

**A NATION BUILT ON NOTHING: CUBAN AMERICAN SUBJECTIVITIES IN  
REVOLT**

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English and Comparative Literature (Comparative Literature).

Chapel Hill  
2007

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## **ABSTRACT**

JOHN D. RIBÓ: A Nation Built on Nothing: Cuban American Subjectivities in Revolt  
(Under the direction of María DeGuzmán)

Through an imbrication of autobiographical anecdotes and critical readings of Cuban American cultural production of the 1990's, this study attempts to parse the rhetorical structures and strictures that have come to define Cuban Americans in terms of the contentious discourses of Cold War ideological conflict. I argue that Eduardo Aparicio's "*Fragmentos de narraciones cubanas*," Elizabeth Mesa-Gaido's "Upon the Arrival of My Family" and Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* revolt against restrictive definitions of Cuban American identity by reenacting and working through traumas in order to posit new understandings of *cubanidad* and *cubanía*. Yet Aparicio's photographs, Mesa-Gaido's installation and García's novel engage "Cuba" as an undefined, polysemic object of melancholic loss suggesting that these works remain entrenched in problematic repetitions of the very discourses against which they revolt.

Para mi abuelo Ribó. Ojalá nunca se traduzca esta tesis.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First and foremost, I need to thank my family. You have always supported the many endeavors I have undertaken, especially and most admirably when you have not understood why I do what I do. Y gracias Bea por tu ayuda y tu amor que nunca me faltaron. I would also like to thank the many mentors who have been fundamental to my personal and professional development over the years: Vance Holloway, Elizabeth Richmond-Garza, Thomas Vessely, Virginia Higginbotham and Stuart Day. I attempt to emulate the lessons I have learned from you every day in the classroom and in the library. And finally, thank you to the members of my committee: María DeGuzmán, Antonio Viego, and Juan Carlos González Espitia. Your ideas have shaped not only the ways I read texts, but more importantly, the way I read the world. Your offices and classrooms, as this thesis attests, have served as safe spaces for self-discovery, intellectual exploration and academic engagement. You have never failed to give the suggestions, guidance and encouragement that have gotten me through this project.



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## **Introduction**

### **Welcome To My Revolt**

Julia Kristeva writes, “When the excluded have no culture of revolt and must content themselves with regressive ideologies, with shows and entertainments that far from satisfy the demand of pleasure, they become rioters,” (*Sense* 7). This text is the story of my own very particular revolt. The following pages represent not only an autobiography of revolt, however, but also an engagement with the revolts of Cuban American artists that have preceded me.

I have chosen to analyze the works of Achy Obejas, Eduardo Aparicio, Elizabeth Mesa-Gaido and Cristina García because each marks a moment of revolt against “regressive ideologies” that have structured Cuban American identity and imagines new understandings and modes of *cubanidad* in the United States. I have interspersed my critical analysis of these texts with autobiographical reflections to stage the ongoing dialogue between the texts and myself and to demonstrate the ways cultural production can provide minoritarian individuals new possibilities for imagining the self.

I insist on structuring my interaction with these texts in the form of a dialogue because to speak of outright identification would be overstating my case. I am not in these texts; these texts are not in me. That would suggest an oversimplified, essential *cubanidad* that permeates all things “Cuban.” I have yet to find art, photography or literature that exactly mirrors my experience as a Cuban American. This is not surprising and, perhaps, not even desirable. I know of only three other Cuban Americans from Dallas who grew up

speaking English with a slight twang and in ignorance of all things Cuban besides food: my sisters.

Rather, I partially identify with certain elements of the texts; I am sympathetic to the questions the texts ask, their revolts. My sympathy, however, has little to do with the majority of Cuban American cultural production. I have sought out these texts with the help of like-minded mentors because they ask questions similar to those I have found myself asking. In the process, the bookshelves of my apartment have been filled with books that I have chosen not to address here, books that I would describe returning to Kristeva's terms as the hackwork of "regressive ideologies."

#### The Politics of Cuban American Identity / Collectivity

When I write of "regressive ideologies," I am referring specifically to the manner in which concepts of Cuban American identity have been structured in terms of the binary opposition of communism and capitalism, the ideological split of the Cuban nation since the Revolution in 1958. While the Cuban diaspora remains a historical fact, the ways we understand the diaspora can be redefined and re-imagined. The story of Cuban American identity that both the works I have selected and the current study wish to tell presents more complicated images of Cuban American identities and collectivities. Yet as revolt is meaningless in the absence of boundaries or interdictions, the cultural production I am both describing and enacting must also be seen as intimately invested in the very "regressive ideologies" against which it rebels.

### Roland Barthes, Psychoanalysis and Cuban American Subjectivity

In the analysis of the rhetoric of images, I turn to Roland Barthes. Barthes' theories of myth and his subjective methodology of reading photography provide tools that enable three critical steps in my study. First, Barthes' semiological model of myth provides a framework through which I can parse apart the naturalizing link between form and signification of the mythical image of Che to better understand my own idiosyncratic reception of the image. The result uncovers the source of the crisis of meaning I experienced: the conflict between what Che's image means within a community of spectators to which I in part aspire to belong and what the image means to me as an evocation of inherited familial trauma. Second, Barthes' *Camera Lucida* provides a model of engagement with photographic images that reinforces subjective reception as a valid method of critique. Barthes' distinction between *studium* and *punctum* provides my reading of Eduardo Aparicio's photos the traction to reassess the message his portfolio attempts to convey by creatively extrapolating meaning from minor details that pierce my sensibility and problematize the photographer's project.

Finally Barthes provides a means of linking a semiological understanding of images to psychoanalysis. Kristeva describes Barthes' project of exposing ideology as a semiological structure at a time "when ideologies were far from dead" as a revolt willing to confront the meaning of language and thus question structures of subjectivity (*Sense* 18). The most sustained theme of this project is the attempt to recognize the ways that Cuban

American exilic experience is structured in terms of melancholia, an aspect that exist to various degrees in both the texts that I read as well as my own.

### Melancholic Time and Tongues

This is by no means an exhaustive or up-to-date exploration of Cuban American cultural production. More recent Cuban American cultural production has imagined new ways of restructuring Cuban American identity that I do not address here. This is the work of an individual stuck in a very specific past. At least three discrete time frames coexist within this text: that of the texts I analyze which were produced between 1992 and 1996, that of my personal experiences which occurred between 1997 and 2001, and that of the term papers and conference talks which I began to write in the fall of 2005 and that become this thesis now a little over a month before the beginning of 2007. The text you now read, a temporal palimpsest of layers of discrete temporalities, only creates the illusion of a unified moment.

Yet the illusion of a unified moment fascinates me. My obsessive return to the past that consolidates almost fifteen years into the illusory unified moment of this text provides a particularly startling image of the immobilizing temporal effects of melancholia Kristeva describes when she writes:

As the time in which we live is the time of our discourse, the alien, retarded, or vanishing speech of melancholy people leads them to live within a skewed time sense. It does not pass by, the before/after notion does not rule it, does not direct it from a past toward a goal. Massive, weighty, doubtless traumatic because laden with too much sorrow or too much joy, *a moment* blocks the horizon of the depressive temporality or rather removes any horizon, any perspective. Riveted to the past, regressing to the paradise or the inferno of an unsurpassable experience, melancholy persons manifest a strange memory: everything has gone by, they seem to say, but I am nailed down to them, no revolution is possible, there is no future... *Black 60*

Yet I am stuck in a past not entirely my own. I concentrate my efforts on texts created in a historical context and focused on traumatic losses. I participated neither in this history nor these traumas, until now. In my melancholia, the movement of temporality melts away, or rather, is frozen, nailed down to an inherited traumatic past like Mesa-Gaido's bifurcated, immobilized ship.

Is it absurd to suppose that a diasporic community such as Cuban Americans could suffer from a case of mass melancholia? I do not believe so. In recent history most Cuban Americans have suffered traumatic experiences associated with exodus from one's homeland, losses that can easily account for fixations that escape symbolization and characterize melancholia (Fink 26). Then from where does melancholic loss come for the children of Cuban Americans born in the United States such as myself? Lacanian models of discourse and language can begin to help answer this second question. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, "we are born into a world of discourse, a discourse or language that precedes our birth and that will live on after our death... Long before a child is born, a place is prepared for it in its parents' linguistic universe" (Fink 5). Through this birth into a language that precedes and is prepared for the child, a generation that seemingly escapes traumas their parents experienced can inherit the linguistic repercussions of those traumas, fixations and gaps in symbolizations in their parents' discourses.

While it is useful to imagine Cuban American diasporic experiences in terms of melancholia, I am in no way arguing for a monolithic, universalizing model. As the artists I have chosen to address here demonstrate, Cuban American immigration to the United States has occurred over an extended period of time, in many different waves and for many different reasons. As *Dreaming in Cuban* suggests, in melancholia, "Cuba" can act as an



empty signifier into which myriad personal significations flow depending upon the experiences and needs of individuals. Finally, my goal is not to pathologize melancholia as a sickness to be cured, but rather to draw melancholic fixations into language, coaxing the unconscious into the conscious movement of discourse.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Image of Che: Myth and Cuban American Subjectivity**

Dallas, Texas. December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1997. I see the repeating image of Che on a sea of black t-shirts carpeting the interior of the Cotton Bowl: a stoic regard into the empty space of the future, an unkempt beard and lone-starred beret, the oversimplified iconic reduction into negative space and quasi-geometric monochromatic traces, as if an underground resistance group had stenciled the visage upon the chests of middle-class America pumping their fists in the air to Rage Against The Machine as the group warmed up the audience for U2. At first, amused confusion accompanies my recollection of these images, and then an overpoweringly chaotic chain of questions.

What do *these* people have to do with Che? Do they know who he was? How he lived, died? Do they think he would have liked this concert? Do they believe in Marxist revolution? What would Guevara have thought about his face being all over this rock band's shirts, sold by the hundreds of thousands to fat, sunburned gringos at the largest sports stadiums across North America? Didn't Che want Khrushchev to nuke the United States? Wasn't he furious when the Cuban missile crisis ended "diplomatically?" Is the irony of Che's image being sold at a concert that is part of a tour entitled "Popmart" lost upon everyone? Where do these people get the right to use this image as a fetishized trinket of style in naïve homage to rebellion? For the moment it is better simply not to think.

Years later, as I reflect on the images of my memory, I distort the experience with theoretical approaches and historical factoids unknown to me at the age of seventeen. The

image of Che proves the perfect sort of icon, pregnant with meaning, an easily recognized *form* of myth as Barthes conceives it: decontextualized, oversimplified and above all, attractive, pleasing to the eye. As Lutz and Collins observe, Che's gaze off-frame could suggest either a "dreamy, vacant, absent-minded person" or a "forward-looking, future-oriented, and determined one" (361). Both play a part in the myth this image of Che propagates. He is at once an attractive, rebellious figure, longhaired and scruffy, young, striking; he is dreamy in the way the Beatles are dreamy, the rock star of Marxist revolution struggling to attain the highest ideals. Yet his military beret and stoic expression coupled with his fixed gaze just over his observers' shoulder suggest an uncompromising vision of the future eliminating any suspicion of vacant absent-mindedness.

For me, this *form*, this mythical image of Che transformed into icon, invokes not only the optimism of revolution, but an inherited, family trauma: the exodus of my father and his family from Havana to Tampa. The widely accepted use of Che as a representation of leftist resistance conflicts with the particular concept the image evokes within me. My own political and intellectual positions further complicate these first two concepts in a strangely tense *ménage à trois*. How do these different allegiances to the popular and the familiar readings of an image's signification intersect with one's personal convictions? Can I accept this icon as merely a call to social justice? Or must I acknowledge and honor an inherited set of values my parents, grandparents, and uncle have attempted to instill within me? Barthes' notion of mythology as a second-order semiological system may help unpack and understand these concepts and the confusion and emotional disturbance they caused within me.

