

Cuban-American Women's Anglophone Novels of the 1990s

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ABSTRACT

Graham Ignizio: Cuban-American Women's Anglophone Novels of the 1990s
(Under the direction of Rosa Perelmuter)

My dissertation examines twelve Anglophone novels written by Cuban-American women published in the 1990s, a period during which Isabel Alvarez-Borland and others have observed a “Cuban-American Literary Boom.” The twelve novels that constitute my corpus belong to nine authors: Teresa Bevin, Havana Split (1998); Cristina García, Dreaming in Cuban (1992) and The Agüero Sisters (1997); Margarita Engle, Singing to Cuba (1993) and Skywriting (1995); Ivonne Lamazares, The Sugar Island (2000); Tina Matlock, Guava and Cheese (2000); Himilce Novas, Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story (1996); Achy Obejas, Memory Mambo (1996); Beatriz Rivera, Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express (1997) and Playing with Light (2000); and Ana Veciana-Suárez, The Chin Kiss King (1997). A combination of known and lesser-known writers, this group includes all the novels written during the decade I selected with the exception of the entertaining mass-market detective thrillers by Cristina García-Aguilera. Chapter 1 defines the contours of this “boom” by discussing first the unifying motifs and preoccupations that speak to the hyphenated identity that represents contemporary Cuban-American narrative written in English by women and then by establishing three common themes that explore questions of self-identity and nationality shared by the Cuban-American

characters in the novels in my corpus: the mother-daughter relationship, the voyage to Cuba, and the obsession with family history. Each theme is developed in the three chapters that follow (Chapters 2-4) and four novels are discussed in each. The analyses of these three themes brings to the fore aspects of identity confusion between various generations as depicted by the mothers and daughters portrayed in these texts, the centrality of the voyage back to the island and its effect on identity formation, and the intersections between individual and family memory, which often are enlightened by the use of concepts such as “postmemory” and “collective memory.” The 1990s is a period of particular importance to Cubans on and off the island and this dissertation is but one example of the central –and I believe representative--preoccupations and achievements of some of the Cuban-Americans writing in this significant period at the end of the 20th century.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a Cuban-American daughter of exiles who came from Cuba in 1962, I also shared vivid memories with the authors and the narratives that I was teaching, as well as the same sense of rupture between my languages and cultures.

-from Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona (1998)
Isabel Alvarez Borland

It bears noting... that Cuban exiles, and especially Cuban-exile women, have had a significant and unique history as entrepreneurs after immigrating to the United States.

-from Cultural Erotics in Cuban America (2007)
Ricardo L. Ortiz

Exile, in Spanish, is a male noun –exilio. Curiously too, most writing about the idea of exile is done by men. Is that because women don't have countries to lose?

-from Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba (1995)
Ruth Behar

I have chosen to devote my dissertation to the study of the Cuban-American Boom of the 1990s, focusing on those works written in English by women during that very prolific decade. I have selected novels originally written in English by Cuban-American female authors presently residing in the U.S. and published between 1990 and 2000. My intention for this project does not to seek for a resolution of the complex issues that are discussed throughout Cuban-American prose, but to define and explore a particular selection of novels that deserve a more in-depth study. I present a reading and comprehensive analysis

of twelve Cuban-American novels that speak to the hyphenated national identity that many Cuban-Americans share. In this chapter I introduce and survey the pertinent research that helps define the Cuban-American Boom of the 1990s as a relevant category of contemporary literary production in the United States. Furthermore, I review the most important criticism of these novels to which I will compare and contrast my approach to this literary category.

I. Cuban-American Boom of the 1990s: The Female Novelist

The concept of the Cuban diaspora has been discussed by highly regarded theorists such as Isabel Alvarez Borland, Ruth Behar, Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff for the last couple of decades. Using an eclectic mix of postmodern, postcolonial, and cultural studies, they and others have attempted to define the transnational uniqueness of the Cuban-American, an identity that applies fully to the writers discussed in this project. The exile's disposition demands a perspective that looks beyond the limitations of any monolithic idea of community, nationhood, or national culture. For many of these Cuban-American exiles, the practice of writing has served as a literary expression of their particular situation. Currently, Cuban writers living in the U.S. have been placed into various generational and linguistic groups that mirror the movements of exiles leaving Cuba after 1959. Migratory waves, such as the Peter Pan flights in the early 1960s or the large exodus from Mariel Boat Lift in 1980, left many Cuban writers searching for a sense of belonging in their adopted land. In her introduction to Identity, Memory, and Diaspora: Voices of Cuban-American Artists, Writers, and Philosophers, Isabel Alvarez Borland

alludes to these specific movements. She explains, “These consecutive yet different waves of immigration from Cuba to the United States have produced a unique pattern of exchange and renewal between the various generations of intellectuals in exile” (117). Alvarez Borland defines one of the latest groups of writers as “ethnic Cuban Americans” who “feel the need to leave a record of the story of a community split by history, a record that up to the last decade [has] remained untold” (118). Since the early 1990s there has been an explosion of Cuban-American literary production by both male and female authors. Many of these authors, to borrow a phrase by Pérez Firmat, write *from* the United States *towards* Cuba and address the sentiment of loss of their Cuban heritage (153). In an interview with Eduardo R. Del Rio in 2006, Pérez Firmat explains his ruminations on the exilic component of Cuban-American literature, saying:

But what I find most peculiar is exile literature written in English that pines for the homeland in a language that makes that homeland more distant. Longing for Cuba in the language of Cuba makes sense; longing for Cuba in the language of America is a little strange, and yet I and others do it all the time. (115)

Pérez Firmat alludes to the ongoing discussion of the Anglophone literary production among diasporic Cuban-American writers. It would be wrong to assume that Hispanophone Cuban-American literature is excluded in anthologies; however he agrees that “one-and-a-halfers,”¹ write mostly in English “for both practical and existential reasons” (113). For them, writing in a language

¹ He defines this particular generation as a unique combination of old and new cultures that is marginal to neither. (4)

that is different than one's mother tongue becomes a way of creating a new national and social identity. For the one-and-a-half generation, the movement from one language to the other resembles the physical move from the island to the mainland and thus becomes an aspect of the exilic condition. Although critics allude to many Cuban-American Anglophone literary works, there are few anthologies or studies that limit their content in this fashion.

M. Delores Carlito's Cuban-American Fiction in English: An Annotated Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources (2005) offers a comprehensive list of Anglophone Cuban-American literature of both genders. In this groundbreaking bibliography, Carlito presents a new approach to Cuban-American fiction and its criticism written in English beginning with 1963's A Wake in Ybor City by José Yglesias and extending into the twenty-first century. In the introduction she asserts:

Cuban-American fiction can no longer be categorized as works that are written in Spanish about exile life in the United States...The literature written in English has moved from being literature about Cubans in the United States to any theme or topic, including Americans in Cuba. Cuban-American fiction offers a microcosm of the way literature processes displacement and how that process is illustrated in literature. (11)

In other words, as Pérez Firmat mentions, Cuban-American literary production has crossed language boundaries and now embodies traditions that extend beyond the scope of the traditional Cuban literary canon. The ability to

write and publish in English allows these authors to reach a broader audience and speak from a unique perspective that incorporates linguistic and cultural characteristics from Cuba and the United States. Although many of these authors write in English out of necessity, some might also do it because of what Pascale Casanova has referred to as “literary capital” or “literary credit,” which every writer seeks to acquire.² By publishing their works in English, Cuban-American authors employ a language of a “high degree of *literariness*” which will be associated with a “high culture.” She states:

The former [high culture languages] are languages that are read not only by those who speak them, but also by readers who think that authors who write in these languages or who are translated into them are worth reading. They amount to a kind of license, a permit of circulation certifying an author’s membership in a literary circle” (20).

However, Casanova does not belittle the importance of Spanish. In fact she observes that the mere fact that many Cuban-American texts have been translated into Spanish³ speaks to rise of the language status in the “world republic of letters,” especially since the Latin-American Boom in the 1960s (184). Authors like Cristina García, thus optimize their number of readers by having their Anglophone novels translated into Spanish.

This emphasis on the English language does not mean, however, that Cuban-American authors have forgotten about their mother tongue. In fact,

² See The World Republic of Letters.

³ For example, Alan West’s translation of The Agüero Sisters and Marisol Palés Castro’s translation of Dreaming in Cuban.

much of the work they produce “serves as a vehicle for the examination of that duality they continue to feel about the role language plays in their lives” (Del Rio 19). Del Rio states further in his introduction:

Most of the writers point to English as a device they use to reveal that English is only one of their linguistic weapons. The sense of wordplay that this duality creates allows the writers to explore their own sense of loss by employing the language that underscores it (20).

Moreover, this linguistic duality precisely permits scholars to reach beyond the customary canonical bodies of literary production and examine the distinguishing characteristics of hybrid culture and literature.

The collection of Cuban-American writers on which I have chosen to focus share many similar traits in addition to their language choice. Almost all were born on the island, but now reside in the United States, so their pages are filled with the sounds, images, and experience of North American life. For some of them, the Spanish language may be a mere memory that is sustained via familial ties. However, these writers write from a position that cannot exclude the influence of their Cuban roots; familial, literary, cultural, linguistic, or otherwise. Thus, it is from a body of literature that expands the Cuban literary canon and creates a space for what Homi Bhabha might call an “in-between” space of literary expression.

One of the most difficult and controversial issues surrounding Cuban-American studies and its literature, and of Latino/a literature in general, is that of

labeling. To date, there has been no consensus on how one defines or identifies Cuban-American texts or what we are to call the authors who create them in terms of nationality. When asked, these authors tend to classify their identity according to their personal and political experiences. Some feel comfortable considering themselves part of Pérez Firmat's one-and-a-half generation while others, such as Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, find this label suffocating and vague. Clearly there is not one, but multiple classifications that this group of writers use to label themselves. Nonetheless, the critics are likely to agree that no matter what categorization they choose, these writers ultimately produce a literature that shares similar themes and motifs. Unlike their predecessors, these younger generations immigrated to the United States as children or were born to Cuban parents in the United States. Their writing also tends to extend beyond the traditional themes that centered on anti-Castro or anti-Marxist views that occupied the minds of first generation Cuban exiles. Speaking with Del Rio in 2005, Achy Obejas acknowledges her situation as a contributor of this "in-between" or transitional generation of Cuban exiles, stating, "I think it's [exile] a defining aspect of Cuban-American literature in *this* generation...This is where Gustavo [Pérez Firmat] is correct. This is a unique moment in terms of Cuban-American history. There is a bridging generation...I wonder, twenty years from now, who the Cuban-American writers will be" (94).

Many of these Cuban-American writers still find themselves battling between the strict political dichotomy of the Latino/a and Miami literary establishments. They have been criticized for being too accepting of the values

of capitalist materialism. Progressive Cuban-American authors, such as Obejas, struggle between the refusal of the Miami establishment to consider them Cuban and the anticolonial critics labeling them “non-progressive.” They must eventually find a delicate balance between these two communities if they are to write and publish successfully in the United States. In their pioneering work entitled The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez carefully examine this predicament. Arguing that Cuban-American cultural production has been defined by a “double-blind dynamic,” Dalleo and Machado Sáez suggest that there are now authors who “negotiate a path through the political division within the Latino/a and Miami public discourse in order to imagine a third space beyond an ideological binary that seeks to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic cultural production” (162).

As Isabel Alvarez Borland, Rocío Davis, Eliana Rivero, William Luis, and others have clearly indicated, there has been a surge of Latina authors writing in English in the last decade of the twentieth century. One of the most prolific groups in this category is that of the Cuban-American novelists. Cuban feminist scholar Luisa Campuzano suggests that this is due to the drastic economic changes in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union. She states:

[I]n the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, while Cuba underwent a drastic economic contraction that had major repercussions in every sphere of life, an explosion of feminine narrative writing occurred that now, as the twenty-first century

begins, has become one of outstanding features of contemporary Cuban literature(9).

In the introduction of a recent anthology, Open Your Eyes and Soar: Cuban Women Writing Now (2003), Campuzano provides the following rationale for her selection: “The writers included here are among the most visible and internationally successful of a large number of women writers publishing fiction today, both on the island and in other countries” (9). As Campuzano notes, these writers made their mark in the literary world of academia, and many of them have gone on to win prestigious awards (for example, Cristina García’s Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for Fiction [1999] and her Whiting Writers’ Award [1996]). Likewise in her introduction of Making a Scene: Cuban Women’s Stories, Mirta Yáñez recognizes a “new wave of woman writers” that has achieved popularity since the late 1970s, many writing in the diaspora (9). Arguing that many of these writers share common themes in their work, namely a special brand of realism, Yáñez assembles a collection of short stories that exemplify these topics. She suggests that the 1990s marked an aperture for new themes, such as the quotidian life and the urban environment within Cuban and Cuban-American women’s prose.

Since the beginning of the Latina literature explosion, Cuban-American authors such as Cristina García, Margarita Engle, Achy Obejas, and Ana Veciana-Suárez have raised the bar and created fresh and innovative works that speak to the hyphenated identity that continues to represent Cuban-American prose today. Alvarez Borland has referred to a “Cuban-American Literary Boom

of the 1990s” that calls attention to a particularly prolific group of authors publishing during that decade (51). In her comprehensive study of Cuban-American writers, Cuban American Literature of Exile — From Person to Persona, she observes the following:

During the calendar year of 1996-1997 alone, six novels have appeared in print. Achy Obejas’s *Memory Mambo*, Himilce Novas’s *Mangos, Bananas and Coconuts*, Cristina García’s *The Agüero Sisters*, Virgil Suárez’s *Going Under* as well as his memoir, *Spared Angola: Memories from a Cuban-American Childhood*, and Ana Veciana-Suárez’s *The Chin Kiss King* confirm that the 1990’s have become a time when the second-generation writers have begun to establish themselves as a significant writing force in the United States. (51)

Author and critic Rafael Rojas agrees with her observation. In his Tumbas sin sosiego: Revolución, disidencia y exilio del intelectual cubano, he asserts, “Así como en los 80 la plástica fue el arte más dinámico del campo cultural, en los 90, la narrativa escrita en la isla y la diáspora...alcanzó su mayor esplendor desde los tiempos de Carpentier, Lezama, Piñera, Cabrera Infante, Sarduy y Arenas” (453). Even in the present day, Cuban-American writers continue to write at an impressive pace. While Alvarez Borland calls attention to the decade of the 90s, she does not emphasize in her study this specific ten-year period of Cuban-American literature, and this is what I plan to do in my dissertation.

The works that I have chosen consist of twelve novels, belonging to nine authors listed here: Teresa Bevin, Havana Split (1998); Cristina García, Dreaming in Cuban (1992) and The Agüero Sisters (1997); Margarita Engle, Singing to Cuba (1993) and Skywriting (1995); Ivonne Lamazares, The Sugar Island (2000); Tina Matlock, Guava and Cheese (2000); Himilce Novas, Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story (1996); Achy Obejas, Memory Mambo (1996); Beatriz Rivera, Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express (1997) and Playing with Light (2000); and Ana Veciana-Suárez, The Chin Kiss King (1997). By limiting my corpus to female, Anglophone authors residing only in the U.S., I was able to compile a reasonably inclusive corpus. The study of these novels will enable me to establish the common threads among them and explore the questions of self-identity and nationality shared by these hyphenated Cuban-American women writers.

An important consequence of my self-imposed parameters is that I have had to exclude significant Cuban women novelists such as Daína Chaviano, Zoë Valdés, and Mayra Montero, who either live outside the U.S. or write in Spanish. Moreover, excluded are certain novels written by authors in my corpus but published outside the decade of the 90s. In addition, non-fiction works, such as the memoirs of Maria del Carmen Boza, The Scattering Ashes (1998), and Ana Veciana-Suárez's Birthday Parties in Heaven (2000), fall outside the scope of this dissertation. Finally, popular mass-market fiction such as the entertaining detective thrillers by Carolina García Aguilera have not been included either.

II. Literature Review

Latina literature has developed noticeably in the United States, both in the academic world and in popular fiction. While many critics have devoted their attention to the various groups that make up the general label of “Latina writers,” several, such as Alvarez Borland, Rocío Davis, Mirta Yáñez, Ruth Behar, Claudia Sadowski-Smith, Carolina Hospital, Luisa Campuzano, and Andrea O’Reilly Herrera, have specifically focused on works and bibliographies of Cuban-American women. In their books and articles, they address a diverse spectrum of thematic issues in these writers’ texts.

Alvarez Borland’s in-depth work of Cuban-American writers, while not limited to female writers, is the most comprehensive study to date. It spans decades and examines works by both male and female authors with topics such as the representation of gay and lesbian communities and autobiographical writing. A compelling book, her analyses gather an excellent sampling of the past 30 years of exile literature written by Cuban-Americans. She suggests that Cuban-American authors differ from other Latino authors in their sense of loss due to their exile from Cuba. Of the novels under consideration, the author includes sections devoted to García’s Dreaming in Cuban and The Agüero Sisters, Engle’s Skywriting, and Obejas’s Memory Mambo, though her research takes her in a different direction than I will take mine. Specifically, she chooses to include these works within separate chapters such as “Gay Lesbian Images of Community” and “Collecting the Tales of the Community from Person to

Persona.” By situating these four novels among other texts within these two chapters, she constructs a convincing argument for the evolution of the Cuban-American narrative based on the personal loss caused by the exilic condition. Although Alvarez Borland effectively presents these Cuban-American women writers as part of larger Cuban-American canon, she chooses not to address their work as a collective corpus that speaks directly to her “Cuban-American Literary Boom of the 1990’s.” Furthermore, she does not include the other seven works published in the 90s that I have included in my dissertation.

