity, questions of belonging, memory, and violence. For an entertaining, live discussion of the novel, see Obejas's *Talk of the Nation: Book Club of the Air*. As with Obejas's other fictional work, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to *Memory Mambo*.

of her parents and the romantic yearnings of would-be revolutionaries" (380), but she never offers a true analysis of the nostalgia present and how it might affect the "truth or consequences" she analyzes; and finally, Sugg claims that Obejas comments on "both the productive and the incapacitating aspects of [. . .] nostalgic projects and their effects on subsequent generations" (471), but never explains those "nostalgic projects" adequately. These critics acknowledge the nostalgia represented in the text, but fail to critically consider the significance of such nostalgia and thereby never offer a full-fledged discussion on the subject.

But even more striking than these cursory mentions of nostalgia are those critiques that go one step further and completely dismiss the significance of nostalgia in the text. Critics such as Pamela Maria Smorkaloff claim that Obejas explodes "false memory, nostalgia, and the mythology of exile," and ultimately achieves "a definitive break with narratives of nostalgia and evocation" (32), creating "a significant rupture with narratives of nostalgia" (36); for her part, Isabel Alvarez Borland asserts that "[n]ostalgia is not allowed" (121) in the novel because it would negate or call into question the sexual possibilities of the main protagonist; Olga Lorenzo, agreeing with Smorkaloff, claims that "false memory, in the form of nostalgia that has no place in reality, and that attempts to privilege the past and deride, devalue, or arouse shame about the present, is explored, exploded and rejected" (18); and finally, critics such as Maite Zubiaurre claim that Obejas "abandona [. . .] toda pesquisa arqueológica y

renuncia [. . .] sin amargura ni sentimentales nostalgias a una búsqueda esencialista de los orígenes” [abandons all archeological inquiry and without bitterness nor sentimental nostalgias renounces the essentialist search for origins] (6). Notably, time and again, critics completely ignore, cursorily mention, or directly dismiss the validity and importance of the nostalgia present in the text, claiming instead that Obejas completely ruptures the notion of nostalgia through her questioning of her family’s version of the past. While these readings certainly demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the text and offer clearly pertinent analyses in terms of lesbian subjectivity, belonging, memory, exile, violence, etcetera, they do not fully engage critically with the question of nostalgia.

In contrast to these readings, I propose that nostalgia plays a central role in *Memory Mambo*, one that cannot be dismissed as insignificant or as a thing of the past in contemporary Cuban-American narratives. Nor should the nostalgia in the text be addressed in a cursory manner insofar as it provides us with a unique, fictionalized account of the way in which we as individuals access the past in our postmodern present. Yes, the novel does pose a series of questions about nostalgia and even, one might contend, tries to avoid nostalgia, but, as I will argue in the following, it certainly falls short of creating a “definitive break” with all exile and nostalgic narratives. Linda Craft perhaps puts it best when she claims that Juani has “distanced herself from the *uncritical* nostalgia of her parents” (emphasis added). By questioning the nostalgic tales that her family continually reiterates, Juani is certainly critical of their nostalgic tales but,

in the end, she does not—and perhaps cannot—fully escape the nostalgic mode as she yearns for Cuba and envisions the island as a paradise where she might finally learn the “truth” about herself and her past, whatever that “truth” might be. Just because Juani is perhaps not as nostalgic as her parents or partakes in a critical nostalgia does not mean that she completely breaks with the paradigm. The question of memory and history, the power of family and the narratives they tell and, above all, nostalgia are all central issues in *Memory Mambo*. Ultimately, what I suggest in my reading is that Juani’s constant questioning of the past and memory, the manner in which the Casas’s family narratives are transmitted, and her nostalgia for Cuba are best understood as part of the commodification of everyday life in postmodern society. As she searches for the truth about her past, Juani demonstrates a complete and utter dissatisfaction with the world of connotations and simulacra that surrounds her, but at the same time she resigns herself to the fact that many of her private, intimate narratives, especially the central memory of how her father claims to have invented duct tape, eventually become commodified—a simulacrum in a world of simulacra. But in order to properly understand this commentary on the commodification of everyday life in the narrative, one must first look at how and why Juani is compelled to remember the past and how that past, in this case Cuba, is conveyed.

*Memory Mambo* is the story of Juani Casas, a twenty-four year old lesbian who emigrates to the United States from Cuba with her family in 1978, when she is just six

years old, thus making her a part of what has been called the “one-and-a-half generation.”<sup>9</sup> As Juani narrates her and her family’s story in non-sequential fragments, she displays an all-consuming obsession with histories, memories, and storytelling, repeatedly questioning her own recollections about Cuba, her family’s repeated stories about their journey to the United States, and a particularly traumatic and violent evening with her now ex-girlfriend, Gina. The narrative begins with an exploration of the nature of memory:

I’ve always thought of memory as a distinct, individual thing. [. . .] But I don’t know. I’m not that old, just twenty-four, and I often wonder just how distinct my memories are. Sometimes I’m convinced they’re someone else’s recollections I’ve absorbed. [. . .] It’s just that sometimes other lives lived right alongside mine interrupt, barge in on my senses, and I no longer know if I really lived through an experience or just heard about it so many times, or so convincingly, that I believed it for myself—became the lens through which it was captured, retold and shaped. (9)

From the opening moments of the text, Juani seriously interrogates the purely individual nature of memory and constantly doubts the veracity of the events in her life, or at least how she remembers those events. She views memories as something tangible,

---

<sup>9</sup> The one-and-a-half or 1.5 generation is a term coined by Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut and later expanded on by Gustavo Pérez Firmat in *Life on the Hyphen* to describe those Cuban immigrants born in Cuba but raised in the United States, generally from a very young age. They are neither first nor second-generation immigrants; they straddle both worlds, belonging to neither fully. In his analysis, Rumbaut stresses the marginal aspect of the 1.5 generation, but Pérez Firmat inverts this negative characterization: “Although it is true enough that the 1.5 generation is ‘marginal’ to both its native and its adopted cultures, the inverse may be equally accurate: only the 1.5 generation is marginal to *neither* culture. The 1.5 individual is unique in that, unlike younger and older compatriots, he or she may actually find it possible to circulate within and through both the old and the new cultures. [. . .] [T]hey are capable of availing themselves of the resources—linguistic, artistic, commercial—that both cultures have to offer” (4-5). Thus, the 1.5ers inhabit a unique position with regard to both cultures. As Chon Noriega states, “[i]t is a generation whose “exile” is lived through their parents’ memories and modified by American mass culture” (x).

as a commodity which can be passed onto her and which she then “captures” and “shapes” in order to fit into a particular narrative or vision of the past.

Throughout the narrative, the reader encounters Juani wondering why and how it is that “some memories are precise” (11), while others seem so misguided. For instance, when she recounts the events of her father’s—“the *genius* behind the trip” (10, emphasis added)—preparations for the family’s journey from Cuba to the United States, she states:

Why do I remember driving around senselessly, for days, in and out of the beaches outside of *La Habana* [. . .]. My father planned our escape this way, but I *never went along on these excursions*. So why is it that I can see my father’s body gleaming like larvae, vanishing into the water just off the shore. [. . .] It’s true that *I’ve heard the stories, but I never went along*, I never saw the motions, so how can I remember my father shaking the water off like a dog, the salt drying on his body, the hurried, nervous way he unearthed the street clothes he’d buried in newspapers in the sand? If these memories aren’t my memories, then whose are they? (11, emphasis added)

Juani’s constant interrogation about the veracity of her memories plagues her and the question of how, why, and what one remembers moves the narrative forward.<sup>10</sup> She

---

<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the narrator’s constant questioning of the past, Juani’s cousin Patricia displays complete confidence in her own memories and assertively dismisses other family tales as fiction. She claims that because she witnessed her recollections, she knows that they are true. For instance, when Patricia recounts how her father, tío Raúl, suffered nightmares after participating in the Revolution, she “always add[s] that these are not just stories—she *has her own memories* of her father, walking like a zombie at night through their house” (106, emphasis added). Or, when she relays the story of her father’s first sold-out show of paintings, she remarks: “if she’d heard the story from anybody else, she wouldn’t have believed it. But she says she was there for all of it” (113). In both of these instances, Patricia relies on her physical presence and her personal experience of these events to lend validity to her memories. Furthermore, she assertively qualifies other family stories that she has not witnessed or cannot prove as “fantasy” (25), “invention” (27), or simply “false” (32). Strikingly, in a text that constantly questions the veracity and reliability of memories, Patricia

struggles with the disparity between the vivid memories that she can picture so easily and the reality that she “never went along on these excursions” – something that she repeats twice in an attempt to comprehend the possibility that she fabricated these memories from the stories that she has heard so often.<sup>11</sup> Even in her journal, which she keeps to have “a record of the truth somewhere” (148) with the “*right* dates, photographs with names and places written on the back” (79, emphasis added), Juani discovers lies: “I’d flip through the pages and find [lies. . .] [N]one of that was true, none of it. So what was it doing in my notes? How had it made its way into my journal?” (173).<sup>12</sup> Importantly, as the storyline progresses, Juani moves from wanting to ignore or bury her memories, as she claims soon after her breakup with Gina, to wanting to face them head on; she moves from thinking “I have my own fresh memories to run

---

never displays any nervousness or angst in relation to her recollections. And her unwavering certainty about her memories only highlights the extent to which Juani doubts all of her memories. Notably, Patricia is one of Juani’s U.S.-born cousins. Perhaps the fact that Patricia is not a part of the one-and-a-half generation and thus has not had to grapple with the issues of exile and loss in the same way Juani has had to allows for this difference in attitude.

<sup>11</sup> Juani’s confusion between fact and fiction, story and history is particularly notable because, as any speaker of Spanish knows, the Spanish word for both story and history is *historia*. As a native speaker of Spanish, Juani struggles with the difference between two ideas that in her native tongue are embodied in one word.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, disparities in the recollections of other people do not seem to perturb Juani in the least. For instance, when she recounts how her cousin Caridad first meets her husband Jimmy, she claims: “I saw it, so nobody can tell me any stories about it.” She then goes on to claim: “neither of them [Caridad and Jimmy] remember it quite this way” (43). Although a discrepancy such as this in her own life would cause Juani much turmoil, here she seems to accept it. From this one can surmise that it is not misguided memories that bother Juani per se but by how those misguided memories create a level of uncertainty in her life.

from" (48) to now only wanting to "know what happened" (229). Tellingly, the first chapter ends with Juani asserting: "I don't long for a perfect memory. [. . .] What I want to know is what *really* happened" (14).<sup>13</sup> This closing line to chapter one sets the tone and frames the rest of the narrative as Juani continually negotiates the stories and memories that abound in her life and desperately searches for the truth. Because she feels that she lives in a "house of nostalgia and fear, of time warps and trivia" (79) and can no longer trust in her own—or her family's—memories, Juani embarks upon a quest for "what really happened."<sup>14</sup> In this process, she puts into question the nostalgic tales of the past

---

<sup>13</sup> Juani expresses this desire to know the truth numerous times throughout the text. For instance, when she witnesses but cannot admit to seeing Jimmy sexually abuse her infant niece, Rosa, Juani wonders, "[b]ut what really happened? *What really happened?*" (224). Or take the scene where Juani and Gina finally come face to face after the violent end to their relationship where they physically attacked each other. Here Juani pleads with Gina: "I want to know what happened" (229). Finally, take the last scene of the text, when Juani is sitting in a diner thinking about her life, the end of her relationship with Gina, and the scene with Jimmy and Rosa. Here again she wonders, "[w]hat really happened?" (234). Throughout various difficult and often physically violent moments in Juani's life—most of which she should recall and yet for some reason cannot—all she desires is to know "what really happened."

<sup>14</sup> The desire to remember—or the frustration that arises when one cannot remember—events central to the last days in one's homeland is often depicted in immigrant or exile literature. See for instance the portrayal of the García family's last days in the Dominican Republic from Sofía's perspective, the youngest of the García sisters, in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*: "I'm the one who doesn't remember anything from that last day on the Island because I'm the youngest and so *the other three are always telling me what happened that last day*. I can tell you one thing I do remember from right before we left. [. . .] Chucha stood us all up in front of her. 'Chachas'— she always called us that [. . .] 'You are going to a strange land.' [. . .] 'When I was a girl, I left my country too and never went back. Never saw father or mother or sisters or brothers. I brought only this along.' She held the bundle up and finished unwrapping it from its white sheet. It was a statue carved out of wood like the kind I saw years later in the anthro textbooks I used to pore over, as if staring at those little talismanic wooden carvings would somehow be my Madeline, bringing back my past to me like they say tasting that cookie did for Proust. But the textbook gods never triggered any four-volume memory in my head. Just this little moment I'm recalling here" (Alvarez 217-21, emphasis added). Another, more violent reaction to this inability to remember one's homeland can be seen in a letter written by Dr. Helen Kings, Ph.D. in Roberto Fernández's *Raining Backwards*. Here Helen expresses her hatred for all communists and her extreme sense of isolation when she cannot remember certain things about Cuba: "They [the communists] left us without a penny. I hate them especially because I don't remember the Yacht

that her family cherishes and so desperately strives to perpetuate. By doing this, she begins to displace the nostalgic discourse of memory described in the works of Eire and Pérez Firmat.

In addition to Juani's inherent desire to know the truth about her past, she also faces additional factors that compel her to remember: namely, her family and their investment in their exile status. Much of Juani's life revolves around the central issues of family and exile for, like many other exile families, the Casas depend on an extended network of relatives composed mainly of tíos, tías, and cousins and a focus on specific family stories and memories of their lives in Cuba to create, recreate and foster an intimate relationship with the past and their homeland. Early on in the novel, as Juani contemplates the veracity of her memories, she declares:

Sometimes I'm as sure that I couldn't have heard the stories about the memories anymore than lived through them—that both of the experiences are false for me—and yet the memory itself will be so fresh, so fantastic and detailed, that I'll think maybe my family and I are just too close to each other. Sometimes I wonder if we're not together too much, day in and day out, working and eating side by side, sleeping in the same

---

Club, the maids and the ranch so big it reached from coast to coast. I hate them because at family gatherings everybody talks about it and I'm left out because I don't remember because I was only five when I came and when this happens I get mad and I wish I had a machine gun to mow down every single communist in the world" (102). Interestingly, this last example highlights another aspect of memories and nostalgia in relation to Cuba—the issue of class. Given that the majority of the first wave of exiles that came from Cuba were wealthy, they often wax nostalgically about the land, privilege, and wealth that they were forced to leave behind. This particular example exemplifies the angry and delusional position many hard-line Cuban exiles have against Fidel Castro, the communist system, and all communists. In effect, these individuals, much like our discussion about Eire and Pérez Firmat in Chapter One, often do not yearn for Cuba as much as for the lifestyle of wealth and privilege that they were forced to leave behind.

rooms, fusing dreams. Sometimes I wonder if we know where we each end and the others begin. (9)

But this seeming critique of the extreme intimacy of the Casas family, where family members meld together into one, does not diminish the importance of family in Juani's life for, according to her, family comprises the "links in the chain of our history, even the history we don't know" (13). Thus, because family forms an integral part of one's own history, it serves as a constant yet subtle reminder of the past. Juani, constantly surrounded by family members, truly values the importance of family and the sense of history, community, and security it affords her.<sup>15</sup> Ever since childhood, whenever circumstances proved difficult or dangerous, Juani recalls how together with her cousins, they "fought back or took refuge" (12). And after "the incident" with Gina—as Juani calls the violent physical argument that ends their relationship—, when Juani cannot fully admit even to herself what really happened, "the rest of the family was around, helping me with what I needed, keeping me company, looking out for me" (157).

Importantly, this intimate connection with family is not limited to blood relatives as her description of "cousins in exile" demonstrates. These relationships, "links [partially] forged out of loneliness and desperation" (13) with individuals that are not

---

<sup>15</sup> Importantly, this is a sentiment that many within the extended Casas family seem to share. Of those in the United States, they almost all live in Chicago within striking distance from each other, they either work or have worked at the family "Wash-N-Dry Laundry/Lavanderia Wash-N-Dry," they show solidarity, protect each other always, and they insist upon helping their family members back in Cuba.

actually related to the family but become honorary members simply because they are Cubans living in the same city or neighborhood in the United States, demonstrate a profound desire to establish a community resembling the one they left behind, a community to share and validate their memories of Cuba. Cousins in exile, according to Juani, are unique family members: “we have an affinity, a way of speaking that’s neither Cuban nor American, neither genetic or processed. There’s a look, a wink, the way we touch each other. We communicate [. . .] like deaf people—not so much compensating for the lost sense, but creating a new syntax from the pieces of our displaced lives” (13).<sup>16</sup> And it is precisely this notion of a displaced life that feeds Juani’s desire to know the truth about her past. However, if one agrees with John Frow’s assertion that memory’s “relation to the past is of desire, not truth” (229), what is it that Juani really desires? And, given that family are the “links in the chain” of one’s past, what role does family play in creating and fomenting that desire?

One way to begin answering these questions is to look at the role that exile, which is said to be “about remembering” (Rieff 116), plays in emphasizing certain memories about the Casas’s past and how those memories shape Juani’s life. The Casas

---

<sup>16</sup> An interesting visual representation of the idea of a displaced life can be seen in the ellipses of nine dots that periodically separate different sections of the narrative. In her well-written article about the role of truth in *Memory Mambo*, Linda J. Craft deftly notes that the ellipses serve as “visual reminders of her [Juani’s] efforts to connect the disparate threads of her life” (372). This description of connecting the dots of her life is emphasized in the last scene of the narrative, where Juani, sitting in at a diner, scribbles on a stack of napkins: “I litter a bunch of dots across a napkin I’ve spread out on my table and try to connect them, one to the other, across around, in loops. [. . .] One part of me says, *Yes, connect the dots*; another part asks, *What dots?* Whatever I doodle on the napkins smears the minute I move it onto this little puddle of water in the middle of the table. The napkin sucks up the liquid and the dots, the lines, all the connections, vanish” (234).

family, and in particular Juani's father, Alberto José Casas y Molina, frequently narrates life-defining stories from the family's past in an attempt to foster and sustain an intimate connection with Cuba, not only for himself, but for his entire family. Memories are passed on from one generation to the next as if they were precious heirlooms. They are "hoarded like capital" (Martin-Fugier 264) in the family and become a way of at least symbolically returning to Cuba, their lost homeland.<sup>17</sup> This approach to dealing with the pain of exile through the reliving and retelling of memories is commonplace, according to Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, precisely because Cuban exiles rarely cease to think or talk about Cuba, even when they appear to be assimilated to U.S. culture:

Nuestra rápida asimilación a la cultura norteamericana, la cual ha dado tanto que hablar a sociólogos y economistas, no ha anulado nuestra 'metedura' con Cuba. Ese 'coco' no lo rompen ni los porrazos del tiempo ni las mañas de la distancia, porque ese 'coco' es nuestro corazón y nuestra coraza. Encandilados de ausencia, nos entregamos a cultivar una relación íntima y fatal con un amor que abandonamos, pero que no nos abandona.

[Our rapid assimilation to North American culture, which has given sociologists and economists much to talk about, has not deleted our

---

<sup>17</sup> Here it is interesting to consider that even those individuals who do not have a romantic vision of their lives in Cuba and who seemingly never succumb to nostalgic yearnings for the past also recognize the importance of their memories of Cuba. Take for instance the way that Mirta Ojito remembers when, upon first arriving on U.S. shores, an immigration officer suggests that she can erase her past: "A bald man with a military bearing but dressed as a civilian was in charge of my file. In flawless Spanish he asked my name. Before I could tell him, though, he said that I could choose any name I wanted. It didn't have to be my real name. You are in America now, he said. You can forget the past and begin anew. I thought the man was joking, but his face remained serious, waiting for my response. Thank you, I said, but I'll keep my name. I didn't tell him that my name was all I had. My name and my memories" (231). This sentiment about the importance of memories for Cuban exiles has also been articulated by scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz who writes: "[a]nyone who is familiar with Cuban exile communities knows that Cubans live in memory" ("No es fácil" 76).

'blunder' with Cuba. This 'nut' cannot be cracked with the thump of time nor with the flow of distance because this 'nut' is our heart and our shield. Engrossed with absence, we give ourselves over to cultivate an intimate and fatal relationship with a love that we have abandoned, but that does not abandon us]. (*Cincuenta lecciones* 29-30)

Thus, the exile, unable to physically return to Cuba, strives to maintain an intimate relationship with the island, the loved object lost, through nostalgic memories.

A clear example of this struggle can be found in Alberto José's constant retelling of his family's escape from Cuba and the loss of his duct tape formula, a central family story that becomes a focal point of Juani's quest for the truth. According to Juani, "everybody in the family has heard my father's duct tape story at least a million times. And anybody who's ever come to the house has gotten the entire tale. From beginning to end, whether they liked it or not, at least once" (25). In retelling the events that led up to the family's decision to leave Cuba, Alberto José emphasizes two main issues: his pro-Capitalist, anti-Revolutionary position and his upper-class social standing. According to Alberto José, in the months leading up to his exile, he was working for the CIA because "he had an uncanny ability to procure boats to get people out of the island" (27) and because he wanted to market his duct tape in the United States. He even lays claim to playing an important part in helping Fulgencio Batista escape "on that fateful New Year's Eve in 1959" (27). Because of his work with the CIA, which to this day is "still a state secret," Alberto José claims things in Cuba were "getting hot" for him and that he was fearful "the communists" were going to kill him (28). Interestingly, this story about

the events that led to his family's decision to leave Cuba reveals a great deal about Alberto José's capitalist tendencies and his anti-Revolutionary positions. He clandestinely worked for the US government while still living in Cuba, viewed the triumph of the Revolution as a "fateful" day, and disparaging thought of his fellow Cubans as "communists" capable of killing him in front of his wife and children. For Alberto José, the environment in post-Revolutionary Cuba was tense and potentially violent.

Another important aspect in the retelling of why and how the Casas's left Cuba is the family's racial and social lineage. Alberto José was "the son of one of Havana's oldest and most prosperous families," he knew "all [of the] members of the Miramar Yacht Club, which was *much more prestigious* than the Havana Yacht Club" (27, emphasis added), and he "enjoyed the privilege of being a Casas y Molina in Cuba's small society circles" (31). Juani's mother, Xiomara Ruíz y García, further embellishes their lineage, adding that "the prestigious Alberto José Casas y Molina [. . .] boasted a splendid ancestry," something that was particularly important to her since she was "clearly a mixed breed" and would "do just about anything to deny her real lineage" (32, emphasis added). Whenever these family lineage stories are recounted, Juani notes that her mother stresses that they are "direct descendants of Bartolomé de Las Casas, better known in Cuban lore as 'The Apostle to the Indies'" (32) and that their "bloodline dates

to prior to his [Las Casas's] commitment to God" (33).<sup>18</sup> Xiomara stresses her husband's lineage not simply because Las Casas is an important historical figure and thus lends prestige to the family name, but also because Alberto José was "green-eyed and very light skinned" (32). For Xiomara, because she was a "café con leche mulata," "marrying a guy this pale was a big deal" (32, emphasis added). Her steadfast preoccupation with race, and especially her denial of her own racially mixed lineage, proves so important to Xiomara that when she sees what the revolution means for racial mixing in Cuba, she insists on leaving:

When the revolution triumphed in 1959, nothing stunned my mother more than the fact that that crazy Raúl [her brother-in-law] and his black friends were riding on tanks with Fidel [. . .]. In that instant, my mother—who's been struggling to pass her entire life—could see that the order of things had just been altered. [. . .] [H]er immediate goal became to get us [her children] out of Cuba, out of Latin America, out of any country where we might couple with anybody even a shade darker: We had to get to the United States, which was close by and chock full of frog-eyed white people [. . .] Each time my Mami remembers the moment when Raúl, Fidel and his supporters waved and laughed at the *multi-colored masses* lining the streets of Havana on that historic New Year's Day, she's reborn as a counterrevolutionary. (35, emphasis added)

Clearly Xiomara desired to leave Cuba but, in reality, her impulse to leave stems from her fear of the new social order that the Revolution ushered in rather than some sort of deep-seeded dissatisfaction with the island itself for as Juani notes, her mother

---

<sup>18</sup> For an interesting reading of race and racism in the text, see Smorkaloff.

was truly happy with her father in Cuba: "I don't think she's [Juani's mother] ever been as happy as she is in those dull color pictures of her at Varadero beach" (31).