I have been careful to use Barthes' terminology in describing the image of Che and my reception of it. According to Barthes, myth appropriates the entire sign of a first-order

semiological system transforming it into the signifier or *form* of it's own second-order system (*Mythologies* 114, 117). Barthes renames myth's signified, what the mythic image communicates, as *concept* and the marriage of form and concept, what would be the sign in a first-order semiological system, the myth's *signification* (*Mythologies* 117). Here is a simple chart of the myth of Che according to a Barthesian model:


signification	
form	concepts
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ideals of Marxist resistance and revolution</li> <li>- family trauma and rejection of communist ideology</li> </ul>

Figure 1.1

The conflict seems to be the contradiction between two *concepts* that the *form*, the image of Che, evokes within me and the discomfort experienced of finding oneself incapable of adhering to either, of wedding the *form* and *concept* into a *signification*. If myth “transforms history into nature,” the inability to accept a myth that others see as natural, as an *a priori* given, leaves the subject in a precariously marginalized position, outside the normative,

<sup>1</sup> Although in this chart, the form is represented with solely the image of Che, a more faithful rendering would refer to the entire sign of the first order sign system, the image's indexical quality, it's pointing to a specific moment in the life of Che.

collective reception of a “natural” myth (Barthes, *Mythologies* 129). At the moment the image disturbed me, it was as if an ideological line in the sand had been drawn: accept Che as representative of Cuba as a symbol of Marxist resistance to Western hegemony or resist this reading and remain loyal to the pain and suffering of my family. These myths represent conflicting sources of *cubanidad*, the public patria and the private family.

The best way I can describe the resulting emotion is as a sort of paralyzing psychic claustrophobia. Achy Obeja’s protagonist Juani in *Memory Mambo* (1996) experiences a similar crisis that challenges her *cubanidad* while socializing with a group of Puerto Rican *independentistas* including her girlfriend Gina. After the group questions Juani’s knowledge of and loyalty to Cuba bandying about the term *gusano* in reference to Juani and her family, Juani reacts in the only meaningful way she is able: she punches Gina (Obejas 131, 134). Far from providing a model of how to cope with conflicts between discourses of myth, both my confusion faced with the image of Che and Juani’s violence demonstrate the real need to work towards new framings and definitions of Cuban identity in the United States, to mine and work through the trauma of em/immigration, and to provide forums, spaces for Cuban Americans to explore and reassess our relationships to history, ideology, family and the world of images.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Photographic Fragments / Pan-Cuban Narrative: The Photos of Eduardo Aparicio**

As the previous anecdote illustrates, a distinct architecture of rhetoric, both linguistic and imagistic, underpins Cuban American subjectivity. My personal discomfort vis-à-vis the image of Che revealed a rupture between the image's intended signification as an icon of commodified rebellion and what it evoked in me: inherited familial trauma. The conflict between the image's mythic signification and my idiosyncratic reception of it suggests the need to revisit and rework conceptions of Cuban American identity within imagistic discourse. A variety of possible approaches to this project are available.

In the essay "In Our Glory," bell hooks writes of photography as a means of re-imaging marginalized identities within the African American community, righting the wrongs of imagistic rhetoric by providing alternative spaces of self-definition to those subjected to the often exoticizing, denigrating and reductive image repertoires of dominant discourses (389). Similar projects of redefining and resisting dominant discourses for other minority groups seemingly follow as logical extensions of hook's observation. One such process, Eduardo Aparicio's portfolio of portraits of Cubans entitled "*Fragmentos de narraciones cubanas*" (1994) included in the anthology *Bridges to Cuba / Puentes a Cuba*, creates such a space in which the photographer re-images and re-imagines the Cuban (trans)nation in both promising and problematic ways.

In "Cuba Made Me So", Edmundo Desnoes points out that, "Photography is an index of values. Both in production and consumption" (311). In order to avoid the deceit of a

supposed indexical objectivity of photography, photography must be recognized and presented as an inherently subjective, political practice (Desnoes 315). As such, “The analysis or contemplation of photographs as objects in themselves, independent of their context, outside the system of social circulation, is an illusion, a methodological trap” (Desnoes 311). The contexts in which photographs circulate are not, however, merely abstract, antiseptic realms of ideas for, “A lone photographer, no matter what his or her photographs may say, is powerless unless he functions within a definite context, unless the pressure of bodies exists behind his images” (Desnoes 315). In light of these observations, I will first attempt to contextualize the historical, social and political aspirations to which Aparicio’s portfolio aims before proceeding to a close Barthesian reading of two of Aparicio’s photographs and the captions that accompany them.

After the Cuban Revolution, dominant discourses on Cuban identity could be seen as stalemated in a Cold War binary opposition, the bilateral hurling of mutually insulting stereotypes between *los rojos y los gusanos*. Yet while these oversimplified categorizations sufficed for certain portions of both the Cuban American exile community and Cubans on the island, new ways of imagining and questioning Cuban identity emerged in the early 1970’s sparking debate about the need for dialogue across the Straits of Florida (Torres 45). A portion of Cuban exiles who had been politicized in the U.S. during the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s began to imagine themselves as both part of an ongoing American struggle for minority rights and as part of Cuban culture and the Cuban nation (Torres 45). As Maria de los Angeles Torres puts it, “Though their politics were oriented towards life in the United States, they also wanted to build bridges to the island” (45).

In her introduction to the anthology *Bridges to Cuba / Puentes a Cuba*, Ruth Behar describes the political context of this particularly difficult task within the United States:

The fact is that Cuba and its diaspora are always defined within a U.S. framework, on the right and the left. Indeed after the revolution the nation split apart precisely between those who stayed, to live with their backs turned against the great power to the North, and those who left and took refuge in the belly of the beast. The powerful and unyielding groups within the Cuban American exile lobby – that not only refuse any kind of contact with the contemporary island, but frequently used violence to terrorize those Cuban Americans seeking to forge connections – could not exist without tacit U.S. support. Other players within the North American left, in seeking to highlight the inhumane aspects of the blockade and provide unequivocal support for Cuba's right to self-determination, sometimes impose their own hard line about what can or cannot be said about Cuba, unwittingly closing off possibilities for constructive debates. 2

*Bridges to Cuba / Puentes a Cuba* attempts to overcome these polarized discourses within the U.S. and the mutual distrust of years of separation and antagonism across the Straits of Florida in order to foster debate and reflection amongst an inclusively defined group of Cubans on and off the island. Behar prefaces her introduction with an anonymous message from a New Years greeting card sent from Cuba, "*Las paredes / vueltas de lado / son puentes*" (1).

In order to overturn these walls and build bridges, a complex project of negotiating histories, redefining discourses, and re-imagining the Cuban nation and identity must be undertaken. Xavier Albó describes in general terms such "Latin American" projects in his article "Our Identity Starting from Pluralism in the Base" writing:

To be or constitute a *nation*, in some cases, will be the result of previous projects, already crystallized; in others, it will be the mobilizing memory of a previous reality that has been stolen from a people; it can also be something that has not yet occurred but that one hopes to realize. In this last case, it is unlikely that the entire group already will feel identified as a *nation*. Furthermore, it is possible for various conflicting national projects to exist within a nation. 23



*Bridges to Cuba / Puentes a Cuba* attempts to initiate a future-oriented (trans)nationalist project through the diverse contributions of poets, novelists, artists, photographers and academics. One difficulty of the task to which Behar's anthology aspires is that the socio-historical particularities of the Cuban and Cuban American situations encompass all of the dynamics Albó describes. For almost fifty years Castro's government has alloyed socialist and nationalist ideals to create a previously inexistent conception of the Cuban nation. Cuban American projects of identity and nation have often melancholically yearned for a mythic Cuba of the past lost in the Revolution's wake. And finally, the concept of a "Cuba" unfettered by linguistic, ideological and geographical boundaries exists only as an ideal to be realized in the future. These different national projects obviously conflict in fundamentally problematic ways.

Yet Eduardo Aparicio's portfolio "*Fragmentos de narraciones cubanas*" attempts to construct a space through imagistic and textual collage in which this inclusive concept of the Cuban nation can exist. In "*Fragmentos*" Aparicio juxtaposes portraits of Cubans and Cuban Americans with short captions, vignette sketches of the photographic subjects' memories, dreams and/or recent experiences. In the interplay between the bilingual captions and black and white photos, Aparicio's study participates in a project akin to that described by bell hooks: re-imaging and thus re-imagining marginalized and stereotyped subjects. Aparicio's portfolio begins with the artist's statement:

The personal history of each Cuban living in the U.S. is mostly unknown, unspoken, and often lies buried under a thick layer of inaccurate assumptions. Every Cuban knows that we do not constitute a monolithic social or ethnic group. The people who have agreed to be photographed for this series are a small indication of the great diversity among us, based on differences of generation, class, and political views. They also represent different waves of migration and regional origin. 143

Aparicio's photographic endeavor aspires to posit complexity and fragmentation against inaccurate, reductive assumptions, complicating rather than simplifying the observers' understanding of *cubanidad*. Rather than suggesting difference as erecting barriers that separate diverse individuals, Aparicio's photographs attempt to create a space of tolerance in which diversity on many levels such as gender, ethnicity, political ideology, class and age peacefully coexist. As Albó puts it, "...if a sufficiently tolerant and pluralist social environment is achieved, there is no problem of loyalty. Conflict arises when any one of the identities wants to proclaim its exclusivity at the expense of the others..." (29).

The tolerant diversity of "*Fragmentos de narraciones cubanas*" should not, however, be naively accepted as unproblematic. The story Aparicio wishes to tell is far from innocent; the collection attempts to portray Pan-Cuban unity across divides of geography, gender, sexual preference, race, class and ideological beliefs that represent real points of conflict within a radically fragmented (non-)community. The distance between recognizing difference and engaging difference remains. While foregrounding so many borders that divide, Aparicio creates an image of a (trans)nationalist Pan-Cuban unity through collage by eliding difference in the melancholic sentiment characteristic of exilic Cuban American cultural production. It should not be surprising then that certain details in Aparicio's collection, moments where difference creeps back into the frame, betray the (trans)nationalist discourse the work aspires to enact.

## The Portraits

Were one to see many of Aparicio's portraits without captions, it would be difficult to know why they should be of interest to an audience of strangers. Decontextualized, the photos seem almost banal. Sans captions, many of the portraits would seem more appropriate within the intimate context of a family photo album; the spectator would perhaps feel the discomfort of their voyeurism, peeping into the personal photos of complete strangers. Yet these banally intimate portraits perhaps attempt to realize a goal Desnoes evokes in his discussion of Latin American photography where, "Photographing men and women, as men and women, is here a positive and vital feat" (317).

Aparicio's presentation of the photographs of these individuals asserts that these subjects are worthy of being photographic subjects. In turning our gaze upon them, Aparicio forces the audience to consider them, to ask why the photographer chose to take them, who was this person he deemed worthy of capturing, of immortalizing. Desnoes writes:

The Latin American photographer has the possibility, and the means, for naming the things of our world, for demonstrating that there is another kind of beauty, that faces of the First World are not the only ones. The Indian, the black, the plundered white and mestizo faces are the first element defining the demographic content of our photography. 318-319

The primacy of diverse individuals as the building blocks of a Latin American photography has its analog here in Aparicio's Cuban photography. As bell hooks and Edmundo Desnoes both argue, in struggles for equality and representation it is a mistake to overlook the realm of images. It would equally be erroneous to think these seemingly mundane images of

seemingly unknown, unremarkable, unimportant people are without their reverberations, their effects, their own importance.

Los pies de foto / The Captions

The complexity and tolerance to which Aparicio aims could also be read in the bilingual nature of his portfolio. The formal necessity of stating everything twice, first in Spanish and then in English, indicates the importance of translation and code switching in dialogue between Cuban and Cuban American subjectivities. Yet translation, like photography, never communicates transparently. For example in Spanish, the subject of the first sentence of the artist's statement, "*El historial personal de cada uno de los cubanos que vivimos en los Estados Unidos*" indicates from the outset the author's inclusion in the grouping of "each Cuban living in the U.S." through the *nosotros* form of *vivir* (143). The English translation negotiates this nuance in meaning by inserting the prepositional phrase "among us" later in the paragraph. No such analogous phrase exists in the Spanish.