O’Reilly Herrera’s ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora assembles a diverse sampling of “testimonial expressions” drawn from the Cuban-American community throughout the United States. Although many of the contributors (both men and women) pertain to a very similar socioeconomic class, their stories vary in terms of perspective and what it means to be a Cuban exile. Drawing from work of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, O’Reilly Herrera introduces the term “*Cuband* presences” which seeks to redefine the somewhat vague terms of Cuban-American identification, such as “ABC” (American-Born Cubans) and “1.5” generation. As the author argues, if we must use a label at all, it must be “an open-ended and more inclusive phrase [that] better functions as a kind of lightning rod that grounds Cuban exile identity to an actual place and an idealized, rather than imagined, geography and history, which are at once both present and absent” (xxix). Digging deeper into the particulars of the Cuban-American condition, O’Reilly Herrera offers some very convincing observations about memory and how it pertains to this group of exiles. Specifically, she

discusses the unique characteristic of the island nation being both “real and imagined” for the diasporic community living in the United States. Although this is not a term used exclusively regarding Cuban-American narrative, I will refer to it throughout my project due to its complexity and duality, which is most relevant and applicable to the situation of Cuban-American characters in my corpus.

In addition, O’Reilly Herrera’s recent edited collection of essays entitled, Cuba: IDEA of a Nation Displaced, addresses a variety of subjects that include the Cuban diaspora and cultural transformation. Here, the author compiles an eclectic mix of texts that are organized in three related sections: the physical migration of Cuban exiles to various parts of the world, new conceptualizations of Cuba as a transnation, and the reflections of Cuban artists concerning the diasporic condition. Featuring contributions from distinguished critics and theorists such as María Cristina García, Adriana Méndez Rodenas, Jorge Duany, Eliana Rivero, and others, O’Reilly Herrera’s volume aims to address multiple topics that have gone “largely unexplored in Cuban diasporic studies” (11). Although not specifically addressing the Cuban-American woman writer as a whole, this collection includes chapters that speak directly to their particular situation. For example, in “A Homecoming without a Home: Recent U.S. Cuban Writing of Diaspora,” Claudia Sadowski-Smith examines the unique position from which authors Ivonne Lamazares and O’Reilly Herrera write. Sadowski-Smith argues that these two authors, among others, pertain to slightly different groups, citing the one-and-a-half generation, coined by Pérez Firmat, and the Cuban-American ethnic writers, coined by Alvarez Borland. Curiously, she concludes

her study by stating that some Cuban-American novels “suggest that diasporic notions of return and the insistence on ‘correct’ representations of Cuba underlying nationalist narratives of *Cubanidad* are gradually becoming displaced by other issues that include questions of divisions within the Diaspora” (279). Overall, O’Reilly Herrera presents a solid compilation of transnational discourse that calls for a more panoramic view of the Cuban identity.

Ruth Behar’s Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba examines the idea of a Cuban homeland that serves as a structure, or “bridge”, that connects Cuban and diasporic Cuban communities together. The editor thus assembles an anthology of essays and creative works by Cuban-Americans living throughout the United States. Many of these works were first published in a double issue of Michigan Quarterly Review and seek to find a “meeting place” or “imaginary homeland” for Cuban-American exiles. Behar explains, “It [Bridges to Cuba] is a space for reconciliation, imaginative speculation, and renewal. It is a first-time event” (5). In her introduction, Behar alludes to the significance of the Cuban-American woman writer and her contributions to this project. She clarifies, “Our collection offers several examples of how women’s subtle rereading of Cuban history and contemporary politics can offer crucial insights” (12). Referring to Cristina García’s Dreaming in Cuban, Behar suggests that the novel is one of the first works of its kind that “transgresses the border between the United States and Cuba by giving voice to three generations of women divided by revolution and exile” (12). It is evident that the editor recognizes the importance of García’s

work within the Cuban national narrative, but chooses not to focus specifically on Cuban-American women writers that have published in the 1990's.

A Century of Cuban Writers in Florida, edited by Carolina Hospital and Jorge Cantera, is a collection of literary works written by Cuban exiles living on U.S. soil. Interestingly, Hospital and Cantera include translated works from the nineteenth century along with contemporary authors such as Ivonne Lamazares. In her preface, Hospital argues that for over a hundred years Cubans have maintained strong ties with Florida, listing a long historical context that spans over centuries. As the title of their compilation states, Hospital and Cantera suggest that these examples of literary works are written by Cubans who live in Florida. However, the editors avoid labeling these authors as “Cuban-Americans.” Although Hospital chooses not to focus only on Cuban women writers in Florida, she alludes to their significant contribution. She explains, “Whether they live in Tampa or Miami, whether they write in English or Spanish, these [woman] writers share common threads in a giant tapestry that extends over more than two hundred years of literary production in Florida and touches at least two cultures” (26).

David Rieff's The Exile: Cuba in the Heart of Miami (1993), a kind of second installment to his earlier Going to Miami: Tourists, Exiles, and Refugees in the New America (1987), is a non-fictional study that traces the unique condition of the Cuban exile living in Miami. This sociological examination speaks to the situation, sentiments, and desires of many Cuban-Americans residing in South Florida. Rieff explains that much of his book is a result of his

personal experience living among the Miami exile community, saying that “this book is as much the product of our [his and the Cuban-Americans he meets and interviews] dialogue over the course of the past three years as of anything they permitted me to observe or that I uncovered on my own” (209). Rieff’s work refers to Rene Silva’s self-diagnosis of his love for Cuba as a “sacred illness.” In turn, the author suggests the Silva’s condition could be applied to the Cuban exile as a whole, stating his observations of many people in Cuban Miami that are obsessed with “treating their sacred illnesses with whatever palliatives they could find” (103). Although not focused on Cuban-American fictional characters or specifically Cuban-American women writers, David Rieff’s contribution is a necessary tool when addressing the Cuban-American situation, a central theme in many Cuban-American narratives.

Of the novels I will study, the one that has received the most attention is undoubtedly García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*. Critics such as Mary Vásquez, Rocío Davis, William Luis, Ricardo Ortiz, and Adriana Méndez Rodenas, have focused on this particular novel in their own work. Vásquez’s article, “Cuba as Text and Context in Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*,” gives an analysis of the three main female characters while arguing that the island is an essential part of the text and context of the novel. She observes that Cuba is figuratively moving further away from the United States and that, within this context, the mother-daughter relationship between Celia and Lourdes grows more distant. She states that “foreignness becomes in *Dreaming in Cuban* a metaphor for a separation and estrangement; it can exist as fully within a family home as in exile

in an alien land” (23). It is evident that while Vásquez acknowledges the significance of the mother-daughter relationship and the importance of García’s female characters. She is more interested in the relationship between the island and the newly-created homeland in the U.S.

In a convincing article entitled “Back to the Future: Mothers, Language, and Homes in Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*,” Rocío Davis suggests that García’s novel depicts struggles specifically within mother-daughter bonds across three generations. She further points out that there exists an urgency of appropriating one’s own history as part of a “process of self-affirmation” (61). Hence, as her study’s title indicates, there is a need for a return back to Cuba (for Pilar and Lourdes) so that they may come back to the United States with renewed lives. Like Vásquez, Davis also proposes that the mother-daughter relationship is central to the development of the female characters’ identities, but she does not focus on the representations of psychoanalytical theories that I use in my project.

William Luis’s close reading of the novel in Dance between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States. He draws from Pérez Firmat’s analysis of the 1.5 generation and applies this theory to Pilar. Suggesting that Pilar and Lourdes’s return to Cuba emulates Alejo Carpentier’s “Viaje a la Semilla,” Luis proposes that the García’s novel describes life both in Cuba and the United States and “raises the question of whether liberty exists not just for some but for all people” (205). Curiously, Luis argues that Pilar becomes disenchanted by “the contradiction between what the United States is and what

the country is supposed to represent” (205). This observation of Pilar’s demeanor is intriguing and calls for a more in-depth analysis of the process in which she becomes disillusioned.

Besides Alvarez Borland’s extensive study, where some of the writers in my corpus are discussed, there exists no other investigation that addresses this group of women novelists as a whole or that focuses on the themes I selected. In fact, in her book entitled A Place in the Sun?: Women Writers in Twentieth Century Cuba, Catherine Davies devotes a chapter to women writers in post-revolutionary Cuba and observes that “the Cuban American women population deserves an in-depth study in its own right” (116). Furthermore, scholars such as Luisa Campuzano attempt to briefly describe the recurrent themes found in recent fiction by contemporary Cuban (and Cuban-American) women writers, but claim that there is a need for a serious examination of their work, both on and off the island. Campuzano asserts, “There is much more to say. There are all the Cuban women writers who live and publish in other countries: those who have been there for decades and others who have moved recently, those have done all their writing there and others who already had established careers in Cuba” (17).

Going back to Alvarez Borland’s “Cuban-American Literary Boom of the 1990s,” my project defines this boom with concrete parameters and offers examples of innovative work that speak to the hyphenated identity that represents contemporary Cuban-American prose. I establish three common themes that explore questions of self-identity and nationality shared by Cuban-

American characters in these novels. By concentrating, in particular, on the mother-daughter relationship, the voyage to Cuba, and the obsession with family history, I study the various attempts to resolve the characters' continual search for their identity. Although authors, such as García and Obejas, are well-known within my field, my dissertation goes beyond where other critics have left off and offers a cohesive, all-encompassing study of Anglophone novels written in the decade of the 90s by Cuban-American women writers residing in the United States. I believe that my study will make a valuable contribution to Cuban-American studies and its literature, especially by placing these twelve novels in dialogue with each other.

The work of theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Marianne Hirsch, Luce Irigaray, Nancy Chodorow, and Gustavo Pérez Firmat, among others, have found their way into my analyses and helped strengthen or back up my observations. Still others, who have studied the formation of national identity such as Jorge Duany, Néstor García Canclini, and Benedict Anderson have been instrumental in my discussions of these issues.

I analyze the following novels in my second chapter: García's Dreaming in Cuban, Veciana-Suárez's The Chin Kiss King, Rivera's Playing with Light, and Lamazares' The Sugar Island. Nancy Chodorow's work on the mother-daughter relationship is relevant; as she describes a framework of this specific relationship that is based on traditional psychoanalytical and social thought. She theorizes that the relationship between mother and daughter involves a more "personal" interaction than does the mother-son relationship.

In Engle's Skywriting and Singing to Cuba, Bevin's Havana Split, and Matlock's Guava and Cheese, a voyage from the United States to Cuba is made by one or more of the characters in each novel. This trip is almost always followed by a return to the United States. Just as Andrea O'Reilly Herrera has suggested that Cuba is both real and imagined for Cuban exiles, there exists a similar dilemma for the fictional characters in these four novels. The Cuban-American experience allows for the possibility of imagining a paradise or "lost world" solely based on fragmented memories and nostalgia. This specific condition may help create the overall desire for Cuban-Americans to return to the island.

My fourth chapter examines the theme of the obsession of family history in the following novels: Obejas's Memory Mambo, García's The Agüero Sisters, Rivera's Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express, and Novas's Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story. With the help of theories from critics such as Maurice Halbwachs and Marianne Hirsch, I highlight the unique intersection of history and memory and how it is related to family ties. In all four of these works, on one level or another, the protagonists must grapple with their family history and their personal memories. Conflict arises when the family's past is told from various perspectives which create a complex web of stories that contradict each other.

In the following chapters I will discuss these three particular themes where many of the novels could be incorporated. I decided to be as inclusive as possible by selecting and examining twelve novels instead of choosing to focus

on only a few. In doing so, this study will present a broad scope of Cuban-American Anglophone Women's novels published at the end of the twentieth century and offer a more complete analysis of this prolific decade.

Chapter 2:

Mother May I?: Representations of Mother-Daughter Relationships

Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other-beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival-a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: The knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.

-from *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*
Adrienne Rich

During those first sweltering days of summer, Maribel found herself cleaving to her mother's company, her grandmother's wisdom. Many years later, when she looked back at this particular period, she would remember not the mounting tension that accompanies all fatal illnesses but the gentleness of the hours as these drifted and bumped into each other.

-from *The Chin Kiss King*
Ana Veciana-Suárez

The greatest tragedy that can occur between mother and daughter is when they cease being able to speak and listen to one another. But what if they inhabit the same body, what if they are the same person, speaking with two voices?

-from *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*
Marianne Hirsch

To investigate the richness of the characteristics of the diasporic Cuban-American novel requires patience and an intensity that grows with the time spent immersed in the literature. Many aspects of these novels present themselves indirectly, at times overlapping and meshing, which creates a fertile text that calls for an in-depth investigation. In perhaps all of the novels under consideration in my dissertation, and because I chose to focus on women novelists, there tends

to be an emphasis on feminine relationships and experiences. One of the most prominent aspects of these connections is found in the interaction between mother and daughter characters. Feminist theories with foundations in female genealogies and the mother-daughter relationship have been particularly useful in analyzing this group of novels. The most complete and multifaceted work on mother-daughter relationships to date has been carried out in the area of feminist psychoanalysis. Among the most interesting examples, I have chosen theorists Nancy Chodorow and Luce Irigaray, since their work speaks directly to the intricacies of the mother-daughter relationship, a relationship that is clearly represented by many of the characters in these novels.

In this chapter I will analyze the following works: Ana Veciana-Suárez's The Chin Kiss King, Cristina García's Dreaming in Cuban, Beatriz Rivera's Playing with Light, and Ivonne Lamazares' The Sugar Island. I have chosen these four novels because they emphasize female genealogies. Moreover, in The Chin Kiss King and Dreaming in Cuban the relationships span three generations, forming a grandmother-mother-daughter triangle. This situation allows for an even more powerful examination of the family dynamic and perspective. Thus, Adela (The Chin Kiss King) and Lourdes (Dreaming in Cuban) each find themselves entwined in complicated relationships as mothers and daughters. Both of these stories trace the family's maternal genealogy back in Cuba; however, the focus is definitely on the representation of the Cuban-American woman. Along the same lines, Rivera's Playing with Light describes three generations of women, although the mother-daughter relationship of

Rebecca and her daughter, Nell, receives the most attention. Rebecca's own mother does not approve of her life and therefore struggles to maintain a healthy communication with her daughter and her granddaughter. Unlike The Chin Kiss King and Dreaming in Cuban, Playing with Light does not portray a positive connection between grandmother and grandchild. Nevertheless, I believe that the struggle between the generations of women in the family forces Rebecca to re-examine her own life as a Cuban-American woman and search for a way to deal with the dysfunctional relationships with her mother and daughter. In the case of The Sugar Island, Lamazares creates a tumultuous mother-daughter relationship in Mirella and Tanya. Constantly quarreling, these two characters present a history that is framed by Castro's Cuba and then later by Cuban Miami. The story tells of Mirella's "rehabilitation" and her longstanding mistrust of the Cuban government; however, it is clear that the center of the story is her chaotic relationship with her daughter Tanya. Lamazares examines key points of the mother-daughter relationship within the context of the Cuban-American diaspora.

Nancy Chodorow's work on the mother-daughter relationship is relevant and speaks to particular examples in my four primary texts. Chodorow describes a framework that is based on neo-Freudian psychoanalytical and social thought. She theorizes that the relationship between mother and daughter involves a more "personal" interaction than does the mother-son relationship. Chodorow and her followers argue that women seem to be more prone to retaining certain aspects of their primary relationship with their mother. In her article "Mothers and

Daughters: A Discussion of Theory and Research,” Carol Boyd observes that Chodorow “contends that mothers and daughters engage throughout their lives in *personal* identification, as opposed to *positional* identification” (292). In Chodorow’s article entitled “Family Structure and Feminine Personality,” examines the effects of the family structure in the development of young females’ gender identity. This sociological study traces the differences between male and female children as they reach young adulthood. She suggests that a woman identifies with her own mother and that through association with her own child she “re-experiences” herself as a cared-for child. She explains further:

The development of a girl’s gender identity contrasts with that of a boy. Most important, femininity and female role activities are immediately apprehensible in the world of her daily life. Her final role identification is with her mother and women, that is, with the person or people with who she also has her earliest relationship of infantile dependence. The development of her gender identity does not involve a rejection of this early identification, however. Rather, her later identification with her mother is embedded in and influenced by their ongoing relationship of both primary identification and preoedipal attachment. Because her mother is around, and she has had a genuine relationship to her as a person, a girl’s gender and gender role identification are mediated by and depend upon real affective relations. Identification with her mother is not positional—the narrow learning of particular role behaviors—

but rather a personal identification with her mother's general traits of character and values. (51)

Although Chodorow does acknowledge possible contingencies where mother and daughter oppose each other, she argues that a girl cannot and does not completely reject her mother. She claims that the daughter will ultimately continue her relationship of dependence with her mother due to the strong personal identification between the two (59). As the reader realizes, Chodorow's work represents detailed sociological and psychological examinations of the family structure. By applying her insights to the mother-daughter relationships portrayed in these four Cuban-American novels, we are able to approach this particular theme with a better understanding and make an in-depth analysis of the characters' relationships and identities within these works.

Likewise, Luce Irigaray has studied female genealogies and the mother-daughter relationship. According to Toril Moi, Irigaray does a significant job in exposing certain recurrent patriarchal strategies, especially in her work in Speculum (148). However my interest in Irigaray's work focuses on her detailed analysis of the mother and her relation to her daughter. In the text, "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other," Irigaray addresses the mother-daughter bond. In her introduction to Irigaray's essay, H el ene Vivienne Wenzel suggests that Irigaray rejects the belief that "lack"⁴ causes girls to reject their mothers and attach to their fathers (58). Wenzel proposes that by doing so, Irigaray deconstructs Freudian and Lacanian Oedipal theories. However, Irigaray explains that the fusion, in which mothers and daughters are forced to lose their

⁴ In this case Irigaray is referring to the lack of male genitalia.

separate identities, leads to a lost possibility for a relationship between two separate, whole women. This conclusion is very similar to Chodorow's boundary confusion.