Notably, Alberto José's and Xiomara's focus on their anti-Revolutionary stance and their white, upper class past is an interesting twist on Freud's first, asexual stage of the Family Romance. According to Freud, a child becomes free from the absolute power and love of his or her parents by imagining that they are grander than they actually are: "the child's imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has such a low opinion and of replacing them by others, occupying, as a rule, a higher social station. [. . .] [P]arents are replaced by others of better birth" (76). But strikingly, in this instance, it seems that Juani's parents enact the Family Romance for their children; instead of being replaced in the imagination of their offspring, they replace themselves. "Delusional because of what exile has done" (*Memory Mambo* 28) to them, Juani's parents replace themselves, simple Laundromat owners "trying desperately to stay afloat" (78), with the grander versions of themselves that they (supposedly) recall from when they lived in Cuba, clandestine citizens working for the CIA, members of the elite, white upper class, and direct descendants of Las Casas. In the end, the Family Romance of the duct tape story (with its related stories about the Casas's life in Cuba) does somewhat free Juani from her parents and, as we shall see in the rest of the chapter, allows her to question the family's nostalgic version of the past.

By frequently reiterating these aspects from their past, Juani's parents firmly establish the importance of the family's Cuban roots.<sup>19</sup> These memories are deliberate constructions imposed by Juani's parents to ensure that their children embrace their Cubanness. But, importantly, this type of investment in the past, where the past is a vital part of everyday life, impedes mourning, the necessary grieving process associated with permanently losing their beloved Cuba, and leaves the family with an interminable nostalgic yearning.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the nostalgic memories that they perpetuate distort

---

<sup>19</sup> As Keya Ganguly contends in a discussion about how memory plays a role in establishing selfhood and identitarian affiliations in postcolonial Indian exile communities in the United States: "[R]ecollections of the past serve as the active ideological terrain on which people represent themselves to themselves. The past acquires a more marked salience with subjects for whom categories of the present have been made unusually unstable or unpredictable [. . .]" (29-30). For Juani's parents, the past is a way to represent themselves and their family as Cuban. This past is particularly important to them precisely because they are individuals forced into exile in the United States by the new social order ushered in by the Revolution. They desire to highlight their different and unique qualities: their Cubanness. For another, excellent example of how Cuban exiles emphatically stress their family members' Cubanness, see the exchange between Manuela Ripoll and her young granddaughter, Mimi, in the play *Broken Eggs* by Eduardo Machado. When discussing the Cubans that remained on the island, Mimi admiringly states, "at least they know who they are." To this, Manuela responds: "You don't? Well, I'll tell you. You're Manuela Sonia Marquez Hernandez. A Cuban girl. Don't forget what I just told you." Mimi, hearing that her grandmother states that she is Cuban, corrects her: "No, Grandma. I'm Manuela Sonia Marquez, better known as Mimi Mar-kwez. I was born in Canoga Park. I'm a first generation white Hispanic American." Mimi, having been born in the United States, clearly understands herself not as Cuban but as American and stresses this in how she pronounces her last name. Upon hearing Mimi's seeming denial of her Cubanness, Manuela ardently states; "No you're not. *You're a Cuban girl*. Memorize what I just told you" (181, emphasis added). Much like Alberto José and Xiomara, Manuela cannot allow even her grandchildren to deny their Cuban roots. Her family, like the Casas, are through and through Cubans, regardless of where they were born or where they grew up.

<sup>20</sup> Ester Rebeca Shapiro Rok addresses precisely this issue of nostalgic yearning in "Finding What Had Been Lost in Plain View:" "The world lost to traumatic immigration becomes frozen in time, sometimes idealized, sometimes disavowed, but of necessity contained, encapsulated, while individuals and families struggle to re-establish a shared sense of coherence and stability in an unfamiliar new world. The frozen image of the lost world interferes with the freedom of genuine, full, multifaceted remembering which permits us to face, bear, and learn to live with loss and grief. Only when we can face the anguish of uprootedness can we regain access to the past that enriches our present and future, restores the forward movement in developmental time, permits the creative integration of a multi-cultural identity" (86). Juani's parents do not want to "face the anguish of uprootedness" nor do they want to encourage a "multi-cultural identity" in

the real contradictions of the family's history by erasing all conflicts. Only in this manner can they create a coherent recreation of the primordial unit, Cuba.

As discussed in the Introduction, Fred Davis in *Yearning for Yesterday* explains that individuals, such as the Casas, might focus on nostalgic memories when faced with a new, threatening reality, one whose uncertainties interrupt a past sense of security and continuity (34). Alberto José and Xiomara, fearing children completely Americanized in terms of culture with no ties to their beloved homeland—a reality that simply is untenable for them—, continually narrate their memories of Cuba and create an environment in which Juani and her siblings are forced to participate in the memorial process. This process of forced participation thereby fosters a deep-seeded desire for the island in the Casas's children. Indeed, Juani's parents are so invested in their versions of the past that when Juani's cousin, Patricia, questions the family's link to Las Casas, saying "that the whole Bartolomé de Las Casas tale is one elaborate lie" (Obejas, *Memory* 34), Alberto José and Xiomara "get *hysterical*, making the sign of the cross" (34, emphasis added). Later on in the narrative, when Juani questions the validity of the duct tape story, Xiomara is left sobbing and "mumbling" (181) and she desperately tries to hide the conversation from her husband. Extremely traumatized by Juani's incessant

---

their children. They want children as invested in Cuba and Cubanness as they are and thus they continually return to the "frozen image" of their lost world.

questioning, Xiomara asks: “Why do you want to *torture* your father with this?” (178, emphasis added). Juani’s parents cannot accept anyone questioning the stories that link them to Cuba because that questioning has the potential to fracture the precarious selves they have labored to construct over the years. And, to a certain degree, their staunch approach has worked as one notes when Juani claims that she is “as marked by genetics and exile as everyone else” (79) in her family, something which is particularly surprising given that Juani emigrated to the United States at such a young age and claims to remember very little about the island. By sharing their nostalgic tales, Juani’s parents, inevitably and perhaps even intentionally, cultivate an intimate, wholly nostalgic relationship with Cuba for the entire family. But as we have seen, this does not stop Juani from questioning her past and the family narratives that abound. Simply existing in the Casas family dynamic compels her to remember, but it certainly does not require her to unquestioningly accept those memories. Instead, she embarks upon a journey to determine if her memories really are, as her cousin Patricia claims, “just a fantasy created in exile” (25).

### ***Connotations, Simulacra, and the Commodification of Stories***

Our discussion of *Memory Mambo* thus far has focused on the question of how and why Juani is compelled to remember, now let us turn our attention to how the past is conveyed in the narrative through a series of objects which connote Cuba and that serve as one of the ways in which Juani attempts to create “a new syntax from the pieces

of [. . . her] displaced life.” According to Roland Barthes, connotation is one of two levels of signification in any given sign: the first order, denotation, is roughly equivalent to the literal meaning of the sign, but is not to be considered the first meaning; the second order, connotation, refers to the socio-cultural meaning ascertained from a sign that an individual subsequently appropriates.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, connotation “is the way into the polysemy of the classic text [. . .] it is a determination, a relation, an anaphora, a feature which has the power to relate itself to anterior, ulterior, or exterior mentions, to other sites of the text (or another text)” (S/Z 8). Thus, seemingly neutral or straightforward concepts wield ulterior meanings that are significant to the individual and stem from her socio-cultural context. In the following, we shall analyze precisely how Juani’s association with certain objects, symbols and images, which ultimately connote a strong sense of Cuba and Cubanness, accentuates her nostalgic longings for and intimate tie with the island. Echoing Jameson’s observation that nostalgia film “was never a matter of some old-fashioned ‘representation’ of historical content, but instead approached the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image” (*Postmodernism* 19), here Obejas’s nostalgia fiction is not simply a

---

<sup>21</sup> Later on, in his now classic *Mythologies*, Barthes argues that the denotation and connotation of a sign combine to form mythology or ideology. He defines ideology as something which distorts meaning and refers to the culturally variable concepts that support a particular viewpoint; it is the way that cultural traditions, values, customs become naturalized: “Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion. [. . .] We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature” (129).

depiction of the family's Cuban past, but rather a commentary on the pervasiveness of connotation as a means to convey the past.

Throughout the course of Juani's struggle to find out "what *really* happened," she displays a strong sense of what Cuba signifies for her life and she understands herself, although clearly Americanized in some respects, as intimately tied to the island. Juani embodies the lived tension inherent in being a member of the one-and-a-half generation; although she lives in the United States, Cuban culture and traditions, present through various, mostly commodified, objects such as music and food, dominate much of her landscape. The Casas family, and particularly Juani, illustrates what Pérez Firmat has called the "'appositional' rather than 'oppositional'" nature of Cuban-American culture. "[T]he experience of Cubans in this country [is of] lives lived in collusion rather than collision" (*Life* 6), the result being an appliqué project where American aspects of culture are sewn onto the foundational fabric of Cuban cultural identity. The first and most clear illustration of this appositional nature in *Memory Mambo* is the title, a striking juxtaposition of two seemingly opposite activities, dancing and remembering, that together depict a sexually-charged and uninhibited image of a memory dance. On one level, the mambo denotes a style of music that fused Afro-Cuban rhythms with American big-band sound and that was popularized in the United States in the 50s by "el rey del mambo," Dámaso Pérez Prado. But, on another level, the mention of the mambo connotes, at least in part, Cuba and Cubanness. According to

Pérez Firmat, the mambo is a true mix of Cuban and American music, with its roots in the Cuban *danzón* and American jazz, it is predominantly about conquest: “aggressive, uninhibited, seductive” (“I Came” 246).<sup>22</sup> “The name connotes excess, outrageousness, [and a] lack of decorum” (*Life* 81) because of the free improvisation in both the music and dance. This intimate relationship between mambo and Cubanness has also been noted by theorists such as Antonio Benítez-Rojo in “The Role of Music in Afro-Cuban Culture” where he claims that both music and dance connote a strong sense of Cubanness (179). For instance, within the novel, according to the narrator, Caridad, one of Juani’s older cousins, is considered an excellent dancer precisely because she learned to dance on the island: “she learned to dance in Cuba, where they play the really authentic music—not just Celia Cruz, but Beny Moré, Arsenio Rodríguez, Celeste Mendoza and Los Van Van too—so she got assigned to teach all of us younger cousins how to dance” (*Obejas, Memory* 18). Having learned to dance in Cuba imbues Caridad with a certain Cubanness. In contrast, Patricia and Jimmy, both considered more Americanized than their other cousins, cannot dance. Patricia “was born in New York, which we [the cousins] joke is the reason she can’t dance worth a damn” (18) and Jimmy

---

<sup>22</sup> The mambo’s unique characteristics draw the reader’s attention to two other central themes within the novel: violence and aggression. To mention just a few examples of the violence and aggression present in the novel, consider the violence of exile, Caridad and Jimmy’s abusive marriage, the spectacular, physical end to Gina and Juani’s relationship, Jimmy’s sexual abuse of Rosa, Juani’s sense of enrapture when playing violent video games, how Jimmy hypnotizes Juani with his brazenness and sexual vulgarity, or how, when Caridad and she were little, Juani watched mesmerized as Caridad almost drowned before saving her. For an excellent analysis of the significance of violence in *Memory Mambo*, see McCullough.

“got so Americanized without even realizing it” over the years that “he couldn’t dance to save his life” (44). Within the boundaries of the Casas family, knowing how to dance and listening to “authentic music” connote Cubanness.

By juxtaposing memory and mambo, Obejas’s title alerts the reader to the importance of both the United States and Cuba as central metaphors for the novel and portends the lived tension between the two that overshadows Juani’s life. As Pérez Firmat aptly describes, the mambo was “born in Cuba but made in the U.S.A.” (*Life* 12). It “is the one-and-a-half’s dream music; it celebrates fractions and sings of parts that refuse the whole” (102). It is “a kind of music that does not know its place” (81).<sup>23</sup> That is precisely why Juani connects with the idea of the mambo: “‘Memory mambo,’ I said, one hand in the air, the other on my waist as if I were dancing, ‘one step forward, two steps back—unngh!’” (Obejas, *Memory* 194), one step forward towards the United States and two steps back towards Cuba, her native homeland. Given that the etymology of the word mambo, which dates back to the Congo religion, means “conversation” (see Pérez Firmat, *Life* 81-82), the title foreshadows Juani’s ‘conversation’ with her memories as she

---

<sup>23</sup> It is striking to note that in his article on the critically acclaimed novel by Oscar Hijuelos, *The Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love*, Gustavo Pérez Firmat finds that “mambo’s lovely inarticulateness makes it an odd choice as a model for literary composition [because] the mambo [. . .] tends toward a kind of expressiveness whose medium is *not* language” (“I Came” 246). In the case of *Memory Mambo*, Obejas takes on Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s implied challenge. The mambo, which is inarticulate, aggressive and unsettling, is the perfect metaphor to frame a narrative about being unsettled, not fully understanding the past and one’s own nostalgic yearnings. In keeping with this desire to create an unsettling experience for the reader, Obejas includes many terms in Spanish in the narrative, which the non-Spanish speaking reader must look up in the glossary in the back of the novel. This constant flipping back-and-forth interrupts the fluidity of reading. The narrative, in this manner, reveals its true 1.5 character.

searches for the truth about her past. Furthermore, by choosing the mambo as a central metaphor, Obejas highlights the importance of commodification in the narrative for by the mid-nineteen fifties in the United States, mambo was everywhere: mambo appeared as the subject of featured cover stories in national magazines, major movie studios released movies focusing on the mambo, and stores sold “mambo motivated gifts” such as “mambo dolls, mambo nighties, mambo ‘kits’ (a record, maracas, and a plastic sheet with mambo steps to put on the floor)” (Pérez Firmat, *Life* 97). The mambo emerged and was sustained as a highly commodified—perhaps the most commodified—style of music in the United States. Obejas’s use of the mambo both as a central metaphor and as the title of the text is suggestive of just how important the commodification of culture is within the narrative.

There are numerous other examples throughout the narration that illustrate the manner in which Cuba and Cubanness is connoted through objects, traditions, and imagery. Take, for example, Juani’s command of language. Juani’s English “has always been the best in the family” (Obejas, *Memory* 140), marking her as American, but she also deftly speaks Spanish with such a perfect Cuban accent that even someone who does not know her very well can recognize it. As one of Gina’s friends notes after speaking with Juani for a few minutes: “You must be Cuban, I can tell by your accent” (127). Juani’s accent in Spanish marks her as part of the Cuban community and thus highlights her

connection to the island.<sup>24</sup> In addition to her Cuban accent in Spanish, Cuban food links Juani to the traditions and culture of the island. According to her, when her family got together for dinner, they would often make traditional Cuban food such as “*boliche* [Cuban-style stuffed beef], *moros y cristianos* [black beans and rice], and fried *malanga* [taro root]” (26); or when she visits tía Celia’s, she eats “huge steaming plates of *fufú* [green plantains] with a big slab of meat next to it, or a massive bowl of *caldo gallego* [Galician soup], because *everything at Tía Celia’s is big and Cuban and delicious but probably bad for you*” (160, emphasis added). Eating, whether at her parents’ home or at tía Celia’s, is a Cuban affair and those who prefer “Folgers and eggs to Bustelo [Cuban coffee] and toast for breakfast” (44) have lost a connection to their past. Juani “love[s] Cuban food] and refuse[s] to give [it] up for anything or anyone” (117); her affinity for Cuban food connotes her Cubanness. Cuban food is a central and important aspect in Juani’s life and something that affords her a sense of comfort, a sense of family, a sense of Cuba. And beyond food, the Casas’s family traditions and gatherings also foster an intimate relationship with Cuba. For instance, at her cousin Caridad’s wedding to Jimmy, which was held at “Saint Ita’s in Uptown [. . .] where all the Cubans in Chicago get married” (68), “the church was covered with yellow roses (in honor of the Virgin de

---

<sup>24</sup> Although Juani speaks fluent Spanish and has a strong Cuban accent, she still remains a bit insecure when it comes to her written Spanish. When Juani contemplates writing a letter to her “crazy cousin Titi” in Cuba, she confesses to her cousin, Patricia: “I don’t even know if my written Spanish is that good” (154). Although her language marks her relationship and connection with Cuba, Juani questions her abilities. In much the same way as she questions the family stories and memories that connect her with Cuba, she also questions the language skills that tie her to her homeland.

Charity, Cuba's patron saint) [and] Mario Varona [. . .] was hired to play guitar and sing Cuban songs during the ceremony" (69). All of the aspects of this traditional and treasured day, from the location to the decorations to the music, connote Cuba. Or finally, consider how the family mourns the death of tío Pepe. As Juani notes, although "Cubans don't normally have people over after funerals" (92), both she and Patricia thought it was a good idea and thus the family decided to invite people over after the funeral. And although they adopt certain elements of the American mourning process, tía Celia still "tossed a handful of Cuban dirt on the casket (brought from the island by Tomás Joaquín for precisely this purpose)" —in an effort to at least symbolically bury her exiled husband in Cuban soil—and at Tía Celia's house "the windows and mirrors were all covered with black cloth" (92). In the end, Juani "realized that most of [the guests at the funeral] were Latino, awkwardly trying to perform an American custom, and [that they] didn't really have much sense of what to do" (93). The funeral ends up being an odd mix of Cuban and American customs. But regardless of whether or not the family attempts to adopt certain American customs into their lives, from the commonplace family rituals of food and language to the more traditional forms of grieving or celebration, Cuba is always present in one way or another in the Casas household and thus in Juani's life.<sup>25</sup> Language, food and traditions each have their immediate and

---

<sup>25</sup> In fact, beyond family traditions and rituals, Cuba exercises some sort of hold over almost all of the Casas family members, not just Juani. For instance, Patricia, who was born in New York and often displayed "little *americanadas*" [American mannerisms] (155), is the only cousin to have gone to Cuba since the Revolution,

distinct denotations but here, together they create and sustain a connotation of what it means to be Cuban: one speaks Spanish with a Cuban accent, one eats and enjoys Cuban food, and one follows certain customs and traditions.

Significantly, Juani's complex and contentious relationship with Cuba and her Cubanness through connotation is also expressed in two striking descriptions that physically link Juani to the island: in the first, the reader finds Juani sitting in her cousin Caridad's kitchen, absentmindedly "playing with the edge of [a well-worn] plastic placemat, which says *Cuba* and has a map of the island, a picture of the flag, and a bouquet of palm trees. On the placemat Cuba looks like a giant brown turd; the flag's colors have faded so that the triangle appears pink" (15). This rich description of a faded Cuba and an altered flag draws the reader's attention to two central themes in the narrative. One, that Cuba, although constantly present in Juani's life, no longer

---

often to partake in cane-cutting trips, and was "a fervent Fidel supporter until a few years back" (32). According to Juani, "Patricia's always known more about Cuba than all of us put together—our parents included" (155). She also "always sees a connection to Cuba" (60) when the female cousins get together to discuss family matters. Throughout her life, her Cuban roots and heritage clearly affect Patricia. Or, consider Caridad who was born in Cuba but immigrated to the United States when she was seventeen. According to Patricia, Caridad yearns for Cuba to such an extent that she is willing to endure a relationship with an abusive husband, Jimmy, precisely because he reminds her of Cuban men: "there's something disgustingly Cuban about him [Jimmy], and I think, in a way, that appeals to her, like a *primordial* memory" (60, emphasis added). Jimmy evokes something so fundamental and necessary for Caridad that it allows her to withstand other significant and dangerous flaws, such as physical abuse, simply because he fills this void. Importantly, Juani also understands this relationship in terms of sympathy, that is, she believes that Caridad feels sympathy for Jimmy because of the struggles he endured after arriving as part of the Mariel boatlift. For both of these women, as well as for Juani, Cuba clearly occupies a central role in their lives and leads them to embark upon certain life paths—trips to Cuba, marriages to less-than-ideal men, quests for the truth—that appear at least partly motivated by a desire to ease their yearning, their nostalgia for Cuba.

represents the pristine and perfect Cuba, the unexamined and uncritical nostalgic Cuba, that her parents remember and try to instill in Juani. Instead, while Cuba is obviously present, it has been converted into a “giant brown turd” thanks to Juani’s questioning of the nostalgic memories her family attempts to pass on to her. Here Cuba is completely demystified; the image highlights that while Cuba is a presence that can be somewhat altered—for it is a brown turd—it can never totally be eradicated. Second, the description of the red triangle on the Cuban flag that has now faded to pink due to the passing of time in the United States subtly links Juani’s lesbian sexuality and her Cuba identity.<sup>26</sup> The national emblem of Cuba—the triangle representing freedom, equality and fraternity and the color red symbolic of the blood shed by Cuban patriots fighting for independence—is converted here into a sign of gay pride.<sup>27</sup> Juani, by absentmindedly fingering the placemat, physically links herself both to Cuba and, through the altered red-now-pink triangle on the Cuban flag, to gay pride.

---

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted here that the significance of the fading of the red triangle on the Cuban flag is addressed in Allatson’s thought-provoking chapter on *Memory Mambo* in *Latino Dreams: Transcultural Traffic and the U.S. National Imaginary*. Although Allatson did bring this aspect of the passage to my attention, I interpret the importance of the image slightly differently. Whereas he reads it as both an “insertion of lesbian desire into the heart of Cuban-exile imaginaries, and, by extension, into Cuban-exile narrative [and as a] parallel insertion of the Cuban-exile lesbian into U.S. queer imaginaries” (168), I focus on the image as it relates to Juani’s complex relationship between herself, Cuba, her lesbian sexuality, and her nostalgia for the island.

<sup>27</sup> It seems prudent to add here that the symbolism of the pink triangle originated in Nazis concentration camps during World War II. The pink triangle was used to denote prisoners who were incarcerated because of sexual deviance, mostly commonly, homosexuality. It is only in the 1970s that gay rights activists resigified the symbol to represent gay pride and the gay rights movement. By paralleling the blood shed by Cuban patriots fighting for independence with the symbol of gay pride, Obejas subtly points toward the struggles overcome by the gay rights movement.