Translation theories often insist on a schema that valorizes the original language to the detriment of the target language summarized in the well-worn saying "Translation is treason." This conception of the act of translation as betrayal gains new nuanced complexity when considering a work such as "*Fragmentos de narraciones cubanas*" because the inscription of the original text itself relies, almost naively, upon translation as a means to communicate to and bring together a wider audience of both English and Spanish readers. Translation may be treason, but the verb *traducir* also suggests through its Latin origins to bring across, to bridge. The title of the anthology, *Bridges to Cuba / Puentes a Cuba*,

functions in a similar way, the slash between the English and Spanish portions of the title forming both a caesura that separates and a bridge between the two languages and all they imply.

Although the argument could be made that this need for bilingual enunciation indicates a status of equality between the English and Spanish texts, many compositional and editorial decisions indicate the opposite. The title of the portfolio appears first in Spanish, in a larger font that fills almost the entirety of the first page. On the second page, the English translation of the title appears in a diminutive form. The “*Declaración del artista*” precedes the “Artist’s statement.” Beside the photos, captions appear in bold Spanish, while the English versions in a smaller font, qualified as “Translation[s]” lie below. These compositional decisions indicate not only the photographer’s but also the photographic subjects’ investment in Spanish as the primary language of enunciation. Yet the English translations exist stubbornly without any credit to a translator. Without further indications, the reader can only assume that the photographer also performed the roles of interviewer and *traductor*.

The central role of translation in “*Fragmentos*” indicates the linguistic diversity of both the portfolio’s intended audience and its author. Although the collection’s composition indicates the primacy of Spanish in the text, the coexistence of English points to an individual and collective practice of linguistic negotiation and the nuances in Cuban American identity therein implied. Whether for practical, editorial or personal reasons, Aparicio chooses to communicate in two languages. Curiously, the space in which he aspires to depict a tolerant, inclusive conception of the Pan-Cuban nation seemingly valorizes

Spanish as a sign of authentic *cubanidad*. Would it be indecent of me to wonder whether all of the interviews originally took place in Spanish?

### La foto / The Photo

The following readings of the two photos borrow the terms *studium* and *punctum* that Barthes coined in *Camera Lucida*. As terms that describe different degrees to which a photo affects the spectator, *studium* moves the spectator on the order of mere “liking,” appealing to general aesthetics of composition and communication of the photographer’s intention, while *punctum* pierces the spectator (Barthes, *Camera* 26, 27). Of *punctum*, Barthes writes, “...a ‘detail’ attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eye with a higher value. This ‘detail’ is the *punctum*,” (*Camera* 42). Barthes terminology provides a methodology of reading photography through subjective reception of an image that fits appropriately into my revolt, the subjective critique I wish to enact. Yet Aparicio captions the portraits with the words of their subjects, “making it possible that not only their faces be seen, but also that their voices be heard” (143). The captions in “*Fragmentos*” exceed Barthes discussion of the uncaptioned image and have the strange effect of framing the spectators’ reception of the image, speaking to the larger socio-historical context that exceeds the image’s frame, intimating things that cannot be captured in a cliché.

A photo that fits my earlier description of “banally intimate,” the photo of Rubén D. Jiménez gains *punctum*, new melancholic overtones that causes me to completely reconsider my reading of it only when considered in terms of its caption. Despite having left Cuba over

twenty five years ago, Jiménez tells us he feels, “...*tan cubano como la caña de azúcar*,” his bitter advantage of exile being that “*el destierro nos ha enseñado a querer a nuestra patria aún más*” (Aparicio 145). Exile has also meant separation from family, yet Jiménez still dreams of an eventual return to Cuba: “*Siempre pienso en el regreso a ver a mi familia. Pues aunque hayan pasado tantos años, el amor y la relación familiar jamás se han perdido*” (Aparicio 145). Although with the passing years, “*el miedo de llegar viejo a Cuba y no poder disfrutarla me entristece*” (145).

Implicit in this fear of growing old in the U.S., I interpret the nervous impatience and recalcitrant stubbornness of one awaiting Castro’s death to return to Cuba. These words clash with this image of a smiling schoolteacher, pointer in hand, standing proudly in his office. Without the caption, pinpointing Jiménez nationality or ethnicity proves difficult. Without the melancholic narrative, Jiménez seems to me merely a smiling nobody, like so many photographs taken, developed and forgotten everyday. The portrait, however, gains *punctum* after having read its caption at which point all I can see are Mr. Jiménez laughing eyes, wide smile and the pain hidden behind them.

As I read the caption, the portrait of Concepción Gil del Real gained *punctum* as well, but in a different way. My initial impression of the portrait was one of seasickness. Its intimate, diagonal horizon contorts the subject’s body into a claustrophobic check mark. Initially for me the photograph had neither *studium* nor *punctum*. It transgressed my internalized aesthetic of photographic composition. For *studium*, the subject should have been well framed; her torso and legs should have been parallel and perpendicular to the borders. Yet upon reading the caption that reveals that the photograph captures Gil del Real “*de regreso a La Habana, Cuba*” in the Miami airport, her garish wardrobe, the myriad

scarves, bracelets, and endless layers of clothing she wears become the detail the pierces me (Aparicio 148). All I see are these clothes and baubles. The heat must have been incredibly oppressive. I imagine Gil de Real filling her suitcases and adorning her body with presents for family and friends to briefly relieve them of the economic privation of the blockade and *el periodo especial*. Despite the materialistic gaudiness of her outfit, Gil del Real insists in the caption that “*yo quiero mucho a Cuba*” and “*pasé unos días muy buenos aquí, pero adoro mi patria*” (Aparicio 148). She has enjoyed her two visits to the U.S., loves and misses her family in Miami, but she insists, “*yo no dejaría a los seres queridos que tengo allá [en Cuba]*” (Aparicio 148). The composition I previously perceived as sloppy, gains a new intimacy: the rush and bustle of airports, preparations for a bittersweet voyage, attempts to fully capitalize on the rare opportunity to squeeze a few trinkets through the economic stranglehold the U.S. has on the island.

Rubén D. Jiménez and Concepción Gil del Real seem separated by many barriers: age, class, gender, ethnicity, geography, and politics. Presumably if they desired it strongly enough, Jiménez could visit Cuba or Gil del Real could immigrate to the U.S. For reasons Aparicio’s portfolio elides, these choices are not sufficient solutions for either of these individuals. Both speak of a common desire to share Cuba, to ease the pain of separation they feel and to reunite family and friends. Jiménez’s belief, “*Verdaderamente es difícil tratar de recuperar el tiempo perdido, pero el cariño puede vencer*” echoes in Gil de Real’s wish, “*Ojalá un día podamos estar todos juntos*” (Aparicio 145, 148). Perhaps through ignoring the political rhetoric and framing that underpins these photographic subjects’ particular situations, the differences that separate, Aparicio hopes to show a common pain and common desire. Perhaps by working through the emotional trauma experienced by



Cubans on both sides of the Straits of Florida, these common dreams can become concrete goals. On the other hand, perhaps the futurity of Pan-Cuban universalist discourse is merely a method of eliding conflict and differences that create barriers that prevent this dream from ever becoming more than a dream.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Lacunae: Identity As Absence**

When I imagine who I am, when I attempt to trace the genealogy of my particular identity and pinpoint possible points of origin, often I have found myself at a loss. Growing up, there were certain things the family did not discuss. My father did not often speak of his early childhood, his life in Cuba before his brother Angel and he, mere children, left their home and everything they knew without the comfort or reassurance of their parents in *Operación Pedro Pan*. This gap in the narrative of my father's life came to occupy a strange, disproportionately central position in questions of my own identity.

For instance, my maternal grandmother, Leda, was born and raised in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the United States as a young rebellious woman to marry my grandfather, a mentally unstable G.I. recently returned from the beaches of Normandy. Leda and my mother openly speak of their lives, the good and the bad. I am somewhat amazed that I have never fixated on the history of this branch of my family; I have not, to this point, felt the need to research or question these stories. The narrative it seems has been complete, satisfying. I could speak with my grandmother and visit the beaches of Normandy. I could feel at peace with this history and my relation to it, not because the story of my maternal grandmother and grandfather offered less tragedy or hardship, but because the story had been told. The incompleteness of my father's story, his silence, his lack of willingness to share a convincing narrative of his life in Cuba and arrival in the U.S. lies at the root of this project.

I first learned of *Operación Pedro Pan* when a journalist and academic arrived on my front porch early one morning before high school. To my surprise my uncle Angel who lived hours away sat in the kitchen drinking coffee with my father. No one had informed me of this meeting. No explanations were offered. Later that day at school, a classmate would tell me he had seen my dad and uncle on the news being interviewed. Upon returning from class, on the front page of the local section of the *Dallas Morning News*, a photo of my father and uncle with a smiling reporter standing around our kitchen table brimming over with documents and photos from Cuba stared up at me from the very same, but now empty table.

Some years later when I first brought my research interests to my father's attention, it angered him. I wanted to do a series of recorded interviews with my grandparents, uncle and father to document their untold histories. He dismissed the past telling me, "Why do you want to know about these things? The most important things for you to know about me all have to do with my life since I've come here. I accepted the Lord as my personal savior. I went to high school. I met your mother, and we had you and your sisters, our children, *here*. All that has been important to me happened *here*." Yet his frustrated and frustrating outbursts never satisfied me. I stubbornly persisted, unbeknownst to him, to read and research Cuban history, literature, photography and film seeking the things my father was unwilling or unable to share.

### Critical Approaches to "Personal" Problems

In *History in Transit: Experience, Identity and Critical Theory* Dominick LaCapra approximates a working definition of identity writing:

Identity is probably best understood as a problematic constellation of more or less changing configuration of subject positions. And subject positions themselves are not necessarily fixed or complacent (even when they become fixations). For example, the child of a Nazi has received a burdensome “legacy” and at times a name (Martin Bormann, say) that carries connotations and even conveys narratives that are difficult to live down. If someone with such a subject position did not attempt to come to terms explicitly with his or her positionality, or claimed that subject positions are ineluctably and universally undecidable or indeterminate, one might suspect evasiveness. This is not to say that someone in this position inherits the guilt of a parent or even that anyone has a definite, prescriptive idea of what coming to terms with such a “legacy” should be. Nor is it to deny the significance of ambiguous cases in the twilight or gray zones of perpetrator-victims and more or less complicitous bystanders. But it is to say that in certain respects people are implicated in a past (hence are not simply contingent singularities [self-] created *ex nihilo*) and at some level are subject to experiences that require an attempt to situate themselves historically and work with and through that situatedness.<sup>5</sup>

According to LaCapra it would seem that my personal interest in Cuba would amount to an attempt on my part to historically situate my positionality as a subject burdened with a certain inherited legacy. Within LaCapra’s theoretical framing, my academic endeavors amount to an attempt to work through my “situatedness.”

Yet as the quote suggests, neither the configuration of these subject positions nor the subject positions themselves are static but rather dynamic, ever-changing. As I attempt to situate my historical position working with and through it, as this process unfolds, certain elements of the constellation of subject positions that comprise my identity may assume disproportionate importance while others may be obscured. This can be seen in the overemphasis of my father’s historical legacy and the de-emphasis of that of my mother in my own working with and through.

LaCapra’s rhetoric, “to work with and through that situatedness,” obviously echoes Freud. In “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” Freud describes the aim of psychoanalytic methods through which psychoanalysts attempt to assist patients “to fill in

gaps in memory” and “to overcome resistances due to repression” (148). The particular gaps, the repressed memories, I am attempting to fill here are, however, inherited ones which complicates but in no way invalidates a Freudian approach to the problematic process of working through them. Abraham and Torok elaborate precisely this very idea of inherited gaps in their collection of essays *The Shell and The Kernel*. In a footnote the editor of the collection, Rand writes, “the buried speech of the parent will be (a) dead (gap) without a burial place within the child” (Abraham and Torok 140). The trauma of previous generations, their “unfinished business” can be “unconsciously handed down to their descendants” (Abraham and Torok 167).