In addition, Irigaray's compilation of lectures entitled, Sexes and Genealogies includes a transcription of a lecture she gave in Montreal in 1980 entitled "Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother." In this speech, Irigaray states:

If we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother we also need to assert that there is a genealogy of women. Each of us has a female family tree: we have a mother, a maternal grandmother and great-grandmother, we have daughters...it is easy to forget the special quality of the female genealogy...Let us try to situate ourselves within that female genealogy so that we can win and hold on to our identity. (19)

Therefore, as Irigaray clearly presents, there is a need for a woman to recognize and appreciate her specific female genealogy. In doing so, she is able to maintain her personal identity and claim a history that is rightfully hers. In her book, Philosophy and Maternal Body, Michelle Boulous Walker argues that Irigaray believes that "The daughter experiences the mother as both oppressive and liberating. The mother is at once the space of her confinement and of her release" (170). Like Chodorow, Irigaray agrees that the mother-daughter

relationship is, in fact, more complicated than once previously assumed by Freud and his followers.⁵

There is a consensus by most feminists that the mother-daughter relationship, and in turn, the female genealogy, share both negative and positive characteristics. More importantly, as Irigaray and Chodorow argue, the representation of identity confusion brought on by the mother-daughter relation is key and this will be central to my argument in discussing the four Cuban-American novels selected for this chapter.

With the help of work from Chodorow and Irigaray, I demonstrate that aspects of the mother-daughter relationship (both negative and positive) are an essential part of these novels. Specifically, I examine how this relationship is tied directly to the constant examination and affirmation of the female characters' identities as Cuban-Americans. While theories from Chodorow and Irigaray do not focus specifically on Hispanic relationships, their ideas are universal and can be applied to these particular texts. Throughout this analysis, I address questions of living in the diaspora and re-identification as part of an exile community. In each of the following novels, there exists a special shared bond between female characters, be it grandmother-daughter-granddaughter or mother-daughter.

The Chin Kiss King

Ana Veciana-Suárez's The Chin Kiss King is an excellent example of the relationships framed by three generations of women. Set in the mid-1990s,

⁵ Feminist psychoanalytic work about the mother-daughter relationship tends to draw, if not entirely, somewhat on the Freudian oedipal paradigm and neo-Freudian theory, especially object-relation psychology.

Veciana-Suárez's work tells of the hardship of loss and longing shared by three women, Cuca, Adela, and Maribel. This emotional story develops from the strengthening relationship formed between grandmother, mother, and granddaughter due to the passing of Maribel's infant son. Veciana-Suárez's novel can be read as an example of a beneficial relationship between three women. However, the relationship between Cuca, Adela, and Maribel is not always agreeable. Each woman has a very distinctive approach to living her life, which in turn complicates their bond. The combination of three generations of Cuban-American women captivates the reader's imagination, creating a vibrant novel that speaks particularly to the Cuban-American female genealogy.

Cuca is a complex character who calls on the spirits of deceased family members for advice and counseling. From the beginning of the novel, Cuca maintains a close relationship with her lost loved ones, such as her maternal grandmother, Mamá Cleofe and her hot-tempered husband, Tony. At seventy-seven, Cuca is the first to know her great-grandson has arrived due to her husband's announcement of a new star in her dreams. The narrator explains, "And she [Cuca] did, and she saw it, a star smaller than a hummingbird's pupil but as brilliant, as steady, as needed as a lone votive candle in a dark cave" (6). Her dedication to continuing strong and healthy communication with family members, especially female members, is seen throughout the novel. More than ever, Cuca serves as a cornerstone for the entire family, being connected to both the past and present of the family's maternal genealogy. She thus provides a window for the reader's solid understanding of the family's extended history. Like

Cristina García's Celia in Dreaming in Cuban, Cuca is the head matriarch who not only represents the importance of female genealogy, but its connection to Cuba and Cuban identity. Cuca's reflections of a time as a young woman and child living in Cuba continually remind the reader of the similarities and differences these three women face in their respective countries. Cuca's memories of a Cuban past articulate her mixed feelings associated with her own experience as a younger woman in Cuba and Adela and Maribel's current situation as Cuban-Americans. Her past is filled by both warm, loving memories and heart-wrenching loss. Cuca's flashbacks of her suffering due to the deaths of some of her children are paralleled to Maribel's protracted grieving over the loss of her own son. The narrator explains:

The family buried her sons, all her [Cuca] live babies, in the family plot, down past the outhouse, under a ceiba tree. Three little marble markers all in a row, one two three, like children in line for recess. She had survived, lived on. A fourth, a miscarriage, more blood, hemorrhaging love, but she had persevered. (136)

Although a deeply sad situation, it is this event that leads Cuca to share her own experiences with her daughter and granddaughter. Her relationship with her mother in Cuba is described in blurry snippets of recollections. The few times Cuca thinks of her own mother, she is portrayed as plastic, cold, and distressed: "Cuca's mother was overcome with grief. She cried so loud that they could hear the *jutias*, the tree rats, returning her calls in the distance" (87). On the other hand, Cuca's personal relationship with Mamá Cleofe reminds her of what she

desires for her own daughter and granddaughter. Here, we can refer to Chodorow's "personal" identification process in which a woman retains certain aspects of her initial relationship with her mother. Cuca strives to maintain many facets of this particular relationship with her daughter, and ultimately her granddaughter. We can speculate that her preoccupation in continuing a positive relationship with her offspring is related to her own positive experience with Mamá Cleofe. The narrator states:

Cuca longed to develop a similar relationship [like the one with Mamá Cleofe] with her granddaughter. (She had tried, at various times and with varying degrees of success, with Adela, but there were lessons her daughter learned better and more quickly than others, unfortunately.) Cuca wanted to be teacher and guide, scout, heroine and escort, mistress and equal. And Maribel had so much potential! (70)

Adela is portrayed throughout the novel as a sensual lover of life who relentlessly plays the lottery. At first glance, Adela could be classified as the stereotypical Miami Cuban-American, obsessed with money, glamour, and physical beauty. Trained in cosmetology, she always dresses to impress and cannot understand her own daughter's unwillingness to follow suit. Adela's weaknesses are obvious for all to see, thus Maribel struggles to overlook her faults and accept her as who she really is. One of the most evident examples of this is Adela's somewhat secretive relationship with Fefa's husband, Carlos the town butcher. The representation of Maribel's judgment of her mother peaks

when she discovers Adela with the butcher. The conversation is short, yet is a testament to Maribel's disgust with the situation:

"Maribel!"
"Mami, Carlos." Maribel's voice was as cold and dry as ice.
Carlos stumbled down the steps without saying another word. His car tires screeched as he fled the scene. The two women watched him wordlessly.
"Maribel..."
"I don't want to hear it, Mami"

Adela comments on all of the amorous relationships the three women have experienced. She affirms that the fact that they are alone is not their fault but a choice made by the men in their lives:

Adela was beginning to understand that women were not the ones who drove men away, as if men were oxen to be led by rings in their noses or stallions that startled easily when surprised. No, no, no. Men chose to go away. As she pulled the first of the withered red blooms, it struck her how the three generations of women in her family were variations on a theme: her mother widowed, she divorced, her daughter abandoned. (201)

Unlike Adela, Maribel loves to be in control of everything. Maribel keeps her half of their Miami duplex spotless and cannot understand her mother's messiness or absentmindedness, something that has bothered her for years. She frequently mentions her mother's negative attributes, intentionally differentiating herself from Adela. In this respect she provides an example of Chodorow's thesis on boundary confusion, where the realization that the daughter is actually living but her mother's life leads to guilt or self-blame for the

other's grief and unhappiness (59). This tendency towards culpability is related to the lack of adequate self-other distinctions that can even affect relationships outside the mother-daughter bond. Chodorow explains, "if the woman does not differentiate herself clearly from the rest of the world, she feels a sense of guilt and responsibility for situations that did not come about through her actions and without relation to her actual ability to determine the course of events" (59).

Thus, Maribel's dependable disposition towards household chores and responsibilities is always methodical and meticulous. This is how the narrator puts it:

Maribel had passed from childhood into womanhood without any discernible changes, except, of course, a physical blossoming that was expected. Her mind, her expectations of life, her method of approaching and deliberating and finalizing details did not change. She was, as always, reluctant to deviate and quick to doubt, a stranger to risk and adventure. (21)

This approach to life is contrasted by Adela's free-spirited attitude towards almost everything, including her quotidian chores around the house.

Undoubtedly, Cuca, Adela, and Maribel's relationship is complicated. However, the birth of Victor Eduardo is a catalyst that begins a re-evaluation of their relationship brought on by a shared common goal: the caring of a sickly infant boy. While creating a stronger bond as mother and daughter, Maribel and Adela also have the opportunity to question their own identity as Cuban-Americans.

Just as García's Pilar in Dreaming in Cuban, Adela knows that she does not belong in Cuba because she is a Cuban-American, but as such both Victor Eduardo and Adela believe they should have the right to visit the beautiful country. She explains to her grandson:

“Yes, we would go somewhere cool. Ah, chico, for sure, I would take you back to Cuba. *Not to live, no. For a visit.* Now, that is a real country. The sand in the beaches is sugar, *Tesoro*, pure sugar. Imagine building sugar castles with your pail and shovel, eh?
(182, my emphasis)

Just like the selective memories of Cuba that Cuca shares with the reader, Adela also acknowledges Cuban roots for herself, her daughter, and the infant who all have a special connection to the island. However, it is evident she also believes that she is part of the Cuban-American community in Miami, not the Cubans in Cuba, like her mother. In addition, her description of Cuba seems strongly idealized, in contrast to Cuca's experience of living there. This is a common characteristic of Cuban-Americans according to Andrea O'Reilly Herrera. She states in her article “Inheriting Exile: Cuban-American Writers in the Diaspora” that “For others, Cuba is a romantic, almost mythopoetic ‘idea’ or space, a ‘lost paradise’ simultaneously tied to and un-tethered from historical events or, for that matter, an actual physical place” (189). Clearly, there are no sugar beaches in Cuba, but actually a short supply of the substance for residents to sweeten their coffee.⁶ By comparison, in the representations of Cuba given by Cuca to those

⁶ In his book, This is Cuba: An Outlaw Culture Survives, Ben Corbett argues that there has been a steady decrease in sugar production in Cuba due to the growing tourist industry and “Crisis”

described by Adela, Cuca's memories are vivid and detailed, such as the description of her memories of housework:

Cuca remembers moving in the same way, with a quiet determination and unaware of the passage of time. Of course, washing laundry was different back then, fifty, sixty years ago. At least Maribel has a washing machine, a heavy-duty Sears Kenmore with four cycles. Cuca used her hands against a washboard in a tin tub filled with water carried from the well. Life was very rudimentary then, and though others speak longingly of those simple times, their retrievals of the past as ignorant as they are innocent, she knows progress has had its definite benefits...If she had had a microwave in her youth, she would have served dinner on time every night and her relationship with Tony might have been, if not perfect, at least a lot smoother. Ay! (230).

There is a distinct difference between Cuca's and Adela's Cuba. Of course this is understandable, since Cuca grew up on the island and Adela left when she was very young. In turn, their opposing versions of the Caribbean nation support my theory that Adela is searching for her particular hyphenated national identity. Specifically, Adela (and similarly Maribel) seeks an identity which embodies characteristics from Cuba and the United States. In his article, "Reconstructing Cubanness: Changing Discourses of National Identity on the Island and in the Diaspora during the Twentieth Century," Jorge Duany argues

years of the Special period when Cuba was forced to return to the ox and plow for harvesting (235).

that the reoccurring theme of diaspora within Cuban and Cuban-American texts serves as a cornerstone for the re-examination and reflection on Cuban identity. He asserts that “The artificial dichotomy between Cuban culture on the island and in exile is subverted by the constant flow of people and ideas across geopolitical borders [...] Today, a hyphenated Cuban-American culture flourishes along the interstices between Havana and Miami, above the air bridge that connects the two spiritual centers of *lo cubano*” (36). Although Duany bases his proposal on his sociological and anthropological study of Miami and Havana, his approach is applicable to Veciana-Suárez’s novel. In the case of Adela and Maribel, their strengthened mother-daughter relationship aids in the re-evaluation of their Cuban-American uniqueness. This is a representation of the hyphenated identity that theorists such as Gustavo Pérez Firmat and Isabel Alvarez Borland describe in their works. Borrowing Fernando Ortiz’s famous metaphor for Cuba, Pérez Firmat suggests that Cuban America is best represented as an *ajiaco*. The tropical stew contains many specific ingredients, just as Cuban-American identity does, yet the final product is original. He argues that the hyphen in the term “Cuban-American” should actually be read as a “+” sign, acknowledging that Cuban-Americans share aspects from both national identities (16).

Additionally, we can consider Irigaray’s suggestion that it is this closeness between this family’s female genealogy that reaffirms personal and national identity, even if it is always in a state of flux. She calls for women to situate and reaffirm their female genealogy; to cherish and appreciate this “special” relationship. Towards the end of the novel, Maribel speaks to the importance of

this connection. Even though she has always had her mother and grandmother around, she realizes that she has never just accepted them for who they are. More importantly, by involving herself in her extended family and allowing her female family members to partake in her life, Maribel is given the support she needs to understand who she is as a Cuban-American woman. For the following passage the narrator addresses this very point:

Theirs was an unusual relationship, Maribel thought, a complicated, erratic pas de deux with no end. Growing up, she liked to think of it as a complementary partnership that benefited both of them mother and daughter, but later, as Maribel gained maturity and experience and knowledge of the world beyond her house, their alliance shifted, lost its footing. In the dance now, they were no longer touching hands, and sometimes they had their backs to each other, moving to the rhythm of individual songs. After Victor, Maribel thought that the music had blended together once again, like a piano duet. (257)

Later on, the narrator again mentions Maribel's thoughts on the subject:

During those first sweltering days of summer, Maribel found herself cleaving to her mother's company, her grandmother's wisdom...As she spent more and more time with her mother and her grandmother, she began enjoying their stories, their idiosyncrasies, the very fact that their brains, illogical, circuitous, never worked the way she expected them to, certainly not the way hers did. (269)

Maribel surprises herself by enjoying the idiosyncrasies of her mother and grandmother that once bothered her so much. As she slowly becomes aware of her powerless situation with her infant child, Maribel begins to listen more to her mother and grandmother, whose stories tell of past female family members in Cuba. In her article, "Mothers and Daughters," Marianne Hirsch traces and challenges the mother-daughter relationship and alludes to multiple trends within the field. In her study she argues that "Female writers' accounts of the mother-daughter bond are the most articulate and detailed expression of its intimacy and distance, passion and violence, that we can find; they are the most personal and at the same time the most universal" (204). The Chin Kiss King reveals an intimate account of the relationship of three women who confront the ties that make them a family. A testimony to the resilient spirit of women, this novel uncovers the intricacies of the mother-daughter relationship. Furthermore, the re-building of Cuca, Adela, and Maribel's relationship allows for a projection questions of national identity and the representation of the diaspora for Cuban-American women. This dialogue is initiated by what Hirsch would consider as a personal account of the mother-daughter relationship. Without Cuca's stories of her life in Cuba, Adela and Maribel could not reflect on their experience as Cuban-Americans living in Miami.

Dreaming in Cuban

Of all the novels I will examine, the one that has received the most attention is undoubtedly Cristina García's Dreaming in Cuban. Critics such as Mary Vásquez, Rocío Davis and William Luis have focused on the mother-

daughter relationship in this particular novel. Vásquez's article, "Cuba as Text and Context in Cristina García's Dreaming in Cuban," argues that Cuba is both part of the text and context within the novel. She claims that the island is figuratively moving further away from the United States and that, within this context, the mother-daughter relationship between Celia and Lourdes grows more distant. In the article, "Back to the Future: Mothers, Language, and Homes in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*," Davis suggests that García's novel depicts struggles specifically within mother-daughter bonds across three generations. She further points out that there exists an urgency of appropriating one's own history as part of a "process of self-affirmation" (61). Hence, as her study's title indicates, there is a need for a return back to Cuba (for Pilar and Lourdes) so that they may come back to the United States with renewed lives. William Luis offers a close reading of the novel in Dance between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States. He draws from Pérez Firmat's analysis of the one-and-a-half generation and applies this theory to Pilar, the youngest of the three women. Luis traces the unique interaction between Lourdes and Pilar suggesting that "Although Pilar wants to stay away from her mother's interpretation of Cuba's internal situation, in some strange way, she comes back to it" (217).

For García's novel, I focus on the importance of female genealogy and how it also relates, as in Veciana-Suárez's The Chin Kiss King, to the search and re-construction of the national and cultural identity of Pilar. I concentrate on Pilar's process of forming her own identity and how her relationship with both her

mother and her grandmother is an integral part of this development. Within the novel, García centers the action and narration mainly around the relationships between women, especially mother-daughter and grandmother-daughter interactions. Even though there are important examples of the relationships involving the male characters in García's novel (Jorge, Rulfino, Gustavo and Hugo to name a few), I believe the majority of the narrative is concentrated on the effect of the Cuban revolution on the three generations of women in the Del Pino family and thus my discussion will center on them. When asked particularly about Dreaming in Cuban, García responded:

I realized I wanted to create very specific characters and chronicle their obsessions, while at the same time exploring the trickle-down effects of the Cuban revolution on their lives and relationships. I also wanted to focus primarily on women. So much of history is written by and about men. I hoped to explore the more personal repercussions of a big political event. (250).

My approach will be to discuss how female genealogy is represented in this novel and how, in the end, it affects Pilar's process of building her Cuban-American identity. Within the novel, the reader is able to define three women who are integral to the plot of the story: Celia, Lourdes, and Pilar. The relationship between Pilar and both her mother and grandmother allows Dreaming in Cuban to address the importance of the mother-daughter relationship within a Cuban-American context. Throughout the novel, the

narrator describes the interactions between these three characters, allowing the protagonist to evolve and form her own national, sexual, and cultural identity.