Later in the narrative, in the second description physically linking Juani to Cuba, Juani asserts that she is her “own island,” with her “own practical borders” (79).<sup>28</sup> The metaphor of Juani as an island stresses the connection between Juani and her Cuban roots. This is all the more significant when one notes that the only other individual compared to an island in the narrative is Juani’s lesbian cousin Titi, who has tried numerous times to leave the island to no avail. According to Juani, although she has never met Titi in person, she knows Titi is a lesbian:

I know just from the pictures [. . .] that Titi’s a lesbian. There’s no androgyny, no fashion statement, no political button or secret hand signal to give her away. There is nothing other than her particular madness. I know everything just by gazing at her; I know it in my heart, which reads and decodes her every gesture and look. More importantly, I also know that the damage in Titi’s soul—and it’s there, clear as the blue skies in every one of those photographs—is connected to how she loves, or more precisely, how she’s not allowed to love. Her face, with its thin lines and bloody red lips, is a map of a sealed *island*, surrounded not by water but by an invisible, electrified barbed wire. (75, emphasis added)

This parallel between the two lesbian cousins, Titi and Juani, one living in Cuba and the other in the United States, again links Cuba with lesbian sexuality—something that we

---

<sup>28</sup> The inclination to imagine oneself as an island, according to Pérez Firmat, is quite commonplace for Cuban exiles. He writes: “El nuestro—el mío—ha sido un exilio pródigo en oportunidades y recursos. Y aun así, nos sentimos pobres, desnudos, incompletos. Teniéndolo todo, nos falta la mitad. Quizás por eso nuestro modo de adaptación es fabricar islas dentro de los continentes. [. . .] Cuando nos acosan, nos hacemos isla; cuando nos ignoran, nos hacemos isla. En busca de compañía, nos hacemos isla; solícitos de soledad, nos hacemos isla. Para conjurar el tedio, nos hacemos isla; para ser felices, nos hacemos isla.” [Our—my—exile has been bountiful with opportunities and resources. Yet, even so, we feel poor, naked, incomplete. Having everything, we are missing half. Perhaps because of this, our way of adapting is by creating islands within the continents. [. . .] When they harass us, we become an island; when they ignore us, we become an island. In search of company, we become an island; solicitous of solitude, we become an island. In order to avoid tedium, we become an island; to be happy, we become an island] (*Cincuenta lecciones* 100). Thus, seeing oneself as an island is one way in which Cuban exiles cope with the reality of exile.

shall address again in relationship to Juani's desire to make a return trip to Cuba later on in the chapter. Suffice it here to highlight the importance of the presence of Cuba through connotation in Juani's daily life and image of herself. Throughout the narrative, these instances that highlight the importance of Cuba in Juani's conception of self set the stage for Juani's ambivalent relationship with the island. Whether it is through food, language, traditions, or symbols, Juani lives in a community that fosters an intimate connection with Cuba. Much like her extended family and fellow exiles, the conduits through which Juani is connected to Cuba are almost exclusively commodified objects—music, dance, food, rituals, traditions, and placemats. These objects all connote a sense of Cuba and Cubanness to Juani, something with which she desperately struggles.

Notably, Juani's uneasiness at maintaining an intimate relationship with Cuba does not end here. One of her most passionate and complex ties to Cuba is her relationship with her ex-lover, Gina. Upon first meeting Gina at a community meeting for an aldermanic candidate, Juani thinks to herself that "the thing that was missing from my life at that point was plain and simple, and what I wanted most: love, *rapture*, and *surrender*" (83, emphasis added). Aside from the commonplace desire for love, Juani also sees a potential relationship with Gina as rapture and surrender, as if Gina could be some sort of all-encompassing, mystical experience that has the potential to carry Juani away, perhaps even to Cuba, since Gina has traveled there. Strikingly, Juani even describes Gina as a conduit to her beloved homeland:

I wanted to be with Gina—*in* Gina, *on* Gina—all the time. I was sick with love, sick with yearning, up to my neck with it. To me, she was like the purest, blackest earth—that rich, sweet soil in which sugarcane grows. I always imagined her as hills in which I would roll around, happy and dirty, as if I were back in Cuba, or perhaps in Puerto Rico. (119)

Here love and place are completely intertwined. Juani expresses her intense desire for Gina, but it is not just Gina that she longs for. As Eliana Rivero explains in her now classic essay “(Re)Writing Sugarcane Memories: Cuban Americans and Literature:” “In the nostalgic discourse of Cuban writers residing in the United States [. . .] the presence of palm trees and sugar cane is a constant. [. . .] It can be said that the words *sugar* and *sugar cane*, and the images created by them, are metaphors for the essence of what it means to be Cuban” (175). The fact that Juani imagines Gina as the soil in which sugarcane grows and in which she herself would like to roll around implies that Juani not only believes that Gina connotes Cuba, but that she *is* Cuba. By claiming that she is sick with love and yearning, Juani is professing both her longing for Gina and her nostalgia for Cuba. In this context, Juani’s understanding of love as rapture and surrender take on new meaning: Juani wants to be raptured by and surrender herself not only to Gina but to Cuba. And although aware of the fact that Gina is a fierce Puerto Rican *independentista*, Juani’s definitive assertion that Gina is rich, lush, *Cuban* soil starkly contrasts with her qualitative admission that *perhaps* Gina *might be* Puerto Rico. Given how Juani perceives Gina as Cuba, her reaction to their first night spent together is all the more poignant:

When I woke up later that night, I didn't want to open my eyes. For an instant, I couldn't tell if I was dreaming or breathing in the dark. [. . .] And then, when I realized I recognized the steady heartbeat behind me, the tender flesh that spooned the length of my body, I shut them even harder, wanting the moment to last forever, afraid that I'd break down and just cry. (Obejas, *Memory* 91)

Having Gina nearby, Juani realizes that she does not want to lose Gina, the way that, because she is an exile, she has lost Cuba. Her overwhelming emotion at having reconnected with Cuba is apparent in her intense desire to "break down and just cry."

Nevertheless, Juani does lose Gina. After a tense evening at Gina's house where her Puerto Rican friends unduly characterize Juani as a *gusana*, Juani questions Gina: "Do you really think I'm a *gusana*?' [. . .] 'What I mean is, do you really think it's so despicable that we're [my family's] here?' I asked. *My lip trembling*. 'We wouldn't know each other, we wouldn't be together, if my parents hadn't left Cuba.' *I was choking a little, holding back tears*" (132, emphasis added).<sup>29</sup> Given that Juani understands Gina as Cuba, Gina's seeming rejection hurts Juani on more than one level: it is not only her lover that is rejecting her but her homeland also. Juani reacts viscerally to this potential loss and a violent and explosive physical argument erupts that leaves both women ravaged. Gina and Juani inflict serious injuries on each other (and Obejas depicts for the reader a rare scene of lesbian domestic violence): Gina's face is swollen and bloody from the force of

---

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, the term *gusana* was originally coined by Castro to refer to those counter-revolutionary individuals that fled post-Revolutionary Cuba. The fact that this term is the catalyst for the demise of Gina and Juani's relationship subtly highlights the importance of the Revolution and exile in the narrative. It is not simply any pejorative term that causes this fight. It is a term that labels Juani as an anti-Revolutionary Cuban exile.

one of Juani's blows and Juani's right breast is savagely scarred by one of Gina's tremendous bites. At the hospital, Juani contemplates her injuries and thinks Gina "ripped my heart out with her teeth" (136). She continues: "I couldn't believe Gina and I had done this to each other; I couldn't believe I'd caused the end of our world" (136). This violent conclusion to her relationship with Gina hauntingly echoes Juani's violent separation from Cuba. Both are cataclysmic events that define her life. When she was a child, Juani never realized the seriousness of what was happening when her family was preparing to leave Cuba: "the whole time this [the planning for their exile] was happening, I didn't know what was going on. I was simply gathered up, like one more precious belonging, and packed into a stranger's bloated car in the middle of the night" (10). It was only later, when she was already living in the United States that she finally grasped the reality of her situation. In direct contrast to this, Juani, now older and wiser, does understand the significance of losing Gina—and thus, her very own personification of Cuba. That is why she is in such shock that she caused the end of their world, that she caused herself to lose Cuba all over again. Ultimately, Juani's relationship fails but her obsessions continue and thus she feels compelled to seek out the truth behind her nostalgic yearnings, to find the kernel of truth underneath the layers of connotation that surround her.

At this juncture, Juani's obsession with her father's duct tape story warrants a closer analysis. Initially, one perhaps might think that nostalgic recollections of a

previous, less commodified time in 1970s Cuba would afford the possibility or the illusion of escaping from the omnipresence of commodification in contemporary society. But as we shall see, nostalgia here does not break free from the far-reaching grasp of commodification. Instead, it simply illustrates the extent to which commodification has infiltrated aspects of private everyday life. Let us begin with a brief look at the duct tape story itself. According to Alberto José, before leaving Cuba, “he invented a formula for a strong, durable black cloth tape, ideal for packing, and immune to rain and snow [. . .]. He called his breakthrough *cinta magnética* [magnetic tape], even though it had nothing whatsoever to do with magnetics, electricity or power of any kind” (24). When the family journeyed from Cuba to the United States, Alberto José entrusted his wife to bring the formula with her, but “somehow, in the madness of the moment, she either lost it or forgot it” (29). Later, when the family arrives in Miami, Alberto José sees some duct tape for sale in a store and comes to the conclusion that the CIA stole the formula from him: “The CIA! [. . .] They stole the formula! You know what happened when I got to the United States? The first thing I see in a hardware store window in Miami? Duck tape, that’s what. [. . .] [D]uck tape—*cinta pata, cinta maricon*a—can you believe?” (29). Whereas Alberto José calls his formula *cinta magnética*, he qualifies the American tape as *pata* or *maricon*a, two pejorative terms in Spanish that signify gay or lesbian. Alberto José’s use of these negative adjectives to refer to the American version of his *cinta magnética* reveals not only his rejection of this bastardized version of his formula but also

his disparagement of gay and lesbian sexuality.<sup>30</sup> Because he believes it was stolen from him, Alberto José changes *cinta magnética* into *cinta pata*, *cinta maricon*. Furthermore, this allusion to the theme of homoerotic sexuality in the narrative is fundamental, as we shall see in the final section of this chapter, because it, coupled with the duct tape story, plays a significant role in how Juani's nostalgia for Cuba plays out. But, to return to the story at hand, for Alberto José losing the duct tape formula was "the greatest tragedy" (24) of his and his family's life and it fuels his sense of loss associated with his exile.

Interestingly, at first, Juani attempts to go along with her family's version of the duct tape story. When listening to her father recount the tale, she states:

I don't know how much of this is true. I have a *vague* memory of shirtless men in the patio of our home in Havana [. . .] I remember it as infernally hot, and made hotter by the flames cooking buckets full of my father's goo, and the men hairy-chested and thin, wearing loose black pants and hard shoes with laces. [. . .] I remember all this, but I don't know if I remember it for real or because I heard the story a million times. (24-25)

Although not completely and unquestioningly convinced that she remembers, she does try to piece the story together from her "vague memories" and never openly questions her parents about the details of their story. Notably, it is not until Juani is visiting her

---

<sup>30</sup> One could even read this scene as a potential rejection of Juani by her father. In the narrative, Alberto José never directly addresses the question of Juani's sexuality. Instead he avoids all conversations that could lead to her openly revealing her sexuality to him. As Juani puts it: "His motivation isn't to spare me discomfort but to save himself. Because he's afraid I won't lie, it's vital to him that I not be provoked into the truth" (80). Not wanting to face the reality that his daughter is a lesbian, Alberto José prefers to evade the truth and thus never be forced to choose between his own homophobic beliefs and his love for his daughter.

sister Nena in Miami—or “Havana, U.S.A.” (168) as Nena jokingly calls it<sup>31</sup>—that she suddenly feels compelled to know the truth about the story. Perhaps because of the cataclysmic end to her relationship with Gina—which, as we saw above, connoted for Juani another violent separation from Cuba—, Juani simply cannot deal with the uncertainty surrounding the story any longer: “I don’t know what had come over me—why it suddenly became so fucking important—but I was obsessed; I had to know the truth about this stupid thing and the human cost seemed irrelevant” (178). Knowing full well that her parents are heavily invested in maintaining their nostalgic memories, Juani persists in questioning her mother over the phone about the formula, regardless of “the human cost” of her inquiries, and ends up “shaking from the pain and havoc” (181) she caused.<sup>32</sup> In her struggle to understand losing Cuba twice over in her life, Juani desperately needs to understand the truth. She does not “know who or what to believe [. . .] ever” (182) and yet, because she knows that believing will alleviate her anxiety

---

<sup>31</sup> Juani vehemently denies the idea that Miami could be like Havana. Juani sees Miami as “an arid pancake with splashes of neon, even in daylight. And because of the swamps underneath, there’s not much height to the construction, so the city has a kind of stunted look to it” (168). In contrast, she thinks Cuba is “green, lush and majestic, no matter how badly it may be crumbling” (168). Juani, although she does not really remember much of her life in Cuba, certainly has a romantic—nostalgic—vision of what Cuba is like.

<sup>32</sup> This scene again highlights the theme of violence in the narrative. Juani begins by pleading but, as her conversation with her mother progresses, Juani becomes increasingly hostile and violent. The scene becomes a true memory mambo: an aggressive, uninhibited Juani verbally attacks her mother and leaves her unsettled about the memory. Juani’s voice was “mean,” her face was “twisting” as she spoke and she had “venom cursing through [her] veins.” By the end, Juani narrates: “I started screaming the same thing over and over into the phone, my own tears coming down hot and salty. I was up, stomping and pacing, my face red, my body acrid from sweat. I was going under with some hideous fever, lights flashing in my eyes from imaginary strobes.” And her mother, “hearing the words like bullets piercing” her, is by the end “kind of out of it” (179-81).

about the past, she desperately wants to believe. She even mulls: “Why do I want so bad to believe” (205). But regardless of whether Juani wants to believe or not, the question arises: does the veracity of memory matter? And, why is Juani so obsessed with the “truth” about the past? Ultimately, Juani is not only searching for the truth behind this particular story, but for what is erased in the reconstruction of her family’s narratives about Cuba that allows them to depict a perfect nostalgic tale. She longs for the truth with regards to Cuba—not a spectacle or a shimmering, pristine, nostalgic representation of Cuba as seen through the eyes of others. She longs for a better understanding of her nostalgic environment and for a real connection to Cuba.

Having discussed the significance of the duct tape story as a focal point for Juani’s search for the truth, let us now turn our attention to the question of commodification—which according to theorists such as Fredric Jameson is in full force in our postmodern, late capitalist present—as it relates to the transmission of this nostalgic memory. According to Karl Marx in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, a commodity at its most basic is “an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind” (126). In capitalist societies, commodities “have a dual nature, because they are at the same time objects of utility and bearers of value” (138). The use-value (utility) of a commodity has to do with the object itself, “the physical bodies of commodities” (133), and specifically relates to the object’s usefulness. Use-values “are only realized [. . .] in use or in consumption. They constitute the

material content of wealth, whatever its social form may be" (126). The exchange-value (or simply put, the value) of a commodity "appears first of all as the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind" (126). Precisely because commodities can be exchanged, Marx determines that there must be an underlying property in every commodity that allows it to be distinguished as having a certain value. That underlying property is the abstract human labor necessary to produce that particular commodity: "What exclusively determines the magnitude of the value of any article is therefore the amount of labour [. . .] or the labour-time socially necessary for its production. [. . .] The value of a commodity is related to the value of any other commodity as the labour-time necessary for the production of the other" (129). Marx continues:

A thing can be a use-value without being a value. This is the case whenever its utility to man is not mediated through labour. Air, virgin soil, natural meadows, unplanted forests, etc. fall into this category. A thing can be useful, and a product of human labour, without being a commodity. He who satisfies his own need with the product of his own labour admittedly created use-values, but not commodities. In order to produce the latter, he must not only produce use-values, but use-values for others, social use-values. (And not merely for others. The medieval peasant produced a corn-rent for the feudal lord and a corn-tithe for the priest; but neither the corn-rent nor the corn-tithe became a commodity simply by being produced for others. In order to become a commodity, the product must be transferred to the other person, for whom it serves as a use-value, through the medium of exchange.) Finally, nothing can be of value without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value. (131)

Thus, in order for an object to be a commodity, it must not only have use-value and exchange-value, but labor. Furthermore, the product must be exchanged with another individual for whom that product has a use-value. Only then can a product truly be considered a commodity. As John Frow succinctly describes it: “the concept [commodity] refers to a matrix of conditions of exchange (the capitalist market), conditions of production (capital investment and wage labour, which is itself a commodity at another level), and conditions of consumption (private rather than collective appropriation of goods)” (132).

Keeping in mind Marx’s detailed definition of a commodity, let us return to the duct tape story. On its most basic level, the story revolves around the loss of a commodity: the infamous duct tape formula. According to Alberto José, his duct tape formula is a unique and fully Cuban commodity that “the *yanquis* stole” (Obejas, *Memory* 180). He slaved over the formula at his house in Havana: “direct[ing] traffic [. . .] he’d stand in the middle of all of the activity, taking mysterious notes on his clipboard [. . .]. To check his masterpiece, he’d stick the little finger of his left hand into the buckets and burn himself” (24). And he even had a plan in place to begin selling his invention in the United States; during his final months living in Cuba, he had begun to work for the CIA because it “was a good route into the American business community, where he hoped to market his *cinta magnética*” (27). Clearly, his formula fits the definition of a commodity: it had a use-value for it was “a strong, durable black cloth tape, ideal for

packing, and immune to rain and snow;” it possessed abstract human labor for Alberto José certainly dedicated a significant amount of time and labor into developing the formula and creating the product; and it had a potential exchange value as can be seen by Alberto José’s plan to market the product in the United States. In losing the formula on their trip to the United States—certainly an ironic twist of fate given that the family was fleeing a communist country for a capitalist one—Alberto José loses the potential wealth and privilege that the duct tape formula would have afforded him once he had sold it on the American market. He ardently believes that “if the Americans hadn’t stolen it out from under him, he’d have been rich, and we’d have been much happier. If things had gone the way he believes they should have, we’d never be running the Wash-N-Dry Laundry/Lavanderia Wash-N-Dry in Chicago” (24). For Alberto José, the riches associated with duct tape “should have been our [the family’s] future” (70). Hence, this story is not only about a crushed dream but about losing access to a commodity that would have changed his family’s life by giving them, to use Marx’s term, surplus value. Interestingly, if Alberto José’s memory had been of the salty sea air of Cuba or of the beautiful Cuban sunset instead of about how he invented a commodity, then perhaps these nostalgic memories of Cuba would not emphasize the commodification of everyday life to the extent that they do.<sup>33</sup> To reiterate the Marx quotation above: “a thing

---

<sup>33</sup> Many Cuban exiles fondly remember the Cuban landscape and nature as focal points of their nostalgic memories. Recall, for instance, how the main protagonist in “We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?” tightly holds onto her green sweater because it “smells of salt and Cuban dirt”

can be a use-value without being a value. This is the case whenever its utility to man is not mediated through labour. Air, virgin soil, natural meadows, unplanted forests, etc. fall into this category.” Hence a memory about the Cuban landscape would have had a use-value but its value would not have been mediated through labor. By employing a memory about a commodity as a focal point of the Casas’s nostalgia for Cuba, Obejas points the reader to the importance of commodification in the narrative and, in turn, in postmodern society.

Importantly, the currency of this particular memory does not end here. In addition to the memory itself being about a commodity, the conditions in which the family transmits those memories are those of a commodified economy. At first, the passing on of this particular tale, an epic part of the family lore, seems to form part of what scholars have described as a gift economy and thus exterior to and distinct from a commodity-based economy. In general terms, gift economies form a system of reciprocity, where individuals or groups continually take part in an exchange of

---

(114-15). Or, how Carlos Eire nostalgically waxes about Havana: “Havana by day. Hot, yes, and radiant. The sunlight seemed at once dense and utterly clear. The shadows were so crisp, so cool. The clouds in the blue sky, each one a poem [. . .]. The sunsets: forget it, no competition. Nothing could compare to the sight of that glowing red disk being swallowed by the turquoise sea and the tangerine light bathing everything, making all of creation flow as if from within. Even the lizards. The waves, those turquoise waves, splashing against the wall of the Malecón, splashing, leaping over it to flood the road, lapping, lapping, lapping endlessly, eternally” (*Waiting* 12). Both of these examples are memories that cannot be considered commodities because, although they might have a use-value, they do not have labor.

objects.<sup>34</sup> According to Lewis Hyde in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, a gift is an object which “we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It bestowed upon us.” (xi). Additionally, gifts are in constant motion: “whatever we are given is supposed to be given away again, not kept” (4). If one keeps a gift then it ceases to be a true gift. Closely following Marcel Mauss’s classic theorization of gift economies, Hyde argues that “[g]ift economies tended to be marked by three related obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate” (xv). Accordingly, when an individual receives a gift from another, a bond is created between the two individuals. Gifts create a sense of obligation within the recipient toward the giver and therefore a cycle of interdependence, of social interaction between giver and receiver, is created.<sup>35</sup> More specifically, the exchange of

---

<sup>34</sup> Numerous scholars have discussed the notion of a gift economy. Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift*, published in 1925, is the foundational study. There have been numerous interpretations of gift economies since then in fields ranging from anthropology to sociology to literary studies. See Bourdieu, Cheal, Derrida, and Lévi-Strauss. This is by no means an exhaustive list of studies about gift economies. Instead, it simply points to some of the most relevant discussions in recent years.

<sup>35</sup> Claude Lévi Strauss focused on this notion of reciprocity as the basis of all of social life. But the obligation of reciprocity, of course, can create problems. As Stephanie Coontz puts it: “Organizing social relations through reciprocity involves a delicate balance. It is unacceptable to give a gift with the sole motive of getting something in return, yet it is unthinkable to accept a gift without understanding that it sets up conditions for future behavior; it is an equally antisocial act to refuse a gift and the obligation that gift entails. The difficulty of maintaining this balance may explain why some languages—German, for instance—came to refer to gifts and poison with the same word” (47). Following in line with this notion of gift as poison, Jacques Derrida argues that a gift must not require reciprocity else the gift is “annulled.” “for there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt. If the other *gives* me *back* or *owes* me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral or differance. [ . . . ] [T]he gift puts the other in debt, with the result that giving amounts to hurting, to doing harm” (12). Interestingly, Derrida continues to explain that there can be no logic of the gift because that in itself nullifies the gift. In today’s society, gifts, at least as understood by Derrida, are impossible to achieve.

objects creates community: “[a]ny exchange, be it of ideas or of goats, will tend toward gift if it is intended to recognize, establish, and maintain community” (78). The relationship between the recipient and giver is the ultimate objective of a gift economy and this circle of interdependence is constantly expanded to include more and more individuals. The “circulation of gifts can produce and maintain a coherent community, or inversely, [. . .] the conversion of gifts to commodities can fragment or destroy such a group” (82). One, therefore, must pay special attention to gift economies if one desires to maintain the social cohesion of the group or community.

Given this sketch of what gift economies are and how they function, one might come to the conclusion that all family narratives, such as the duct tape story, exchanged between a parent and a child fall within a gift economy system. In the most general sense, family stories do form part of an exchange between parent and child: the parent gives the gift of the story to the child and the child thereafter, perhaps much later, passes that same story onto other family members, thereby maintaining the gift in circulation. The notion of reciprocation is attained, for instance, by the child also creating stories which she then shares with her parents. Furthermore, the telling of family stories creates a sense of community and family unity, an intimate social relation between the various

---

Given this conception of the gift, it is not surprising that the Casas family lore never achieves the status of gift and simply forms part of the commodification of everyday life prevalent in postmodern society.

family members. Consider, just for a moment, how the notion of a “family secret” ties individuals together and creates a sense of an intimate, exclusive community. By telling family stories, the goal is to forge stronger social relations between the various family members.<sup>36</sup> The duct tape story, at first glance, seems to fulfill all of these requirements: it is passed on from Alberto José and Xiomara to Juani and her siblings; it is told in an effort to create an intimate social relationship between the family members; and it is reciprocated within the family dynamic with other stories. But, upon further investigation, it becomes clear that the duct tape story in *Memory Mambo* does not function in this manner.