Interpreting Cuban American cultural production through the lens of Freud’s 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia” provides an apt framework for analysis of a corpus of texts within which Cuba figures as a common, yet undefined object of loss. Freud’s conception of the “loss of a loved object” central to mourning expands both in its vagueness and scope into melancholia’s “loss of a more ideal kind” (“Mourning” 245). In melancholia, the object itself may not actually be “lost,” it may still exist. Instead the melancholic subject loses either the previous affective attachment to the object, such as in the end of a romantic relationship, or something that the loved object represented or provided; the patient, “knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him” (Freud, “Mourning” 245). The nebulous, vague nature of the lost object of affection lies at the source of both the persistence of melancholia and its flexibility as an interpretive concept.

Yet this theoretical lens through which we can view the broad range of literary, historical, dramatic and filmic texts encompassed within Cuban American cultural production can also be turned onto the text I produce here. As suggested earlier, the lack of a

narrative explaining my father's exodus from Cuba has created an inherited gap "without a burial place" within me. In an attempt to fill that gap, I have sought texts that mirror and expand upon my own experience. My analysis becomes not only an exercise of critical interpretation of texts that exist independently of myself, but also a transference of my inherited legacy onto those texts. Critical interpretation becomes itself a working with and through. In many ways, in my critical project, reading texts has become reading myself.

As LaCapra and Freud both seem to suggest, a definite prescriptive methodology of working through trauma, repression and loss does not exist. The endeavor is rather an individual, personal process born out in many forms through repetition and transference. Work with an analyst may suffice for some; for others, re-inscription in textual, imagistic or aural forms may provide apt outlets. Furthermore, as I have suggested through my own experience, often in the Cuban American situation Freudian models of trauma, repression, melancholia and working through are played out across the span of generations.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Images of Exodus: “Upon The Arrival of My Family”**

In “*Encuentros y Encontronazos*: Homeland in the Politics and Identity of the Cuban Diaspora” María de los Angeles Torres describes the installation “Upon the Arrival of My Family”:

Elizabeth Mesa-Gaido’s multimedia installation in “Cubana” included a ship with severed masts above the hull; these masts could be viewed as tree trunks, because beneath the hull thick roots extended down and out. A video projected images of hands digging while the taped voices of her mother and relatives talked about their journey to the United States and their lives afterward. The ship signifies not one journey outward but moving in both directions; the roots are sunk in diaspora but nothing prevents their being interpreted as also rooted in the homeland. The installation legitimates the voices of women as valid participants in the discourse of identity. 59

For de los Angeles Torres, this is “art [that] articulates a vision of transnational being” (Torres 59). But what exactly is this articulated vision of transnational being?

“Upon the Arrival of My Family” (1993) creates a space the spectator enters enveloped in its elements: the voices of Mesa-Gaido’s family echo throughout the gallery off photos of smiling faces, video images of hands scratching at the soil, and this strange wooden ship, its severed masts, trunks stopping short of the sky yet sprouting roots into the hull. The multiplicity of disembodied, familial voices recounting experiences of exodus and exile resonates with the ship, the digging hands, and the roots suggesting an excavation and preservation of memory. The immobility of the ship is contradictory and double; truncated masts firmly rooted intimate a traumatic flight, a transnational Cuban American identity entrenched in em/immigration.

Several elements of Mesa-Gaido's installation point to traumatic loss. The ship can be interpreted as symbolic of flight, of em/immigration, while its severed masts suggest contradictorily an inability for motion or progress. Furthermore, the ship stands rooted within a wash of familial discourses describing the experiences of em/immigration and exile. Thinking in terms of Freud's formulation of melancholia, however, "em/immigration" may provide merely one of the more obvious, emblematic embodiments of a deeper, more nebulous loss addressed in Cuban-American cultural production. The recorded voices, disembodied and decontextualized seem a beautifully apt rendering of "the buried speech of the parent [that] will be (a) dead (gap) without a burial place within the child" (Abraham and Torok 140). The juxtaposition of these voices, the disabled, rooted ship and the video images of digging hands suggests the need to deal with "unfinished business" of previous generations "unconsciously handed down to their descendants" (Abraham and Torok 167).

In order to better understand "Upon the Arrival of My Family" further socio-historical contextualization of the piece's first appearance seems appropriate. Maria de los Angeles Torres outlines the broad political, social and cultural evolution within the Cuban exile community from the time of the revolution through the period of *el diálogo* and beyond characterizing the process as a series of steps towards and setbacks in attempts to normalize relations and catalyze meaningful exchange across the Straits of Florida. According to de los Angeles Torres, new Cuban immigrants in the late 1980's brought fresh vigor to debates in Miami:

Unlike past waves of exiles who were dismissed as members of the ancien regime or outcasts of the new one, this one contains the revolution's own cultural elite, who criticize the [Cuban] government not for its leftist ideology but rather because it had betrayed its own nationalist and socialist principles. Many have studied at the Ministry of Culture's Art Institute, where students were encouraged to read the classics, not Soviet manuals; they have more



analytical tools with which to *rethink the Nation*. In Miami, the city they were taught to hate and which was taught to hate them, new exiles are meeting the children of the 1960s exiles. Like their island counterparts, many Miami Cubans now also reject the dominant political culture of their community, including the predescribed ways each side is expected to deal with the other. The result is an intense exploration for new ways of rethinking Cuban identity, art and politics. 55

It is in this ambience that Mesa-Gaido's "Upon the Arrival of My Family" was shown as part of "Cubana", an exhibition that brought together the work of twelve Cuban women at Miami's Museo Cubano de Arte y Cultura in November of 1993 (Torres 56). Yet this spirit of dialogue and reconciliation was far from universal; only five years earlier a bomb had exploded at the front door of the Museo Cubano (Mullin).

### The Insufficiency of CliChes

Previously in "The Image of Che," I explored the Cuban American's precarious "situatedness" within the discourses of political and familial rhetoric and posited that this can result in the conflicted reception of mythic images, such as the famous icon of Che Guevara I saw emblazoned upon the t-shirts of the rock group Rage Against the Machine. I argued that ambivalent loyalties split between familial trauma and personal conviction could transform the image of Che from an icon of popular culture to a sight of psychic confusion and conflict between the dominant, social concept that the mythic image may be seen to represent, i.e. "leftist resistance," and the personal reading of the image seen through the lens of familial trauma, i.e. "exilic loss."

If my essay "The Image of Che" suggests that for Cuban Americans certain mythic images from popular culture fail to clearly communicate their concepts but rather bring to the

fore internal conflicts and ambivalences of Cuban American subjectivity, the suggestion becomes all the more complicated when one considers that the essay was inspired from my personal, subjective experience, and that the image of Che may incite completely different reactions for other Cuban Americans. It would thus be more accurate to speak of a plurality of Cuban American subjectivities influenced by a variety of racial, socio-economic, political, geographic and gender positions. Obviously an Afro-Cuban *marielita* will not necessarily experience her Cuban American subjectivity in the same way as a middle class, male *Pedro Pan*.

### The Insufficiency of Imagined Communities

Attempts to forge a collective identity amongst a group of diverse individuals may be seen as utopian or even quixotic undertakings. Yet this need to feel that one belongs, that one's experience relates to a larger community exercises a strong pull and shapes the various actions of individuals that can be read as claims to markers of identity, whether it be relatively mundane personal choices such as the style of clothes one wears, the food one eats, the music to which one listens, or the more ambitious creation of cultural products such as novels, photographic portfolios, or art installations.

In Chapter 2 I posited that certain Cuban Americans feel the need to imagine themselves as part of a transnational *cubanía*. I argued that Eduardo Aparicio's "*Fragmentos de narraciones cubanas*" and the anthology in which it appeared, *Puentes a Cuba / Bridges to Cuba*, represent this tendency to attempt to redefine the Cuban nation along broader lines. Ultimately I found that Aparicio's photo collection paradoxically foregrounds and effaces the

richness of Cuban and Cuban American subjectivities, eliding some of the more contentious political causes of the split in the “Cuban” nation in order to emphasize a melancholic longing for reunification on both sides of the Straits of Florida.

The trauma of exile can thus be seen as disrupting both the reception and the creation of images, as fragmenting and complicating both the concepts that mythic images of popular culture are supposed to transmit and the ability to create images that communicate a sense of community. My interest in Mesa-Gaido’s installation “Upon the Arrival of My Family” springs from that I read it as both a critique and a restaging of Cuban American identity in the tradition of melancholic Cuban American memory projects such as Eduardo Aparicio’s photographic portfolio. I will now include some photos of the installation Mesa-Gaido was kind enough to email me and discuss “Upon the Arrival of My Family” in further detail.

### Tangents and Fragments

I first encountered Mesa-Gaido’s installation while researching images of exilic departure in the works of Achy Obejas and Cristina García. María de los Angeles Torres figured heavily in my research as her book *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan* proved movingly informative of the plight of young Cubans like my father and uncle who left Cuba under the auspices of the Catholic Church and the U.S. government’s attempts to “save” the next generation of Cubans from Marxist indoctrination. As is often the case in research, reading about Mesa-Gaido’s installation in de los Angeles Torres’ essay “*Encuentros y Encontronazos*” began what at the time was merely a tangential project loosely related to melancholic images of exilic departure in Cuban American literature.

The photographs of Mesa-Gaido's installation cannot accurately represent the experience of entering the three-dimensional multimedia space the artist originally created for the spectator. The photos freeze, flatten and silence a work of art that was intended to be experienced in space and time as an interactive ambience. As mentioned earlier, audio loops of Mesa-Gaido's family members recounting their journeys to and arrival in the United States and a video loop of hands digging at the earth played continuously. The three-dimensional space created an environment through which the spectator could move providing different angles of sight and juxtapositions of sculptural, photographic, video, and aural sensory experiences. Ironically writing about an installation that I have never seen based on an insufficient collection of five photographs mirrors my larger academic projects' focus on Cuba, a country I have never visited and seen only in photographs.

### The Photos

The first photo Mesa-Gaido provided shows the general layout of the installation. A bisected ship with truncated masts sails across a sea of colorful collage of photographic fragments. Yet the shorn masts and hull as well as the stand upon which the ship rests also suggest that the ship is immobile. The image of a bifurcated ship whose masts are trees that while rooted have been felled seems especially pregnant with meaning in the Cuban American context. Torres interprets this ship rather optimistically. At the risk of sounding simple minded, two things prevent me from seeing the trees as simply "rooted in the homeland." First, the trees are literally rooted in a ship; Second, the ship appears



traumatically immobilized for being both split open in order to display its roots and for having lost its methods of locomotion, its masts.

The ship is also constructed of naked, unfinished wood, which provides a sharp contrast to the very bright colors of the photographic fragments in which it stands immobilized. When turning my gaze to the photographs of the installation's collage, one of the first things I notice is the overwhelming "whiteness" of the photographic subjects. They may be Cuban, but they are certainly not Afro-Cuban. The photos represent individuals of different ages and genders who wear different facial expressions, but the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of Aparicio's portfolio seems absent. These could almost be images of the white-washed Hispanics we see in ads from *People En Español* or Univisión. Almost hidden behind the ship, I see a black and white photo that echoes the color contrast between the ship and its surroundings.