A) Business Is Booming: The Celia-Lourdes Dichotomy

The sociopolitical atmosphere in Dreaming in Cuban is more or less a dichotomy between the world of capitalism of the United States and the socialist economy in Cuba. As an adamant supporter of the Castro regime, Celia represents Cuba's socialist agenda. To illustrate, the narrator explains:

Celia has devoted herself completely to the revolution. When El Líder needed volunteers to build nurseries in Villa Clara province, Celia joined a micro brigade, setting tiles and operating a construction lift. When he launched a crusade against an outbreak of malaria, Celia inoculated schoolchildren. (111)

On the other hand, Lourdes completely rejects her mother's political goals and constantly reaffirms her capitalistic point of view. This is most evident in Lourdes's success with her bakery business. In his book, Cultural Erotics in Cuban America, Ricardo Ortiz addresses Cristina García's participation in a wider political and cultural economy that shapes the transnational and global scene. Ortiz argues that the author benefits from the enterprise of producing novels within the United States, a common theme he pins to characters in three of her novels (including Dreaming in Cuban). He says, "It bears noting here, too, that Cuban exiles, and especially Cuban-exile women, have had a significant and unique history as entrepreneurs after immigrating to the United States" (201). Lourdes's accomplishment of owning a bakery is paralleled with her voracious

appetite and unquenchable desire for sexual relations with her husband (21). This, perhaps, is a metaphor for the rejection she feels from Celia. This is made clear by Celia's declaration that she would not remember Lourdes's name (195). Clearly, Pilar is stuck in the middle, caught between two separate worlds both culturally and politically. In her book, Latino Literature in America, Bridget Kevane effectively emphasizes this point. She affirms, "García develops Celia as a staunch supporter of Castro's revolution, Lourdes as a vehement anti-Castro American immigrant, and Pilar as the granddaughter caught between two extremes" (87). Thus, Pilar is confronted with the differences between her mother and grandmother and is thrown into the process of defining her own identity. In the end, Pilar must ultimately choose what is right for her, as a product of both Celia and Lourdes's economic, political, and social perspectives.

B) My Mother's Mother: The Celia-Pilar Duo

Celia's situation can best be described, using Gilbert and Gubar's terminology, as a "passive angel" and an "active monster". Celia represents many aspects of what Gilbert and Gubar would call the "passive angel." She seems to be trapped, in her house, in her relationship with Jorge, and even on her island. However, throughout the novel, we read the love letters Celia has written to her Spanish lover, Gustavo. These letters, which are never sent, are never read by Jorge and are left for Pilar to put in her diary (235). In one of those letters Celia confesses, "If I was born to live on an island, then I'm grateful for one thing: that the tides rearrange the borders. At least I have the illusion of change, of possibility" (99). In other words, Celia is represented as a woman

writer, but as a trapped angel who cannot improve her situation. She passively accepts her position as it is, enjoying the time when Jorge travels to perform songs on the piano he has forbidden her to play (8).

Celia does not completely fit the stereotypical role of a passive angel. Her active involvement in Castro's Revolution portrays Pilar's grandmother as a woman who takes control of her destiny. Celia chooses to cut sugar in the fields, guard the north coast of Cuba, and volunteer as a civilian judge. Pilar often pictures her grandmother as a woman who rejects the status quo, a characteristic she admires in herself. Pilar explains, "My mother told me that Abuela Celia was an atheist before I even understood what the word meant. I liked the sound of it, the derision with which my mother pronounced it, and knew immediately it was what I wanted to become" (175). Of course, Celia's position is apparent to Pilar when she comes to visit. She addresses her doubts about staying with her grandmother:

I have to admit it's much tougher here than I expected, but at least everyone seems to have the bare necessities. I wonder how different my life would have been if I'd stayed with my grandmother. I think about how I'm probably the only ex-punk on the island, how no one else has their ears pierced in three places. It's hard to imagine existing without Lou Reed. (234)

Pilar realizes that it was the right decision to visit Cuba and meet with her Abuela Celia. Alvarez Borland writes, "Her [Pilar] encounter with the Cuba of her parents produces a variety of feelings that she seeks to unravel and hopes to

understand” (141). However, Pilar recognizes that even though she loves her grandmother dearly, Cuba is not where she belongs, which she struggles to admit to Celia (236).

C) Stuck in the Middle: The Celia-Lourdes-Pilar Triangle

Another representation of female genealogy as it relates to Pilar’s process of creating her own identity is the relationship between Celia and her daughter Lourdes. García presents these two characters with dynamic and conflicting personalities. In short, Lourdes is quite conservative politically, yet rejects the social norms for a woman of her times. Lourdes works as a police officer and, as I mentioned before, opens her own bakery, neither of which jobs were as common for women in the early twentieth-century as they are now. Celia appears to be Lourdes’s polar opposite. Although very progressive in her political opinions, Celia is much more conservative in the social sense. Her relationship with Jorge is an excellent example of this. Phillipa Kafka writes, “Lourdes is conservative politically, yet her actions are feminist, whereas Celia is progressive politically and yet more traditional, especially in her conduct and attitude toward men” (83).

Lourdes often compares her life in the United States with her mother’s life in Cuba. While walking her beat as an auxiliary policewoman she ponders, “In Cuba nobody was prepared for the Communists and look what happened. Now her mother guards their beach with binoculars and a pistol against Yankees” (128). Lourdes does not reject her mother completely. Just as Chodorow acknowledges possible conflicts between mother and daughter, she maintains

that a daughter cannot separate herself from her mother entirely. In fact, Hirsch argues that the notion of the woman as a singular and transparent category must be reconsidered. She states that “[t]he multiplicity of ‘women’ is nowhere more obvious than for the figure of the mother, who is always both mother and daughter” (12). Because of the strong personal identification shared between the two women, Lourdes ultimately continues her relationship with Celia. This is most evident when Lourdes and Pilar travel to Cuba to visit Celia. Lourdes intense reaction and her quick response in bathing Celia speaks to her need to care for her mother, even after many years of separation and anger. Returning to Cuba is an overwhelming experience for Pilar, who watches her mother and grandmother interact for the first time. While on the island, Pilar finds it hard to rest, saying “I think Mom envied me my rest. But tonight it’s different. I’m the one who can’t sleep” (221). Pilar seems to be caught between these two distinct personalities, trying to define who she is. Although Pilar feels a special connection with Abuela Celia, she also knows that Lourdes is an important part of her makeup. The unveiling of Pilar’s mural in the Yankee Doodle Bakery illustrates this mother-daughter conflict. Pilar’s punk version of New York’s famous statue with a safety pin through Liberty’s nose invokes a hateful reaction from the Brooklyn audience. Even though Lourdes does not care for Pilar’s work, she defends her daughter by hitting a man who criticizes it. At this moment, Pilar affirms her love for her mother (144).

As García mentioned, Dreaming in Cuban seeks to show another perspective of the Cuban revolution, as told by the women of the Del Pino family.

It is crucial that we mention how García reveals feminine writing within the text. Whether the entire novel is in fact Pilar's diary or not, this does not undermine the fact that, at certain moments, we are reading Pilar's writing. More importantly, Celia's writing appears in the text in the form of letters, which Pilar has inherited. In this case, we are able to see a relation between grandmother and granddaughter with the passing of written text from Celia to Pilar. The opportunity to read Celia's letters allows Pilar to reevaluate her perspective of the Revolution and her national identity, as it presents the internal history of the family. By sharing these intimate experiences, García lets the reader watch the personal development and reaffirmation of identity of these women, especially Pilar.

Just as Benedict Anderson believes that members of a nation can only "imagine" how their community is, Pilar creates her own community, where she can begin to feel comfortable and accepted. It is important to point out that Suzanne Oboler redefines the idea of "imagined communities" and suggests a reevaluation of Anderson's text. One cannot lump all Latin American immigrants into one category, Oboler states:

In other words, Latin American immigrants in the United States, like people everywhere, are a very complex group whose class and race values, differentiated gender experiences, national differences, and political convictions and beliefs may interfere again and again with the construction of group solidarity among themselves. (162)

However, Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" can be applied to Pilar's particular situation. Pilar reconsiders her identity by realizing she is a combination of both Cuban and American heritage. Her re-construction of her national identity is directly related to her relationship with Lourdes and Celia. As the novel advances, she begins to foster a new identity, not one of her mother's or of her grandmother's, but one of her own which is original, exclusive, and separate from her family members. Pilar is Cuban-American, who lives on the hyphen and not on either side of it. As such, she creates her own community where she as the daughter and granddaughter of Cubans can feel comfortable and accepted in the United States.

Playing with Light

Like García's Dreaming in Cuban and Veciana-Suárez's The Chin Kiss King Beatriz Rivera's Playing with Light also tells of multiple generations of females in the Barrios family. Set in an upscale area of Miami Beach, the novel focuses on Rebecca, who decides to restore the custom of having traditional Cuban *tertulias* at her home. Having always being an avid reader, Rebecca believes that she can reclaim past friends from her high school days by buying a batch of white wicker rocking chairs and inviting them over for book discussion and sweet treats. The novel the Cuban-American women read, poetically and self-reflexively entitled "Playing with Light," is also the one read by the reader. Hence Rivera's work is actually two parallel and metafictional stories; one set in mid-1800s and the other in present-day Miami. By combining both accounts,

Rivera creates a powerful narrative that mixes two distinct worlds separated in time and geographical location.

A) Rebecca and her Mother

In his book, Remembering Maternal Bodies: Melancholy in Latina and Latin American Woman's Writing, Benigno Trigo argues that Latina and Latin American woman writers speak to an influential force that goes beyond the individual lives of their biological mothers. Trigo claims that these women writers give voice to a "maternal speaking body" which changes the shape of what he coins as a "patriarchal maternal imaginary" (2). He offers various in-depth readings of works from authors such as Rosario Ferré and Julia Alvarez. Although he does not look specifically at the authors in my dissertation, his work is indeed relevant to it. Trigo suggests that images of the mother and motherhood in works of Latina writers "confirm that the maternal imaginary is both a linguistic and an organic process that makes but at the same time troubles meaning, identity, and subjectivity" (4).

Rebecca lives a relatively sheltered life as a housewife. She repeatedly questions her situation as Tommy's wife, seemingly confused about what she has become. Her relationship with her husband is strained due to the recent loss of his business and it is mirrored in their nightly drinking episodes. With respect to her relationship with her mother, Rebecca struggles to cope with her demanding demeanor. Rebecca's mother frequently expresses her disappointment with Rebecca's decisions in life:

“It was before that man you married taught you to disdain and mistreat your own mother...” Mami momentarily stopped to think, and sighed, “When I think of all the sacrifices I made to send you to that school...so that you could mingle with the best people in Miami...and go to the best university...have a career...” (4)

It is evident that female genealogy is a central concern in Rivera’s novel.

Rebecca’s mother addresses her daughter, saying: “And you never used to criticize your own mother. It’s because you married an *americano*, and *americanos* have no sense of how close mothers are to their daughters” (12). Here, a distinction is made by Rebecca’s mother between what “americanos” believe and what Cubans know to be true. In her case, the fact that Rebecca married Tommy has somehow ruined her own relationship with her daughter, something she believes all Cubans take very seriously. In “Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother,” Irigaray argues that the separation between mother and daughter can lead to lasting, negative effects on a woman. She asserts, “Neither the little girl nor the woman needs to give up the love for her mother. To do so is to sever women from the roots of their identity and their subjectivity” (20). In Rivera’s work, there are various examples of the conflict between Rebecca and her mother. Some of the more significant illustrations of this are found in their phone conversations. In one instance, Rebecca receives a call from her during one of her tertulias:

“Mom, I really have to go now, I have company, I’ll call you later.”
“Yes, of course, no time for me,” Rebecca’s mother said and hung up. (100)

Another instance occurs when her mother calls to talk about Brothers to the Rescue and how Fidel shot them down. Rebecca's reaction is disinterested and neutral. The narrator explains, "Rebecca was sitting in a rocking chair with the phone cradled between her shoulder and her jaw. While her mother talked she examined her skin in a little vanity mirror. 'Un-hunh' she replied" (193). In both cases, her mother becomes extremely aggravated with Rebecca's attitude and hangs up the phone. The reader can assume that she blames Rebecca's past choices, such as marrying Tommy, for her apathetic and indifferent disposition towards Cuban-American politics and her relationship with her mother.

Rebecca knows that she does not share the same national identity as her mother. By growing up in Miami, not Havana, her perspective of what it means to be "Cuban" is distinct. Rebecca does not consider herself part of her mother and father's community of exiles. She questions the validity in labeling herself part of a group of people who no longer live in their homeland. For her, Miami is home; it is where she belongs. She asserts:

By the time this "*grupito de Cubanitas en el Exilio*," as they called themselves, graduated from The Assumption Academy, even the departure from Cuba and the arrival in El Exilio seemed so distant that it no longer concerned them. El Exilio was their parents' nickname for Miami, but Miami was home from them [Rebecca and friends], and, in secret, it was becoming home even for their parents. (16)

More than ever, Rebecca defines herself as separate from her mother's generation. As a Cuban-American, she belongs in Miami, the city that is integral to her hyphenated identity. Rebecca's mother also makes this distinction when she insists that Rebecca has become "Americanized" by marrying Tommy. Be that as it may, Rebecca takes a step further by insinuating that even her parents, who once struggled to live in Florida instead of Cuba, have made Miami their home.

B) Rebecca and Nell

The frustration Rebecca's mother displays towards her daughter obviously affects Rebecca's own behavior towards Nell. Throughout the novel, Rebecca expresses her cynicism through her comments on the manner her daughter eats, talks, and dresses. Curiously, it seems that Rebecca has treated her daughter this way since she was pregnant. While contemplating her particular relationship with Nell, it is apparent that she regrets many of her choices in raising her only child and is envious of her friends' children. The narrator explains:

The worst part about it was that not all her feelings were noble ones and she felt ashamed, they wouldn't go away, they were there, so embarrassing, she wished she could start all over again, get it right this time, she envied Daisy and Conchita for the smart children they had. Why Nell? Was it because she was still smoking a pack of Marlboro Lights a day when she was pregnant? And Nell hardly ate when she was a baby, perhaps she was undernourished like those children in Africa. (23)

Rebecca becomes frustrated and angered when she watches Nell dance among her peers, alluding to her daughter's physical appearance. The narrator asserts, "Rebecca reads. She reads at the ballet studio while Nell's in class. Once in a while she looks up and wonders if Nell's too fat and uncoordinated. Daisy's daughter, Sylvia, is just gorgeous" (34). Her disappointment of Nell's incompetence leads to an explosive argument over her daughter's failure in completing her homework, a daily activity that Rebecca often winds up doing herself. Although Rebecca and Nell resolve their argument, Rebecca's view of her overweight daughter remains negative. She cannot understand why Nell cannot meet her expectations each and every time. Rebecca begins to reexamine her role as a mother and feels that she has not been successful in raising her own child. What is not clear is if she is worried about her own image as a mother or her daughter's. Moreover, Rebecca confides in her friends when discussing her preoccupation of her daughter's size. Rebecca asks her friend, "Conchi, tell me the truth, do you think Nell's getting fat? Never mind, here she is. Nell! How was your day?" (87) It seems that Rebecca's constant ridicule of her daughter's physical and mental condition alludes to something greater that resides in her own identity crisis. It manifests itself, among other things, in the form of criticism of her mother and daughter.

C) Filling the Gap

Just as Rebecca and her own mother share a somewhat thorny relationship, Rebecca and her own daughter also find it difficult to connect. Their interactions mainly consist of shallow discussions about what they are having for

dinner or if the daily homework has been completed (169). Even though Rebecca feels guilty about how she has treated Nell and tries to make it up to her by feeding her and doing her homework, she still fails in really understanding who her daughter is. In addition, it seems as though Rebecca's own identity remains fragmented. That is, without the strong bond between grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter, Rebecca lacks the fulfillment that Irigaray alludes to in her lecture. In fact, Rebecca's relationship with her mother and Nell resembles many aspects of Chodorow's conclusions on boundary confusion. Chodorow asserts that:

Mothers and daughters...describe their experiences of boundary confusion or equation of self and other, for example, guilt and self-blame for the other's unhappiness; shame and embarrassment at the other's actions; daughters' 'discovery' that they are 'really' living out their mothers' lives in their choice of career; mothers' not completely conscious reactions to their daughters' bodies as their own (over-identification and therefore often unnecessary concern with supposed *weight* or skin problems, which the mother is really worried about in herself); etc. (58, my emphasis)

Unlike Pilar and Celia's or Cuca and Maribel's relationship, Nell and her grandmother share no telepathic or even familiar connection. For example, Nell visits her grandmother only once in the novel even though they live in the same city. Described as a superficial event, the reader only knows she has visited her

grandmother because Rebecca asks her daughter if she's had enough to eat there:

Did you get enough to eat at your abuelita's sweetheart? Did she make chicken?
Nope, pig's feet.
Why don't you have a tall glass of milk with Quick and a chocolate pudding before you go to bed, mi vida? (146)

Besides eating pig's feet, there is no reference to what Nell and her grandmother shared while visiting each other. Moreover, Rebecca appears to be interested only in what Nell ate and whether or not she is full, not on what they spoke about. In response, Rebecca seems to want to "outdo" her mother by offering Nell more food when she returns from her grandmother's house. Chocolate pudding and chocolate milk, in the end, only reinforce Rebecca's incessant preoccupation with Nell's weight problem.

Throughout Playing with Light, Rebecca seems to be constantly searching for something that will define who she is. She often compares herself with her friends and fictional characters in the metatext "Playing with Light." She wants to be different, not just a Miami housewife or Tommy's possession:

Rebecca said she'd gladly tell Harvey's story were it not swarming with stereotypes. The job, the money, the power, the girls, the toys, Harvey had it all, so he decided to go for the wrong clients.

Tommy? Of course she isn't talking about Tommy! My Tommy?

Tommy isn't like that at all. Granted, he lost his nightclub for all the wrong reasons but we were different. I'm a reader! I'm deep deep deep. (156).