The fact that the duct tape story is *about a commodity* and that it is passed on *as if it were a commodity* fractures the social relation of the gift. Thus, one could argue that the exchange is transformed into a commodified exchange. As noted above, according to Marx, in order for any product, in this particular case a memory, to become a commodity, it must possess certain characteristics. The use-value, or usefulness, of the duct tape story lies in its ability to augment the sense of Cuba and Cubanness that Alberto José and Xiomara try to instill in their children. Its value stems from the fact that

---

<sup>36</sup> It is interesting to consider that while family stories can schematically form part of a gift economy — assuming, that is, that one diverges from theorists such as Derrida and believes that true gifts are possible —, this is most definitely not always the case. Take, for example, when an author decides to sell his or her autobiography or write a tell-all book about her family’s deepest, darkest secrets. Here, the family stories, the personal, private and treasured, are sold as objects within a commodified economy and marketed to those individuals desperate to know about the lives of others. In these cases, one could argue, the self becomes the nostalgic project.

in exile families such as the Casas, memories are a way to sustain their sense of self.

These memories are never without value and meaning because they are one of the few windows to the past and their homeland available to them. The story is a product of human labor because Alberto José and Xiomara carefully and dedicatedly construct, narrate, and perpetuate this story to any and everyone who is willing to listen. Once Alberto José and Xiomara attribute a sentimental and nostalgic value to the story they have constructed, the process of transforming this intangible object into a commodity begins. But, one might ask, what is expected in exchange for these nostalgic tales?

Alberto José and Xiomara tell these stories in order to get the family's participation in the perpetuation of the nostalgic tales of Cuba that are fundamental to their sense of self, a confirmation of sorts of their nostalgic reconstructions. In return, Juani and her siblings get a stronger sense of their Cuban roots as well as a mediated glimpse at their homeland. Juani metaphorically pays for the tales by participating in the family's nostalgic tales, in the "group hallucination based on my [Juani's] father's constant retelling of the story" (Obejas, *Memory* 25). Finally, Juani, as the recipient of the product, has to have a use for the memory else the labor involved in the product would not have value. Because Juani uses this story as a focal point of her own quest for the truth, it has a dual utility. Not only does it allow her to develop a sense of her Cuban roots, something absolutely fundamental to her, but it also serves as a means to face her own nostalgic yearnings for the island. Ultimately, because of how the family values these

nostalgic tales and how they are transmitted from parents to children, the family's social relations have been transformed into exchange relations thus yielding a commodified economy of exchange within the family dynamic. Perhaps, one could even claim that in today's society where gifts seem out of reach and commodification is rampant, a gift economy is no longer culturally distinguishable from a commodified economy.

Interestingly, within the Cuban exile community more broadly, individuals often view memories as commodities, as can be seen in Roberto G. Fernández's "Retrieving Varadero" in *Raining Backwards*. This particular vignette describes how a young boy, Eloy, "has been serving [his Cuban neighbor] Mirta faithfully for the last two years" (11) because he "was thirsty for information on those golden cities, those fabulous places in that enchanted island his aunt refused to mention [. . .]. He wanted to savor tidbits from that past he longed to relive somehow [. . .]" (11). After his first visit, Eloy "developed a need to talk with her [Mirta] every evening after school" (12) and would listen engrossed as she "intoxicated his mind with her maze of remembrances" (12). Eventually, realizing the currency of her stories, Mirta decides to "trade her remembrances of memories for practical favors that could ease the burden of living" (13). In a later vignette, Mirta declares: "*I pay him with memories*. It's the best way to fight forgetting. The day we forget, we are all dead. Even the living, because then we are going to be nameless" (37, emphasis added). From this story, one notes how for many Cuban exiles, memories have a use-value, an exchange-value, involve human labor, and

are seen as payment. For these exiles, memories are valued and treasured commodities and are fundamental to their existence.

But, returning to *Memory Mambo*, as can be seen from the duct tape story, nostalgia is once again subsumed into the world of commodities insofar as commodification plays a role both on the level of the memory itself—for the story is about a commodity—as well as on the level of the transmission of that memory. Whereas before, various commodified objects—images, traditions, food, placemats, etcetera—connoted Cuba and hence, encouraged a sense of nostalgia for the island through those objects, here the family’s nostalgic memories about Cuba are narrated in economic terms, and thus we have the actual nostalgic storytelling forming part of a commodified economy. As we have been seeing, throughout the entire narrative the past is conveyed through a series of objects that connote Cuba. And this lack of depth in Juani’s relationship with Cuba ultimately leaves her dissatisfied and seriously questioning the truth about her past. Instead of offering her *real* presence, “all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation” (Debord 1). In a world of sheer simulacra, Juani’s relationship with Cuba remains on the level of commodification. But, Juani wants to have a sense of what Cuba *really* is, not just a nostalgic version understood as the result of contact with various objects that connote Cuba. The ‘aura’ of Cuba, to recall

Nora's term, which she attains through connotations, no longer satisfies her. She wants to break free from the world of the simulacra and the commodity.

Faced with the reality that her present nostalgic, commodified relationship with the past can no longer sustain her, Juani looks towards "the real Cuba" as the ultimate solution to her problems. Cuba becomes a sort of messianic object that has the potential to save Juani from the emotional, physical and mental challenges that seem to plague her. At present, she feels "miserably alone" (Obejas, *Memory* 172) and she believes that only Cuba can afford her the renewed sense of "belonging" (235) she desperately needs. She wonders: "Who would I have been in Cuba? Who could I still be, in Cuba or here?" (133). Cuba is portrayed as her savior, as the place to overcome the cataclysmic events that have scarred her deeply: her exile and the end of her relationship with Gina. However, ironically, Juani has not been to the island since she was a child. When Gina asks her if she "remember[s] *anything* about your life in Cuba" (133, emphasis added), Juani wistfully declares: "I realized that I'd left Cuba too young to remember anything but snatches of color and scattered words, like the cutout letters in a ransom note. And what little I could put together had since been forged and painted over by the fervor, malice and nostalgia of others. What did I really know?" (133). Already feeling frustrated with her own inability to remember about her life in Cuba, the fact other people, such as her ex-lover Gina, had been to post-Revolutionary Cuba, and spoke about "helping on sugarcane cutting brigades, and hearing Fidel speak at the Plaza of

the Revolution for hours on end, [ . . . and had seen with their own eyes] how verdant Cuba was" (129), only accentuates Juani's dissatisfaction with her own relationship with Cuba. She realizes that "was jealous that she [Gina] and her friends knew so much about my country, and I knew so little" (133).

In order to overcome her feelings of inadequacy with regards to remembering Cuba, Juani comes to the conclusion that she must make a trip to the island herself. She no longer wants to deal with nostalgic recollections of her paradise lost, but instead longs to grasp hold of the *real* Cuba. She excitedly tells her cousin Patricia: "'Okay, okay—I know what I want,' I finally said. I was glowing, I could tell. *It was just so right.* 'And, you're the perfect person to help with this, Patricia.' [. . .] 'I want to go to Cuba'" (153). Juani believes that Cuba is the answer to all of her problems. She states that she wants to "see Cuba with my own eyes, walk the streets of Havana by myself, see where we used to live, talk to people, ask questions" (154). Juani wants to have *real presence*, to see the *real* Cuba and to distance herself from mere representations and simulacra. In her mind's eye, a trip to Cuba will give her all of the answers that she is lacking and will set her on the right path towards a bright and prosperous future which at present seems unclear and out of reach in the United States. Juani's relationship with Cuba is completely nostalgic, her future opportunities and possibilities lie in her past. Interestingly, her nostalgic yearnings play with time such that the past becomes the only terrain from which she understands a prosperous and successful future can spring.

Importantly, Juani's dissatisfaction with her nostalgic image of Cuba mediated through connotations and commodities is never truly resolved. She never makes her trip to Cuba instead only getting as far as Key West, which is "the one place in the U.S. where, on a clear night, you can see Havana" (172). As Juani describes:

One night I strolled down to the pier, hoping [. . .] I might get a glimpse of the lights in Havana. I thought *the view would free my head*. I'd brought a pair of binoculars but I knew I didn't really need them if the skies were clear. This night was spectacular: a swash of stars seemed to create a bridge between the Keys and Cuba, and the sky was a deep blue velvet. I closed my eyes, breathed deep and held the salty air in my lungs. [. . .] I was staring off the pier at what I was sure was the halo over Havana. [. . .] I turned around and tried to find Miami in the opposite direction, but the sky was mysteriously black and starless to the north, with a toxic haze over what might be the city. (173-74, emphasis added)

Unfortunately for Juani, the view from Key West does not "free her head" and thus there is no closure of the past which ultimately prevents any real movement toward her future. Instead, we have a rich description of a messianic Havana with its "halo," shining white and calling to Juani in the distance. In stark contrast, Miami, although geographically only slight farther away than Havana from Key West, is "mysteriously black" and under a "toxic haze." Cuba is innocence, purity and messianic while Miami is dangerous, contaminated and impure. Furthermore, the stars seem to illuminate a future path for Juani although ironically that path is towards her past: "a swash of stars seemed to create a bridge between the Keys and Cuba" while the sky above Miami is "starless." Interestingly, the diction in the description of the stars enacts the lived tension that James Clifford articulates in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late*

*Twentieth Century*. The stars here form a bridge, they descriptively evoke, much like the title of the book itself, the constant negotiation Juani must undergo to bring together the two parts of her life—Cuba and the United States. As Clifford notes: “In diasporic experience, the co-presence of ‘here’ and ‘there’ is articulated with an anti-teleological (sometimes messianic) temporality. Linear history is broken, the present constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired, but obstructed future: a renewed, painful yearning” (264). This passage accurately depicts Juani’s situation: stuck between the fully commodified ‘here’ of Florida and the ‘there’ of Cuba, she is living in the shadow of her own exile and the veracity of her mysterious past. Juani, in questioning the nostalgic memories her family attempts to instill in her, does challenge the notion of nostalgia but ultimately, remains quite nostalgic herself. This complete immersion in past events is the hope for her future, a future that is visualized through a return to Cuba.

But, Juani’s strategy to replace her nostalgic and commodified relationship with Cuba with fresh, “real” encounters attained through a return trip is doomed to fail from the beginning. It is not that the narrative “rejects” or “does not allow nostalgia” as critics such as Alvarez Borland or Lorenzo claim, but that Juani’s sexuality alters her ability to fully invest herself in the nostalgic tales her parents so desperately try to sustain. The notion that Cuba can offer her all of what she is looking for in life is simply not the case. For Juani, “being out is a simple matter of convenience” because it is easier to be honest

than “to lie, to dodge the truth, to try to make people think I’m something else” (Obejas, *Memory* 78).<sup>37</sup> Living in the United States, she is completely comfortable in her sexuality and feels it is possible to be openly gay and have an openly gay relationship. In contrast, according to Juani’s understanding of her lesbian cousin Titi’s life in Cuba, one is not necessarily free in Cuba in this same way. After looking at photographs of Titi, Juani asserts that Titi’s problem with Cuba has to do with freedom, but not freedom from Communism or Castro—as Xiomara and Alberto José believe in an effort to “coast around the truth [about Titi’s sexuality] to project and protect their own fears, their own yearnings” (78)—but freedom “to be queer,” “to be loved in daylight—to walk down the street arm in arm with her lover without the pretense of a mere friendship, to be utterly and ordinarily in love” (76). Juani claims to be “the only one—the only one—who knows it’s that unquenchable romantic desire—and not Fidel, not communism, not shortages of rice or limited hours of electricity—which has her twisted” (76). From this, one can surmise that Juani sees an openly gay love affair in Cuba as difficult, if not impossible, to

---

<sup>37</sup> Although Juani is out, that does not mean that her parents acknowledge or fully accept her sexuality. Xiomara knows and has had “unsteady, clumsy conversations” (Obejas, *Memory* 179) with Juani about her sexuality. “Her basic reaction is Catholic: she is mystified but defers, both to her vague knowledge of the church’s condemnation, and to the fact of my [Juani’s] existence” (79). Juani thinks that “in her heart of hearts she [her mother] wonders, if this is supposed to be so morally disfiguring, why do I seem so clear and reliable?” (79). And as noted above, Juani’s father is considerably less open about the situation, skillfully avoiding the topic in conversations: “My father is as aware as anyone could ever be. He avoids not just the topic of my sexuality, but any subject that could inadvertently lead us there [. . .] because he can think of nothing worse than having to look me in the eye and make a decision about whether to accept or reject me” (80). Although both parents find a way to have a relationship with Juani, it is clear that neither one of them is particularly at ease with her sexuality. Xiomara is torn between her daughter and her Catholic beliefs while Alberto José actively avoids acknowledging Juani’s lesbianism in order to continue his relationship with her.

achieve. This impression, coupled with the dissatisfaction Juani feels because every lover she has “ever had has been closeted, has always instantly looked over her shoulder when we’ve kissed on a street corner or train station platform” (76), makes a trip to Cuba for Juani virtually impossible. She shares Titi’s desire to be “free to be queer,” to have an openly lesbian relationship, “to walk down the street arm in arm with her lover” without her looking over her shoulder to see if someone is watching them. Believing that this type of relationship is difficult if not impossible to attain in Cuba impedes Juani’s ability to make the trip.

Juani’s obsession with the past and her nostalgic reconstructions is what leads her to the idea that the past and a clear understanding of what happened is the perfect future, but in order to be able to achieve that perfect past future, she must reconcile all of the irregularities in her memories. A return to Cuba for Juani will never work. Her future must be resolved in another manner. This is made clear at the end of the novel when she is sitting in a diner, contemplating her life and a fly continually hums around her booth, never relenting, much like her memories about the past circle around in her head, never leaving her alone. Juani “swat[s] at it [the fly] and it falls into a puddle on the table” (236). In the end, as Juani gets up to leave, she frees the fly: “it crawls a bit, then takes off, making an aimless loop in the air, then smashes itself against the window pane” (237). Perhaps the metaphor of the fly represents Juani finally freeing herself from the uncertainties surrounding her memories. That is why she can finally admit: “it is

possible—it is entirely possible—that [. . .] need dictates what I remember” (234). Now, recognizing her own needs, Juani must slowly piece her life back together without actually going to Cuba. In contrast to how the novel began with an anxious search for the truth, the novel ends on a note of tranquility: “It’s quiet now” (237). Neither the fly nor her pesky nostalgic memories will plague Juani anymore.

By demonstrating how Juani seeks to reconcile her nostalgic yearnings and a life filled with commodified objects that connote Cuba, *Memory Mambo* offers the reader a commentary on the extent to which commodification has infiltrated everyday life. Even seemingly innocuous nostalgic tales of the past have succumbed to the omnipresence of commodification. Furthermore, through the novel, Obejas offers the reader an innovative perspective on the notion of Cuban exile nostalgia. Nostalgia here, in contrast to what many other might claim, is not “ruptured” or “exploded,” but instead dealt with critically. The new social order ushered in by the Revolution is addressed and the Revolution’s effects are not simply dismissed as negative. Through Juani’s search for the truth and her questioning of her family’s memories, Obejas demonstrates for the reader a way of dealing with nostalgia that is not dismissive or derogatory. Given that we live in an age that has been characterized as unstable, uncertain, depthless and historically deaf, this attempt to recuperate nostalgia from the negative connotations of sentimentality so prevalent today is fundamental. In contemporary society, nostalgic tales of the past are unavoidable commodities because they are one way in which we

have access to history, even if that history is communicated through objects which merely connote the past. Obejas's *Memory Mambo* is an example of how individuals today "are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which remains forever out of reach" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 25).

Ultimately, Juani's journey reveals both a sense of dissatisfaction and inevitability as individuals try to think and act historically in a society overpopulated by nostalgic tales and commodified simulacra of the past.

## Chapter Three. Breaking with Nostalgia: Engaging Revolutionary Cuba Otherwise

Art [. . .] is the ultimate revolution  
(C. García 235)

As we have seen in the previous chapters, much of Eire's, Pérez Firmat's, and Obejas's memories about Cuba depend upon two factors: their (or their family's) contempt for the revolution and the direct refusal, inability, or hesitance to return to Cuba as long as Castro is in power. The political stakes of such memories are clearly grasped by theorist José Muñoz when he writes: "The politics of much, but certainly not all, Cuban American memory is a politics of nostalgic reconstruction where prerevolutionary Cuba is figured as a utopic lost homeland. This memory is meant to undermine the Cuban Revolution. It is meant to posit an imaginary ideal that was 'lost' with the advent of socialism" ("No es fácil" 76). In this chapter, I seek to explore a counter-hegemonic politics of Cuban-American memory by focusing on alternate reconstructions of Cuba's past that deviate from the standard Cuban-American nostalgic paradigm. I will attempt to show that there exists a non-nostalgic politics of Cuban-American memory, one in which pre-Revolutionary Cuba does not figure as a "utopic lost homeland" and Revolutionary Cuba is no longer, or not simply, the epitome of evil. To do so, I will offer readings of Cristina García's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* and Alina Troyano's performance pieces *Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution* and *Milk of Amnesia/Leche de Amnesia*. My argument is that these three texts work from within

stereotypical, hegemonic Cuban exile discourse to present a different perspective within Cuban-American exile literature. In this sense, they perform something similar to José Muñoz's notion of disidentification in that they work within and against the dominant ideology in order to transform the cultural logic of the diasporic community (*Disidentifications* 11). Although García and Troyano share a common exilic condition, they pursue different strategies in their works not only because their texts belong to different literary genres, but also because they form part of different communities in the United States—García is an established, heterosexual journalist and novelist while Troyano is a queer performance artist. In the following, I will show how García uses the heteroglossia inherent in the genre of the novel to destabilize the dominant nostalgic politics of memory and how Troyano shatters the foundations of these nostalgic politics of memory and imagines an alternative to it.

### ***The Fracturing of a Paradigm***

Before delving into how Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* might disrupt the nostalgic paradigm so prevalent within much of Cuban-American literature, it seems prudent to first situate her within the larger framework of the Cuban-American writers addressed herein. Much like Eire, Pérez Firmat, and Obejas, García came to the United States shortly after the start of the Cuban Revolution. She was born in Havana in 1958 and immigrated to the United States with her family in 1961. As she was growing up in New York, García felt slightly "schizophrenic" (López 606) because of the stark contrast

between her very Cuban, anti-communist and anti-Castro household and the Irish, Jewish and Italian community where she lived. As she recalled her youth in New York:

For me being Cuban was very much a family affair. My life bifurcated in that sense. At home I felt very Cuban and that identity was very much instilled in me. Culturally and temperamentally and in every way I felt very Cuban. This element was a very strong part of my identity. On the other hand, this Cuban identity wasn't relevant as I moved through the rest of my life. (López 606)

In the 1980s two events occurred that changed how García viewed being Cuban in the United States. The first was a trip back to Cuba in March of 1984 to visit her mother's side of the family, all of whom had stayed in Cuba after the revolution by choice.<sup>1</sup> During this trip García developed an intimate relationship with her maternal grandmother and her other relatives on the island, who were ardent supporters of Communism. She discovered how distorted her mother's account of Cuba as a "monstrous place, an island prison" (Italie) had been. She also realized that she had been taught "a very limited notion of what Cuba and Cuban history meant. Everything [she had learned from her mother] revolved around the revolution; it was the big B.C. and A.D." of their lives (Irizarry 178). However, talking with her extended family in Cuba changed all of this. Recalling the significance of this trip, García observes that "it definitely enlarged my perspective on the choices family members made, particularly

---

<sup>1</sup> García has contradicted herself in various interviews as to the year of her trip to Cuba. In some interviews, such as the López interview in *Michigan Quarterly Review* published in 1994, García states that she went to Cuba in March of 1984. However, in other interviews such as the Stern interview in *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, she claims that she traveled to Cuba in 1985. Regardless of when the actual trip occurred, what is clear is that this trip, coupled with her work in Miami, lead her to reconceptualize her *cubanidad*, Cuba itself, and what it means to be a Cuban exile in the United States.

those who chose to remain in Cuba. Furthermore, it enlarged my sense of self and my own identity” (Vorda 65-66). Ultimately, García’s trip changed her understanding of *cubanidad*, politics, and history.

The other event that forced García to reconceptualize what it meant to be Cuban in the United States was becoming Miami Bureau Chief covering Latin America and the Caribbean for *Time* magazine in the summer of 1987. In Miami, García was introduced into the Miami-Cuban community for the first time. Once there, she felt “extremely alienated” by both her peers and her family (López 607). They attacked her verbally, calling her a communist simply because she had different ideological beliefs from the mainstream Cuban-American community and was a registered Democrat. Whereas before, living in New York, she had taken for granted that she was fully Cuban, in the Miami-Cuban community, she suddenly became “a black sheep” (López 608). She simultaneously felt part of the community and rejected by it. According to García, at that time the Cuban community in Miami was “intolerant” and “frequently monolithic in its approach to Cuba” (Kevane 71). Both her tense relationship with the Miami Cuban community and her trip to Cuba radically changed how she viewed the Cuban community in the United States and forced her to think in different terms about her own *cubanidad*, about the way in which her identity was determined by politics, by networks of power and knowledge.

In 1990, shortly after leaving her job at *Time* magazine, García decided to dedicate herself full time to writing fiction. She quickly became the first Cuban-American woman to publish a novel in English at a major press and only the third Latino author ever to be nominated for a National Book Award in fiction in 1992 for *Dreaming in Cuban*. This debut novel, which she affirms is “very autobiographical” (López 610) on an emotional level, allows her to explore the political and personal costs families, particularly women, underwent because of the Cuban Revolution. In the process of writing, García came to the conclusion that “there is no one Cuban exile” (Kevane 75). “Everyone has his or her own version of Cuba” (Irizarry 179).

While García lays claim to the idea that her novel is *emotionally* autobiographical, her decision to write a novel as opposed to an autobiography is telling. Generally speaking, autobiographies project the illusion of a unified subject, of a transcendental consciousness integrating all signifying practices, emotions, values, desires, and perceptions. To take up Mikhail Bakhtin’s well-known distinction, classic autobiographies, such as those discussed in Chapter Two by Eire and Pérez Firmat, are monologic texts that present one vision, in this case, one vision of Cuba’s pre-revolutionary and revolutionary pasts. In contrast, García’s novel is richly polyphonic, which in turn highlights the complexity of opinions about Cuba’s pre-revolutionary and revolutionary pasts. As Bakhtin notes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the novel is a

continually evolving genre and because of this it “reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding” (7).

Bakhtin rebukes the notion of a fixed definition of the novel for the novel “is plasticity itself” (39). The novel is a fluid and constantly changing genre whose roots lie in folklore. The genre, from its inception, “was structured not in the distanced image of the absolute past but in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality” (39). One fundamental characteristic of the novel is that it thrives on inclusiveness. Unlike other forms of literary narrative, the novel can include different genres and voices without compromising its integrity as a novel. In fact, “[p]arodic stylizations of canonized genres and styles occupy an *essential* place in the novel” (6, emphasis added). Thus letters, confessions, diaries, or poetry all can appear within a novel and the work as a whole can still be called a novel. Another fundamental characteristic of the novel is that it is governed by the notion of heteroglossia, a plurality within languages that creates a stylistic unity. “The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (262). Thus, various speech types and voices allow the novel to present seemingly contradictory or conflicting points of view without necessarily privileging one point of view over another. As Bakhtin argues:

All languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all

may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. (291-92)

This rich definition of the genre speaks not only to the elements within García's novel, but also to her understanding of her text. García explicitly lays claim to working against the monolithic interpretation of the Cuban Revolution and the Cuban or Cuban-American exile. Repeatedly, she states that she is not "trying to create models or types or prototypes or archetypes" (Kevane 76) of Cubans. Nor is she affirming her perspective as representative of all Cuban-American exiles for she believes that "the people who purport to speak for the large [Cuban exile] community are not speaking for as many people as they think" (López 608). García's text is about multiplicity and fluidity. It includes various perspectives, genres, and languages precisely to disrupt and destabilize the monolithic hold the staunch anti-Castro community has had and to highlight the complexity and heterogeneity of the various positions members of the community have. With this description in mind, let us now turn to the text.

Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* recounts the lives of three generations of del Pino women and how the Cuban Revolution profoundly impacted each of them in different ways. Through continual shifts in narrative time from the mid 1930s through 1980, García subtly interweaves various political moments in Cuban and U.S. history into the storyline. Events such as the Batista Presidencies in the 1940s and 50s, the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the 10-Million-Ton Sugar Harvest in 1970, the Padilla affair in 1971, the United States bicentennial in 1976, and the

storming of the Peruvian Embassy in Havana in 1980 (that eventually leads to the *Marielito* exodus) subtly mark the narrative. However, strikingly, it is not the politics of these important historical events nor their aftermath per se that take center stage. Instead, they remain part of the backdrop while the novel truly explores the divisive effects of the revolution on the family unit and the individual familial trajectories that the revolution sets in motion. In the novel, García examines “the personal cost of what happened in Cuba after 1959” by focusing on “how women have responded and adapted to what happened to their families” (López 609).

The central feminine figures of the novel—Celia del Pino, her daughters Lourdes Puente and Felicia Villaverde, and her granddaughter, Pilar Puente—all live, in one way or another, in the shadow of the revolution. The revolution is a pivotal moment in their lives and sets them each on a different path. As with the other texts studied in this dissertation, the revolution alters the characters’ lives in dramatic ways. However, in contrast to the other texts, in *Dreaming in Cuban* the memory of the revolution does not give in to nostalgic laments about how things were prior to the revolution. Instead, the reader is presented with a vast array of nuanced positions and opinions about the revolution, both positive and negative. Celia, the matriarch of the family, fully embraces the revolution, dedicates her life to its missions, and remains on the island for the duration of her life. She is the ultimate paradigm of those who remain on the island supporting the revolution and its new social order. Her eldest child, Lourdes, is

ideologically at odds with her mother and leaves Cuba for the United States in 1961, when the revolution is still in its infancy. Felicia, whose name belies her profound sadness, is Celia's second child. Although she remains in Cuba throughout her troubled life and embraces certain aspects of the new social order in Cuba, she lacks commitment to the revolution, "a source of great rancor between" (107) her and her mother. Finally, Pilar, Lourdes's daughter and thus Celia's granddaughter, leaves Cuba as an infant and grows up in New York. Pilar's passionate interest in the revolution, leftist tendencies, and desire to see her grandmother leads Lourdes and her to travel back to Cuba in 1980.

Throughout the narrative, García presents a collage of primarily strong female voices that shift between first and third person narratives and a mix of various genres ranging from poetry, to letters, to literary prose, which echoes Bakhtin's insights about the genre of the novel and its plasticity. García offers this combination of voices and genres perhaps in part to illustrate precisely the impossibility of offering simply one perspective on the experience of revolution and exile. In this text, "there is no one single truth, but rather a spectrum of personal truths conditioned by experience" (Tate 147). In this way, García subtly highlights the plurality of subject positions on the revolution and its effects without affirming or advocating one particular opinion as righteous or true, "without encouraging polar thinking or advocating one perspective over another" (Tate 147). With a fragmentary structure that leaves the reader to piece together the order of events and their impact on the characters, García's nuanced account offers three vastly

different reconstructions of the revolution: from those female characters who stayed (exemplified by Celia and Felicia), from those who left as adults (such as Lourdes), and from those that emigrated as children (the story of Pilar).

The novel begins with Celia del Pino acting as a sentinel, eyes fixed on the water, imaging her crucial role in the defense of the revolution: “guarding the north coast of Cuba. Square by square, she searches the night skies for adversaries then scrutinizes the ocean [. . .]. From her porch, Celia could spot another Bay of Pigs invasion before it happened. [If she did this,] [s]he would be feted at the palace, serenaded by a brass orchestra, seduced by El Líder himself” (3). This opening image encapsulates Celia’s passion for the revolution and its leader, Fidel Castro. In the years leading up to the revolution, Celia frequently wrote forlorn love letters to Gustavo, her Spanish ex-lover, expressing her disillusion with the state of affairs in Cuba, with Batista as leader of the government, and with the influence the United States had in the country. She writes: “that bastard Batista stole the country from us just when it seemed that things could finally change. The U.S. wants him in the palace. How else could he have pulled this off?” (162). She later writes that under Batista Cuba had “become the joke of the Caribbean, a place where everything and everyone [was . . .] for sale” (164). According to Celia, prior to the revolution, “Cuba was a pathetic place, a parody of a country” (233). It was a place where “all the profits went to a few Cubans, and, of course, to the Americans” (233) and where “smart girls [. . .] usually didn’t go to college. They got

married and had children while they were still children themselves" (121). Given her opinion about the state of affairs in Cuba and the lack of options available to women, it is not surprising that Celia protests in support of the revolution and excitedly awaits Castro's victory. In June of 1955, four years before Castro triumphantly enters Havana, she writes to Gustavo: "Now the revolution is close enough to smell" (165). She wholeheartedly believes in the myth of the nation and the new social order that the revolution promotes. To participate in the revolution is to "participate in something larger than herself," in "the greatest social experiment in modern history" (117). For these reasons, Celia ultimately dedicates herself body and soul to the revolution. In addition to guarding the shoreline against "*gusano* traitors" (3) or signs of a possible attack from the United States, she serves as a civilian judge for the People's Court, cuts sugarcane during the 10-Million-Ton Sugar Harvest, joins a micro-brigade to help build nurseries for children, inoculates school children against malaria, and "would gladly do anything" (112) *El Líder* asked of her. She passionately lives by Castro's early motto: "Within the revolution everything; against the revolution, nothing" (235). And, she even fantasizes about a love affair with *El Líder*. She "keeps a framed photograph of him by her bed, where her husband's picture used to be" (110) and when she guards the shoreline, she dresses up, puts on makeup, "and imagines that *El Líder* is watching her, whispering in her ear with his warm cigar breath" (112). For Celia, *El Líder* represents salvation, not only the salvation of her beloved Cuba, but of herself. In this sense, she

regards Castro as a charismatic leader in Max Weber's sense of the word, that is, as an individual who is "considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (241).

Within the revolution, Celia has a purpose. She feels empowered and useful. Already during the first days of the revolution, Celia views her future differently. She writes, in her last letter to Gustavo, on her fiftieth birthday: "the revolution is eleven days old. [. . .] I will no longer write to you, *mi amor*" (245). The revolution for her is a type of rebirth. Instead of fantasizing about what her life could have been had she married her ex-lover and gone to Spain with him, she now imagines being seduced by *El Líder*, defends the merits of the revolution, and fights for its causes. "She had fallen in love again. She thought only of the revolution" (194). But her sense of empowerment only goes so far. While she values her impact on the community in her role as protector of the coast and civilian judge, she also ponders why she cannot help her family in the same way. She questions: "how is it possible that she can help her neighbors and be of no use at all to her children?" (117).<sup>2</sup> Strikingly, Celia's ardent resolve to support the

---

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that the paradigm of revolutionary fervor, Celia, commits suicide at the end of the novel. However, Celia dies from a broken heart caused by her family, not the Revolution. Her daughter, Felicia, the only daughter she had a real relationship with, dies. Her revolutionary son, Javier, returns from Czechoslovakia broken hearted and goes off into the mountains to die. And her granddaughter, Pilar, who she thought she had a true connection with, ultimately betrays her by not fully embracing the revolution as she herself does. In the end, it is her family that breaks her heart and opens the door to her apparent suicide. As she laments in the last days before her death: "we have no loyalty to our origins. [. . .] Families used to stay in one village reliving the same disillusion. They buried their dead side by side" (240). This is certainly not the case for Celia. Instead, she "steps into the ocean and imagines she's a soldier on a mission—for the moon, or the palms, or *El Líder*. The water rises quickly around her. It submerges her throat and her nose,

revolution is a perspective that is not often seen in monologic texts written by Cuban-American exiles. Instead of bemoaning how the island has changed under socialism, she celebrates the advancements the revolution has imposed on the island: “no one is starving or denied medical care, no one sleeps in the streets, everyone works who wants to work” (117).<sup>3</sup> As García herself articulates, Celia has a “militancy and singlemindedness” about her “especially when it came to her system and her way of life” (Vorda 72). She is resolute. She is a staunch, unwavering revolutionary.

In stark contrast to Celia, her daughter Lourdes does not speak out against the opulence of the Batista regime nor does she support the revolutionary efforts. In the 1950s, when Celia is harshly criticizing the corrupt state of affairs in Cuba, Lourdes marries Rufino Puente, a man from “one of the wealthiest families in Havana” (205), in a fancy wedding held at the Tropicana Club (more on the Tropicana Club in the section of

---

her open eyes that do not perceive salt. Her hair floats loosely from her skull and waves above her in the tide. She breathes through her skin, she breathes through her wounds” (243). In this way, Celia commits suicide in the space between Cuba and the United States, between socialism and capitalism.

<sup>3</sup> Importantly, Celia’s opinions about how life in Cuba has improved since the revolution are not unique to her. Herminia Delgado, Felicia’s best friend and daughter of a well-known high priest of *santería*, also expresses appreciation for the advancements made under the now social order. She claims: “For many years in Cuba, nobody spoke of the problem between blacks and whites. It was considered too disagreeable to discuss. But my father spoke to me clearly so I would understand what happened to his father and his uncles [. . .]. Things have gotten better under the revolution [. . .]. In the old days, when voting time came, the politicians would tell us we were all the same, one happy family. Every day, though, it was another story. The whiter you were, the better off you were. Anybody could see that. There’s more respect these days” (184-85). Once again, García includes a perspective about the revolution that many Cuban-American authors were either unwilling or unable to offer. In doing so, García creates a rich, dialogic text that confronts the nostalgic paradigm in Cuban-American politics of memory.

this chapter devoted to Alina Troyano) and attended by “hundreds of society people” (208).<sup>4</sup> By marrying into the Puente family, Lourdes suddenly commands greater respect in society and socializes with Havana’s elite, “men in white tuxedos” and “women encased in [. . .] strapless gowns, rubies fastened to their ears” (225). However, Lourdes was not a traditional upper-class woman. While “Cuban women of a certain age and a certain class consider[ed] working outside the home to be beneath them,” Lourdes “never believed that” (130). Immediately following her honeymoon at the exclusive *Hotel Internacional*, Lourdes began working at the Puente ranch. “She reviewed the ledgers, fired the cheating accountant, and took over the books herself” (130). She also took to redecorating the Puente country house, getting rid of the “ornate bric-a-brac” and the “austere furniture carved with the family crest” (130), because she didn’t feel the need to surround herself with reminders of her newly acquired social status. While “she had grown accustomed to the privileges that came with marrying into the Puente family, [she . . .] never accepted the life designated for its women” (130). Much like Celia, Lourdes had a different vision of what she wanted for herself, but unlike Celia, she did not necessarily see the revolution as the path to achieve her goals.

---

<sup>4</sup> Rufino’s father, Don Guillermo Puente, ran a casino in Havana, lunched with Batista every Thursday at the Havana Yacht Club, owned one of the largest ranches on the island, and spoke about “the importance of maintaining good relations with the Americans” because he believed that they were the key to the future of the country (29, 207). The fictional description of the Puente family offered in the novel echoes the descriptions both Eire and Pérez Firmat narrate in their autobiographies. These were examples of stereotypical upper class families that lost everything with the onset of the revolution, suffered greatly in exile, and became staunch anti-Castro, anti-communist Cuban-Americans.

In fact, for Lourdes, the onset of the revolution was catastrophic. She associates Castro's victory in Cuba with two traumatic events that permanently scar her body and soul: the loss of an unborn male child in the early days of the revolution and, a short time later, her rape by two revolutionary soldiers. Her miscarriage occurs at the Puente villa immediately after standing, like a human shield, between her husband and two young soldiers "pointing their rifles at Rufino" (70). The ferocious way in which Lourdes yells and defends her husband startles the soldiers. They "lowered their guns and backed toward their Jeep" (70). Once the soldiers took leave, "Lourdes felt the clot dislodge and liquefy beneath her breasts, float through her belly, and slide down her thighs. There was a pool of dark blood at her feet" (70). Unfortunately, Lourdes's tragic miscarriage is compounded a short while later when these same soldiers arrive to confiscate the Puente *finca* in the name of the new revolutionary government. What ensues is a symbolic, physical representation of Castro's land reform in the early years of the revolution. Here again, Lourdes defiantly stands up to the soldiers, however, this time the soldiers do not cower and leave. Instead, they violently rape her at knife point and then carve an indecipherable inscription into her belly, leaving "a primeval scraping. Crimson hieroglyphics" (72). This illegible scar forever "reminds her of that dreadful day and about her hatred of the Cuban system after the revolution" (Vorda 69). With these two events, the revolution marks Lourdes in a painful, permanent way. She has a triple physical and emotional scar: a miscarriage, a rape, and a disfigurement.

Given the fact that her traumas are directly tied to the political violence that occurred with the onset of the revolution and its new social order, Cuba does not offer any possibilities of redemption for Lourdes. The revolution itself, which provides such optimism and hope for Celia, is a constant reminder of pain and loss for Lourdes. In the months following these two events, the Puente family emigrates to the United States. Once in Miami, Lourdes tells Rufino that she wants “to go where it’s cold” (69), finally settling on New York because it was “cold enough” (70). In stark contrast to Cuba’s tropical climate, the frigid temperatures in New York afford Lourdes an opportunity to break with her past as she attempts to heal and reinvent herself:

Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention. Lourdes relishes winter most of all—the cold scraping sounds on sidewalks and windshields, the ritual of scarves and gloves, hats and zip-in coat linings. *Its layers protect her. She wants no part of Cuba*, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her. (73, emphasis added)

As critic Fatima Mujčinovic notes, Lourdes moves towards the cold in a symbolic act that serves “as an anesthetic that helps deaden the past, freeze emotions, and reduce the intensity of pain” (177). The cold and the layers that she must wear in order to protect herself from the cold allow Lourdes to hide her raw emotional and physical pain. They also serve to help cleanse her from her past: “She breathes in the wintry air, which stings her lungs. It seems to her as if the air were made of crystal filaments, scraping and cleaning her inside” (García 128-29). Lourdes wants to disassociate herself from Cuba

because the island itself “is mined with sad memories” (24). In her attempt to break free from the burdens of her past, Lourdes confidently asserts that Cuba “never possessed her” (73).

The choice of diction, “possess,” is significant because it reveals how Lourdes attempts to regain control of her life by firmly denying that the past wields any power over her. According to Lourdes, her past in Cuba, her miscarriage and rape, do not own her. If the rape can be defined as a patriarchal violence against Lourdes that she associates with the revolution because it is enacted by revolutionary soldiers as they try to confiscate the Puente farm, then Lourdes, in a text dominated by women, fights against such male dominance—and thus fights against the new social order of the revolution—by denying that the rape defines or holds power over her. She affirms that “she wants no part of Cuba” (73). She does not want the memories that it contains, nor the life it represented for her. Cuba is not simply an idealized place that Lourdes leaves behind. Instead, it is the locus of trauma, which Cathy Caruth defines as an “event [that] is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). Thus, while Lourdes claims that Cuba does not possess her, the traumatic events she endured there certainly do. For instance, when she first arrives in New York, she returns to the scene of the rape in her dreams: “She tossed and turned all night, as if she were wrestling ghosts in her dreams. Sometimes she’d wake

up crying, clutching her stomach and moaning from deep inside a place I [Pilar] couldn't understand" (García 221).

Importantly, these traumatic associations prevent Lourdes from engaging in the stereotypical nostalgic longing many upper-class exiles experienced when living in the United States. Just consider, for instance, the longing expressed by Carlos Eire or Gustavo Pérez Firmat. They perpetually imagined what their lives would have been like in Cuba and desperately wished they could return. Similarly, Lourdes's husband Rufino never adapts to life in the United States because "[t]here was a part of him that could never leave the *finca* or the comfort of its cycles" (129). Or finally, recall how, upon arrival in the United States, her female in-laws obsessively worry and complain about their loss of wealth and status (69, 130). In contrast to these reactions, Lourdes almost immediately adapts to life in exile. Instead of dwelling on the things she cannot change—the loss of status and wealth, the reality of the revolution in Cuba, her miscarriage, rape and disfigurement—she throws herself into her new life and embarks upon a successful career as proprietor of the Yankee Doodle Bakery. For Lourdes, the United States is the ideal, cold, sterile place where she can heal and reinvent herself, where she can dictate the course of her life through her obsessive weight gain and loss, through her sexual insatiability with her exhausted husband, through her entrepreneurial instincts. Lourdes tries everything in her quest to regain control over her life and the body that the revolution left damaged and disfigured. In this process,

Lourdes demonstrates a firm belief in capitalism, a strong work ethic, and a resolve to succeed no matter what the challenges.

In her adopted homeland, Lourdes becomes the supreme example of capitalistic success and a vocal opponent to Communism and leftist political beliefs—in this she is similar to conventional Cuban-American exiles, but with the fundamental difference that she never engages in a nostalgic politics of memory. She explicitly lays claim to being an immigrant, “immigration has redefined her” (73), not exile. This is significant because exile is precisely what triggers the type of nostalgic longing that Boym defines as “restorative nostalgia,” which “puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” (*Future* 41). The restorative nostalgic, as seen in Pérez Firmat’s and Eire’s memoirs wants to “return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment” (*Future* 49). For these authors, their Cuban past is of utmost importance and always appears pristine, with no signs of decay or deterioration. In contrast, Lourdes’s past is rife with wounds that she cannot master and that she refuses to discuss (García 138). Immigration makes Lourdes look toward the future instead of clinging to the past. This is why she partakes in everything that is diametrically opposed to life in Cuba. She pointedly sends pictures of the pastries that she sells in her bakery in Brooklyn to Celia in Cuba: “each glistening éclair is a grenade aimed at Celia’s political beliefs, each strawberry shortcake proof—in butter, cream, and eggs—of Lourdes’s success in America, and a reminder of the ongoing shortages in Cuba” (117). She even

opens a second bakery because “she’s convinced she can fight Communism from behind her bakery counter” (136).

Unlike the Puente women who spend their days in the United States clinging “to their rituals as they did their engraved silverware, succumbing to a cloying nostalgia” (130), Lourdes views her capitalist endeavor as the ultimate affront to the political situation in Cuba. She does not embrace nostalgia or fondly reminisce about what was taken from her. “She could never be this kind of woman” (130). Instead of longing for the past, she fights for her present, by engaging in a series of politically committed actions. She “denounce[s] the Communist threat to America” (171) and foments “her own brand of anarchy” by allowing her bakeries to be “gathering places for [. . .] Cuban extremists who come all the way from New Jersey and the Bronx to talk their [. . .] politics and drink her killer espressos” (177). Finally, Lourdes also attempts to fight communism by volunteering for the New York auxiliary police force. Every Tuesday and Thursday evenings for a few hours, Lourdes patrols a five-block square of Brooklyn. Reminiscent of Celia’s position as a sentinel protecting the coast of Cuba from invasion, Lourdes patrols the neighborhood. While Celia patrols to protect Cuba from another U.S. invasion, Lourdes patrols “to be ready to fight the Communists” (132) when the time comes. Lourdes’s disdain for the Cuban political system can even be heard in how she pronounces the word: “[Lourdes] says ‘Communism’ the way some people say

'cancer,' low and fierce" (26). She views it as a vile disease that must be eradicated from society.

While the most virulent anti-communist and anti-Castro exiles such as Lourdes normally refuse to visit Cuba while Castro remains in power, Lourdes actually travels back to Cuba with her daughter, Pilar, in 1980. Prompted both by her daughter's insistence that they visit Celia and a telepathic conversation with her deceased father, Lourdes decides to face her traumatic history in Cuba. As soon as she contemplates the trip, she does not nostalgically recall the beauty of Cuba, nor does she long for her lost wealth, social status, or *finca*. She does not partake in "restorative nostalgia" at all. Instead, she travels back to the scene of her rape through her senses: "[she] smells the brilliantined hair, feels the scraping blade, the web of scars it left on her stomach" (196). Contemplating her return, "she breathes deeply, until the air courses through her chest without effort" (196). Whereas before the harsh, cold air of New York winters scraped and cleansed her lungs, now the air makes its way into her chest, without effort. She can finally embark upon a return trip and face the past.

Importantly, for Lourdes, the trip "back to that island-prison" (173) becomes yet another opportunity to stake her political claims against the revolution and its social order. She spends her six days in Cuba remarking on the decay in the city's infrastructure and the lack of consumer goods and food. She comments on how "the buildings in Havana are completely decayed, held up by elaborate configurations of

wooden planks" (216) and how the "old American cars [. . . are] held together with rubber bands and paper clips and *still* work better than the new Russian ones" (221). "She argues with [. . .] neighbors, picks fights with waiters, berates the man who sells ice cones on the beach. She asks everyone how much they earn, and no matter what they tell her, she says, 'You can make ten times as much in Miami!'" (234). Lourdes also critiques how the revolution seemingly indoctrinates the Cuban people, asserting that "their heads are filled with too much *compañero* this and *compañera* that! They're brainwashed, that's what they are!" (221). She later adds:

Every way Lourdes turns there is more destruction, more decay. *Socialismo o muerte*. The words pain her as if they were knitted into her skin with thick needles and yarn. She wants to change the 'o' to 'e's on every billboard with a bucket of red paint. *Socialismo es muerte*, she'd write over and over again until the people believed it, until they rose up and reclaimed their country from that tyrant. (222-23)

Lourdes sees no redeeming qualities in the state of affairs in Cuba. Because she "has no patience for dreamers, for people who live between black and white" (129), Lourdes can only see Cuba in negative terms. As she witnesses the decay in Havana, Lourdes thinks: "It's impossible [. . .] for failure to argue with success" (225). She sees failure all around her in Cuba and she feels success in the United States. It is important to note, however, as Pilar astutely asserts, that Lourdes "filters other people's lives through her distorting lens. [. . .] It makes her see only what she wants to see instead of what's really there" (176). Because she believes the climate in Cuba immediately following the revolution lead to her triple physical and emotional scars, for her, socialism is death, literally

represented in the death of her unborn child and of her dreams for his future. Thus, she urges her compatriots to no longer be brainwashed, to no longer passively accept what the revolution has to offer and instead rise up against the social order. Lourdes is, through and through, an anti-Communist, the polar opposite of her mother, Celia.