The second photo focuses on the roots of the truncated masts within the hull of the ship. The symbolic and associative possibilities of trees provide a very rich and polysemic focal point for critical interpretation. Obviously there is the metaphor of the family tree that embodies heritage and family history. Through an extension of this metaphor, one can imagine individuals metaphorically as trees, both finding nourishment in and carrying the history of the various branches of their family in their "roots." Yet again, at the risk of being emphatic, whereas de los Angeles Torres argues that, "The ship signifies not one journey outward but moving in both directions; the roots are sunk in diaspora but nothing prevents their being interpreted as also rooted in the homeland," I find that these roots are only sunk in the ill-fitting home of the crippled, frozen ship (55). The optimism of de los Angeles Torres' interpretation seems to ignore the violence implied in the amputation of the treetops that





simultaneously suggests the inability to flourish or to reproduce, and as the trees double as masts, the inability to “move on.” To me it appears that the tree stumps are destined to die trapped in this motionless ship.

The next photograph shows the deck of the ship and the tops of the tree stumps juxtaposed against a perfect smile and a black-and-white photo of a leaf standing in a glass of water. The tensions between the various elements in these photographs hint at both the installation’s participation in utopian discourses on Cuban American identity and the critique of that utopian discourse I believe “Upon the Arrival of My Family” posits. The conflict between the attractive smile worthy of a Crest commercial and these pitiful trees stumps seems an almost ironic portrayal of the contradiction of the daily lives of Cuban Americans, the normalcy and happiness many seem to have found in the United States and their traumatic means of arrival. This coincidence of images seems to suggest that despite those pearly whites, there is something of the *balsero* inside all Cuban Americans. This hypothesis is reinforced by the only black-and-white image in the collage, that of the transplanted leaf inside the glass of water.

I have already addressed the frustration of analyzing this installation through observing these photos. The photo of the television playing a video loop of digging hands embodies this frustration for two reasons. First, this photo reminds me that contact with the video and audio elements of the installation are absent from my analysis, that all I know of these elements comes mediated through the short description in María de los Angeles Torres’ text. Second, when I compare this photo with the first photograph of the general layout of the installation, I realize that the placement of the video seems to be different in the two pictures. Here the orange and black column containing the television monitor that displays







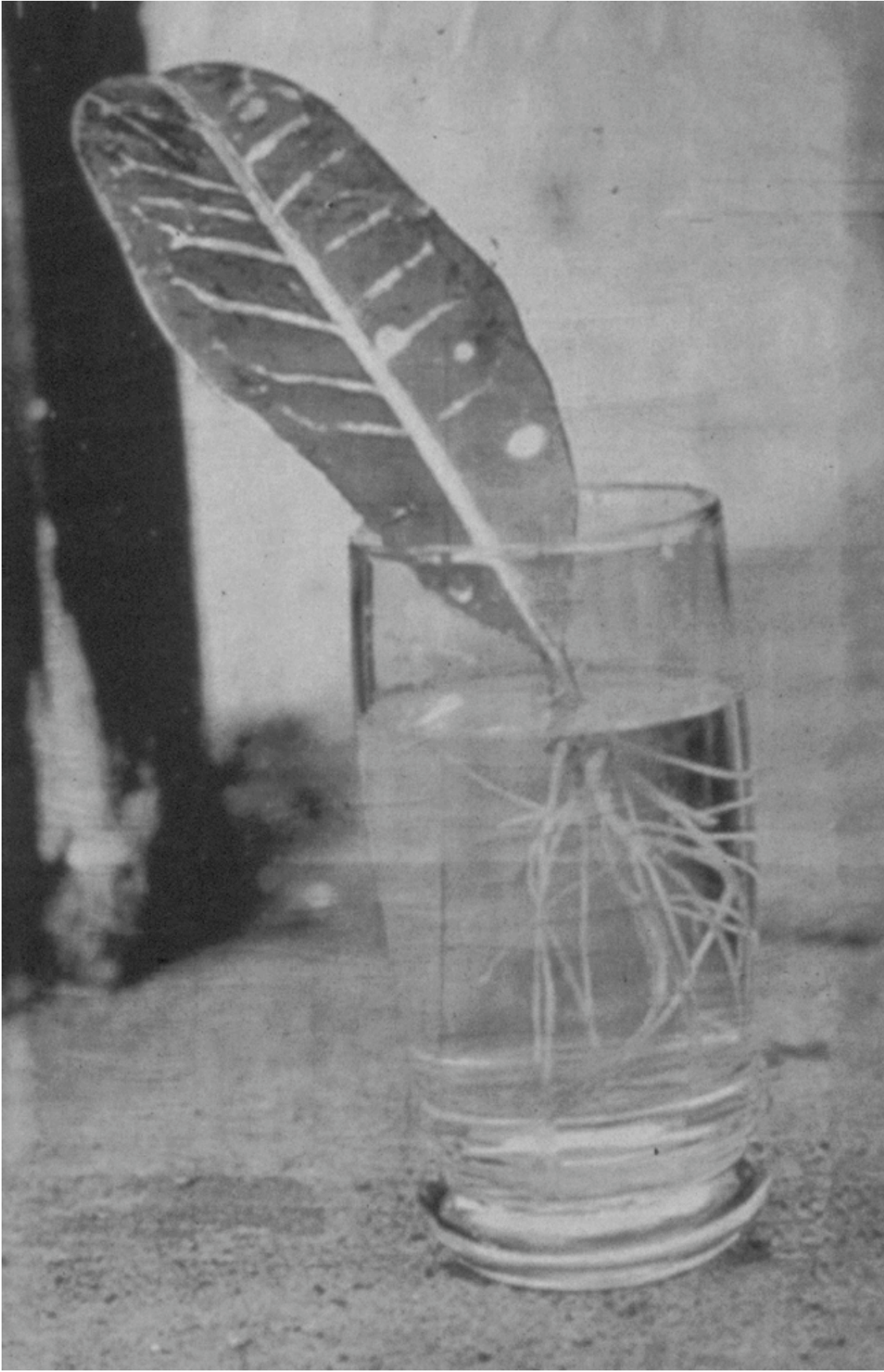


the video loop lies just under the image of the toddler apparently to the right of the ship. In the first photo, the column stands to the left of the collage and ship. Are these two different instances of the installation? Did Mesa-Gaido decide to move the video? In the first photo I

showed, does the ship block another column? In any case, what could the placement of the video signify?

For me, the black-and-white photograph of a young plant floating in a glass of water is central to “Upon the Arrival of My Family.” It stands out amongst the colorful photos of the collage and clearly exists in dialogue with the crippled trees/masts. In many ways the image is the inverse of the ship. The energy producing leaf of the plant is not severed like the masts of the ship. The transparent glass both holds water and lets in light, whereas the hull of the ship keeps water out and must be split open to display roots. This plant seems young, at the beginning of a new life, perhaps ready to be sewn into new soil, while the trees that are masts have been chopped down, trapped in a ship and will not be transplanted. The life of this transplant, on the other hand, is precarious, yet persistent. It carries with itself its own nourishing water, but while the glass creates a protective space, it also constitutes a limit or barrier. As I look at this photo, I wonder if the plant will ever escape the confines of its glass.

The fact that this photo is the only black-and-white image also raises questions. Does this photographic choice emphasize the “past-ness” of what the photo depicts? Is it merely black-and-white in order to provide contrast with the rest of the collage? I also feel that it would be important to identify the species of the trees in the ship and that of this little plant floating in a glass of water. Are they the same? If the plants are the same species, this could connote a lineage and familial relation. Finally, I would like to know if the plants are typical Cuban flora. If the trees and the transplant are flora typical of Cuba, then it would seem that through this choice Mesa-Gaido strengthens the metaphor of em/immigration as the transplantation of living beings not necessarily adapted to new environments.





## Reflections on Looking

What began as a tangent to another research project has unfolded into a rich string of reflections and questions. My initial curiosity led me to contact Mesa-Gaido, and she was gracious enough to send me these images. Yet while these photos have helped me develop an interpretation of her work, they also prove utterly insufficient. I have felt the frustration Victor Burgin describes when, “the image which on first looking gave pleasure has by degrees become a veil behind which we now desire to see” (136). The photos are a frustrating reminder of the belatedness of my gaze. The installation is no more. They cannot replace the experience of observing “Upon the Arrival of My Family” first hand. Yet even had I had the opportunity to visit the exhibition *Cubana*, I am almost certain that many of my questions would still be unanswered. Photographs do not hold a monopoly on catalyzing the insatiable and impossible desire to know and understand that which escapes us; looking at text, photos, art or ourselves can all become a frustrating exercise in the limits of our knowledge and understanding. Yet this frustration also appears to be the impetus for research and exploration.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Cuban American Subject As Object**

Rey Chow levels an astute critique of the trend toward autobiographical narrative in ethnic literatures as a product of the “phenomenon of coercive mimeticism” that “interpellates ethnic subjects into acts of confessions about themselves, in what may be called self-mimicry” (138). Despite the danger of merely aping difference, I have insisted on anecdotal, autobiographical confessions because they underline an emerging aspect in both Cuban American and other minoritized individuals of my generation: the peculiar combination of inherited trauma, lacunae in familial narratives and integration into U.S. society that creates a melancholic subject marked as the foreign other to dominant American culture, and yet simultaneously foreign to his or her otherness. What else is left for such a subject but “self-mimicry?”

According to Stratton and Ang the hyphenated, “ethnic” individual experiences the tension of one whose difference must be defined, “*outside* the general paradigm of a universal all-Americanness” (qtd. in Chow 30). This tension plays out in a strange futurity of hyphenated identities, “always looking ahead to a time when the United States will have fully realized its universal ideals – that is, when the ethnic particulars, while continuing to exist, no longer matter,” (Chow 30). Yet imagined as both a member of an exile community and as a contested sight of ideological conflict, the Cuban American subject experiences the tension of hyphenated identity in conjunction with the dubious chore of being an objectified, overdetermined symbol for entrenched ideological discourses dating from the Cold War.

The question then becomes to which universal principles the futurity of Cuban American identity aspires: integration into the socio-economic fabric of the United States or the messianic spread of democracy and capitalism that will set Cuba “free” from the “tyranny” of Castro? Cuban American difference thus contains the additional complication of existing outside the universal ideals of the United States and yet providing proof of the supremacy of the universal ideals of which it can never be a part. The simplest distillation of these complications can be summarized in two naïve and interrelated questions. If communism were not so horrific and capitalism not so wonderful, why would so many Cubans live in exile in the United States? Can Cubans be both exiles and immigrants? These questions taken to their (il)logical conclusion would ultimately postulate that if Castro’s regime were replaced by a capitalist democracy aligned with the United States, the Cuban American exilic diaspora could magically be undone, an unrealistic and ahistorical flip-flop comparable to what the Bush administration has proposed would happen after “regime change” in Iraq.

Certainly, many Cuban Americans have been extremely comfortable with this version of the story. It provides a clear-cut narrative of good and evil that inflates the importance of a minoritized immigrant community with a strange heroic victimhood as exemplars of the struggle against communism. Yet to be fair, the strong Cuban American identification with the United States must be seen historically. Louis A. Pérez’s obsessively thorough *On Becoming Cuban* demonstrates time and time again the way Cuban American identity began forming long before 1958 through the United States’ cultural and economic colonization of the island since its first moments of independence in 1898. Pérez puts forth the compelling argument that since the earliest calls for Cuban independence from Spain up to the

Revolution in 1958, in so far as Cubans turned away from Spain and to the North for new ways of imagining themselves, to be Cuban in many ways resembled what would become being *Cuban American* (165, 220, 355).

Castro's restructuring of Cuban national identity in opposition to the United States can be seen as the result of the historical failure of the alliance of Cuban (American) otherness with North American capitalist universalism. Thus the trope of the Cuban American as the pious capitalist political exile awaiting return to a liberated homeland has its flipside common among leftist discourses that characterize the Cuban American as the naughty Latino/a, the *gusano/a*. The stereotype that all Cuban Americans are politically conservative, bourgeois capitalists who impatiently await the death of Fidel Castro is certainly not without some basis, but it too serves to restrict Cuban Americans' autonomy to break free from overdetermined categorization.