Here, Rebecca adamantly distinguishes herself from her brother-in-law. Furthermore, she insists on being a “deep” person, someone who is well-read and knowledgeable. She claims that both she and Tommy are not the stereotypical couple. Her friend, Conchita, also makes her reevaluate her own position as a woman living in Miami: “What is it about Conchita? Isn’t she just another rich Miami Beach housewife? So bad...Where does that leave me?” (114)

While reading “Playing with Light,” Rebecca momentarily reflects on the characters in the novel and how their actions compare with her own comportment. The narrator explains, “Nothing compared to Lolo, Conchita, María Fernanda, and Helen; the novel is bleeding all the color she once thought she had in her life, inhaling, drawing it all in, swallowing. How can María Fernanda talk like that?” (155). Rebecca’s friends notice her willingness to escape the “real” world by immersing herself in the fictitious world of her novels. Daisy says:

She [Rebecca] is a perfectionist, and gets quite upset if things don’t quite turn out the way she plans. Not only that but she wants everything to be like one of her eternal page-turners with a beginning, a middle, an end, and a binding. To make a long story short, she’s never been out in the real world. A reader, that’s all she is. (96)

The absence of strong female bonds between the generations of women in the family forces Rebecca to re-examine her own life as a Cuban-American

woman and search for a way to deal with the lack of a healthy relationship with her mother and daughter. One of the ways in which she copes with this is her escape from reality via reading. By reading, she is allowed to fantasize living in another time and place. As she reads the novel "Playing with Light," the characters become part of her life, by comparing herself to Lolo or María Fernanda. She talks about them as if they were just more friends that come to her tertulia. In an interview with Beatriz Rivera, Frederick Luis Aldama introduces the author as contributor to the "increased presence" of Latino/a writers of Cuban descent that continue to shape contemporary American literature. While discussing Playing with Light, Aldama asks Rivera about the significance of writing in her personal life. Her response is curious, as she explains, "Oh, yeah. I was always into writing. Reading and writing...[it] was a way of validating myself and of being with myself" (154). Here, Rivera asserts the importance of reading and writing as a manner of defining herself as a woman and a Cuban-American. Undoubtedly, one must draw distinctions between author and work; however it is apparent that Rivera and her fictional character share many similar characteristics. Moreover, Rivera acknowledges that the very act of reading and writing aided in "validating" herself, a process of defining her identity as a woman and Cuban-American. Rebecca is portrayed in a similar fashion.

Rebecca's insistence in forming a tertulia, where her female friends can meet and share their feelings, seems to stem from her lack of personal relationship with her own mother and daughter. Thus, she must go outside her

family's female genealogy to help her reevaluate her Cuban-American identity. Unlike Pilar and Maribel, who both strengthen their relationship with older generations of their female family members, Rebecca finds comfort in her Cuban-American friends and her imaginary ones. In the end, it is her strong relationship with her friends, not her blood-relatives, that serves a similar purpose in examining her national identity. In other words, the lack of a genuine relationship with her mother and Nell is instrumental in the formation of Rebecca's identity.

The Sugar Island

Unlike The Chin Kiss King, Dreaming in Cuban, and Playing with Light, Ivonne Lamazares's The Sugar Island begins in Cuba and describes a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship as they attempt to escape to Miami. The story is told through the resilient voice of Tanya, who struggles to maintain a healthy relationship with her mother, Mirella. Mirella, who has a history of leaving her children, is willing to take any chance to get off the island. Having left Tanya once when she was a young child, Mirella has lost her daughter's confidence. Tanya's lack of faith in her mother is reinforced when she tries to leave the island once again with both children. After Mirella is sent away to a "rehabilitation and vocational training program," Tanya and her brother, Emanuel, are sent to live with their father's great-aunt Petra Rosa Canuta de Casales in Havana. At their great-aunt's house, Emanuel grows closer to Petra following a strict schedule of piano lessons while Tanya feels betrayed by both her mother and brother. Tanya therefore searches outside her own family for reliable

relationships and befriends Paula and her mother. Throughout the novel, Tanya and Mirella share a turbulent relationship which oscillates between the poles of love and hate. Even when Mirella convinces Tanya to escape Cuba on a homemade raft, her daughter's skepticism is proven correct when her mother instead leaves for Spain (from Miami) with a Cuban-American TV reporter.

Lamazares's The Sugar Island can be examined as a highly political novel that critiques the Cuban realities under Castro's regime. The novel spends a great deal of time describing the food rationing, national illiteracy campaign, black market, and unrealistic productivity goals. Although the criticism is very harsh towards the regime, Lamazares makes sure to not to demonize it completely. Even after Tanya and her mother have escaped Cuba, she realizes that the country they left was not all bad. She says, the "truth was that if we had stayed in our country, not Mamá, not one of us would have been fed to lions, tortured or starved to death in a dark cell. Even if we got caught now, we wouldn't face a firing squad or a gas oven"(152).

In her article, "A Homecoming without a Home: Recent U.S. Cuban Writing of Diaspora," Claudia Sadowski-Smith examines Lamazares's novel. Sadowski-Smith suggests that Mirella and Tanya's reasons for leaving Cuba are not only political, but economic. She relates their escape from the island to many Cubans from lower socio-economic classes who left during the 1980s and 1990s. She claims that the novel emphasizes Cuba and its economic effects on immigration to the United States and the overall lack of financial success of immigrants when they finally arrive. She states, "The novel highlights that

immigrants from poor backgrounds have a hard time achieving economic success in the United States. The family's sole relative, who has lived in the United States for several years, has only made it to floor supervisor in a textile factory" (278). Sadowski-Smith argues that The Sugar Island portrays a different aspect of Cuban diasporic experiences that is not always related to nostalgic visions of return. Although Sadowski-Smith acknowledges that Tanya's dilemma "involves a quest for the withheld affection of [her mother]," she does not provide an in-depth analysis of Mirella and Tanya's relationship, which is what I have set out to do here (269). Just as García's Pilar, Rivera's Rebecca, and Veciana-Suárez's Maribel and Adela, Lamazares's Tanya pertains to a female genealogy which Irigaray would argue is integral in the formation and preservation of a woman's identity. Moreover, Tanya's relationship with her mother not only is the cornerstone of Lamazares's work, but is a fundamental element in the reconstruction of the protagonist's national and sexual identity. As Chodorow suggests, the development of a girl's gender identity is different from that of a boy. She clarifies, "Her [the daughter's] final role identification is with her mother and women, that is, with the person or people with whom she also has her earliest relationship of infantile dependence" (51).

A) Tanya and Mirella

From the very beginning of this novel, it is evident that there exists an emphasis on the female characters within the story. Many of the male characters, such as Tanya's biological father, El Gambao, make few appearances. Tanya explains:

I didn't understand Mamá. Each time El Gambao came home she cleaned and cooked and took us for ice cream. But soon Mamá's fish-lipped pouting turned to door-slamming and dish-breaking, and El Gambao would pack his toothbrush and white uniform and leave until the next shipping season. (7).

Here, the reader infers that Tanya goes as far as suggesting that Mirella is actually somewhat, if not entirely, at fault for her father's absences. Since Tanya barely knows her father, her only parental guidance is from her mother. Mirella is characterized by her constant urge to flee from complicated situations in life.

Tanya asserts, "Mamá always wanted to start life just as I wanted to start a new notebook at school, with neat and crisp lines, waiting to be filled with important dates and bright colors" (8). Tanya's observations are absolutely correct. Mirella never ceases to find comfort in her present condition. Even at the end of the novel, after struggling for years to flee to the United States, Mirella gives her condolences to her daughter and leaves Miami to live in Spain. As a young girl, Tanya cannot comprehend her mother's disposition. While in Cuba, she unsuccessfully tries to convince her mother to not leave with her or Emanuel.

Tanya says, "I took Emanuel's hand and pulled him back. Mamá...Mamá, let's go home now.' But she turned and looked out to the dark. I tried to see what she saw. I tried to imagine what could make someone run away like this, what could be waiting on the other side" (12).

Even though Mirella fails to escape the island multiple times with her children, she continues to forge complex plans to leave Cuba. After being caught

and thrown into prison for rehabilitation, Mirella is forced to work at a matchbox factory where she stands on her feet all day long. Her undesirable job only creates more distress between her and Tanya.

Although Mirella eventually comes home from her rehabilitation at Isle of Pines and shares a bedroom with her daughter, their relationship suffers greatly due to her apathy towards life and her children. This is demonstrated by Mirella's lack of interest in her daughter. For example, when Tanya begins to menstruate, she goes to her mother for advice, thinking she has soiled her pants. Mirella's response is practical, cold, and distant:

She [Mirella] leaned back and blew out a puff of smoke, then pointed to her dresser. 'Pull a rag and two safety pins out of the green box. One pin goes in front, one in back. Make sure the bulge doesn't show. Don't wear white to school all week.' She smiled vaguely. 'Welcome to womanhood.' Then she looked away.

(53)

Mirella expresses an indifferent attitude again when she speaks to Tanya about her upcoming birthday:

'Fifteen,' she [Mirella] said and slid the door shut with her foot. 'You're about to turn fifteen. In this place.' She walked to her chair covered with dirty clothes and plopped herself down. 'I used to make plans for your fifteenth birthday. A party. A long dress. But my plans turned to smoke.' (98)

As much as it bothers Tanya to have her mother treat her apathetically, she cuts her mother some slack, understanding that Mirella's unhappiness stems from her situation in Cuba. Mirella reinforces this idea when she says, "You refuse to understand where you live...In another place you wouldn't betray your mother like this. You wouldn't have to. In another place you'd be different. I'd be different" (100). Tanya accepts her mother's mood swings but strives to find balance in her own life. One of the ways she does this is by befriending Paula and her mother.

B) The Absence of a Mother

When she meets Paula, a piano student of Petra, Tanya is surprised to see the closeness between her and her mother. Paula explains to Tanya that they are both daughters of Ochún and that her mother sees auras. When Paula asks Tanya about the whereabouts of her own mother, Tanya lies, saying, "Sick. She's sick in a hospital, I lied. I knew Mamá was nowhere that comfortable" (21). Here, Tanya distorts the truth for two reasons. Obviously, she is embarrassed that her mother has been sent to prison. However, it is clear that Tanya is actually envious of Paula's relationship with her own mother. She rejects Paula's insistence on making an offering for Mirella and claims that she has already done it herself. Yet, in the end, Tanya consciously accepts Paula's sympathy towards her situation. Tanya concedes, "I could see Paula had decided to take me under her wing and I didn't resist" (22). Like Rebecca in Playing with Light, Tanya forms a close relationship with a female companion to counter the absence of her mother.

As Tanya and Paula's relationship grows, Tanya fails to understand her friend's disposition towards her own mother. She had watched Paula and her mother interact with envious eyes only to find out that her mother chose to ignore the sexual molestation between Paula and her stepfather. Paula chooses not to call the authorities and punish Loló, a decision that Tanya cannot comprehend. She says, "Carina had done nothing to keep Loló away from Paula. 'Your mother opened her legs and pushed you out. That's all,' I said" (104). Paula's reasoning is short and sweet, "She's my mother." Here, I believe Tanya fails to grasp Paula's dedication towards her mother because her own relationship with Mirella lacks the same trust and confidence. Paula's innate need to protect her mother from losing her husband is irrational to Tanya. Tanya views Carina as a woman who gave birth to Paula and that deserves no further loyalty, especially after how she has treated Paula.

C) Abuela Carmen

Tanya's relationship with her grandmother, although not close, is positive. Before Mirella comes back from being "knocked up by a rebel cook," the children are cared for by Abuelita Carmen (4). They spend their nights on a shared cot in her kitchen. Their grandmother frowns upon Mirella's decision to run off with the revolutionary, knowing she would ultimately return due to Mirella's "slippery" heart. After Mirella is sent away, Tanya and Emanuel are forced to leave their grandmother's thatched bohío in the countryside. Although their communication is almost completely cut off while living apart, Tanya writes her grandmother periodically. Every once in a while Abuelita answers Tanya's letters. She writes:

This is for la Tanya, my dear granddaughter, that I want for her to know I remember her always and for her to be careful in Havana with everything, to guard against the strong breeze of the bay at night. I have Elba read me her letters, how much she has grown, she sounds like a big señorita, muy sabida y leida y escribida. (64)

Even though the letter is not actually written by Abuelita Carmen, she signs her name in an illegible scribble; an obvious allusion to the failure of Castro's literacy campaign. Unlike Dreaming in Cuban's Pilar and The Chin Kiss King's Maribel, Tanya has no other way of communicating with her grandmother besides the letters she sends. It is certain that Abuelita Carmen cares for her granddaughter deeply and is proud of her. However, when Mirella offers to make a trip back to the countryside to visit her grandmother, Tanya is hesitant. She ponders, "But something in me-some old hurt-made me stiffen. Mamá never understood what I wanted. These promises hardened me. It didn't matter where we went. Life was difficult, everywhere and anywhere the same" (64). Tanya's uncertainty is based more on her mother's insistence in having a "marvelous trip" than any sort bias against her grandmother. Playing with Light's grandmother-granddaughter relationship between Nell and Abuelita is quite similar to Tanya and Abuelita Carmen's relationship. Like Nell, Tanya shows little interest in visiting her grandmother or maintaining a close relationship. Both Maribel and Pilar are drawn to their mother's mother, discovering they share similar personalities. In many cases they feel a stronger connection with their grandmother than their own mother.

D) The Inescapable Bond

In many ways, Tanya and Mirella share the same destiny. As much as Tanya tries to distance herself from her mother's actions, she finds herself emulating Mirella time and time again. Chodorow suggests that conflicts can arise between mother and daughter and that a girl cannot nor does not completely reject her mother. She claims that the daughter will ultimately continue her relationship of dependence with her mother due to the strong personal identification between the two. This can thus lead to what Chodorow explains as boundary confusion or the equation of self and other. She maintains that what many have called the "oedipal rejection" by the daughter can be clarified by the circular succession of a mother growing up without sufficient ego boundaries which leads to boundary confusion with her daughter (292). Consequently, the daughter is not provided with experiences of differentiating ego development and as a result, projects what she defines as bad onto her mother and what she defines as good on to herself. Even though Tanya finds faults in her mother, she continues to follow in her footsteps, each time taking a step further towards what her mother wants. In this case, the result is that she is filled with a desire to leave the island and begin a life in Florida.

Other characters in the novel also recognize Tanya's tendency towards her mother's disposition. Melena reminds Tanya of how much she lacks faith saying, "Is that what you think...You throw away everything that's given to you as if it weren't good enough. Like your mother. You have no faith" (139). However, when the climax of the story is revealed, it defines a quintessential example of

Tanya's inevitable connection with her mother. This moment is expressed as Tanya jumps on the boat with her mother, yielding to her mother's desperate pleas. Even with multiple instances of Mirella trying to convince Tanya to leave, her daughter had been firmly against the idea. Nevertheless, Tanya changes her mind at the last second. Here, she realizes at this moment she will never be able to change her mother and must accept who she is. She reflects:

I saw in Mamá's face she wouldn't give me up. She'd already given up Emanuel...Mamá turned me around and walked me backward to the edge, gently, and hand over hand, I lowered myself down the rocks, calm at last. I loved Mamá. This was the stupid, dangerous secret I'd kept, mostly from myself. (150).

Tanya accepts that her mother is only trying to help her daughter have as many opportunities as possible. In Mirella's mind, this will only happen when she and her daughter live in the United States. Even after the frightening trip across the sea, where she, Mirella, and the rest of the crew of the raft become trapped in a storm, Tanya finally understands her mother's intentions. She appreciates her mother's initiative and thanks Mirella for convincing her to join her on the raft. She admits, "You were right. You were always right." (161).

There are moments where Mirella admits her daughter is different. She acknowledges the fact that Tanya does not react the way she does around men. She says, "You're not like me about men are you? I mean, you're not romantic...I don't blame you. Look where romance has gotten me" (184). Clearly, Mirella's relationship with Tanya's father has not been without its ups

and downs. Even though El Gambio is excited about the news of his daughter and lover's arrival to Miami, we learn that he has a wife and family, which he ultimately chooses over Tanya and Mirella. Mirella knows that her daughter would not put herself in such ambiguous romantic situations, something that she has done herself repeatedly. Although Mirella periodically defends El Gambio in her daughter's presence, she is very critical of his actions. She says, "I'm almost glad your father's not coming to this [fundraiser]. Señor Contreras will be there. And your father, sometimes he's very jealous" (175).

A defining moment of The Sugar Island is exposed when the reader realizes that Mirella has lied about the raft incident and that there are actually other survivors from their trip. After accidentally bumping into Martín, Tanya becomes aware of her mother's dishonesty. The fisherman tells Tanya that it was actually his brother who pulled her from the depths of the ocean to save her life, not Mirella. Sadly, he explains to Tanya that her rescuer passed away during the storm. Tanya is clearly disturbed by this unforeseen news, yet Martín reiterates his respect for Mirella. He explains, "To go out on a crazy ocean like that, let me tell you, it takes guts. My brother and me, we were seamen, but your mother, she didn't know. She's a brave woman. You're lucky to have her. Reventá" (198). Martín's kind compliments about Mirella aside, this episode pushes Tanya to confront her mother and ultimately aids in her decision to leave the house. Tanya explains to her mother, "I'm leaving...I'm not coming back" (200). Tanya lives with her boyfriend's family for eight months before going to

study at Boston University. Mirella, unsurprisingly, moves to Spain, leaving her daughter and the country that she claimed would resolve all her problems.