Between the staunch revolutionary and the diehard anti-revolutionary, the reader finds the characters of Felicia and Pilar. A tragic figure in many ways, Felicia offers the reader a different perspective on life in revolutionary Cuba. Neither a true believer nor a complete anti-revolutionary, Felicia lives out her life in Cuba, practices *Santería*, has a series of romantic misfortunes, gives birth to three children (Luz, Milagro and Ivanito), slowly loses her sanity, and dies. Felicia does not completely dismiss the new social order, however she is against its militancy and constant propaganda. "To Felicia, El Líder is just a common tyrant. No better, no worse than any other in the world" (110). In Cuba, she sees "a country living on slogans and agitation, a people always on the brink of war. She scorns the militant words blaring on billboards everywhere. [. . .] It goes on and on, numbing her, undermining her willingness to fight for the future, hers or anybody else's" (107-08). For Felicia, words are simply that, words. They hold no promise and offer no optimism for the future because "imagination, like memory, can transform lies to truths" (88).

The other character that navigates the stark divide between ardent support and complete disdain for the revolution, between socialism and capitalism, is Pilar Puente,

Lourdes's daughter and Celia's granddaughter. Pilar is a child of punk, a painter with a unique perspective on life. She expresses anti-Vietnam sentiments, critiques U.S. imperialism, and sympathizes with socialism, even going so far as to buy "a book of essays on Cuba called *A Revolutionary Society*" (132) as a Christmas gift for her mother. "Most days Cuba is kind of dead" (137) to her, but she is not happy about this reality. At twenty-one, she is already nostalgic for her youth (198). Instead of well-defined memories about her childhood, she suffers from an exilic amnesia. She declares: "Every day Cuba fades a little more inside of me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be" (138). Faced with the reality of forgetting and uncertain what she "should be fighting for anymore" (198), Pilar comes to the conclusion that she must travel back to Cuba, the "island colony" (219) she left when she was only two years old.<sup>5</sup>

In Cuba, Pilar sees things very differently than Lourdes. While her mother used the visit to further entrench her anti-socialist ideology, Pilar's interpretation of the social reality in Cuba is much more nuanced. On the one hand, she speaks negatively about the revolution. She emphasizes how she "resent[s] the hell out of the politicians and the

---

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Pilar makes the decision to travel back to Cuba after a visit to a local *botánica* on Park Avenue. It was a place Pilar had passed by numerous times, but that drew her in on that particular day. It was as if there was "nowhere else" for her to go (199). After bathing for nine consecutive days with herbs from the *botánica*, Pilar suddenly knows that she needs to travel to Cuba. The fact that Pilar makes this decision after visiting a *botánica* once again parallels her actions with those of Felicia who practices *Santería*. These two characters highlight the in-between space (between socialism and capitalism, between Cuba and the United States, between pro and anti-revolutionary positions) rarely explored in Cuban-American texts.

generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we'll have when we're old" (138) and "who had nothing to do with [. . . her, and yet] had the power to rupture" her dreams (199-200). She also expresses frustration, echoing Felicia, at the "billboards advertising the revolution as if it were a brand of cigarette" (215). The idea of the revolution as a consumer product bothers Pilar because it diminishes the notion of a socialist revolution when the very idea of the revolution is presented as a commodity. On the other hand, Pilar also expresses admiration for Cuba and the accomplishments of the revolution. She acknowledges the hardships that the Cuban people endure, but she also appreciates that everyone has their basic needs covered. As she asserts: "I have to admit it's much tougher here than I expected, but at least everyone seems to have the bare necessities" (234-35). She also notes that even though it has its flaws, she loves Havana and has been profoundly affected by her visit: "I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. There's a magic here working its way through my veins. There's something about the vegetation, too, that I respond to instinctively [. . .] I love Havana, its noise and decay" (235). She sees the rubbish and decay of the island, but she can also see the beauty of nature and love the hustle and bustle of the city. In the end, Pilar recognizes that she neither belongs fully in Havana nor in New York. As she affirms: "sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now that it's where I belong—not *instead* of here, but *more* than here" (236). Pilar does not view Cuba like her mother does—as an

“island prison” —but rather sees the potential in Cuba. She becomes precisely one of the very people Lourdes has no tolerance for: those that live between black and white. She does not accept Celia’s socialist militancy nor Lourdes’s capitalist fervor. Both are monologic perspectives that she rejects as inadequate options for herself. She ultimately chooses her own path and determines what is right for her — something between Cuba and the United States, between her left-leaning tendencies and the capitalism so rampant in the United States. That is why she permits herself to help her cousin Ivanito escape as part of the *Marielito* boatlift. She believes in the socialist cause, but does not fully embrace the current state of affairs in Cuba. She deftly navigates the divergent ideological stances, accepting the legitimacy of both positions without fully embracing or denying either.

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, García presents different positions related to Cuban-American politics of memory that cannot simply be “characterized in the official polarization that exists in the Cuban context” (Kevane 76). While the novel is not a complete break from the standard nostalgic paradigm, it certainly highlights the possibilities of such a break in that it undermines some of the paradigm’s assumptions. It shows the reader that the revolution is not simply a catastrophic event that prompts Cuban-Americans to imagine, reconfigure, and reaffirm their *Cubanidad* in a nostalgic way. It also is an event that is valued by Celia and, to a certain extent, Pilar. Furthermore, the traumatic associations that the revolution evokes in Lourdes do not

allow for a nostalgic reconstruction of her past. García's ability to incorporate all of these differing perspectives on the revolution certainly deviates from the standard, dominant ideology of the diasporic community and allows for a complex, rich, nuanced version of the past. One that not only acknowledges the revolution, but that grapples with the consequences of it, both positive and negative. Unlike Eire and Pérez Firmat, who wax nostalgically about pre-revolutionary Cuba, Lourdes faces the trauma caused by the revolution in her personal life head on. And unlike Juani Casas, whose sees Cuba as a possible resolution to her dilemma, Pilar actually makes the trip back to realize that Cuba is not a simple answer to her questions. García's "metafictional use of multiple narrators and perspectives creates a community of divergent political views" (Payant 165). She ultimately works on and against the dominant ideologies about the revolution and thus transforms the diasporic community from within. As Celia understands it, the future is dependent upon "a spirit of generosity. Commitments without strings" (García 115), but the question remains: how does one achieve this? The novel does not really provide an answer. However, it does hint at a politics of the future through the character of Pilar Puente, who is the bridge that allows for a connection between life in the United States and her family in Cuba, her cousins Luz and Milagro, the symbolic "light" and "miracle" of life in Cuba. Pilar opens the doors to a dialogue that takes into account the revolutionary past, avoiding the risk of "falling into an emptiness without history or

future” (187). The points of tension exemplified by Pilar Puente in *Dreaming in Cuban* will be radicalized in Alina Troyano’s performance pieces.

### ***Lesbian Camp Memory Practices***

With Alina Troyano’s body of work, the dominant politics of Cuban-American memory reaches a point of no return, one in which its foundations are put into an irreversible state of crisis. For one thing, Troyano’s outrageous and unsettling routines enact a kind of subjectivity — that of a Cuban-American queer feminist performer — that is at odds with the institutions of family and heterosexuality that marked the narratives of Eire and Pérez-Firmat and, to a lesser extent, that of García. In this respect, Troyano’s performance pieces offer the clearest example of a subversion of the nostalgic pathos that has pervaded much of Cuban-American writing about the island’s past. In order to better understand Troyano’s singular engagement with Cuba’s past, it is necessary to contextualize her work in the vibrant, transgressive cultural scene of 1980s’ New York City. Like the other authors examined in this dissertation, Troyano was born in Havana shortly before the triumph of the Revolution. Also like them, she emigrated to the United States at a young age, in the early 1960s, and found it difficult to integrate within U.S. culture. As she recalls half-seriously half-jokingly in her partly autobiographical piece *Milk of Amnesia*, “I was born on an island. I came here when I was seven. I didn’t like it here at first. Everything was so different. I had to change. Acquire a taste for peanut butter and jelly. It was hard. I liked tuna fish and jelly” (*I, Carmelita* 52). Another

element of her personal history that made it more difficult to negotiate a smooth transition into U.S. culture is the little-known fact that her father was a *comandante* in Castro's revolutionary army who later defected (Hughes, Tropicana, and Dolan 149). This close relationship to the Cuban Revolution, however, did not have a straightforward effect on Troyano's work, where both Cuba and the Revolution figure prominently but often in a distorted, displaced, and oblique manner. The reason for this displacement has to do, at least in part, with the distance, ideological and otherwise, that separates Miami from New York City.

One of the powerful elements of Troyano's biography that sets her apart from other Cuban-American artists is that she traded the Miami Cuban community for the East Village performance scene in the early 1980s. Getting to know the women at New York's Women's One World (WOW) Café Theater, a lesbian performance space, and starting to act onstage with them, proved to be a foundational experience for Troyano. "I went to WOW looking for girls and found something more long-lasting: theatre," she confessed in an interview (Román 84). It is at WOW Café, which has recently been described as an "outré, politically incorrect pocket of feminist and lesbian resistance" (Hughes, Tropicana, and Dolan vii), that Alina Troyano created her alter ego and most famous character, Carmelita Tropicana. "It was at WOW," she recalls, "that I'd found my voice and my tribe. If there hadn't been a WOW Café, I probably would not have become a performer or writer" (9). Rather than taking sides in the highly polarized

politics of the Cuban-American community in Miami, Troyano was busy experimenting with the creative and political potential that she found at WOW Café, “a place that provided a family to those whose families were far away or had disowned them” (9).

As a character that came to life at WOW Café in the early 1980s, Carmelita Tropicana anticipates Troyano’s complex relationship to Cuba’s past and sets her work apart from that of the other authors examined in this dissertation. To be sure, the character’s name is a call to prerevolutionary Cuba, where the Tropicana was a well-known nightclub, famous as a hotspot for rich American tourists, Hollywood stars (Marlon Brando, Elizabeth Taylor, and Joan Crawford) and expat writers enamored with the island (Ernest Hemingway and Graham Greene). According to a recent description, the Tropicana in the 1950s was “Havana’s glitziest cabaret,” a place where “tuxedoed guests were entertained by Nat King Cole and Carmen Miranda” and where high rollers “were flown in on a nightly chartered flight from Miami called the ‘Tropicana Special’ and won or lost fortunes at the roulette tables” (Estrada 205, 206). The name Troyano chooses for herself, Tropicana, thus connotes white upper-class privilege and a heterosexual spectacle for the benefit of U.S. audiences—so much so that in 1954 “NBC broadcast live from the stage of the Tropicana for its show *Wide, Wide World*” (Estrada 207). But what Troyano does with the character of Carmelita Tropicana is play with and subvert these stereotypes, appropriating them for other ends. Thus, rather than female exploitation, Carmelita Tropicana connotes female spectacle and empowerment because

she “plays with the stereotype of Latinas [. . . but] goes beyond it” in that “she’s the agent of her own story” and is not “linked with heterosexual romance” because she is a lesbian (Román 87). The glitzy, glamorous forms of the Tropicana cabaret survive in Carmelita Tropicana, but its content has been profoundly altered, if not reversed. In this sense, Carmelita Tropicana is a Camp character—for as Susan Sontag observed many years ago, “Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content” (3). Although Troyano clearly deviates from standard representations of Cuban-American personalities, what she has in common with the other Cuban-American authors analyzed in this dissertation is the urgent need to engage Cuba’s prerevolutionary and revolutionary pasts, which figure prominently in two of her most important performance pieces, *Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution* (1987) and *Milk of Amnesia/Leche de Amnesia* (1994). Importantly, while Troyano does engage these pasts, she does so in a mocking, playful, irreverent tone, which already suggests that the Cuban past is put to a number of uses that are opposed to, and subversive of, the elegiac pathos pervading the narratives of authors such as Pérez-Firmat and Eire.

In *Memorias de la Revolución*, a play that transforms a political revolution (the Cuban Revolution) into the characters’ sexual/aesthetic revolution, Troyano resignifies

several powerful fragments of Cuba's past in an ironic, excessive vein.<sup>6</sup> Chon Noriega has observed that *Memorias de la Revolución* "reworks two Cuban nationalist allegories in order to situate Carmelita at their center" (x). According to him, these "nationalist allegories" are the legend of la Virgen del Cobre and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film *Memories of Underdevelopment*, which is referenced in the play's title (x-xi). Expanding upon Noriega's observation, and steering away from his rather loose use of the term allegory, I would like to propose that there are other relevant aspects of Cuba's past that are engaged in the play. Consider, for instance, the fight against Fulgencio Batista's repressive regime, which is incarnated in the play in Capitán Maldito, "Havana's chief of police and most feared man in all of Cuba" (*I, Carmelita* 11). By reducing Batista's dictatorship to the evil actions of Capitán Maldito, a comic name in Spanish that suggests melodramatic excess, comic books, and childhood play (it roughly translates as "Captain Wicked"), Troyano not only distances herself from any solemn treatment of Batista's dictatorship, but also de-politicizes the Cuban people's fight against the regimes most egregious aspects. For instance, in the play's first act set in Havana in 1955, the protagonist, Carmelita Tropicana and her brother, Machito, attempt to assassinate Capitán Maldito not in the name of revolutionary ideals but rather out of personal revenge (we learn that Capitán Maldito had disappeared and possibly tortured their

---

<sup>6</sup> *Memorias de la Revolución* was first presented as a work in progress at WOW in 1986. In 1987 it was presented at Performance Space 122 with only one cast change: Annie Iobst replaced Holly Hughes in the roles of Brenda/Tropicana (*I, Carmelita* 1). The play, which was written by Alina Troyano and Uzi Parnes, was directed by the latter.

father [14]). The assassination plot fails and the character of Capitán Maldito resurfaces in the third and last act, which is set in New York City in 1967. There Capitán Maldito works as a janitor at a local high school, crosses paths with Carmelita again, and tries to arrest her in the hope that this action will allow him to work for the C.I.A.-led Cuban counterinsurgency. However, when he tries to arrest Carmelita, she sings an incantation, sprinkles glitter on Maldito, and . . . transforms him into a chicken (49-51)! As a symbol of Batista's dictatorship, Maldito is reduced in the closing words of the play to a harmless, laughable character, one whose derision allows Carmelita to accomplish two things. On the one hand, it helps her to embellish her memories of Cuba: "Seeing Maldito today brings such sad memories, but now that he is a chicken, the good memories come back of the place we come from and never can forget. Because where you are born, that place you carry in your heart" (51). On the other hand, it helps her to foster her own particular brand of revolution, which is encapsulated in the twin slogans that make up the closing words of the play: "Let us always remember que la lucha continúa and art is our weapon" (51). The point here is that Troyano grounds her politics in the aesthetic ("art is our weapon") while reducing the conventionally ideological politics of the Cuban revolution to a vague will to struggle ("la lucha continúa").

The second fragment of Cuba's national past transformed in *Memorias de la Revolución* is, as Noriega and others have pointed out, the legend of "*Nuestra Señora de la*

*Caridad del Cobre*" (Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre), which is revisited in Act II.<sup>7</sup>

According to this seventeenth-century legend, the Virgin Mary rescued three Cuban fishermen (two Native Americans and one African slave) lost at sea in the middle of a storm in the waters of Nipe Bay, a miracle that sparked a popular, syncretic cult that blends religious motifs (Catholic devotion and elements of *santería*) with myths of national integration (the Virgin of Cobre is Cuba's patron saint). In Troyano's play, the Virgin of Cobre also makes a decisive apparition, but instead of rescuing three fishermen of different racial origins, she rescues three women who are escaping to the United States in a row boat and who seem entangled in a lesbian relationship: Carmelita and her cohorts Lota (a professional German spy and the granddaughter of Mata Hari) and Marimacha (a character who helps Machito in the failed assassination of Capitán Maldito and whose name literally means "butch" in Spanish). As could be expected, the words and actions of the Virgin Mary do not perform a myth of national integration in the play but rather reveal the importance of sexual/aesthetic revolution to Carmelita: "Cuba will no longer be your home. Her revolution will not be your revolution. Yours will be an international cultural revolution," solemnly declares the Virgin (37). And she adds: "Oh, the revolution. Let it be your art. Your art is your weapon. To give dignity to Latin and Third World Women: this is your struggle" (38).

---

<sup>7</sup> My account about the origins of the legend is based on Portuondo Zúñiga.

The third element of Cuba's past that is re-signified in Troyano's play concerns the title of the play itself, *Memorias de la Revolución*, which, as we have noted above, pays homage to Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's classic 1968 film *Memorias del subdesarrollo*. But in contrast to Gutiérrez Alea's film, which explores the predicaments of a bourgeois intellectual in post-revolutionary Cuba, Troyano's extravagant play is the antipode of the seriousness and moralism characteristic of the elitist world of intellectuals. Thus, when Carmelita declares "I, Carmelita Tropicana, in the name of all here at Tropicana-A-Go-Go, j'accuse Maldito" (48), she is certainly recalling the famous intervention of Émile Zola (1840-1902) in the Dreyfus Affair. But she is doing it in a playful, irreverent, detached manner that only underlines her distance from the tragic dignity associated with Zola, arguably the first French modern intellectual.<sup>8</sup>

Another of Troyano's pieces that engages Cuba's past is *Milk of Amnesia*, a piece with strong autobiographical elements given that it is based on Alina Troyano's 1993 trip to Cuba.<sup>9</sup> More restrained and balanced in tone than *Memorias de la Revolución*, this piece makes memory—or rather, its opposite, amnesia—its central theme. This work

---

<sup>8</sup> Captain Alfred Dreyfus, an officer of Jewish origin in the French army, was suspected of selling military secrets to the German army. Although there was no proof against him, he was convicted of treason and sent into exile. In 1898, Zola published in the daily *L'Aurore* "J'Accuse . . . !," an open letter to the President of the Republic in which he denounced the wrongful conviction of Captain Dreyfus and the prevailing antisemitism in the French army.

<sup>9</sup> "Milk of Amnesia/Leche de Amnesia was commissioned by Performance Space 122 with funds from the Joyce Mertz Gilmore Foundation, and is based on Carmelita Tropicana's 1993 trip to Cuba sponsored by the Suitcase Fund: A Project of Ideas and Means in Cross-cultural Artist Relations, an initiative created by Dance Theatre Workshop, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation" (*I, Carmelita* 52).

tells the story of two amnesiac characters who struggle to get their memories back: Carmelita Tropicana and the Writer, whose more serious voice compensates for Carmelita's wild, extravagant voice. Whereas Carmelita Tropicana is Troyano's flamboyant alter-ego, the Writer is her serious, autobiographical persona. In the play, each character occupies a distinct performance space, the Writer occupying an intimate, dimly lit area on the stage, and Carmelita occupying the other half of the stage, which is painted white and is brightly lit. What the two characters have in common is that they are afflicted by amnesia. But whereas the Writer, who came to the U.S. from Cuba when she was seven—like Alina Troyano herself—, loses her memory as she struggles to integrate into U.S. culture (53), Carmelita loses hers in a "terrible accident" in which she injures her head as she is "chocolate-pudding wrestling" (58). At the end of the play, both characters recover their memories when they travel to Havana during the so-called Special Period of the 1990s, an age of economic hardships and severe shortages ushered in by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the continuation of the U.S. embargo. Thus, while in this play Troyano primarily resignifies a more recent fragment of Cuba's past (the Special Period of the 1990s), she also makes a passing reference to Spain's colonization of Cuba in the sixteenth century, which is seen through the eyes of a horse called "Arriero" ("I saw so many Indians die, so many. So many dead Indians from

disease and overwork" (63), laments the horse in a dialogue he maintains with Carmelita in Havana).<sup>10</sup>

As we have seen, Cuba's recent and distant pasts figure prominently in *Memorias de la Revolución* and in *Milk of Amnesia*. From Fulgencio Batista's repressive regime (1952-1959) and a seventeenth-century religious legend to a famous 1968 high-brow movie, the economic crisis of the 1990s, and Spain's conquest and colonization of the island, the images of the Cuban past conjured up by Alina Troyano seem to have no end and no order. Reading about the past in her works is like going through a pile of junk in an old attic. One can find just about anything and everything. But above and beyond this apparent chaos, one can also discern a pattern, a law that regulates these seemingly aleatory memories. This leads us to the following two questions: How can one describe the type of memory practices Alina Troyano engages in her works? And, more importantly, in what sense, and to what extent, can these memory practices be said to be counter-nostalgic?

In order to provide a preliminary answer to these questions, it is important to note the basic aesthetic tenets of Alina Troyano's work. Troyano herself has noted that *Carmelita Tropicana* engages in "campy satire" (xxii). José Muñoz's path-breaking reading of Troyano's performance pieces has developed this theme, noting that they

---

<sup>10</sup> The presence of animal characters in Troyano's work dates back to the 1998 performance piece she wrote with Uzi Parnes *The Conquest of Mexico as Seen through the Eyes of Hernán Cortés's Horse*. For an excerpt of this piece, see Troyano 173-76.

deploy “camp and *choteo* [a specifically Cuban form of mockery]” as “disidentificatory practices” (119) that work within and against a dominant culture that is heterosexual, patriarchal, white, and nationalistic. The result is that

the piece of (cultural) work that is *Carmelita* . . . [is an instance] in which dominant culture is mimicked, mocked, and finally worked until its raw material can be recycled to ends that are female, Latina, and queer-affirmative. Popular forms are disidentified with, which means parodied with campy extravagance or heckled by this mode of dissidence for majoritarian culture. The spectator is left with a gaudy spectacle that affirms self-subjectivities that are both Latina and queer. (141)

Muñoz rightly emphasizes the subversive character of the subjectivity enacted by/in Troyano’s performance pieces, the way in which it defies established notions of race, sexuality, and class. This subversion is achieved, he goes on to argue, by deploying a specific style of performance that blends camp, a sensibility traditionally associated with the gay male subculture, and *choteo*, a distinctly Cuban use of humor that undermines all authority. In order to read *Carmelita Tropicana* through the lens of camp and *choteo*, Muñoz creatively appropriates both notions. First, he wrestles camp from gay male culture and makes it a mode of cross-cultural recycling associated with female and lesbian sensibilities (121-22). Second, he reconceives *choteo*, a term imported from African culture that is seen as an often pathological trait of Cuban national character, and aligns it with camp, making it “a style of colonial mimicry that is simultaneously a form of resemblance *and* menace” (136). From a theoretical point of view, I see what follows as complementary to Muñoz’s seminal proposal that camp and *choteo*, as

described above, are the two main styles of performance at work in Troyano's skits. But rather than focusing on the subjectivity enacted by Troyano, I would like to emphasize the discourse of memory that sustains the notion of subjectivity deployed in her work.

To be sure, subjectivity and memory are closely aligned. And yet, they are not identical concepts. As Radstone and Hodgkin point out, "historical studies of memory are intimately and indissociably linked to histories of subjectivity, and shed light on historical variations in conceptions of subjectivity and experience" (2). The conception of subjectivity that correlates to the nostalgic politics of Cuban-American memory is most clearly exemplified by Eire's and Pérez Firmat's autobiographies, which are stories of the development of "a coherent and bounded sovereign subject" (Radstone and Hodgkin 3). Their nostalgic memories of pre-revolutionary Havana, which are seen as an immediate and direct reflection of their unique and private experiences, are the seat of their anti-Castro subjectivity, which in turn determines what they remember. Read against the background of Eire's and Pérez Firmat's deployment of a stable, sovereign subject, Troyano's undermining of "notions of a fixed subjectivity" (Muñoz 139) raises an important question: What is the discourse of memory that sustains, and is sustained by, this unstable subjectivity?

My starting point is Muñoz's description of Carmelita Tropicana's subjectivity. "Her queer and *cubana* body is unstable and fragmented," he writes. He goes on to add: "it registers on its surface the intermingling of the identity bits that make up her

performance and persona, because she appears and participates in various forms of media (film, theater, more experimental performances) always within character, undermining notions of authenticity and realness in favor of queer self-making practices" (139). My goal in the closing pages of this dissertation is to outline what I should call Carmelita Tropicana's "lesbian camp memory practices." In other words, I would like to describe the discourse of memory that depends upon an unstable, fragmented, fabricated subjectivity such as the one deployed in Troyano's performance pieces—an aspect that remains underdeveloped in Muñoz's reading. My ultimate goal is to show how this discourse of memory undermines the nostalgic politics of memory prevalent among the Cuban-American diaspora.