For example, once while I was living in France, a friend of mine who was campaigning in the presidential elections for Arlette Leguiller and the Trotskyist party *Lutte Ouvrière* brought several party members to my house for a coffee break. After an hour of stimulating exchange, the conversation turned to my family. Upon discovering that my father was born in Havana, the young militants' eyes shone with a naïve admiration that was quickly replaced with equally naïve disgust when I revealed that my father left Cuba in 1961 shortly after Castro came to power. A string of epithets insulting my family as dirty imperialist oppressors that deserved everything we got led to my friend apologizing profusely and politely escorting his enraged companions out of my apartment. As they left, I sat wondering why they thought I would have knowingly invited a group of Trotskyists in for coffee and conversation if I were such a dirty *gusano*.



Thus we can imagine the ideologically fraught nature of Cuban American difference as existing paradoxically as both an otherness defined outside the universalizing ideals of the United States and as a contested site of ideological conflict at which universalizing ideals attempt to impose hegemony. As a site of ideological conflict, I argue that Cuban American difference can become the mere object of opposing ideological discourses, emptied of self-determined meaning. I have attempted to describe particular moments of crisis when the subject is overwhelmed by the dynamics of hyphenated identity and objectification described above. What happens when a subject unwilling or unable to accept oversimplified, ideologically pre-determined definitions of the Cuban and American components of an inherently split identity revolts?

Rather than being merely interpellated by ideology, the Cuban American caught in the contradiction of the ideological implications of the components “Cuban” and “American” must simultaneously respond to ideology’s call and be exemplary proof of ideology. This relationship to ideology speaks to a paradoxical complication in the problematic constellation of Cuban American subjectivity: how does the subject who does not know him/herself present him/herself in the overwrought and overdetermined mythical realm of metanarratives in which s/he is the contentious object of conflict? The paralyzing psychic claustrophobia I described in myself and found echoed in Juani’s violent outburst takes root in the fact that since the Revolution Cuban and Cuban American subjects have been the site of very public, incessant ideological conflict.

Thus individuals marked by *cubanidad*, become symbols, mere cases in point or proof for larger clashing metanarratives. Whether we think of films of the young children of *Pedro Pan* used by the U.S. government as proof of the horror of Castro’s regime or the

currency of images of Cuba's revolutionary leaders as symbols of resistance to U.S. imperialist hegemony, the discourses of Cold War ideological conflict have objectified and instrumentalized "Cuban" figures robbing human beings marked as Cuban of the autonomous right to define oneself with all the complications, contradictions and problems therein implied and transforming them into proof, mythical symbols or both.

I become confused and angry with a crowd of strangers because they naively wear a symbol that evokes a complicated, conflicted personal relationship to history, ideology and my family; Juani violently strikes her lover for frustration at her inability to rival the richness of the Puerto Rican *independistas*' "knowledge" of Cuba. Whereas the public discourse on the meaning of Cuba abounds with a wealth of impassioned and contradictory significations (i.e. Cuba as either failed, communist dictatorship or exemplary site of resistance to imperialism), the Cuban American's relationship to Cuba centers on loss and a profound obscurity of meaning. Juani puts this dynamic of her inability to speak of Cuba wonderfully, "Suddenly, I hated that I was just sitting there like a big black hole, like the mouth of one of those big industrial washers into which everybody just throws their dirty laundry" (Obejas 133).

**Chapter 6**  
**Melancholic Images of Traumatic Exodus: Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban***

To my knowledge, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) has yet to be seriously engaged in terms of psychoanalysis, a fact I find somewhat shocking considering the overwhelming success of the novel and its currency in curriculums across campuses in the United States. Critics to date offer many differing and at times contradictory interpretations of the novel. Mitchell suggests that *Dreaming in Cuban* problematizes Cuba as “a singular or autonomous political entity” (58). Payant posits that the novel offers hope “for reconciliation between Cubans” (180). De los Angeles Torres claims that García privileges the Cuban American exile community as the site of Cuban national memory (60). And finally Gomez-Vega proposes that Pilar represents a new model of the self-aware, transnational Cuban American woman (99).

In opposition to the optimistic readings listed above, I read the novel as entrenched in trauma, melancholy and ultimately repetition. Thus while *Dreaming in Cuban* broke new ground, notably in representing the darker side of Cuban America and a more sympathetic image of Cuba, the novel ultimately remains trapped in repetition. I will argue that the novel's obsession with remembering and retelling Pilar, Jorge, and Lourdes' experiences of exilic departure through dream-like flashbacks can be read as attempts to deal with traumatic experience after the fact. Yet these emigrations are also merely the first step towards exiles plagued by melancholic loss. For García's exiles, the lost-object of their melancholia is “Cuba.” Pilar, Jorge and Lourdes are, however, unaware of exactly what they have lost *in*

“Cuba.” Finally, as the loss of our characters remains ambiguous and largely unconscious, rather than offering hope, *Dreaming in Cuban* ends with Lourdes and Pilar forcing a repetition of their exilic departure on the youngest of the del Pino family, Ivanito.

*Dreaming in Cuban* creates a narrative collage of numerous traumatic memories of exilic departure that complicates a unified concept of transnational Cuban American identity. The novel recounts three major instances of emigration from Cuba to the United States: Lourdes and her daughter Pilar’s arrival in the Miami airport shortly after the Revolution of 1958, Jorge’s trip to New York for chemotherapy in the mid-1960’s, and Ivanito’s departure through the Peruvian embassy during the Mariel Boatlift of 1980. It is important to note that each traumatic departure occurs at a distinct historical moment involving characters whose motivations for leaving the island are vastly different.

In order to explain how the exilic departures in *Dreaming in Cuban* are traumatic, I must first briefly explain Freud’s concept of trauma as outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Central to Freud’s formulation of trauma is his concept of consciousness. Rather than providing a means for the reception of external stimuli, consciousness furnishes “a protective shield against stimuli” (Freud, *Beyond* 30). Trauma consists in “a breach” within our consciousness, “an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli” (Freud, *Beyond* 33). Freud uses this model of consciousness and trauma to explain nightmares of soldiers who have returned from World War I interpreting dreams that recreate the traumatic events of mechanized warfare as “endeavouring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (*Beyond* 37).

Like the soldiers dreams, the narratives of exodus within *Dreaming in Cuban* form a series of belated repetitions of the trauma of exilic departure. In every case except Ivanito’s,

the emigrations from Cuba are narrated in the past tense through flashbacks. Cathy Caruth underlines the belated reception of trauma writing, “It is not, simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*” (25). The repetition of traumatic memory through dreams or flashbacks is thus not only a remembering of the past, but an attempt to distort and reform memory in order to reinsert anxiety that should have been present at the time of the trauma but was not.

Yet as a reader and critic one must remain utterly aware of the fictional nature of García’s characters. In closing his discussion of the *fort-da* game, Freud offers an analogy to the child’s play writing, “artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults, which unlike children’s, are aimed at an audience, do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences” (*Beyond* 17). With this in mind, I posit that both the narratives *within* García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* and *the work itself* functions as attempts to master traumatic experience. That is to say, these texts both represent and reenact the repetition of traumatic experience as belated attempts at mastering the trauma of exilic exodus. The title *Dreaming in Cuban* can thus be read to imply that through the novel, the characters, the author and even perhaps the reader reenter the dreamscape of traumatic memories of exodus in an attempt to reinsert the anxiety a desire for mastery of the traumatic past demands.

At this point I would like to shift the focus of my analysis from the role of narratives of traumatic exodus to a discussion of exilic melancholia within *Dreaming in Cuban*. In “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud posits that both conditions begin with the loss of a loved object (244). Whereas the “work of mourning” consists of “reality-testing” that demonstrates that “the loved object no longer exists”, melancholia functions differently (Freud,

“Mourning” 244). The major difference is that while the lost-object in mourning can be clearly identified, for melancholia “the loss is of a more ideal kind... withdrawn from the consciousness” (Freud, “Mourning” 245). Confusion occurs in that the melancholic perhaps, “knows *whom* [*or what*] he has lost, but not what he has lost in him [*or it*]” (Freud, “Mourning” 245). Furthermore, Freud describes melancholia as a narcissistic internalization of the lost-object whereby an individual developed, “...an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object.” (Freud, “Mourning” 249).

Central to my argument is the ambiguity of exilic loss within the novel that makes the reality testing of mourning nearly impossible. As exiles, Pilar, Jorge, and Lourdes have lost “Cuba.” For each character determining exactly what was lost in “Cuba,” however, proves nearly impossible. The characters’ inability to clearly identify what was lost in the journey across the Straits of Florida leads to their narcissistic internalization of that loss. For García’s characters, the identification of the ego with the lost object splits the “critical activity” of the ego from the ego-as-lost-object (Freud, “Mourning” 249). Ambiguous loss becomes central to the split identities the characters form. Paradoxically, these characters base their identities on that which they have lost and cannot define.

Thus as Freud’s text would suggest, the internalization of melancholic loss manifests itself in self-destructive ways for the characters of *Dreaming in Cuban*, in impulses to reconnect with fictional, idealized “lost-objects” in doomed attempts to fill the void they find within themselves. This undermines both their understanding of the past and their actions in

the present. For Pilar this becomes the obsessive need to return to Cuba to reestablish contact with her Abuela Celia. Pilar provides the novel's first narrative of exodus:

I was only two years old when I left Cuba but I remember everything that's happened to me since I was a baby, even word-for-word conversations. I was sitting in my grandmother's lap, playing with her drop pearl earrings, when my mother told her we were leaving the country. Abuela Celia called her a traitor to the revolution. Mom tried to pull me away but I clung to Abuela and screamed at the top of my lungs. My grandfather came running and said, "Celia, let the girl go. She belongs with Lourdes." That was the last time I saw her. García 26

In this flashback, Pilar finds herself trapped between the opposing politics of her communist grandmother and capitalist mother. In opposition to Abuela Celia who has embraced the revolution, Lourdes' marriage to Rufino Puente, the son of a wealthy family, places her and her daughter Pilar within a socio-economic class of Cubans with land and wealth to lose in the changes the revolution will bring; for Lourdes and her family emigration becomes the obvious choice.

In Pilar's narrative of her exodus from Cuba, Abuelo Jorge sides with Lourdes asserting that the mother-daughter relationship trumps politics. Jorge's action, however, must be understood within the larger history both of Cuba and of conflicts within the del Pino family. For instance, early in their marriage Jorge had Celia sent to an asylum and subjected to shock treatment and heavy medication in order that she forget her obsession with her former Spanish lover, Gustavo. Celia, however, remembers Gustavo and writes him love letters every month for twenty-five years and keeps them hidden away in a box. Considering Celia's Lorca-induced fantasies of living in Granada, these love letters to Gustavo can be read as Celia's melancholic desire to hold on to an imbrication of her lost love Gustavo and her emotional investment in Spain as a node of identification. Jorge's loyalties, on the other hand, as jealous husband and traveling salesman for a U.S. company, are aligned differently.

The complications of Celia's relationship to Jorge due to her holding on to her lost Spanish lover plagues Celia's relationship with Lourdes whose loyalties align with those of Jorge. Celia wishes to forget her first daughter. Upon Lourdes' birth, shortly before Celia entered the insane asylum, Celia, "held their child [Lourdes] by one leg, handed her to Jorge, and said, 'I will not remember her name'" (García 43). In the passage in which Lourdes informs Celia that she and her daughter are leaving Cuba, these preexisting interpersonal conflicts and loyalties within the del Pino family serve as familial manifestations of national conflicts of ideology.

Lourdes' declaration of the impending departure incites a conflict of political and familial allegiances in the middle of which the two-year old Pilar finds herself. For Pilar, being taken from Cuba has been thoroughly associated with her personal experience: being ripped from her Abuela Celia's arms. The final sentence of the passage sums up the bottom line of what Pilar comes to understand as her exilic loss: "That was the last time that I saw her." Another familial crisis, the marital infidelity of Pilar's father Rufino, activates this memory of Pilar's departure from Cuba. A desire to escape from the problematic realities of her family life in New York catalyzes Pilar's first attempt to return to Cuba (García 25). As Pilar associates her loss of "Cuba" with her loss of Abuela Celia, when Pilar imagines her return, it is not a return to "Cuba," but an escape to Abuela Celia's arms for comfort. Pilar thinks to herself, "She'll stroke my cheek with her cool hands, sing quietly in my ear" (García 26).