Even with this somewhat tragic ending, Lamazares examines key points of the mother-daughter relationship within the context of the Cuban-American diaspora by creating a dynamic union between Mirella and Tanya. This relationship allows Tanya to reexamine who she is as a Cuban (and eventually Cuban-American) woman. Throughout the novel, she struggles to find her appropriate identity and where she belongs. More specifically, Mirella pushes Tanya to question her national identity when they flee from their motherland. However, in the end, Tanya decides that she must break free from her mother (a situation that is perhaps explained by Chodorow's discussion of boundary confusion) and create an identity for herself. Just as Pilar begins to understand her identity by realizing she is a combination of both Cuban and American heritage, Tanya must come to terms with the complicated relationship she shares with her mother. By separating herself from Mirella and staying in the United States, Tanya moves towards an identity that will be different from her mother's. However, unlike Pilar, Tanya must sever communication with her mother so that she may finally come to terms with her own identity. This is the defining moment for Tanya and a beginning in a lifelong search for her Cuban-American uniqueness.

In the four novels discussed in this chapter, there exists a complicated female genealogy that is central to each story. In The Chin Kiss King and Dreaming in Cuban, the grandmother-mother-granddaughter relationship creates

a more developed female genealogy that serves as a foundation from which the Cuban-American women (such as Maribel and Pilar) can situate themselves. This female genealogy then acts as an example of national and political identity to which the Cuban-American female characters can compare themselves. In most cases, this reexamination of self does not harm the preexisting relationship with the family members. I believe that Tanya and Mirella's relationship would be an exception to this observation. With the help of theories developed by Chodorow and Irigaray, I have demonstrated that aspects of the mother-daughter relationship (both negative and positive) are an essential part of the female psyche and thus Cuban-American female characters in the four novels. Specifically, I have examined how this relationship is tied directly to the constant reflection and comparison of the female characters' identities as Cuban-Americans. Throughout this analysis, I have addressed questions of living in the diaspora and identification as part of an exile community. In each of these novels, there exists a special bond between female characters, be it grandmother-daughter-granddaughter or mother-daughter. This relationship is necessary and adds to the overall experience that these Cuban-American characters share living in the diaspora.

Chapter 3: Finding a Way Home: The Return to the Island

Much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. It is not surprising that so many exiles seem to be novelists, chess players, political activists, and intellectuals. Each of these occupations requires a minimal investment in objects and places a great premium on mobility and skill. The exile's new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction.

-from *Reflections on Exile*
Edward Said

One hour and a half later I was on the first stretch of my trip, my mind swirling. With feelings that wavered widely between elation and dread, I anticipated what laid ahead. But finally there was no turning back, and I was heading south.

-from *Havana Split*
Lara Canedo

In Margarita Engle's Skywriting and Singing to Cuba, Teresa Bevin's Havana Split, and Tina Matlock's Guava and Cheese, a voyage from the United States to Cuba is made by one or more of the characters in each novel. Except for José in Guava and Cheese, this trip is always followed by a return to the United States. By drawing from ideas proposed by Rocío Davis, William Luis, and Isabel Alvarez Borland as they considered Cristina García's Dreaming in Cuban, I will address the four novels I have set out to discuss in this chapter.

Engle's Singing to Cuba tells the story of a California farm wife who, without her husband and children, visits Cuba and her long-lost relatives after 31 years of separation. She is reunited with family members before being deported from Cuba back to the United States, charged with wandering too far from a tourist group. Engle addresses the return to Cuba in her second novel as well. In Skywriting, Carmen is drawn back to Cuba after having dreams of her half-brother, Camilo. When Camilo is thrown into a Cuban prison for trying to escape the island, he leaves a 500-year-old chronicle of the family's history with Carmen. To save her family's history, Carmen must bring this book back to California with her.

In Havana Split, Lara Canedo is a psychologist who writes textbooks in Washington, D.C. After having multiple flashbacks of her childhood in Cuba, Lara decides to visit her birthplace. She returns to the United States disillusioned by the present state of Cuba and the circumstances of her friends and family who still live there. The plot of Matlock's Guava and Cheese differs from those of the other three novels in the sense that three families (Ponte, Ortiz, and Jiménez) make the voyage to the United States from Cuba to escape Castro's government. However, both Armando and José decide they must go back to Cuba to help their fellow Cubans with Operation Pluto and eventually the Bay of Pigs Invasion. Although José never returns, as he is killed in action, Armando does finally escape Castro's prisons to return to the United States to be with his family.

The relationship of the exilic condition and the return has been discussed by highly regarded theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Benedict Anderson for some time now. In an eclectic mix of postmodern, postcolonial, and cultural studies, there have been numerous attempts of defining the transnational uniqueness, an identity that most easily could be applied to the exile. The exile's disposition demands a perspective that looks beyond the limitations of any monolithic idea of community, nationhood, or national culture. As Bhabha has theorized, the exilic condition can be discussed from the boundaries of ideology and discourse, the borderlands of culture. The exile is both located and dislocated in the "in-between" space that he argues is in a continuum with the past and constantly intersects the present and future.⁷ Andrea O'Reilly Herrera explains in her article, "'Inheriting' Exile: Cuban-American Writers in the Diaspora," that: "diasporic cultural identifications or differential identities are formulated in 'an interstitial future that emerges in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present.' They are dis-located in a present that is always negotiating between the past and the future" (192). This "in-between" space is analogous to what Bhabha describes as the perpetually contingent borderline condition in which cultural translation and production occur.

These diasporic identities, like postcolonial identities, have various and constantly shifting subject positions. In the case of diasporic Cubans, these shifting positions can best be understood in the context of Cuban and Caribbean history, where aspects of rupture, dispersion, and cultural transformation interface. Said proposes that the defensive nationalism of exiles can sometimes

⁷ For more on this subject, see Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, 225.

create self-awareness (and also a less attractive form of self-assertion). He alludes to examples of restoration projects that have been true in the twentieth century for Jews and Palestinians. He states:

Such reconstitutive projects as assembling a nation out of exile involve constructing a national history, reviving an ancient language, founding national institutions like libraries and universities. And these, while they sometimes promote strident ethnocentrism, also give rise to investigations of *self* that inevitably go far beyond such simple and positive facts as 'ethnicity.' (184, my emphasis).

Said argues that the exilic condition should not be considered a privilege, but as an "alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life" (184). In any case, the condition of the exile is not a matter of choice but a reaction to political instability, persecution, or the effects of being born into a particular generation. The state of the Cuban-American exile can thus be read as a hybrid identity that shares common characteristics of citizens of the United States and Cuba. In many situations, Cuban-Americans do not fit perfectly within dominant American culture, but represent an "alternative" or fringe community that strives to maintain a balance between their two distinct heritages.

A closer examination of the novels in my corpus provides some examples of Cuban-American exilic identity. Even though many of the novels take place within the United States, the authors often choose to include a voyage to Cuba by one or more of the characters. In the last decade or so, critics have looked

specifically at Cristina García's work (mainly Dreaming in Cuban and The Agüero Sisters) in relation to this prominent theme. Authors such as William Luis, Isabel Alvarez Borland, Rocío Davis, and O'Reilly Herrera have alluded to García's representations of the voyage to Cuba and the overall importance it has in her particular novels. This explains in part why I have chosen not to include either one of Cristina García's works in this chapter, but to rather focus on other authors who explore the voyage to Cuba in non-traditional ways. It is to four of these novels that I will turn.

Singing to Cuba

Margarita Engle's Singing to Cuba intertwines the story of a California farm wife who returns to Cuba after living in exile for 31 years and the story of the unjustified arrest and torture of her great uncle, Gabriel. Engle packs this novel full of historical references that relate directly to the protagonist and her family. With Gabriel's life story, Engle paints a dark, dreadful picture of Cuba's judicial and prison system. Interestingly, Engle chooses not to name her main character nor does she organize her novel into structured chapters. Instead, she uses a bold font when Gabriel's story is narrated and a regular font when the California farm wife narrates in the first person. The flashbacks of Gabriel's arrest and prison experience scattered throughout the novel comfortably juxtapose two stories (one in the past and one in the present) that take place entirely in Cuba. The novel's themes are captured by the articulation of the narrator's mission not only to remember her relatives, but to also tell their story, as in the case of Gabriel. Engle tackles the controversial issues of Cuban identity and exile

consciousness and creates a story which includes the typical Cuban-American experience of disillusionment and loss.

Intriguingly, the narrator of Singing to Cuba was not actually born in Cuba. So, technically, she is not truly an exile, as she is U.S.-born. She describes her first encounter with Cuba, saying, “The first time I went to Cuba I was small, a mere toddler” (17). The narrator goes on to describe her second trip to the island in the summer of 1960 and finally her final voyage in 1991. Even though she is theoretically not an exile, she identifies so much with her parents’ heritage that she exhibits similar attributes found in many Cuban-American exiles. O’Reilly Herrera in fact argues that even Cuban-Americans born off the island can still share the same attraction and desperate longing to return to Cuba as Cuban-born exiles. The Cuban-American exile experience allows for this unique possibility of creating an unreachable paradise or “lost world” based on fragmented recollections of memories, nostalgia, and stories from older generations. This particular situation adds to the overall desire that Cuban-Americans have to return to (or visit for the first time) the island (xxiii).

In her article, “The Sounds of Silence: Remembering and Creating in Margarita Engle’s *Singing to Cuba*,” Gisele Requena suggests that Engle’s novel combines aspects of the Cuban-American experience to “break through the silence of Cuba and create sound and song with the power of the written word” (147). Requena compares Engle’s novel with that of other Cuban-American writers who use the double narrative to express displacement, such as García’s Dreaming in Cuban. Moreover, she argues that the double narrative is crucial

because it articulates the displacement of the exile through multiple voices. In the case of Singing to Cuba, this is obviously true. Requena adds that the trip the narrator takes to Cuba is directly related to the beginning of a new personal identity. She notes:

Indeed, so much memory seeks release after the narrator's return from Cuba that remembering and creating combine to form the text. In other words, the novel in which the narrator is a character is also the product of her trip to Cuba. The novel is a physical monument to memory, family, and song – and for the narrator, both the completion of her mission and the beginning of a new wholeness.

(149)

The narrator revives her identity by reclaiming distant memories during and after her trip to the Caribbean island. However, Engle makes sure to distinguish between the narrator's identity, which incorporates aspects of both Cuban and American customs, and Cuban characters who reside on the island. Requena further explains:

As she shows that the narrator must combine her American and Cuban selves to become whole, Engle takes on the issues of Cuban-American literature and Cuban-American identity. *Singing to Cuba* presents a combination of different paths that are all a part of Cuban culture, blending past heritage, and present concerns, forging the way for a new, mixed future. (155)

Requena offers a reading of Singing to Cuba that addresses the fact that Engle's nameless narrator could be one of many Cuban-American women who have experienced the loss of a homeland and the difficulties of dealing with something missing in their lives.

One of the ways in dealing with this issue is the return to the source, as mentioned by Rocío Davis. In her article, "Back to the Future: Mothers, Language, and Homes in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*," Davis suggests that García's Dreaming in Cuban represents, in many ways, a need for regression to the past in order to renew present-day lives. Davis applies Lorna Irvine's "psychological journey," or the process of discovery, to Pilar's need to return to Cuba with her mother to visit her grandmother Celia (61). She explains, "The need to go 'back to the future' implies the urgency of appropriating the intricate truths about one's self and history as part of the process of self-affirmation" (61). Davis proposes that the procedure of discovering communal stories and history becomes an essential part of the process of self-identification. In the case of Dreaming in Cuban, she addresses Pilar and Lourdes' need to return to the island in order to come to terms with the scrambled meanings of home and nationality. Cuba, the motherland, Davis explains "is portrayed through both an insider and an outsider perspective, evocations tinged with the suffering of those who remain and the nostalgia of those who left and wish to return" (66). By visiting Cuba, Pilar and Lourdes are able to renew their present lives in the United States. More specifically, Pilar begins to understand and accept the hyphenated identity that makes her unique.

Similar to Dreaming in Cuban, Engle's first novel also introduces the central theme of the return to Cuba. Singing to Cuba's narrator grapples with questions of living in the diaspora and how her exilic condition ultimately affects her life in the United States. I agree with Requena's proposal, which can easily be placed along theories from Davis; however, I suggest that the voyage depicted in this novel serves multiple purposes. After visiting Cuba, the narrator begins to struggle even more with her fractured identity. As Luis and Alvarez Borland mention, the fictional characters in Dreaming in Cuban are searching for an equilibrium that incorporates both Cuban and American identities. Uncovering what Luis calls "master codes" or Cuban cultural connections represented in the Cuban-American novel, he assesses Pilar and Lourdes' return to the island. He proposes that their return to the source, to Cuba, reflects the theme that has been made popular by Alejo Carpentier's "Viaje a la semilla" (206). Luis states:

Her "journey back to the source" allows Pilar to understand her past and present and assume a self-reliant position, one that seeks to find a delicate balance between the negative and positive attributes of the Castro government...Unlike her mother, Pilar goes to Cuba with a positive view of the Revolution, and her change is part of her own process of development. (209)

The reasons why Pilar and Lourdes feel they must return are diverse, however the trip is necessary for both characters. Lourdes must return in order to liberate Ivanito from Celia and the Revolution. According to Luis, Pilar's return helps to seek a "delicate balance," which not only corresponds to Pilar's approach to

Cuban-American politics but also her national identity. After witnessing life in Cuba for herself, Pilar becomes independent from her mother and more importantly Celia and the Cuban government. Her *viaje a la semilla* allows “Pilar to understand her past and present and assume a self-reliant position” (209).

Alvarez Borland suggests that García dramatizes the anxieties felt by an ethnic writer about the issues of voice and identity through the character of Pilar and argues that Pilar must “unravel” feelings produced when she returns to Cuba. She says, “For Pilar...the task of collecting the stories her grandmother tells and writing them down stems from her archaeological need to recover a past that was already there and needed to be recovered” (141). Pilar has struggled with loss her entire life. She has lost her language and her connection with the island. Thus, by returning to Cuba she is able to recover some of the absent characteristics of her identity and find the “delicate balance.” Alvarez Borland explains that Cuban-American writers like García write from a “unique position” about the story of the exile. She states further that “[It is this unique position] that points to the complex dynamics of the extraterritorial Cuban narrative because it exposes all that is common in the age-old story of exile and all that is unique to the literary production of Cubans in America” (137).

Not surprisingly, in many of these Cuban-American novels, the characters struggle to find this “delicate balance.” In the introduction of Remembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora, O’Reilly Herrera defines the physical space of Cuba as both real and imagined. She explains:

As many critics have observed, Cuba has become a kind of “real-and-imagined” place or space. It is an absent “notion” (as opposed to “nation”), as José Martí observed, which has partly become the object of imagination or desire. In other words, the idea of Cuba that most Cuban exiles nurture and seek to preserve gives itself out as a refracted, shadowy image of a lost world, a fragmented void, an appropriated recollection partially “re-remembered” through the blue cloud of nostalgia or reconstructed through the vicarious imagination of those who either have never been to the Island, or were not old enough to remember when they left. On the other hand, it is an actual place, a physical space whose waxy green shrubbery and red earth and tourmaline sea function for many as an atemporal and ahistorical synecdoche, representing a spirit, a sensibility, a worldview that unites all Cubans and, there for, transcends the ravages of time and human endeavor. (xxix)

Borrowing from O’Reilly Herrera, the representation of the physical space of Cuba can be interpreted by Cuban exiles as both real and imaginary. On the other hand, if a trip is made to the island, it tends to lead to a sentiment of “unbelonging” or disillusionment. O’Reilly Herrera acknowledges this possible reaction, calling it “a kind of vicarious Odyssean complex”:

Not identifying entirely with either Cuba or the United States, these contributors [the Cuban-American writers published in her book] share a sense of ‘unbelonging’ and perceive themselves to be

‘spiritual exiles.’ In effect, they suffer from a kind of vicarious Odyssean complex, caught in the double bind of the person who returns home only to find himself a stranger in his own land. (xxiii)

Singing to Cuba’s protagonist feels the need to make the voyage to the lost world belonging to her family. The narrator’s concept of Cuba is both real and imagined; to use O’Reilly Herrera’s terminology, and while visiting the island she recognizes this dichotomy. She states, “Now, thirty-one years after my last visit, once again I was on my magical island [...]” (19). She goes on to describe the particular atmosphere on the island, depicting the locals as “living under a mysterious spell of silence” due to the political and social control of Communism (20). Her constant flashbacks contain both magical and real elements that “remember” an island when she was younger. She recalls, “I remember the island as an enchanted place of green fields and lapis-blue sky, where guajiro peasants like my great-uncle Gabriel and his grown sons would challenge each other to demonstrations of roping skills one day, and duels of impromptu poetry the next” (22). She portrays a Cuban past that includes family members who enjoyed the daily life of peasantry, but also an enchanted, mysterious place of childhood memories that seems to have ceased to exist.