The first thing to note about Carmelita Tropicana's memory practices is that they are regulated by a specific temporality, one that we could call "queer time" following Judith Halberstam. By this she means a model of temporality that corresponds to queer, non-normative experiences and ways of life and that develops "in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (1). More specifically, "'queer time' is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (6).

In what ways can Carmelita Tropicana be said to live outside bourgeois family time? The reconstructions—nostalgic or otherwise—of Cuba's past carried out by the

other narratives examined in this study take place within a basic familial frame. The subjectivities enacted within these narratives, from Eire's *Waiting for Snow in Havana* and Pérez Firmat's *Next Year in Cuba* to Obejas's *Memory Mambo* and García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, are in great part defined by their belonging to a family with a strong, intimate bond to *cubanidad*, one that was subsequently displaced, shattered, and destroyed by exile. In order to make this bond whole again, some of these characters engaged in nostalgic reconstructions of their past while others foregrounded a more critical view of it. Regardless, all of them could be said to keep what Halberstam calls "the time of inheritance," which refers to "an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next" (5). Interestingly, "the time of inheritance" also "connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability" (5). In short, this transmission of cultural meanings and values, which takes place within both a familial and a national frame, is central not only to the two autobiographies and two novels referenced above but also, and most importantly, to their characterization as nostalgic texts. For as Boym pointed out: "Nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (*Future* xvi).

That this "time of inheritance" is not at all kept by Carmelita Tropicana's performance work should already alert us to its singular place in the cultural field of

Cuban-American memory. Not only are (heterosexual) marriage, reproduction, and child rearing absent from her life, but even references to the protagonist's family are kept to a minimum in *Memorias de la Revolución* and *Milk of Amnesia*. It is true that Carmelita's father, who had been tortured by Capitán Maldito, provides the "revenge plot" that structures act I of *Memorias de la Revolución*. But this paternal mandate of revenge (and any sense of the familial/the national that goes with it) quickly vanishes from the other two acts, where Carmelita forms a new family in relation to homosexuality and artistic vocation, which are revealed to her by the Virgin in act II. There the Virgin of Cobre admonishes her to abandon the Cuban Revolution and to embrace, through art, the struggle of Latin and Third World women to recover their dignity (37-38). The familial mandate of revenge, which also has a clear national implication, is quickly superseded by the Virgin's injunction, which acquires a homosexual dimension when She tells Carmelita "Never let a man touch you" (38).

Much like Alina Troyano who thought of WOW Café as "a place that provided a family to those whose families were far away or had disowned them" (Hughes, Tropicana, and Dolan 9), her signature character Carmelita Tropicana creates a family for herself around homosexuality and art. Well before LGBTQ adoption was legal in the U.S. (the play was first presented as a work in progress in 1985), Carmelita's "queer time" allows her to explore and imagine a new family, one that does away with the heteronormativity of the Cuban nation. At the beginning of act III of *Memorias de la*

*Revolución* Pingalito Betancourt, a stereotypical Cuban macho also played by Troyano, informs us that Carmelita and her partner Lota Hari adopted “a little blond girl” who had lost her family in a car accident: “Lota and Carmelita adopted her and named her Carme Lota Nota Hari. Nota for short. Lota taught her spying, Carmelita singing. Let us welcome that little girl, who has blossomed into the folk singer of today, Lota Hari” (44).

Within this queer artistic family, conventional narratives about *cubanidad* can only be the object of parody because there is a radical disconnect between the familial and the national past. In *Memorias de la Revolución* and *Milk of Amnesia*, this parody is mainly carried out by Pingalito Betancourt, Troyano’s drag male persona. In both performance pieces Pingalito delivers hyperbolic monologues about *cubanidad* while adopting a macho posture that makes the reader aware of the ideologies of hyper-masculinity and heterosexism inherent in conventional Cuban nationalism. Pingalito, a bus conductor who wields an enormous Cuban cigar and scratches “his crotch while talking” (*I, Carmelita* 11), recites a number of “facts about Cuba” that read like a collection of national and sexual stereotypes that have little bearing on Carmelita Tropicana’s familial past. A brief mention to the first fact about Cuba glossed by Pingalito in *Memorias de la Revolución* will suffice to make the point. The first fact is that “Cuba is known as the pearl of the Antilles because of its natural wealth and beauty” (*I, Carmelita* 12). He then proceeds to enumerate some of the landmarks that make up “the most beautiful land that human eyes have seen,” namely “The beaches of Varadero, the

majestic mountains of La Sierra Maestra" (12). Thus far, Pingalito's monologue reads like a straightforward excerpt from a travel guide. But shortly thereafter he adds,

But, ladies and gentlemen, nothing can compare with the beauty of the human landscape. Oye, mi hermano, those chorus girls of Tropicana with the big breasts, thick legs. In Cuba we call girls *carros*, but I mean your big old American cars like Cadillac, no Nissan or Toyota. Like the Dancer Tongolele. I swear to you or my name is not Pingalito Betancourt. You could put a tray of daiquiris on Tongolele's behind and she could walk across the floor without spilling a single drop. That, ladies and gentlemen, is landscape. Give me a gun and I fight for that landscape.  
(12)

There is much to comment about this passage. First, the audience is immediately compelled to not take Pingalito's words at face value not only because the language is so exaggerated but also because the delivery is so incongruous (imagine a proud lesbian actress playing in drag a character who acts and talks like a Cuban macho).

Furthermore, the allusions to Cuba's "human landscape," to the "big breasts, thick legs" of the Tropicana dancers, and more generally the comparison of Cuban women's bodies with Cadillacs, all of these elements, deactivate any nostalgic meanings that could be attached to the Cuban landscape: the comparison is so overtly *machista* that the main effect is comic, not nostalgic. Finally, the *cubanidad* of the landscape in question is short-circuited by the comparison with Tongolele, the stage name of a U.S.-born performer (Yolanda Montes Farrington) who worked mainly for the Mexican entertainment industry in the 1940s and 1950s but who briefly performed at the Tropicana in 1951 (Lundhal). Pingalito's reference to Tongolele adds a number of transnational elements

that should have been left out for the nostalgic dimension of Cuban nationalism to produce its effects. In short, after this routine the reader/spectator is left with a comic parody of the conventional bourgeois narratives about *cubanidad*, one that can hardly be integrated within Carmelita Tropicana's familial past.

The second remarkable feature of Carmelita Tropicana's memory practices is that they are extremely fast paced. Memory in her performance pieces has an intensity that is opposed to the duration developed in autobiography and novel, two genres concerned with the way in which characters mature—simply recall how the protagonists of *Waiting for Snow in Havana* and *Next Year in Cuba* painstakingly reconstructed the Cuba of their childhood, and how they contrasted such reconstructions with their present experiences in the United States. By contrast, characters in Troyano's performance works do not slowly reminisce about their past. Memory for them is associated with momentous changes that have what we could call an "eventful quality." For instance, when at the end of *Memorias de la Revolución* Carmelita recalls her youth in Cuba, she does so by evoking her life-changing encounter with the *Virgin del Cobre* when she was lost at sea with Marimacha and Lota. Carmelita closes the play, saying: "Because where you are born, that place you carry in your heart. Let us always remember que la lucha continúa and art is our weapon" (*I, Carmelita* 51). Thus, when Carmelita briefly brings the Cuba of her youth to life at the end of the play, she does so with no trace of nostalgia because her Cuban past is infused with the political and aesthetic meanings revealed to her by the

Virgin of Cobre in a decisive, life-changing moment when she was lost at sea. In contrast to the autobiographies by Eire and Pérez Firmat, Carmelita's memory seems to exist on a much faster temporal plane made of life-changing revelations and momentous events. A further example of the primacy of the instant over the duration would be what happens to Carmelita in *Milk of Amnesia*, where she loses her memory due to an accident—she tells the audience: “I hurt my head when I was chocolate-pudding wrestling” (*I, Carmelita* 58)—and only recovers it when she travels to Cuba. Two instantaneous events, then, determine what Carmelita remembers about her past in Cuba and how she remembers it. In sum, memory for Carmelita Tropicana fleetingly flashes by rather than slowly flows by, as if it were water in a river.

“I once read that the act of remembering is like xerox copying. You remember a memory, then the next time you remember it's the memory of the memory you are remembering, and after that it's the memory of the memory of the memory, and so on” (*I, Carmelita* xxii). These words by Alina Troyano are an apt metaphor of Carmelita Tropicana's memory practices not only because the xerox machine evokes their fast-paced, instantaneous quality but also because they expose their mediated quality. Mediation is the third—and crucial—element in Carmelita Tropicana's non-nostalgic memory practices. In contrast to Eire's and Pérez Firmat's nostalgic autobiographies, which presuppose that “memory's correspondence to and registration of external reality or experience is particularly direct or immediate” (Radstone and Hodgkin 9), Troyano

puts forth a discourse of memory that lays bare its mediations. Memory is variously mediated in *Memorias de la revolución* and *Milk of Amnesia*. First of all, if we break away from the diegesis of *Memorias de la revolución*, we find that the play is mediated by Troyano's family narratives. As Troyano puts it, "The play is a mix of Carmelita's memories as she reenacts her history and my own exilic memories and those of my relatives, especially my father, who was a *comandante* in Castro's revolution. His revolutionary stories, his defection, and his escape by boat fed the play" (Hughes, Tropicana, and Dolan 149). But if we think in collective rather than individual (or familial) terms, and if we enter again the world of her plays, we find that they are mediated by a number of literary and cultural narratives, including popular culture narratives. For instance, both *Memorias de la revolución* and *Milk of Amnesia* include a number of classic song and dance numbers that evoke Cuba's recent past ("Yes, We Have No Bananas," "Siboney," "Bésame mucho," "Todos por lo mismo") while at the same time critiquing the island's colonial, ethnic, and gender politics. In addition, in *Milk of Amnesia* the character Pingalito Betancourt, which can be seen as a performance of Cuban masculine jingoism, characterizes himself as "the Cuban Antonio Banderas" (*I, Carmelita* 53), in a clear yet comic reference to the Spanish actor often cast as a "Latin Lover" in popular Hollywood movies. As Carmelita succinctly puts it in *Milk of Amnesia*: "who knows where memories come from — movies, books, magazines" (*I, Carmelita* 59). The final way in which Carmelita Tropicana's memory practices are mediated is through

the body. They are a form of memory inscribed in the body. This is clear, for instance, when Carmelita arrives in Cuba in *Milk of Amnesia* and tells her taxi driver that she wants “to see, touch, feel, hear, taste Cuba. All my orifices are open” (*I, Carmelita* 60). The body of Carmelita in *Milk of Amnesia* works like a storage and retrieval device, one whose malfunction made her an amnesiac but whose proper functioning allowed her to recover her memory.

By being regulated by the specific temporality of “queer time,” by being extremely fast-paced, and by having a mediated relationship to experience, Carmelita Tropicana’s memory practices imagine a new alternative to the dominant nostalgic politics of Cuban-American memory. Rather than longing for an irretrievably lost past, Carmelita’s past informs and energizes her present, which is often cast in politically committed terms. This is clearly seen at the end of both *Memorias de la Revolución* and *Milk of Amnesia*. The end of the first play balances Carmelita’s past (“Because where you are born, that place you carry in your heart”) with present and future political concerns (“Let us always remember que la lucha continúa and art is our weapon”) (*I, Carmelita* 60). *Milk of Amnesia* closes in a similar way. Here the closing lines of the performance piece combine Carmelita’s lament about not having heard “Cuban music and to me Cuba is music” (*I, Carmelita* 71) during her trip to Havana with a song number by a contemporary Cuban composer and musician, Pedro Luis Ferrer. The political dimension of the lines by Pedro Luis Ferrer is unmistakable: “Everybody for the same

thing / Between the pages of colonialism / Capitalists, homosexuals, atheists,  
spiritualists, moralists / Everybody for the same thing" (*I, Carmelita* 71). Instead of  
wanting to recapture the Cuban music of her youth, Carmelita seeks to politicize the  
Cuban music of her present and future.

## **Conclusion: Nostalgia, Between What Was and What Lies Ahead**

In the end, the only antidote for the dictatorship of nostalgia might be nostalgic dissidence.  
(Boym, "Nostalgia" 18)

It is hardly an exaggeration to affirm that the nostalgic politics of memory traditionally associated with the Cuban-American community is a byproduct of the Cold War. In all of the texts examined in this dissertation, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 figures prominently as the material pre-condition for the narratives, nostalgic and otherwise, put forth by Carlos Eire, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Achy Obejas, Cristina García, and Alina Troyano. The Revolution appears as a recurring obsession in all of these texts, in one way or another. It is a cataclysmic event that shaped the lives and narratives of each of these writers. Without it, and without the ensuing rule of Fidel Castro, none of these texts would have represented the ideas of home and self in the same way. The Revolution and the political developments that it made possible led these writers into exile. And being exiles, as opposed to immigrants, marked their narratives in a particular way, one that made their Cuban past seem irretrievably lost. Cold War politics and the fierce ideological conflict between the United States and Cuba is what created for these authors the sense that their Cuban past, with all of its imagined virtues and defects, was forever lost. To be sure, not all of them reacted to their individual losses in the same way.

As we saw in Chapter One, Carlos Eire and Gustavo Pérez Firmat responded to the losses of exile by crafting unabashedly nostalgic reconstructions of Havana. These nostalgic reconstructions not only helped their authors grieve for their losses by keeping a conflict-free, idealized, paradisiacal idea of pre-Revolutionary Cuba alive, but also enabled them to deploy a future-oriented political project. In keeping with Boyer's remark that "nostalgia is heteroglossic," meaning that it can have different functions and it can be deployed for different ends, nostalgic discourse in Eire and Pérez Firmat betrays an obsession with an irretrievable past as much as it mobilizes "a present- or future-oriented project of identification and belonging" (20). As Boyer also put it, "nostalgia always carries with it a politics of the future" (25). In Eire's and Pérez Firmat's cases, this future political project is a mirror image of the past they left behind: a Cuba without Castro where the effects of the socialist revolution would be wiped clean, where a return to a U.S.-style democratic society would allow them to recuperate their lost possessions, material and otherwise.

The response to the losses of exile given by Achy Obejas was more complex. In Chapter Two, we saw how Obejas, throughout her early corpus, reveals a preoccupation with nostalgic reconstructions that on one level is very much reminiscent of Eire and Pérez Firmat. The familial stories and objects that remind the characters of Cuba evoke an idyllic life that somehow was taken from them with the advent of the Revolution and their subsequent exile. However, we also saw how Obejas's texts did not simply repeat

the chronic addiction to nostalgic musings so commonplace in Cuban-American cultural production. Instead, they actively critiqued that tendency by introducing characters that continually questioned the veracity of familial nostalgic tales and the import of commodities that reminded them of Cuba as they attempted to chart out their future. Through this incessant questioning, Obejas presented the reader with a more nuanced version of the past, particularly of the Cuban Revolution and its effects. But ultimately, the characters did not make a complete break with nostalgic familial mythologies as they realized they could only access their Cuban past through a series of simulacra and commodities. In Obejas's works, especially in *Memory Mambo*, nostalgic discourse does not so much lay out a clear project for the future as it creates community effects in the present. As can be seen in the novel's ending, the protagonist's tireless questioning of her parents' nostalgic myths did not in any way result in a brighter future for her, but rather created a renewed sense of closeness and intimacy with her family. Here, Obejas's critique of nostalgia did not go beyond the arena of personal relationships and never reached the public sphere of Cuban politics as Eire and Pérez Firmat attempted to do.

Finally, in Chapter Three, we saw how Cristina García and Alina Troyano offered a radical rethinking of the nostalgia paradigm, one which ultimately showed a potential way out of the nostalgic impasse the Cuban-American community has been mired in since the early 1960s. Both García and Troyano, in different ways, destabilized the dominant nostalgic politics of memory. García did so by expressing the complexity

of post-Revolutionary Cuba, both for exiles living in the United States and those individuals who never left the island. Her willingness to engage with the past and present in Cuba allowed for a different future to emerge for her characters. By showing that the Revolution was not simply a catastrophic event that invited Cuban-Americans to enact nostalgic reconstructions of their national selves, García undermined one of the major assumptions of the dominant Cuban-American politics of memory. On a more affirmative note, through the characters of Pilar, Luz, and Milagro, García hinted at a future where there exists a dialogue between multiple voices and subject positions on the political legacies of post-Revolutionary Cuba. Similarly, Troyano shattered the foundations of the nostalgic politics of memory by enacting a series of alternative memory practices that were regulated by the specific temporality of queer time, were extremely fast paced, and had a mediated relationship to experience. Through her alter ego Carmelita Tropicana, Troyano broke free from nostalgic discourse: her character's Cuban past was not an object of yearning but rather informed and energized a vibrant political utopia that articulated anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist, feminist, and LGBTQ demands.

Certainly, the imagined pasts and futures for each of these authors are vastly different. What is undeniable, however, is that all of their narratives started with the loss of exile and that this loss was determined by the ideological battles of the Cold War. Now that the recent normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations and the death of Fidel Castro

seem to be ushering in a new period, it is fitting to ask what will happen to the discourse of nostalgia within the Cuban-American community.

But, before addressing what is to come, let me first briefly mention the biggest changes in the recent normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations. Several steps have been taken in the past few years that have made the political relationship between the two countries less contentious. When President Obama met with President Raúl Castro of Cuba at the Summit of the Americas in Panama on April 11, 2015, it was the first time leaders from the two countries had met since severing ties in 1961, shortly after the triumph of the Revolution. Since then, the two countries have been working together to improve relations. Cuba released fifty-three prisoners that the United States considered political dissidents; the United States eased economic sanctions and travel restrictions to Cuba in order to increase trade, commerce, travel, and the flow of information between the two countries; the United States removed Cuba from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism in May of 2015; and, both countries restored diplomatic relations by reopening embassies in each other's capitals on July 20, 2015. This rapprochement between the United States and Cuba culminated with President Obama's visit to the island on March 20, 2016, the first sitting president of the United States to visit Cuba since President Coolidge in 1928.<sup>1</sup> Of course, there still remains the U.S.-imposed

---

<sup>1</sup> President Carter did visit the island in March of 2011 but on behalf of the Carter Center, not the United States government.

economic embargo on Cuba and a host of other economic and political reforms that Raúl Castro's government needs to carry out, but there is no question that much has changed in how each country views the other.

Given these political changes, it seems only logical to ask whether ongoing political events will be able to radically transform, and envision an alternative to, the Cuban-American discourse of nostalgia. Will the call of nostalgia be lessened by the lack of travel restrictions and the more open relationship between Cuba and the United States? Will Cubans in the United States cease to view themselves as exiles and thus stop reproducing the discourse of nostalgia? The answers to these admittedly difficult questions depends on how Cubans view their own status in the United States, because today in the United States there is no longer a monolithic Cuban-American community made up only of exiles. In addition to the sizable number of Cubans in the United States who consider themselves to be exiles, such as the authors studied herein, there is also a considerable number of Cubans who left the island mainly for economic and political reasons during the *Mariel* boatlift of 1980 or as part of the *Balseros* in the 1990s. These individuals typically do not perceive themselves as exiles, but rather as immigrants. For these two unique groups of Cuban Americans, the normalization of political relations between the United States and Cuba likely means vastly different things. This point is forcefully made by Gustavo Pérez Firmat in a recent opinion piece:

For Cubans who think of themselves as economic immigrants, the changes in US policy will lead to a welcome normalization of their lives: it will be easier for

them to visit and be visited by their families, to send cash and goods, to maintain an effective connection to their homeland. [. . .] But the generation to which I belong has a different view. For us, normalization would mean, in the first and most fundamental instance, the disappearance of the regime that forced us to abandon our homeland. (“The Last Exiles”)

Despite the official normalization of political relations, Pérez Firmat cannot allow himself to embrace Cuba as it exists today. Instead, he clings to the version of Cuba that he experienced when he was a young boy living in Havana, to the trauma of exile, and to a vision of the future of Cuba that faithfully reproduces his nostalgic reconstructions.

The second political development that had the potential to alter the discourse of Cuban-American nostalgia was the death of Fidel Castro on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

Although Fidel temporarily transferred all political power to his younger brother Raúl in 2006,<sup>2</sup> he still wielded considerable influence in the running of the government as he remained an iconic figure with tremendous charismatic power both on and off the island. His passing was an event of global political significance, one that particularly affected Cubans and Cuban-Americans. What so many had been waiting a lifetime to occur, suddenly had happened. As with the normalization of political relations, one could expect that Fidel’s death would somehow alter the politics of memory within the Cuban-American community. However, the reactions of many leading Cuban-American authors were strikingly predictable. While some mourned the death of a courageous

---

<sup>2</sup> Fidel transferred power to his brother on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2006 as he recovered from surgery for an undisclosed illness. Two years later, Raúl was officially made president when Fidel announced that he would not run for reelection.

leader who had, with his revolutionary fervor, stood up to U.S. imperialism in Latin America and the Caribbean, others celebrated his death, waving Cuban flags, dancing in the streets, and chanting that Cuba would finally be free of tyrannical rule. Finally, others were left indifferent to his death, regardless of how symbolic Castro happened to be, because they were aware that the death of one individual did not change the reality of their lives spent in exile. Interestingly, many of the authors studied in this dissertation wrote opinion pieces and were interviewed about their personal reactions to Castro's death. Not surprisingly, much like Pérez Firmat's description above about how the normalization of relations with Cuba would not change his nostalgic yearning, the reactions of Eire, Obejas, and García to Fidel's death continue rather than diverge from the positions they asserted in their narratives.

For instance, in "Farewell to Cuba's Brutal Big Brother," Eire asserts that, although Castro attempted to convince the world otherwise, the Revolution was really "about creating a repressive totalitarian state." He complicates his reaction to Fidel's death in his interview with Scott Simon on NPR. When Mr. Simon asks Eire how his years in exile have shaped his understanding of Castro today, Eire replies: "Well, nothing has changed since even before I left Cuba. Even as a 10-year-old boy, I felt that someone was stealing my mind, my heart, my soul. And there was one man behind it. And it was Fidel Castro. So my view hasn't changed." Eire still views Cuba as the Cuba from his childhood for he is blinded to the reality that Cuba today is different than when

he was a child. Even when directly asked questions about the present or the future of Cuba, Eire can only focus on his personal losses, which he directly attributes to Castro. He even ends the interview referencing “all the property that the Castro regime stole.” He, like Pérez Firmat, desperately clings to the version of Cuba that he remembers in an effort to make sense of the trauma he endured as a consequence of exile.