Yet perhaps Pilar's precocious, preternaturally perfect memory is the most striking thing about this passage, especially when we consider Abuela Celia's final letter that closes the novel and states that she no longer needs to write for Pilar will remember everything.



Maria de los Angeles Torres interprets Pilar's perfect memory and Celia's final letter to mean that, "Exiles are given the role of remembering for the nation" (60). This interpretation fits into a larger discourse that Cubans under the rule of Fidel Castro do not have free access to "factual" history that would allow them to correctly understand and remember their nation. Thus Cuban Americans must remember "Cuba" for Cubans. Yet Cuban American memories in *Dreaming in Cuban* are melancholic attachments to fictional, idealized "Cubas." De los Angeles Torres seems to ignore the melancholy that shapes and distorts Cuban American narratives of memory in the novel.

Certain elements of the text corroborate while others resist de los Angeles Torres' interpretation. For instance, to Pilar's credit as a narrator, she cites the important detail of Celia's drop pearl earrings that were a gift from her former Spanish lover Gustavo. An unidentified narrator informs us that, "Celia has removed them only nine times to clean them. No one remembers her without them" (García 38). Yet Pilar also complains that, "It doesn't help that Mom refuses to talk about Abuela Celia" (García 138). Pilar's mere two years of age and the strained, limited communications between she and Lourdes would make it difficult for Pilar to remember or learn all she knows of her grandmother. Instead she communicates with Celia mainly through supernatural means. Pilar tells us, "Abuela Celia and I write to each other sometimes, but mostly I hear her speaking to me at night just before I fall asleep" (García 28-29). Rather than presenting a perfect, exemplar of memory, Pilar's communication with Abuela Celia more strongly resembles a "hallucinatory wishful psychosis" through which Pilar resists the reality of her loss of Abuela Celia and "Cuba" (Freud, "Mourning" 244).

As I have suggested not all journeys across the Straits of Florida in *Dreaming in Cuban* are motivated by the same causes. Pilar is forced to leave as a minor in the custody of her mother, while Jorge must leave for medical treatment. Nevertheless, as in the case of Pilar, separation from Celia marks Jorge's emigration to New York. Despite their troubled marriage, Jorge, like Pilar, is also ripped from Celia's arms. An idealized version of his relationship with Celia becomes Jorge's misplaced lost-object of affection. Pilar narrates her Abuelo Jorge's arrival:

I saw my grandfather, Abuela Celia's husband, when he came to New York to get treated for his stomach cancer. They took him off the plane in a wheelchair. Abuelo Jorge's face was dry and brittle like old parchment. He slept in my bed, which my mother fixed up with a new nubby beige bedspread, and I slept on a cot next to him. Mom bought him a black-and-white television and Abuelo watched the fights and the Spanish *novelas* on Channel 47. No matter how much my mother bathed him, he always smelled of burnt eggs and oranges. García 32-33

The absence in Pilar's account of political rhetoric as motivation for Abuelo Jorge's installation in the Puente apartment in New York suggests a more nuanced and diverse range of possible motivations for departure from Cuba. Yet while Abuelo Jorge is not a political exile, he neither arrives in an ideal state nor of his own agency.

Pilar recounts how despite stomach cancer and chemotherapy, "He used to write her letters every day, when he had the strength... romantic letters, too. He called Abuela Celia his 'dove in the desert'" (García 33). Abuela Celia does not respond to these romantic overtures. Rather, her letters are "full of facts, about this meeting or that, nothing more" (García 33). Pilar informs the reader in language fit for a child of her age at the time that Celia's responses "make" her Abuelo Jorge "sad" (García 33). The child-like description of Jorge's reaction to Celia's letters belies the melancholic nature of Jorge's letters. In light of the history of Jorge and Celia's troubled relationship, Jorge's letters are problematic in that

they evoke an idealized version of Celia as the wife in a loving, romantic marriage that never existed. The ambivalence of Celia and Jorge's relationship falls away in the separation exile has created. Perhaps, as Freud suggests, Jorge's loss of Celia allows him to internalize the negative aspects of their ambivalent love-hate relationship and create a fictional, idealized version of his wife, the one to whom he writes using romantic epithets ("Mourning" 251).

While Pilar and Jorge associate leaving Cuba with being ripped from Celia's arms, Lourdes associates her exodus with a series of traumas. The locus of these traumas is her family's ranch where she miscarries her unborn son and is raped at the hands of Castro's soldiers. Lourdes arrives in the Miami airport with nothing but, "riding crops and her wedding veil, a watercolor landscape, and a paper sack of birdseed" (García 69). On one level these objects simply speak of the rushed and disordered departures so many Cubans experienced in an attempt to leave the country before the borders were closed. On another level, Lourdes' packing list evokes her losses and traumas. The items echo the lost ranch she acquired through her marriage that the wedding veil represents for Lourdes took great pleasure horse back riding there and had recently redecorated their ranch house with watercolors and an aviary.

Most importantly, however, these objects evoke her two secret traumas: the loss of her unborn son and her rape at the hands of Castro's soldiers. The day Castro's soldiers arrived to appropriate the ranch, the pregnant Lourdes had been riding in the fields and fell from her horse. Upon returning home, she finds the soldiers threatening her husband. As she screams at them to get off her property she, "felt the clot dislodge and liquefy beneath her breasts, float through her belly, and slide down her thighs" (García 70). She never tells her family members of her miscarriage. Two months later when Castro's soldiers return, they

find Lourdes alone. When she tears in two the official document declaring the ranch state property, the soldiers rape her, beat her and carve an illegible word into her stomach. She never tells anyone of her rape. Lourdes' baggage, the riding crop, the wedding veil, the watercolor, the birdseed, and the scar, is the mere shadow of the psychic baggage she takes with her from Cuba.

In exile Lourdes and Pilar both lose "Cuba." Whereas Pilar associates her departure from Cuba with the loss of Abuela Celia, Lourdes has a list of losses and traumas from which to choose. While Pilar wishes to escape through a nostalgic return to "Cuba" and to the memory of Abuela Celia's arms, Lourdes associates her loss with the communism, "wants no part of Cuba" and seeks escape from her traumatic past in fanatical capitalism and American patriotism (García 73). She dreams of franchises of her Yankee Doodle Bakery stretching across the United States and imagines that, "Each glistening éclair is a grenade aimed at Celia's beliefs" (García 117). These apparent differences between mother and daughter can be understood, however, as similarly indirect attempts to address what they perceive to be the source of their loss. If Pilar could just get back to "Cuba," she could return to her grandmother's arms; if Lourdes could eradicate communism then pre-Castro "Cuba" could replace the "Cuba" that took all she had and raped her. Both of these attempts to return to lost-objects of melancholia are problematic, nostalgic memory projects doomed to fail.

The list of baggage indicates that upon her arrival in Miami, Lourdes, like Pilar, carries her own sense of loss. These different ways of losing "Cuba," the traumatic separation of Pilar from her grandmother Celia and Lourdes' lost social status and repressed, silenced traumas embodied in the objects she brings with her on her journey, creates a rift between mother and daughter that persists throughout the novel and makes their divergent

understandings of their separation at the Miami airport understandable. For Lourdes it is the two-year-old Pilar's fault:

Pilar ran away from her in the Miami airport, her crinoline dress swinging like a tiny bell through the crowd. Lourdes heard her daughter's name announced over the loudspeaker. She couldn't speak when she found Pilar, sitting on the lap of a pilot and licking a lime lollipop. She couldn't find the words to thank the uniformed American who escorted them to their gate. García 69

Yet there is nothing accusatory in the tone of the description. Rather there is a motherly insistence on the details of Pilar's precious childhood, her somewhat anachronistic "crinoline dress swinging like a tiny bell" and finally finding her "on the lap of a pilot and licking a lime lollipop." These details describe Pilar as a child absolving her of wrongdoing, communicating Lourdes' maternal affection for her daughter and intimating her emotional distress upon losing Pilar. Yet Lourdes' speechlessness upon finding Pilar also demonstrates the repression that obscures not only Lourdes' traumas, but communication of her emotions in general.

Lourdes' memory of helplessly losing Pilar, watching her daughter disappear before her very eyes into the American crowd, captures their mother-daughter dynamic. Lourdes obviously loves her daughter, but as she says to her father's ghost, "Papi, I don't know what to do anymore...No matter what I do, Pilar hates me" (García 74). Yet, in her exasperation, Lourdes overstates Pilar's hostility. Pilar understands Lourdes better than Lourdes suspects despite Pilar's frustration at Lourdes' political rhetoric. A critique of Lourdes' selective and malleable memory, its questionable reliability and unconscious reshaping of the past frames Pilar's version of the events at the Miami airport:

This is a constant struggle around my mother, who systematically rewrites history to suit her views of the world. This reshaping of events happens in a dozen ways every day, contesting reality. It's not a matter of premeditated deception. Mom truly believes that her version of events is correct, down to

the details that I know, for a fact, are wrong. To this day, my mother insists that I ran away from her at the Miami airport after we first left Cuba. But it was *she* who turned and ran when she thought she heard my father's voice. I wandered around lost until a pilot took me to his airline's office and gave me a lollipop. García 176

While acquitting Lourdes of any premeditated historical distortion, Pilar asserts her version of events in a much more vindictive way than the passage describing her mother's memory. More problematic are Pilar's appeal to "reality" and her insistence on her ability to know things "for a fact." Pilar's insistence on the infallible authority of her memory clashes with her earlier philosophical questioning of history. While reflecting on male-dominated military history, Pilar thinks, "If it were up to me, I'd record other things... the life stories of prostitutes in Bombay" (García 28). Questioning the underpinnings of historiography leads Pilar to an independent and individualized, feminist version of historical revisionism, "Who chooses what we should know or what's important? I know I have to decide these things myself" (García 28). Thus Pilar advocates and reenacts the very revisionist memory she criticizes, repeating the behavior she finds so exasperating in her mother.

It would seem both this poorly packed refugee mother and her two-year-old, anachronistically garbed, lollipop-licking daughter with a "perfect memory" prove to be revisionist historians, unreliable witnesses to their own arrival in Miami. Yet, ultimately, the truth of who turned away from whom in the Miami airport fades in importance in comparison with the rift between this mother and daughter, their conflicting ways of remembering their past, imagining their loss, and understanding the world. Mitchell's distinction between Pilar's personal and Lourdes' political narratives fails to point out that Pilar both remains ignorant of the particulars of the traumatic violence and loss her mother suffered in the wake

of the revolution and repeats some of the very problematic behaviors she criticizes in her mother (54).

Lourdes' inability to communicate her traumas to Pilar creates not only a distance between mother and daughter, but also the "distance" that Pilar's narrative maintains in regard to the political rhetoric that replaces real contact with Lourdes. Lourdes' repression of trauma dooms not only herself but also her daughter to repetition. Freud describes the aim of psychoanalytic methods as an attempt to assist patients "to fill in gaps in memory" and "to overcome resistances due to repression" (*Remembering* 148). Pilar inherits Lourdes' gaps of repressed memories Abraham and Torok describe (140). Lourdes' trauma, her "unfinished business" has been "unconsciously handed down" to her daughter (Abraham and Torok 167).

Despite the differences between Lourdes and Pilar, *Dreaming in Cuban* ends with the mother and daughter's joint efforts resulting in the exodus of the youngest member of the del Pino family. Ivanito's departure during the Mariel Boatlift transforms the women's return to Cuba from its original mission of reunification and reconciliation with Abuela Celia to one of robbing her of her last attachment to the world, her grandson. In opposition to the instructions Jorge's ghost gives her, Lourdes neither passes on his apology nor tells Celia of the loss of her child or her rape (García 196-197). When Pilar finally sees Abuela Celia again as she had wished years earlier thinking, "If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged", the answer Pilar finds is that both she and Ivanito belong in the United States (García 58).