Unexpectedly, Engle’s protagonist discloses her reasoning for her third voyage to Cuba in the first sentence of the first chapter in the novel. She states, “During the summer of 1991, I slipped into Cuba to tell my relatives they are not forgotten” (15). However, as the reader continues to read the novel, it is obvious that the narrator has additional motives to return to the island. Although her

conscious decision to make the voyage is based on reacquainting herself with long-lost relatives, the protagonist begins to reveal a hidden agenda for her trip. These intentions are more personal and relate directly with her relationship to the Caribbean nation. Although not mentioned specifically, Engle's protagonist is continuing a search for her true identity or "delicate balance." Undoubtedly, this includes her wish to remind her relatives that she hasn't forgotten them. Singing to Cuba's narrator demonstrates a desire to re-attach severed roots that Said argues have been cut off from her land and past (177). She feels a certain urgency in reconstituting her fractured identity. By consciously making the decision to return to the island, Engle's protagonist sets out to collect the missing pieces of her national identity and cultural roots. This, however, is not an easy task. While entering the island, she must squeeze between the regulations that impeded many Cuban-Americans from returning to their homeland. On both sides of the Florida Straits, the Special Period of the 1990s had allowed for rapid escalation of sanctions for traveling between the United States and Cuba.⁸ Engle's protagonist must walk a careful line, feigning that she is a tourist, only visiting the island to spend American dollars and enjoy the beautiful beaches. She fools the customs agent at Havana's airport while wondering whether she suspected of planning to contact family on the island (27). In the end, she makes it clear that her intentions are nothing like those of a tourist:

I slipped onto the bewitched island pretending I only wanted to see the sights, the ancient walls of El Morro Castle and La Cabaña Fortress, the marble monuments, winged statues, beaches caves,

⁸ See Louis A. Pérez's Cuba: Between Reform & Revolution.

jungles, waterfalls, and the cane fields with their dirt roads that resemble veins. (24)

Engle's narrator returns with specific intentions in mind, none of which are those of the typical tourist in Cuba. As Davis suggests that the hyphenated Cuban-American desires a regression to the past in order to renew present-day lives, she proposes that the procedure of discovering or rediscovering family history becomes a crucial part of the process of self-identification. In the case of the California farm wife, the desire to recuperate a lost past is mixed with her need to verify her Cuban roots. During her visit to Cuba, she searches for clues that connect her, directly and indirectly, to the island and past memories. While visiting with her cousin Miguelito, the narrator savors every moment of his family stories, paying close attention to his references to the memories he has of her. Miguelito begins to reminisce, asking his wife to share their family photos. The narrator states: "His wife left to find a box of photographs, and she came back holding one that Amparo had sent of my wedding day, a younger version of myself smiling and holding a bouquet of orange blossoms and roses, my North American husband smiling at my side" (37). Miguelito and his wife give the narrator a tour describing every room of the family home and what happened there. Sadness ensues when Miguelito brings the narrator to the room where his father had committed suicide only a few months before. However, despite the gloomy news, the narrator begins to feel reconnected with her lost family. In the hallway, Miguelito points out a framed photograph of the narrator's mother when she was young and pregnant, saying, "So you see, you've been here in Cuba all

along, hanging on the wall, waiting to be born” (41). Even though returning to visit lost relatives begins Engle’s protagonist’s voyage, she ends up searching for own past before she is deported for wandering from her tour group.

In Singing to Cuba, the narrator must come to terms with her own relationship with Cuba and its residents. Even with only spending a couple weeks on the island, she is able to experience the present, the “real” Cuba. She acknowledges her previous condition of imagining Cuba as a utopia, saying, “I thought of all the years I’d spent in Spanish Harlem, firmly believing that Cuba was paradise” (65). However, during her visit, she admits to Miguelito that she was wrong in believing that living on the island would make her happy, explaining, “Most of my life I thought that if only we had stayed in Cuba I would have been happy. Much of my life I thought of Cuba as the only place where people are actually free” (65). As O’Reilly Herrera argues, the Cuban-American exile experience allows for the possibility of engendering a paradise or “lost world” based on fragmented recollections and nostalgia. In Singing to Cuba, we see an example of this trend, as the idealized space likely drives the narrator to the island. However, when the actual trip is made to Cuba, the narrator feels a sense of “unbelonging” or disillusionment, as expressed by O’Reilly Herrera’s “vicarious Odyssean complex.”

After returning to the United States, Engle’s protagonist becomes more secretive and claims to hoard memories like “an escaped slave hiding gold” (154). She struggles to describe her experience after her deportation from Cuba, declaring:

When I returned from Cuba, I tried to tell people what it was like but, my words sounded so strange and remote that nearly everyone stared at me blankly, as if I had chronicled a journey to Neptune or Saturn, as if I had tried to describe the colors of gaseous rings or the patterns of light and dark inside the craters of distant moons.

(153)

The narrator affirms that she will never forget her voyage and when asked how her life had changed by her trip, responds, "At first the question perplexed me. Then I realized that the journey had made me see the North through Cuban eyes...I realized that the pilgrimage had changed me profoundly" (155). She describes her new-found perspective, alluding to the abundance of food and wealth that exists in the United States. Engle's protagonist has become more aware of her surroundings in her birth country as a result of returning to Cuba. She thus exemplifies many characteristics that Cuban-Americans exiles share while living in the United States. Moreover, the narrator expresses a deep sadness after her journey. Her loneliness extends beyond any temporary mood swing and suggests an all-encompassing melancholy that affects her overall disposition. She acknowledges her obsessive behavior of recounting every moment spent on the island, saying "I asked myself questions that could never be answered" (154). Ultimately, the California farm wife must come to terms with her exilic condition off the island and grapple with unanswerable questions that have lingered since her childhood.

Skywriting

Engle's second novel, Skywriting, shares similar elements with her first work of fiction. However, unlike Singing to Cuba, Engle's Skywriting portrays a perspective that is somewhat more removed from Cuba and more focused on the Cuban diaspora. Engle chose to include an introduction to Skywriting that explains her personal experience with *balseros* when visiting relatives in Cuba in the summer of 1992. She summarizes it by stating, "*Skywriting* is the flight my imagination took while waiting" (xi).

The novel tells the story of Carmen Peregrin, an American woman of Cuban ancestry who returns to Cuba in order to meet her half-brother, Camilo. Carmen and Camilo share a father who dies during the first years of the Revolution. Even though they are separated throughout their childhood, they write each other to maintain contact. As in Singing to Cuba, Skywriting's protagonist was not born on Cuban soil, but in the barren California desert. Nevertheless, Carmen adamantly reminds the reader that she was conceived on the island and "born homesick." She states, "I have always been homesick. I have always yearned for a wild place where I once belonged and for lost memories, for memories which are not my own" (2). We can refer once again to O'Reilly Herrera's claim that even Cuban-Americans born off the island can still share the same longing to return to Cuba as Cuban-born exiles.

According to David Rieff, nearly every Cuban-American, even those who were very young when they immigrated, is affected by a longing and love for Cuba. In his book, The Exile: Cuba in the Heart of Miami, Rieff mentions the

“sacred illness” coined by the Cuban-American leader Rene Silva (102). Such emotions, while more common among the older generations of exiled Cubans, were hardly restricted to them. He explains: “Middle-aged Cubans, people who had been brought to the United States as children, whose memories were of Miami, not Havana, and framed in English, not Spanish, shared their parents’ and grandparents’ passion for Cuba to a surprising degree” (31). He suggests that most Cuban-American exiles contemplate a return to the island and, if they make the visit, the imagined paradise melts into the harsh reality of Cuba’s present situation:

[T]o contemplate return, for those who do not actually have the experience, is again to come face to face with the pain of exile, with a sharply refocused sense of lives, and homes, and youth, all gone forever, with the gnawing discomfort that goes with being an immigrant, no matter how privileged an immigrant, in America, and with the inexpressible, desolate sense all exiles the world over share of being at ease and at home nowhere on earth. Those who make the trip to Cuba at least have the consolation of experience the hard sense of the place’s reality for themselves. The dream vanishes. (22)

Throughout his book, Rieff reiterates the idea of “la Cuba de ayer,” or “the Cuba of yesterday.” He comments that many of the exiles of Cuba who choose to talk about the island tend to describe a place that does not exist anymore. This is due, according to Rieff, to over three decades of Cuban exiles dreaming

of the island that, for them, has not changed. However, this place does not exist (38). Although Rieff's research is based on sociological and anthropological studies of non-fictional persons, I believe much of what he suggests can aid in addressing representations of fictional characters in these Cuban-American novels.

In her discussion of Skywriting, Alvarez Borland argues that the distance that is created by Carmen being more North American than Cuban aids Engle's efforts in giving an outsider's perspective to the Cuban diaspora:

Throughout the text, Carmen Peregrin's descriptions of Cuban culture seem to adopt a *costumbrista* tone as the protagonist wants to explain to the reader the differences between American and Cuban humor and even reflects on the meaning of certain words and idiomatic expressions from the perspective of someone who is primarily North American. Yet Margarita Engle's work shares the generational anguish that plagues her Cuban-American half brothers and sisters. (136)

Engle's protagonist acknowledges finding this "generational anguish" in her own father's relatives in Miami. She describes them as of two varieties, "those who mourned for Cuba day and night, and those who kept themselves from mourning by never mentioning it at all" (10). Carmen's description of two varieties of relatives adds an interesting element to Alvarez Borland's reflection. Carmen explains that exiled relatives from her father's family either chose to mourn everyday or kept themselves from mourning at all. Yet, whether or not the family

members actually mourn or not, the urge to mourn exists. Within Carmen's extended family, some choose to mourn publicly and others choose to keep it to themselves. Carmen never claims to be of one variety or another. However, it is clear that she also has the urge to express grief. This is one of the reasons she must make the voyage to Cuba.

Camilo's mother, Marisol, has her own noteworthy theory about her extended family living in exile. She says, "[M]any of us still believe that no one living in exile can ever be happy. The exiles may have plenty of food, and nice clothes, and nightclubs, cars, good jobs, relaxing vacations at pleasant resorts, but that's not the same as being happy, ¿no?" (27). Marisol, a Cuban residing in Cuba, questions whether any Cuban exile can ever really be content outside of Cuba. By allowing the reader to experience both perspectives of the diasporic phenomenon, Engle reinforces Carmen's personal need to return to her roots and re-discover her family's past. Moreover, Marisol's thoughts on her own family living in Miami encapsulate the difficulties that family members experience while left behind in Cuba. She expresses her feelings, saying "Every day...we have a crisis in Cuba. The economy, the sugar harvest, the loss of Soviet aid, the war in Angola, the wars in Central America, the war in Grenada, the impending attack from your cruel North...But this...*this* is a crisis of the family" (34). Even without living in Miami, Marisol understands how her family grieves for past lives and lost relatives.

Conversely, Camilo disagrees with his mother's claim that exiles might never be happy. His dire need to escape Cuba's restricted atmosphere dictates

his reasoning and judgment. He acknowledges the possibility that his mother could be right, but chooses to ignore her suggestions, saying “Well, happy or not, at least you’ve been introduced to the dead” (27). For Camilo, the possibility of reacquainting himself with long-lost family members, many considered gone forever, lures his desire for adventure in the promise land. He assumes that his happiness will be based on his freedom to speak and write what he pleases. Towards the end of the novel, when Camilo is free and living in Miami, he tells Carmen that he is now one of the Brothers to the Rescue who fly out of Miami every day searching the waves for raft people. He seems content living with his wife Alina and writing. Yet, Carmen comments on one specific burden that plagues Camilo’s life. She says:

It was to be Camilo’s affliction for the duration of his life, even after he was free, even after Marisol was dead. It would pursue my brother wherever he went, no matter how warm his welcome, how fervent his followers, how lively his jokes and *conga* lines. He would never escape the tentacles and tendrils of this, the Commander’s condemnation: My brother had been free in exchange for his mother’s captivity. She could never leave; he could never return. (262)

Here, Engle makes it clear that Camilo shares the urge to return to the island to visit his mother. Even though he is free and lives a comfortable life, he can never be comfortable in his adopted homeland. Thus, many of Engle’s characters in Skywriting share a distinct desire to return for one reason or another. Said

mentions how the exilic condition can be a “kind of orphanhood,” where exiles always feel their difference (182). His metaphor sheds new light on Camilo’s situation, living in Miami without his mother. Although free from Castro’s censorship and restrictions, Camilo realizes that his mother may have been correct all along: even with all the material goods, the Cuban exile cannot truly be happy.

Engle presents the identity of the Cuban-American as fragmented. Furthermore, her characters portray a predisposition for a continual search for their lost roots, land, and past. In the case of Carmen, her struggle continues even after she has visited Cuba, which suggests that the return was not a cure-all. Although the voyage to Cuba was necessary for her, it failed to resolve many of the complicated issues she was dealing with before the trip. Just like García’s Pilar, Carmen feels the need to reexamine her own life as a Cuban-American by visiting her family’s roots. However, Engle chooses to create a narrator that makes the trip at the beginning of the novel and then focuses on the consequences and reactions of that trip throughout the rest of the story. Interestingly, Carmen daydreams about growing older and moving back to Cuba with Alec, saying, “So here we are, Alec and I, living above the cave of my ancestors, knowing that we are just as safe, and just as vulnerable, as anyone in Tucson or Miami, Geneva or the cork forests of Extremadura” (282). Here, Engle’s protagonist becomes immersed in a nostalgic fantasy where the commander’s name is “pronounced only as a curse” and the entire extended family lives together (282). She illustrates her incessant desire to imagine a

Cuba that is welcoming and open, where its residents may travel freely. This fanciful wish contrasts the veracity of the island's current situation. In fact, Ben Corbett suggests that Cuba will maintain many aspects of Castro's Revolution even after the leader is long gone. Corbett explains, "Will there be a post-Castro Cuba? Never. His legacy will outlive him for decades, even centuries. In many ways, today's Cuba is not much different from the way it was before Castro. There are the rich and poor. There is inequality. There is corruption, exploitation, racism" (267).

While in Cuba, Carmen struggles to deal with the reality of the nation. She and Marisol discuss the condition of the country and its leader. Marisol responds bluntly with no hesitation, saying "He's [Castro] ripped us apart, torn out families in half" (38). As Carmen travels throughout Havana, she observes how the buildings are slowly disintegrating. Marisol openly complains to her about Cuba's need of goods. She explains, "The food shortage, the fuel shortage, the soap shortage, the medicine shortage, the rising crime rate as people grow desperate and steal anything they can sell to the Black Bag" (34). On the other hand, even though Carmen's entire trip lasts only about two weeks, it is enough to make her feel truly alive. She feels as though she could belong in this land "where a soothing rain could erase words" (57). Engle's protagonist acknowledges that the fantasy of her childhood finally had been brought to life while visiting Cuba. Yet, in the end, she returns to the United States, as she did when traveling with her mother as a child. She explains, "I'd longed, all my life, to dwell in a hot, green, tangled place...Yet each time we [Carmen and her

mother] visited one of those places, I eventually returned to the windswept desert, to dust devils and scorching sands, and a sun so alive [...]” (65). Here, Engle’s protagonist acknowledges the everlasting grasp from her birthplace in the barren California desert that always brings her back in the end.

Back in the United States, Carmen must somehow come to terms with her split identity, a task that ultimately is left unresolved. On one hand, she has found some temporary relief by making the voyage, yet on the other, Carmen remains unsettled with what she has seen. She had pictured Cuba “the way Camilo described it, an imagined island, *la isla imaginaria*” (91). Yet, when she compares her imagined Cuba with the reality of Cuba, she feels conflicted. Thus, as Alvarez Borland mentions, Carmen becomes a central link between Cuba’s past and present: “Engle’s protagonist becomes a mediator between the Cubans in Cuba and those in the United States and provides an outsider’s perspective on the Cuban crisis” (136). Moreover, Carmen’s feeling of disillusionment aids her in openly discussing the *balseo* crisis, including the activities of the Brothers to the Rescue. This, of course, is very significant to the narrator, since Camilo himself tries to escape Cuba on a homemade raft. The disenchantment of Cuba creates a more cynical protagonist who struggles to keep her spirits high.

In her article, “In Two or More (Dis)Places: Articulating a Marginal Experience of the Cuban Diaspora,” Eliana Rivero speaks to the traits of what she calls the “dislocated transCuban.” She explains, “Yes, *los cubanos son gitanos del Caribe*. We are nomadic bodies hovering on the borders of the continental mass, being swayed by waves of migration politics, colored by

mainstream 'tropicalizations' of self, and troubled by conflicted identity constructions" (199). She reflects on her "transCuban" experience which allows her to functionally display the characteristics of an integrated American citizen. However, her displacement permits a "multiple positioning" of a diasporic "Cuban-and-other" who can experience "Cubangst" (198). Similarly, Carmen suffers from anxiety that is based on those who are not "nomadic bodies hovering on the borders", like Alec and Alina. She says, "I envied Alec and Alina. They were convinced that actions would produce results...He and Alina would laugh and banter, taking the whole thing lightly, optimistically, while I brooded with Camilo in his dungeon... (180). Even after she is back in the United States, Carmen does not comprehend how she got out of Cuba without getting caught. She explains, "Smuggling human-rights documents off the island was an offense punishable by unimagined horrors...I wondered whether during that *rato* of waiting I had somehow been helped, whether an angel had accompanied me on the journey out of Cuba" (193).

Overall, Engle's Skywriting encompasses a story of a woman with a hybrid heritage that elects to return to Cuba in order to meet her half brother. Unlike García's Dreaming in Cuban, Skywriting focuses on the effects of the voyage after Carmen Peregrin returns to the United States. Here, the reader sees a different side of the Cuban-American, one who sees the island more clearly and less idealistically after a return trip. This, in effect, creates a strong disillusionment that will remain until the end of the novel. Engle interweaves Carmen's emotional voyage and her predisposition as a Cuban-American to

create a novel that addresses the mediations –real and imagined- between the island and the mainland by Cubans in the 1990s.

Havana Split

Similar to Engle's Singing to Cuba and Skywriting, Teresa Bevin's Havana Split tells the story of Lara Canedo, who decides to return to her native Havana after living in exile for seventeen years in Spain and the United States. Lara, now living in the United States, is a psychologist who writes college textbooks for a living. While in Washington D.C. in the mid-1990s, Lara experiences a series of flashbacks of her childhood in Cuba. These flashbacks are vivid and give the reader a glimpse of how Havana might have been before the Revolution. The novel begins with one of Lara's colorful dreams where the family is celebrating her godmother Clemencia's birthday. When she wakes up from her dream, Lara must "reorient" herself by flipping her "American" switch. In doing so, she becomes a YUCA (young, upwardly mobile Cuban-American) once again. After multiple dreams and flashbacks of her childhood, Lara decides it is time for her to return to the island. She explains, "When I finally decided to arrange a trip, I was surprised to find how easy it was. I could almost taste the Cuban air as I thought of my friends, I could hear the waves by the shore in Cojímar, and smell the ripe mangoes in our backyard" (20). O'Reilly Herrera alludes to the desire for Cuban exiles, like Lara, to return to the island. She states, "Though one cannot rule out the ancestral call that pulses within some of us like some ancient drum, it is more difficult to account for the nomadic self-conception, the longing for Cuba...expressed by those who grew up and reside outside of the Miami

enclave” (xxiii). Lara chooses to make this important trip alone, consciously keeping her decision to herself. Even without living in Miami, she feels O’Reilly Herrera’s “ancient” drum beat drawing her to back to her homeland and long-lost childhood.