Significantly, Obejas and García also illustrate their views about the dominant nostalgia paradigm in their respective opinion pieces and interviews. In her reaction to Castro’s death, Obejas writes that she felt “strange, relieved and a little sad” (“The Little Fidel”). She goes on to admit that the title of her piece reveals how all Cuban-Americans have adopted, intentionally or not, aspects of Fidel: “those of us who have spent our entire lives with Fidel as a powerful backdrop, let’s say, have, in some ways, sometimes absorbed some of his, you know, if not attitudes, sometimes peculiarities of affects” (“Complicated Feelings”). Much like in her fiction, instead of a piece against Fidel and the Cuba of today, Obejas embraces an ambivalent position. She respects and reveres aspects of Castro and Cuba and she also casts doubts about the future. Obejas writes: “Perversely, not much will change in Cuba after Fidel. [. . .] Cuba’s future hasn’t been his for a long time. And yet the future doesn’t feel like it’s really in the hands of the Cuban people yet, either” (“The Little Fidel”). Much like Obejas, García takes into account the nuances of Castro and the Cuban Revolution. She writes of the utopian promises made by the Revolution and the excitement in the early heyday of the

Revolution. However, she also highlights the supreme disillusionment with the current state of affairs in Cuba. Her willingness to acknowledge post-Revolutionary Cuba distinguishes her commentary from the likes of Pérez Firmat and Eire. Neither Obejas nor García wish to eradicate traces of Castro's post-Revolutionary Cuba. Instead, they cautiously look toward a utopian future that would bring together Cubans on and off the island. As García writes: "I can only hope that with the passing of El Comandante, the Cuban people on both sides of the Straits of Florida—and beyond—can finally live fully and freely in pursuit of their dreams, and begin to heal from this failed, costly experiment" ("Fidel, the Promise and the Betrayal").

The above testimonies by Pérez Firmat, Eire, Obejas, and García are fascinating insofar as they shed light on some features of the discourse of Cuban-American nostalgia that had remained obscured up to this point. Most strikingly, they highlight what one could call the inertia of nostalgic discourse. By this expression, I mean to underscore the force and affective pull that nostalgic reconstructions exert upon those who engage in them, regardless of where they are on the political spectrum and the events that happen to surround them. Nostalgic subjects seem so invested in their wounds and losses, and in the idealized plentitude with which they have replaced them, that they struggle to separate themselves from them. And, as they are unable to mourn the losses of the past, they have trouble imagining an alternative future.

Although in this dissertation I have examined Cuban-American nostalgic reconstructions of Havana as produced from within the United States, I would like to close by briefly noting how the discourse of nostalgia related to the Cuban Revolution has recently played out within Cuba. In a reflection on the personality cult surrounding Fidel Castro prior to his death, Rafael Rojas explains that during Raúl Castro's rule such personality cult was couched in the language of nostalgia. According to Rojas, Fidel's personality cult was a way for Cubans to grieve for a lost past made of revolutionary epic and grandeur, one whose passing helped make both the advance of capitalism and the stagnation of democratic reforms more palatable to the Cuban people:

A medida que la élite se enriquece y la mayoría ciudadana se empobrece, el culto a la personalidad se propone como discurso de la nostalgia por un pasado glorioso. El capitalismo es presentado como un mal necesario, en el que la isla ha tenido que caer por culpa del 'bloqueo'. Cuidar la memoria y el legado del Comandante es una manera fácil de ocultar la conveniencia del mercado y, a la vez, evitar la reconstitución democrática del régimen ("Fidel, icono")

[As the elites get richer and the majority of the people get poorer, the personality cult is offered as a nostalgic discourse for a glorious past. Capitalism is presented as a necessary evil in which the island has had to partake because of the U.S. economic embargo. To preserve the *Commandant's* memory and his legacy is an easy way of concealing the convenience of the market while at the same time avoiding the democratic reform of the regime.]

Much like what happened in post-Soviet Russia after the fall of the Berlin wall, nostalgia in post-Fidel Cuba seems to have become "a defense mechanism against the accelerated rhythm of change and the economic shock therapy" (Boym, *Future* 64). In his reaction to Fidel's passing, a vehemently anti-Castro intellectual wrote: "A genius at myth-making,

Castro relied on the human thirst for myths and heroes" (Eire, "Farewell"). I would like to add that Fidel and the Revolution he so passionately brought about in 1959 excel at a very specific kind of myth-making: nostalgic myth-making, both on and off the island.

## Bibliography

- Agnew, John A. "Space and Place." *The Sage Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*. Ed. John A. Agnew and David N. Livingstone. Los Angeles: Sage, 2011. 316-330. Print.
- Allatson, Paul. *Latino Dreams: Transcultural Traffic and the U.S. National Imaginary*. New York: Rodopi, 2002. Print.
- Alvarez, Julia. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. New York: Plume, 1992. Print.
- . *Saving the World*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006. Print.
- . *Yo*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1997. Print.
- Alvarez Borland, Isabel. *Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998. Print.
- Angeles Torres, María de los. "Encuentros y Encontronazos: Homeland in the Politics and Identity of the Cuban Diaspora." *The Latino Studies Reader: Culture, Economy & Society*. Ed. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres. Malden: Blackwell, 1998. 43-62. Print.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987. Print.
- Araújo, Nara. "I Came All the Way From Cuba So I Could Speak Like This? Cuban and Cuban-American Literatures in the US." *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations*. Ed. Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray. New York: St. Martin's, 2000. 93-103. Print.
- Arenas, Reinaldo. *Antes que anochezca*. Barcelona: Tusquets, 1992. Print.
- Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Levers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Print.

- . *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974. Print.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. "The Role of Music in the Emergence of Afro-Cuban Culture." *Research in African Literatures* 29 (1998): 179-184. Print.
- Blanco, Richard. *City of a Hundred Fires*. Pittsburgh, PA: U of Pittsburgh P, 1998. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. Richard Nice. New York: Cambridge UP, 1977. Print.
- Boyer, Dominic. "From Algos to Autonomos: Nostalgic Eastern Europe as Postimperial Mania." *Post-Communist Nostalgia*. Ed. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010. 17-28. Print.
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic, 2001. Print.
- . "Nostalgia and Its Discontents." *The Hedgehog Review* 9.2 (2007): 7-18. Print.
- Campa, Román de la. *Cuba on My Mind: Journeys to a Severed Nation*. New York: Verso, 2001. Print.
- Carpentier, Alejo. *Los pasos perdidos*. Ed. Roberto González Echevarría. Madrid: Cátedra, 1985. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. Print.
- Casey, Edward S. *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Print.
- . *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.
- . "The World of Nostalgia." *Man and World* 20 (1987): 361-384. Print.
- Cheal, David. *The Gift Economy*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *Caramelo, or Puro Cuento*. New York: Knopf, 2002. Print.

- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.
- Collazo Peña, Roberto "Robby." "Nostalgia Habanera." *Youtube.com*. YouTube, Oct. 3, 2014. Web. 20 Feb. 2014.
- Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic, 1992. Print.
- Cooper, Sara. "Queering Family: Achy Obejas's *We Came All the Way From Cuba So That You Could Dress Like This?*" *Chasqui: Revista de literatura latinoamericana* 32.2 (2003): 76-88. Print.
- Craft, Linda J. "Truth or Consequences: Mambos, Memories, and Multiculturalism from Achy Obejas's Chicago." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 35 (2001): 369-87. Print.
- Cruz, Angie. *Soledad*. New York: Simon, 2001. Print.
- Cruz, Nilo. *Anna in the Tropics*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003. Print.
- "CubaNostalgia." *CubaNostalgia*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Jan. 2017.  
<<http://www.cubanostalgia.org/english/index.html>.>
- Dainotto, Roberto. *Place in Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000. Print.
- Davis, Fred. "Nostalgia, Identity and the Current Nostalgia Wave." *Journal of Popular Culture* 11.2 (1977): 414-24. Print.
- - -. *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. New York: Free, 1979. Print.
- Davis, Natalie Zemon, and Randolph Starn. "Introduction." *Representations* 26 (1989): 1-6. Print.
- Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1977. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. Print.
- Díaz, Junot. *Drown*. New York: Riverhead, 1996. Print.
- - -. *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead, 2007. Print.

- Eire, Carlos. "'Confessions of a Cuban Boy' Author Talks About Life as a Cuban Refugee." *National Public Radio*. National Public Radio, 26 Nov. 2016. Web. 26 Nov. 2016. <<http://www.npr.org/2016/11/26/503416831/life-as-a-cuban-refugee>>.
- . "Farewell to Cuba's Brutal Big Brother." *The Washington Post*. 26 Nov. 2016. Web. 26 Nov. 2016. <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/farewell-to-cubas-brutal-big-brother/2016/11/26/d369affe-0eeb-11e6-bfa1-4efa856caf2a\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.579d2ddb4df0](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/farewell-to-cubas-brutal-big-brother/2016/11/26/d369affe-0eeb-11e6-bfa1-4efa856caf2a_story.html?utm_term=.579d2ddb4df0)>.
- . *Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy*. New York: Free, 2010. Print.
- . *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy*. New York: Free, 2003. Print.
- Espín, Oliva M. "Roots Uprooted: Autobiographical Reflections on the Psychological Experience of Migration." *Paradise Lost or Gained? The Literature of Hispanic Exile*. Ed. Fernando Alegría and Jorge Ruffinelli. Houston: Arte Publico, 1986. 151-63. Print.
- Embry, Marcus. "Cuban Double-Cross: Father's Lies in Obejas and García." *Double Crossings / EntreCruzamientos. Antología de artículos presentados en el Noveno Congreso Internacional de Culturas Latinas en América del Norte / Anthology of research articles delivered at 9th International Conference of Latino Cultures in North America*. Eds. Mario Martín-Flores and Carlos von Son. Fair Haven: Nuevo Espacio, 2001. 97-107. Print.
- Estrada, Alfredo José. *Havana: Autobiography of a City*. New York: Palgrave, 2007. Print.
- Fernández, Roberto G. *Raining Backwards*. Houston: Arte Publico, 1988. Print.
- Flores, Juan. "Islands and Enclaves: Caribbean Latinos in Historical Perspective." *Latinos: Remaking America*. Ed. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela M. Páez. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002. 59-74. Print.
- Flores, Yolanda. "Memory Mambo: Un paso hacia adelante, dos pasos hacia atrás." *Revista Iberoamericana* 71.212 (2005): 763-74. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Family Romances." Trans. James Strachey. *Collected Papers*. Ed. James Strachey. Vol. 5. New York: Basic, 1959. 74-78. Print.

- Fritzsche, Peter. *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004. Print.
- Frow, John. *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.
- Fuentenebro de Diego, Filiberto and Carmen Valiente Ots. "Nostalgia: a conceptual history." *History of Psychiatry* 25.4 (2014): 404-11. Print.
- Ganguly, Keya. "Migrant Identities: Personal Memory and the Construction of Selfhood." *Cultural Studies* 6.1 (1992): 27-50. Print.
- García, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Ballantine, 1992. Print.
- . "Fidel, the Promise and the Betrayal." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 26 Nov. 2016. Web. 26 Nov. 2016. <<http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/26/opinions/fidel-castro-promise-and-betrayal-garcia/>>.
- García, María Cristina. *Havana USA*. Los Angeles: U of California P, 1996. Print.
- Goldman, Dara E. "Next Year in the Diaspora: The Uneasy Articulation of Transcultural Positionality in Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe*." *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 8 (2004): 59-74. Print.
- Halberstam, Judith. *In a Queer Time and Place*. New York: NYU P, 2005. Print.
- Halperín Donghi, Tulio. *The Contemporary History of Latin America*. Ed. and Trans. John Charles Chasteen. Durham: Duke UP, 1993. Print.
- Harper, Jorjet. "Dancing to a Different Beat: An Interview with Achy Obejas." *Lambda Book Report* 5.3 (1996): 1-7. Print.
- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Malden: Blackwell, 1990. Print.
- . *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996. Print.
- Hijuelos, Oscar. *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. New York: Farrar, 1989. Print.
- Hofer, Johannes. "Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia." Trans. Carolyn Kiser Anspach. *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2 (1934): 376-91. Print.

- Hughes, Holly, Carmelita Tropicana, and Jill Dolan, eds. *Memories of the Revolution: The First Ten Years of the WOW Café Theater*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2015. Print.
- Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. New York: Random, 1983. Print.
- Italie, Hillel. "Authors Life, Family Parallel Book's People." *The Fort Scott Tribune* 2 Apr. 1992: 6B. Print.
- Irizarry, Ylce. "An interview with Cristina García." *Contemporary Literature* 48.2 (2007): 175-194. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997. Print.
- . "Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia." *Salmagundi* 10/11 (1969-1970): 52-68. Print.
- Johnson, Kelli Lyon. "Lost in El Olvido: Translation and Collective Memory in Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe*." *Bilingual Review* 27.1 (2003): 34-44. Print.
- Kevane, Bridget. "At Home on the Page: An Interview with Cristina García." *Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers*. Ed. Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2000. 69-82. Print.
- "La Plaza; Conversations with Ilan Stavans: Achy Obejas." Oct. 2, 2001. WGBH Media Library & Archives. Web. Jan. 25, 2017.  
<[http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_4F9D0C791C3642A9985A234BAB2CAE7](http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_4F9D0C791C3642A9985A234BAB2CAE7)>.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991. Print.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer. Boston: Beacon, 1969. Print.
- López, Iraida H. ". . . And There is Only My Imagination Where Our History Should Be": An Interview with Cristina García" *Michigan Quarterly Review* 33.3 (1994): 604-17. Print.

- Lorenzo, Olga. "Nostalgia, Shame and the Transplanted Cuban: 'la cubana arrepentida'." *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 2.1 (2005): 1-25. Print.
- Lundahl, Mats. "Tongolele en La Habana." *Diario de Cuba*. April 6 2013. Web. 21 Aug. 2016. <[http://www.diariodecuba.com/cultura/1365248487\\_2645.html](http://www.diariodecuba.com/cultura/1365248487_2645.html)>
- Machado, Eduardo. "Broken Eggs." *The Floating Island Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1991. 169-218. Print.
- Machover, Jacobo. "La ciudad-fantasma (Conversación con Guillermo Cabrera Infante)." *La memoria frente al poder. Escritores cubanos del exilio: Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Severo Sarduy, Reinaldo Arenas*. Valencia: U de València, 2001. 223-33. Print.
- Manzari, H. J. "Living "On the Hyphen" and Beyond: An Interview with Gustavo Pérez Firmat." *Gustavo Pérez Firmat*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Mar 2014. <[http://www.gustavoperezfirmat.com/interview/gpf\\_interview-manzari.php](http://www.gustavoperezfirmat.com/interview/gpf_interview-manzari.php)>
- Martí, José. *Nuestra América*. Ed. Cintio Vitier. Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 2002. Print.
- Martin-Fugier, Anne. "Bourgeois Rituals." *A History of Private Life: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*. Ed. Michelle Perrot. Vol. 4. Cambridge: Belknap, 1990. 263-337. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. Vol. 1. 3 vols. London: Penguin, 1976. Print.
- Mastretta, Ángeles. *Arráncame la vida*. Madrid: Alfaguara, 2002.
- Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. W. D. Halls. New York: Norton, 1990. Print.
- McCullough, Kate. "'Marked By Genetics and Exile:' Narrativizing Transcultural Sexualities in *Memory Mambo*." *GLQ* 6.4 (2000): 577-607. Print.
- Menéndez, Ana. *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*. New York: Grove , 2001. Print.
- Muñoz, Elías Miguel. *Brand New Memory*. Houston: Arte Publico, 1998. Print.

- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999. Print.
- . "No es fácil: Notes on the Negotiation of Cubanidad and Exilic Memory in Carmelita Tropicana's *Milk of Amnesia*." *TDR (The Drama Review)* 39.3 (1995): 76-82. Print.
- Mujčinovic, Fatima. "Multiple Articulations of Exile in US Latina Literature: Confronting Exilic Absence and Trauma." *MELUS* 28.4 (2003): 176-86. Print.
- Naficy, Hamid. "Introduction. framing home: from homeland to homepage." *Home, exile, homeland: Film, media, and the politics of place*. Ed. Hamid Naficy. New York: Routledge, 1998. 1-13. Print.
- Nora, Pierre. "General Introduction: Between Memory and History." Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*. Ed. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman. Vol. 1. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. 1-20. Print.
- Noriega, Chon A. "Editor's Introduction: Very Good with the Tongue." *I, Carmelita Tropicana: Performing Between Cultures*. Boston: Beacon, 2000. ix-xii. Print.
- Obejas, Achy. "Complicated Feelings: 'The Little Fidel in All of Us'" *National Public Radio*. National Public Radio, 30 Nov. 2016. Web. 30 Nov. 2016. <<http://www.npr.org/2016/11/30/503825310/complicated-feelings-the-little-fidel-in-all-of-us>>.
- . *Days of Awe*. New York: Ballantine, 2001. Print.
- . "The Little Fidel in All of Us." *The New York Times*. 27 Nov. 2016. Web. 27 Nov. 2016. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/27/opinion/the-little-fidel-in-all-of-us.html>>.
- . *Memory Mambo*. Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1996. Print.
- . *We Came All the Way from Cuba so You Could Dress Like This?* Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1994. Print.
- . *Talk of the Nation: Book Club of the Air*. Natl. Public Radio. WBEZ, Chicago, 24 July 1997. Radio.

- Ojito, Mirta A. *Finding Mañana: A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus*. New York: Penguin, 2005. Print.
- Ortiz, Fernando. "Cubanidad y cubanía." *Islas* 6 (1964): 91-95. Print.
- . -. *El contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y azúcar*. La Habana: Editorial de ciencias sociales, 1983. Print.
- Paternostro, Silvana. "Carlos Eire." *Bomb—Artists in Conversation* 90 (2005). Web. 24 June 2014.
- Payant, Katherine B. "From Alienation to Reconciliation in the Novels of Cristina García." *MELUS* 26.3 (2001): 163-82. Print.
- Paz, Octavio. *El laberinto de la soledad*. Ed. Enrico Mario Santí. Madrid: Cátedra, 1998. Print.
- Pérez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999. Web. 11 June 2014.
- Pérez, Lisandro. "De Nueva York a Miami: El desarrollo demográfico de las comunidades cubanas en Estados Unidos." *encuentro de la cultura cubana* 15 (1999/2000): 13-23. Print.
- Pérez Jr., Louis A. *On Becoming Cuban*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999. Print.
- Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio*. Miami: Universal, 2000. Print.
- . -. "I Came, I Saw, I Conga'd: Contexts for a Cuban-American Culture." *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*. Ed. Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz. Durham: Duke UP, 1997. 239-54. Print.
- . -. *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1994. Print.
- . -. *My Own Private Cuba: Essays on Cuban Literature and Culture*. Boulder: Soc. of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1999. Print.
- . -. *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming of Age in America*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. Print.

- - -. "The Last Exiles." *The Conversation*. N.p., 19 Dec. 2014. Web. 20 Dec. 2016.  
<<http://theconversation.com/the-last-exiles-35746>>.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Alex Stepick. *City on the Edge*. Los Angeles: U of California P, 1993. Print.
- Portuondo Zúñiga, Olga. "The Virgin of Charity of Cobre, Cuba's Patron Saint." *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Ed. Aviva Chomski, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorlakoff. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. 490-97. Print.
- Quiroga, José. *Cuban Palimpsests*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005. Print.
- Radstone, Susannah, and Katharine Hodgkin, eds. *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity, and Recognition*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 2009. Print.
- Rieff, David. *The Exile: Cuba in the Heart of Miami*. New York: Simon, 1993. Print.
- Rivero, Eliana S. "(Re)Writing Sugarcane Memories: Cuban Americans and Literature." *Paradise Lost or Gained: The Literature of Hispanic Exile*. Ed. Fernando Alegría and Jorge Ruffinelli. Houston: Arte Publico, 1990. 164-82. Print.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*. New York: Viking, 1992. Print.
- - -. *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography*. Boston: Godine, 1982. Print.
- Rojas, Rafael. *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History*. New York: Palgrave, 2008. Print.
- - -. "Fidel, un icono 'kitsch'." *El País*. Grupo Prisa, 11 Aug. 2016. Web. 11 Aug. 2016.  
<[http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/08/06/opinion/1470504973\\_739395.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/08/06/opinion/1470504973_739395.html)>.
- Román, David. "Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged." *The Drama Review* 39.3 (1995): 83-93. Print.
- Rubio, Raúl. "Discourses of/on Nostalgia: Cuban America's Real and Fictional Geographies." *Letras Hispanas* 3.1 (2006): 13-24. Print.

- . "Materializing Havana and Revolution: Cuban Material Culture." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 24 (2005): 161-77. Print.
- Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican*. New York: Vintage, 1994. Print.
- Segal, Robert A. *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.
- Shapiro Bok, Ester Rebeca. "Finding What Had Been Lost in Plain View." *Bridges to Cuba: Puentes a Cuba*. Ed. Ruth Behar. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995. 85-95. Print.
- Shaw, Christopher and Malcolm Chase. "The dimensions of nostalgia." *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*. Ed. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989. 1-17. Print.
- Shorris, Earl. *Latinos: A Biography of the People*. New York: Norton, 1992. Print.
- Smorkaloff, Pamela María. *Cuban Writers on and off the Island: Contemporary Narrative Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1999. Print.
- Socolovsky, Maya. "Deconstructing a Secret History: Trace, Translation and Crypto-Judaism in Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe*." *Contemporary Literature* 44.2 (2003): 225-49. Print.
- Sontag, Susan. "Notes on 'Camp'." N.p, 1964. Web. 18 Aug. 2016.  
<[https://monoskop.org/images/5/59/Sontag\\_Susan\\_1964\\_Notes\\_on\\_Camp.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/5/59/Sontag_Susan_1964_Notes_on_Camp.pdf)>
- Spitta, Silvia. "Un altar a la presencia: Los objetos hallados, la fotografía, la memoria y la identidad latina en EE.UU." *Revista Iberoamericana* 71.212 (2005): 745-62. Print.
- Starobinski, Jean. "The Idea of Nostalgia." Trans. William S. Kemp. *Diogenes* 54 (1966): 81-103. Print.
- Stern, Gary. "An Interview with Cristina García: The Cuban-American Novelist Explores Issues of Assimilation." *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education* 19.18 (2009): 18-20. Web. 15 June 2016.
- Stewart, Kathleen, "Nostalgia— A Polemic." *Cultural Anthropology* 3.3 (1988): 227-41. Print.

- Stewart, Susan. *On Longing*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993. Print.
- Sugg, Katherine. "Migratory sexualities, diasporic histories, and memory in queer Cuban-American cultural production." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21.4 (2003): 461-77. Print.
- Tate, Julee. "Matrilineal and Political Divisions in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters*." *Letras femeninas* 32.2 (2006): 145-63. Print.
- Troyano, Alina. *I, Carmelita Tropicana: Performing Between Cultures*. Boston: Beacon, 2000. Print.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1977. Print.
- Turner, Bryan S. "A Note on Nostalgia." *Theory, Culture & Society* 4 (1987): 147-56. Print.
- Vasconcelos, José. *The Cosmic Race*. Trans. Didier T. Jaén. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997. Print.
- Vorda, Allan. "A Fish Swims in My Lung: An Interview with Cristina García." *Face to Face: Interviews with Contemporary Novelists*. Ed. Allan Vorda. Houston: Rice UP, 1993. 61-76. Print.
- Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Trans. Ephraim Fischhoff et al. Vol. 1. Berkeley: U of California P, 2013. Print.
- Wise, J. Macgregor. "Home: Territory and Identity." *Cultural Studies* 14.2 (2000): 295-310. Print.
- Zubiaurre, Maite. "Hacia una nueva geografía feminista: Nación, identidad y construcción imaginaria en *Dreaming in Cuban* (Cristina García) y en *Memory Mambo* (Achey [sic] Obejas)." *Chasqui: Revista de literatura latinoamericana* 28.1 (1999): 3-15. Print.

## Biography

Virginia Camila Tuma received her B.A. in Comparative Literature *with distinction* from Yale University in 1996. She currently lives in Colorado with her husband, Javier, and their two children, Sebastián and Beatriz.