Lourdes practically kidnaps Ivanito from Celia's house waking him before dawn to avoid a confrontation. Ivanito has no say in his own fate, Lourdes literally writes it out for him:

Ivanito is silent as Lourdes hands him an envelope with two hundred dollars and a statement neatly printed in English: "MY NAME IS IVAN VILLAYERDE. I AM A POLITICAL REFUGEE FROM CUBA. MY AUNT, LOURDES PUENTE, OF 2212 LINDEN AVENUE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, WILL SPONSOR ME. PLEASE CALL HER AT (212) 834-4071 OR (212) 63-CAKES."

"Try to get on the first plane out, Ivanito. Don't leave the embassy no matter what. When you get to Peru or wherever they send you, call me. I'll come pick you up, *mi hijito*. I'll bring you back to Brooklyn. We'll go to Disney World this summer."

"¿Y Abuela?" Ivanito asks.

"Go, *mi cielo*, go!" García 238-239

In her neatly written note, Lourdes has hijacked Ivanito's "I." She provides the information needed for him to emigrate under the aegis of political refugee status and assumes responsibility for him once he arrives. Yet written in a language Ivanito understands poorly, the note provides him little instruction or guidance. Lourdes' meager instructions to Ivanito to get on the first plane, to not leave the embassy and to call her from wherever he happens to land once he has left Cuba are shockingly deficient. Despite her reassurances that she will come to get him, the most positive thing Lourdes has to offer Ivan, like a true capitalist trained by years of Super Bowl and World Series commercials, is, "We'll go to Disney World this summer." One can almost imagine Ivanito's arrival in Lima. "Now that you have left your country and family behind, what are you going to do Ivan Villaverde?" With a pearly white smile looking handsome in the new clothes Lourdes has provided, Ivanito will quip with triumphant irony, "¡Voy a ir a Disney World!"

In a last ditch effort to prevent Ivanito's departure, Abuela Celia and Pilar rush to the Peruvian embassy. While Celia waits outside, Pilar rushes in to find her cousin. Pilar finds Ivanito screaming, "'Crraaaazzzy!'... at the sky, talking to a million people at once" yet allows him to remain in the embassy later lying to her grandmother that she did not see him (García 241). Payant has interpreted Pilar's decision to allow Ivanito to leave Cuba as a



demonstration of her “dedication to the future of the family” (172). Yet, this future to which Pilar has contributed will be plagued with yet another traumatic case of emigration akin to her own. Ivan’s unanswered words, “¿Y Abuela?” echo the cries of Pilar being ripped from her grandmother’s arms.

In criticism, Pilar has generally been interpreted as a resoundingly positive figure. Mitchell implies that she is able to maintain critical perspective in the face of the political rhetoric upon which her mother and grandmother rely. Gómez-Vega sees Pilar as a model of the transnational, feminist Latina who benefits from both an understanding of her roots and the liberal ideologies she has acquired in the United States. Finally, de los Angeles Torres implies that Pilar embodies both the ability and the responsibility of the Cuban American exile community to remember the Cuban nation. I read Pilar, however, as entrenched within the trauma, melancholia and repetition of the Cuban American exile community. Her “dedication to the future of the family” involves not only imposing exile on Ivanito, but also distorting “history” by lying to Abuela Celia. If remembering the Cuban nation and being dedicated to family require lying to our grandparents and coercing our nephews or cousins into emigrating alone in a tumultuous, dangerous throng at an age when one is not mature enough to understand the implications of exile and thus make that decision for oneself, then something is seriously askew in this nation and this family.

I read the end of *Dreaming in Cuban* as a literary representation of the failure of *el diálogo* and the promise of reconciliation between Cubans and Cuban Americans it represented. Instead of being indicative of needed critical perspective, the “distance” Pilar’s narrative maintains in relation to the political rhetoric of her mother’s narrative reproduces the gaps of repressed trauma in Lourdes’ narrative dooming Pilar, her mother and Ivanito to

the repetition of the Cuban American dynamics of traumatic em/immigration and melancholic exile. Ivanito, it seems, will grow up asking questions similar to those of Pilar. Pilar, seen both in the novel by Celia and by critics such as de los Angeles Torres, Payant and Mitchell as embodying both the hope and critical perspective of the future generation of Cuban Americans, becomes merely Lourdes' accomplice in what Abuela Celia describes as an even "more significant betrayal" (García 240).

## Conclusions

Aparicio posits an untenable model of an overly optimistic formulation of *cubanía* that while portraying difference fails to fully engage difference. Mesa-Gaido creates an installation that raises more questions about Cuban American exilic identity than it answers. García's characters, stuck in melancholia, cannot escape from reenacting the repetition of their own trauma on the next generation. Aparicio's portfolio, Mesa-Gaido's installation, and García's novel all seem, according to my readings, to fall short of some unspecified goal constantly slipping out from underneath me, escaping definition.

Although it could seem I have focused on these artists' works to emphasize their shortcomings, one of my goals has been to cultivate the continually renewed revolt that Kristeva argues "*est indispensable au maintien de la psyché, indispensable à cette faculté de représentation et questionnement qui spécifie l'humain,*" (*Avenir* 22). What is more, by writing myself into the critique, I have intentionally shifted the study's critical focus away from any claim of objectivity in an attempt to problematize the very assumptions and goals that motivate this study and to suggest that the critiques I levy against the works I analyze not only can, but *must* be turned back onto the text I produce here.

None of the works I have discussed fail themselves. The recognition of difference within *cubanía* that Aparicio enacts signals a positive step in a divisively fragmented community. Mesa-Gaido's installation raises questions that are key to imagining new structures of Cuban American memory and identity. And finally, in portraying Cuban

Americans as both engrained in melancholia and forcing repetition upon younger generations, García's novel levies an indispensable critique of the state of the Cuban American psyche. The important questions then become, "How do these texts fail me?" and, "Why is it so critical for me that they succeed?"

I have juxtaposed personal experiences that date from 1997 through 2001 with texts that date from the 1992 to 1996. In the process I have mapped a constellation of Cuban Americans and their cultural products that spans both the last decade of the twentieth century and the United States from Texas, Florida, Illinois, Ohio, and New York. I write this as 2007 rapidly approaches, almost seven years after Elián González returned to Cuba and almost six years after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The current geopolitical context and the position of Cuban Americans within that context have radically changed from that of the period in which my experiences occurred and the texts I analyze were produced. The U.S. government moved forcefully to return an orphaned child to his father in Cuba. The focus of U.S. hegemony has largely shifted from Cold War antagonisms to the dubiously vague international "War on Terror." Castro has fallen gravely ill. The question must thus be asked: why do I study these texts today?

Kristeva argues that revolt occurs in three interrelated ways: "as transgression of a prohibition, as repetition, working-through, working out; and as displacement, combinatives, games" (*Sense* 16). This collage of texts, images and autobiographical anecdotes I have assembled does all three of these things. My study attempts to transgress ideological framings of Cuban American identity in terms of the binary conflict between capitalist and communist world-views. My analysis of Aparicio's photos, Mesa-Gaido's installation and Obejas' and García's novels reenacts the traumas these works interrogate in an attempt to

come to new terms with them through psychoanalysis. Finally, by creating a collage of sorts, I have gathered cultural products that are temporally and spatially dispersed, displacing and combining them with my own experiences within the intellectual game of academia.

Ultimately, personal deficiencies motivate my return to these Cuban American cultural products of the 1990's. My belated critical return to both my recent history and that of Cuban American cultural production is an attempt to master the past in which I grew up in the strange double exile as a Cuban American largely ignorant of the Cuban component of my identity due to both my geographical location that made interaction with other Cuban Americans nearly impossible and my father's attempts to "move on" that silenced his personal history. In so many ways this study is an attempt to understand, fill up, and undo his silence. In so many ways this study is a means to construct an imagined community that retroactively fills the gap left by the lack of community and the isolation I felt as a young adult becoming aware of my subjectivity within and through language.

While Kristeva argues that revolt or, "Loosening the strictures concerning 'one's own' and the 'identical,' 'true' and 'false,' 'good' and 'bad' becomes necessary for survival, because symbolic organizations, like organisms, endure on the condition of renewal and joy," every revolt, "leads to the risk of new defenses, false and deadly in other ways" (*Sense* 18). The call for continually renewed revolt points me in directions beyond the strictures of the current study and the texts it addresses. The revolt of this text must lead to future revolts, so that I may find new understandings of my position as a subject today. This text and those I have addressed fail me because as temporally confined manipulations of language they must eventually fail me; I as a subject require the constant transgression and revision of the strictures by which I relate to the world through language.

Where will I find new revolts? In this study I have concentrated on the subject positions I inherited from my father. I have looked to a group of Cuban-born cultural workers of my father's generation in an attempt to fill the gaps in his discourse and to come to terms with one aspect of the alterity I find within myself. This Cuban American fixation is not, however, the whole story. I have yet to engage either the Dominican elements of my family's history or cultural workers of my own generation whose situations more closely mirror my experience as a U.S. born Latino acculturated to life in the United States and yet at tension with injustices I see around me.

In many ways, I find that the label "Latino" fits me more comfortably than "Cuban American." As a child in the Dallas suburbs I experienced my earliest encounters with my *latinidad* through misidentifications; I was marked by a particular otherness unfamiliar to the community within in which I lived yet perceived to be vaguely "Hispanic." As the largest "Hispanic" community in Dallas was Mexican American, I was often mistaken for a Mexican American. In addition to the gaps in my father's discourse, the frustration of being misidentified for many years have contributed to my desire to study Cuban American cultural production as a means of claiming a part of my misrecognized otherness.

Yet after moving to the eastern seaboard, I become aware through more regular contact with other Cuban Americans that I lack so many Cuban American shibboleths: accents and inflections, uses of a slang, slight gestures, common experiences. Rather than chasing an illusory holy grail of Cuban American authenticity, I have tried to come to terms with *cubanidad* as one of the many problematic components of my identity. It is not surprising that "Latino/a" as an umbrella term appeals to me as it encompasses multiple nodes of (mis)identification within the constellation of my subject positions.

The political implications of the label “Latino/a” also appeal to personal convictions of solidarity and social justice. While I experienced certain frustrations in being misidentified as Mexican American, I often found common ground with Mexican American peers on issues of immigration, integration and discrimination. Furthermore, personal confrontations with bigotry sensitized me to the difficulties that not only Latinos, but also other minoritized groups within the United States face. Finally, during the time I lived in France observations of the marginalization North African immigrant communities experience showed me the global scope of the problems I had experienced through *latinidad*. Around the world late capitalism thrives on the traffic of human lives, the dynamics of em/immigration that creates minoritized, marginalized groups who provide cheap labor.

I cannot, however, right the world’s wrongs by merely donning the label Latino. “Latino/a,” like “Cuban American,” is ultimately a problematic construct, but one I willingly assume with full knowledge of its problematic construction and its political implications. I have not traded “Cuban American” for “Latino.” The terms are not mutually exclusive. Rather I have attempted to uncover buried aspects of the rhetoric that underpins the architecture of Cuban American identity in order to better understand my own situatedness within *cubanidad* and *latinidad*. This personal search has social implications that go beyond mere navel-gazing. As an educator who aspires to enact change through meaningful engagement with students, I believe a personal understanding of the problematic, fragmented and multiple components of my own subjectivity as structured in and constructed through discourse can only make me more sympathetic to the processes of self-discovery young adults often confront in universities. As a cultural critic and producer, I can aspire to consciously intervene in discourses that attempt to define others and myself.

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- \* Photos of Elizabeth Mesa-Gaido's installation "Upon the Arrival of My Family" obtained through electronic correspondence with the artist.