Lara must make the same “psychological journey” that Davis argues in Pilar’s case. However, unlike Pilar, Lara does not return to Cuba with her mother, but alone. Yet, the motives for the return are strikingly similar to those of Pilar, the narrator in Singing to Cuba and Carmen Peregrin’s. In fact, Bevin’s Havana Split shares many characteristics with García’s first novel. Katherine Payant relates Cristina García’s personal experience of her 1984 visit to Cuba with Pilar and Lourdes’ fictional return. In her article entitled, “From Alienation to Reconciliation in the Novels of Cristina García,” she states:

A 1984 trip to the island to visit her mother’s family, supporters of Castro, focused her interest on her identity and larger questions of history and politics, opening up the complexities of the Cuban revolution. Before that visit, she had viewed the Cuban situation in the unambiguous black and white of many Cuban-Americans. (164)

Payant argues that even though García was born in Cuba, she lived as a Cuban-American in a Brooklyn neighborhood. Payant suggests that García’s childhood could be described as “bifurcated.” This hyphenated identity leads García to return to Cuba and immerse herself in a larger sociopolitical context of being Cuban-American and how historical events can affect individuals and families. Payant suggests that the idea of reconciliation (borrowing from the

Cuban-American scholar Ruth Behar) is one of the major themes in García's work. Payant adds, "This search for identity and "belongingness" is common to all adolescents, but in a child like Pilar, it is complicated by a hyphenated existence" (169). When Pilar finally makes it to Cuba she realizes that the "Cuba" in her dreams does not exist, something she previously had feared. Payant explains, "Like many exiles who search for self by returning to the geographical space of the homeland, she [Pilar] is unsuccessful" (171).

In Havana Split, Lara demonstrates the urgency of returning to clarify her memories, as vague and unclear as they might be. Her return is an integral part of discovering untold stories and the history of her family and thus becomes an essential aspect of her process of self-identification as a Cuban-American. For Lara, this trip must be made and even though she knows that her friends and family in the United States would disagree, she feels it is the right time to go. Her musings betray her decisiveness as well as her anticipation of the turmoil the voyage to Cuba maybe create in her:

I claimed a window seat, and with some effort I was able to isolate myself from the surrounding chaos. I thought of my friends in Washington, whose collective opinion was that I was out of my mind to go to Cuba, 'the biggest jail in the world,' according to exile lore. The United States was facing war in the Persian Gulf, and stepping on 'enemy territory' wasn't a popular idea. But I felt in my heart that this was the right time. I knew that this trip could potentially launch me into a vortex that would affect a very large

part of my life. But I had no way of knowing to what extent the experience would transform me. (27)

Hence, from the beginning, the moment Lara gets on the plane in Miami, she knows this trip will change her perspective on life and of herself as a woman. She is unsure about how much she has lost of her Cuban roots due to years of living in exile. While on the plane, she focuses on some plastic flowers in the cabin, explaining, “My attention latched to an arrangement of plastic flowers nearby, their size and colors impossible to ignore. I fear they might represent some symbol of solidarity, or ‘Cubanism,’ and I was missing out” (25). As worried as she is, Lara knows her return to Cuba is not only necessary, but long overdue. As her plane lifts off the ground, she recalls the day she left the island seventeen years before and alone. Thus, just as Lara left Havana by herself, she consciously returns in a similar fashion. By doing so, she prepares herself for what she envisions is waiting for her in her native country.

After being away for almost two decades, Lara can only imagine the current state of things in Cuba. Unlike Carmen Peregrin and the narrator of Singing to Cuba, Lara seems more prepared for what she will encounter. She explains:

This time, though I had done my best to look at my journey home as an adventure, I had only been able to mask my apprehension. As much as I told myself that I would be prepared to face the ruins of people and familiar places, ready to confront the memories, good and bad, I couldn't be completely ready for what lay ahead. (28)

After contemplating her complicated situation, Lara acknowledges it will be difficult to find a balance between what she remembered of Cuba versus what Cuba is now. She ponders, “What would the trip do to the memory of my past experiences? I didn’t want the Cuba of my past destroyed by the Cuba of the present. Could old and recent memories live peacefully alongside one another”?

(28) As in the case of Luis’s analysis of Dreaming in Cuban, it is evident that Lara shares the same intention of finding the “delicate balance” between the past and present Cuba. Her internal monologue suggests that there is not only a struggle between memories of a past and present Cuba but also a conflict in Lara’s national identity.

According to Homi Bhabha, the exile is located in the “in-between” space that is on a continuum with past and also intersects the present and future. This means that, in the case of the Cuban-American, the exile is located in a space that exists beyond the binary of Havana and Miami or Cuba and the United States. Some have suggested that this space could be seen as an aerial or marine “bridge” that connects the two communities together.⁹ In Lara’s situation, she is fearful due to the fact that her voyage to present Cuba will destroy her past memories of her homeland, leading to a possible reassessment of her national identity. As a self-described YUCA, Lara seems to have a firm grasp of her national identity. However, her return to the island brings her entire self-identification process into questioning. One of the most prominent examples of this is when Lara finds out that her father had a secret life and family where he

⁹ See Jorge Duany’s “Reconstructing Cubanness: Changing Discourses of National Identity on the Island and in the Diaspora during the Twentieth Century.” 32-34.

raised a daughter named Ofelia. Looking at the photos in Ofelia's house, Lara realizes that her father had lived a great lie. She thinks, "Pictures of my father as the head of a family other than mine passed in front of my eyes, clouding them with deep sadness I was struggling to hide. In those photos he was Ofelia's father, not mine" (138). This discovery is one of the first that turns Lara's world upside down, explaining, "Before my final decision to travel to Cuba, I was held back by the fear of discovering that my memories were mostly lies. I had just found the first one, and its enormity had eclipsed any other fear I might have harbored prior to my trip" (139). Discovering the existence of her half-sister Ofelia adds an important aspect to Lara's voyage. Yet, instead of rejecting her, Lara embraces Ofelia with acceptance and intrigue.

However, Lara admits she will wait until she returns to the United States before deciding how to make sense of the shocking realization. She reminds herself, "I didn't know what to think or feel, so I saved most ruminations for my return home, when I would be in more solid ground. The lie I had just uncovered hurt me deeply, but it wasn't Ofelia's fault, and her predicament hurt me as well" (142). Here, Lara suffers from a sentiment of "unbelongingness" or disillusionment. Returning to O'Reilly Herrera's description of the "vicarious Odyssean complex," we can say that Bevin's protagonist does not identify entirely with either Cuba or the United States and perceives herself as an outsider in her own land. Lara has returned to a place that did not exist in her childhood flashbacks or nostalgic dreams. Instead, she meets Cuba's harsh reality, with many political and social repercussions that directly influence her

perspective of her birthplace. Thus, Lara returns to her homeland and discovers an unknown past that ultimately questions her anticipated condition of the island nation.

Another defining moment for Lara is when she visits her godmother, Clemencia. Somehow "*Madrina*" has survived the Revolution, the demise of her immediate family and maintains an "abundance of internal vitality" that empowers Lara (99). Lara exclaims, "But *Madrina*, you are so well! It's as if the Revolution hasn't touched you" (100). Clemencia, the keeper of the family's heirlooms, shares Lara's childhood journals with her goddaughter.¹⁰ Lara describes the overwhelming feeling she experiences, saying:

I touched the journals and turned page after page, unable to read for a while, transported to a time of innocence. I could see the dirt under my fingernails, the ink stains on my middle finger, as a variety of pen points scratched the pages, unloading my thoughts in a ritual of liberation. And I closed my eyes, opening the flow of memories that wouldn't be stopped. (105)

The act of reading her childhood journals pulls Lara back to the days of her youth in Cuba. Following Lara's discovery of the journals, Bevin includes an entire chapter where, through flashback, Lara returns to her days in Cuba and her interest in writing. Throughout the novel, Bevin's protagonist weaves in and out of these intricate flashbacks, tying together both past and present memories. O'Reilly Herrera suggests that Cuban diasporic identities, like postcolonial identities, have various and constantly shifting subject positions, and Lara

¹⁰ This is reminiscent of the relationship between García's Celia and Pilar.

displays this as she swings between her past and her present. In her case, the shifting between past and present is almost entirely initiated by her return to the island. Without the voyage, Lara would not have discovered her childhood journals, nor would she have known that she had a half-sister. Both of these examples force Lara to discern between what she thought was her past in Cuba and what actually was.

After visiting her godmother and Ofelia, Lara experiences an unexpected revelation. She describes the feeling of being reborn, saying “[I] drove into a tunnel of impenetrable darkness...I fantasized it was a birth canal, that I was being born at that moment, and there would be light on the other side” (143). Here, it is evident that Lara’s internal conflict surfaces. After facing some very difficult information about her past, she reexamines her present. In this case, she expresses the feeling of being born again. This sentiment of starting anew is linked directly to the reexamination of who she is. Whether we call it an identity crisis or an entering of an “in-between” space, Lara begins to process this new perspective and will continue to do so even after she has left Cuba. Even Lara herself acknowledges her unique situation, but claims to be too emotionally drained to deal with it. She says, “Emotionally spent, I soon realized that my remaining energy couldn’t cope with the implications of that fantasy” (143).

Moreover, after Lara returns to the United States, her mood begins a downward spiral. She explains:

My grief was beginning to drown me, waves of despair born of anger of submerging me. My exile had lasted so long, so

unnecessarily. The companions of a large part of my life remained in the cell I alone had escaped. Would I always have to continue alone? Would I ever again be among those whose feelings run so wild within that they explode upon reaching the surface? For the first time in my life outside Cuba, I felt truly exiled, uprooted, grieving for what was no longer mine. (230)

Lara suggests that for the first time she feels exiled and removed from her native land. Finally, after so many years of being away from Cuba, she understands the loss and pain that other Cuban exiles have described. This sentiment continues after her return from the island. In other words, Lara's despair is directly related to her "rebirth" or realization during her trip.

Unlike Pilar, who moves forward after her voyage back to Cuba, Lara returns to the United States disillusioned. She leaves Havana numb with sadness, "dragging [her] unwilling body back into exile" (227). Lara finds herself in a difficult situation, leaving her childhood friends to cope with the hopeless economic conditions of the Special Period. Moreover, she must abandon her lover, Casilda. However, instead of leaving the desperate situation in Cuba behind, Lara seems to bring much of the sadness with her. Back in Washington, she hears news of Toni dying of AIDS and Casilda contaminating her blood with his. Although she writes to Osvaldo monthly, she worries that he will not receive her letters and is in agony before opening his. Even the photographs Lara took while she was in Havana haunt her memories. She describes a picture of

Casilda she took during her visit, saying, “The photo went to occupy a place on my desk, though I often turn it around so I can work in peace” (230).

Speaking from her personal experience as a Cuban-American, Rivero describes her analogous position as a “transplanted/transplanted” persona:

We are still unable to verbally configure a national identity because we have yet to come to grips with our differences (geographical and political), and because we are preoccupied with our own morphing, ever immersed as we are in the process of negotiation recognizable/acceptable places and modes of being in the transnational Cuba we inhabit. (199)

As Rivero suggests, Cubans are the gypsies of the Caribbean. In a sense, Lara embodies this metaphor as her travels take her from the United States to Cuba and back again. Bevin’s novel thus traces the lives of Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits. The story depicts the long-awaited homecoming for Lara and the unsuspected secrets she uncovers while visiting her native country. The opportunity to return to Cuba allows the protagonist to reacquaint herself with long-missed friends and relatives; yet this experience forces her to confront the realities of the island. Although Lara must drag her “unwilling body” back to the United States, once again losing her childhood friends, she follows through because she knows she cannot stay in her birthplace. Ultimately, Lara realizes that she belongs in Washington D.C. and her life must continue in exile. Unfortunately, her short voyage to Cuba carries a heavy price as she returns to the United States with many unresolved memories. This is due, in part, to the

conflicting versions of Lara's imagined (in her flashbacks and dreams) Cuba and the reality of the island during the Special Period.

Guava and Cheese

Tina Matlock's Guava and Cheese approaches the voyage to Cuba differently. Instead of beginning outside Cuba, Matlock chooses to recount the story of three families that leave the island after 1959. Guava and Cheese examines the political events occurring during the Revolution, such as the Peter Pan flights, the Bay of Pigs invasion, and negotiations between the United States and Cuba. In pre-Revolutionary Cuba, three children (Lina Ponte, Emilio Ortiz, and Angela Jiménez) make a pact to be friends forever. However, soon the children are separated due to Castro's rise to power. Lina moves to Tennessee, Emilio escapes to Miami and Angela stays in Cuba. Representations of the 1960's Peter Pan flights, Lina and Emilio (and his sister Ana María) wait in the United States for their parents. Once they finally arrive in the United States, José Ponte and Armando Ortiz decide they must return to their native island for a short "special mission" (94). In contrast to the voyages made by characters in Singing to Cuba, Skywriting and Havana Split, Matlock's Guava and Cheese tells of two fathers who, after making the long trip to escape Cuba, decide to return to the island to fight in Operation Pluto and the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Although José and Armando's return does not follow the same process of maturation as the other three novels in this chapter, their voyage is pertinent to understanding the reasoning for beginning a new life in the United States. Before departing, José tells his wife that their return to Cuba will be a "short visit"

and that he shall return to Tennessee soon (88). Likewise, Armando asks his son Emilio to remain steadfast and to take care of his sister in Miami: “Son, you’ll have to be strong because you may not get a letter or a phone call from Mami or me for a while” (94). José and Armando leave the United States with high hopes that their families will return to their homeland after the invasion. The narrator elucidates, “They spent the evening filling out numerous forms and questionnaires...They felt energized, filled with anticipation, and proud to be part of the brigade” (99).

José and Armando’s plan is to help remove Castro from power and return to Cuba to live as they did before the Revolution. However, their return to the island is not a trip sanctioned by the Cuban government (as in Singing to Cuba, Skywriting, and Havana Split), but a covert military invasion supported by the Cuban-exile community and private individuals with business interests. The operation produces anticipated fears for José, Armando, and their families. José reflects on “how uncertainty has a way of bring people closer together or tearing them apart” (64). Moreover, their exit from Florida does not take them directly to Cuba but to Guatemala’s southwest coast, where the men can train and prepare before the invasion. By training in Guatemala, they spend more time outside Cuba preparing for their surprise attack on their homeland.

The time abroad allows for the two men to begin to recreate and imagine what Cuba will be like after they fulfill their mission. Even after only residing in the United States for a couple of days and in Guatemala for a few weeks, they are convinced that they will return to the island with their families after the

Revolution falls. They imagine a Cuba free of Castro and an end to the Revolution. Of course, the reality of the situation is made clear to both of them when they disembark at Playa Girón. After reaching his destination, José expresses suspicious ruminations, sensing that the landing site, Playa Girón, is not a feasible choice (121). Believing the Americans to be on their side, the two men rush to their native country's coast with determination. However, reality strikes again when José is shot and dies in the dense vegetation. Not long afterwards, Armando surrenders to Castro's soldiers. While locked in his cell, his wife Ana visits him to ask about José. Armando answers her directly saying "We buried him near the swamp. 'To die for one's country is to live,' is what I wrote on the ground at the foot of his grave" (139). He demonstrates his dedication to his friend's effort and sacrifice, although noting that he will do whatever it takes to get back to his wife and children in the United States.

José and Armando believe that Cuba will welcome them as heroes because they have "the cause of freedom, justice, and democracy on [their] side" (121). Their expectations are derived from their imagination of what Cuba once was before the Revolution, yet the reality of their native country has changed.

Said proposes:

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience. (185)

He explains that the situation of the exile allows for a new flexibility of the homeland. José and Armando quickly realize that they are not welcomed as heroes but as enemies. This is due in part to the lack of support by the United States government. We must also consider, however, that this negative reaction towards the two men suggests that, in the beginning, many people in Cuba agreed with the Revolution and found the Bay of Pigs Invasion repulsive. For instance, the Jiménez family happily joins forces with the Revolution by volunteering their time at the mill, hospital, and rural schools. Angela, who becomes a member of the Association of Rebel Youth, begins teaching for the literacy programs designed to help the workers and peasants from the countryside.

Olga vocalizes her thoughts of the Ponte family's plan to send their daughter on a Peter Pan flight, saying, "I can't believe you would turn your daughter into a *gusano*...No friend of mine could turn against Cuba the way you're doing...You are traitors!" (73) This reaction, coming from close friends of the family, ultimately affects José and Armando. Their unsolicited return to the island is met with friction and conflict that eventually leads to a reevaluation of their homeland. Once a "familiar territory," Cuba has become a location of distress and discomfort for the two friends.

Due to his unexpected death, the reader is not given a chance to comprehend much about José's reaction towards his newfound homeland. However, through Armando we see that the voyage to Cuba instills many of the same sentiments we have seen in the characters in Singing to Cuba, Skywriting,

and Havana Split. In other words, Armando returns to the United States because he cannot live in his native country anymore. After the fruitless invasion and months spent in prison, he realizes that Cuba has experienced drastic internal changes that make it impossible for Cuban exiles to return to their homes. For Armando, there is no option except to live in the United States. He chooses to rebuild and renew his life, acknowledging his exilic condition, but not wallowing in sorrow. As Said argues, the situation of the exile is not a matter of choice but a reaction to political instability and persecution. He says, "But, provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity" (184). Armando has become disillusioned with his homeland due to the realization that Cuba has rejected his effort in countering the Revolution. After suffering imprisonment, he knows that he must return to be with his family and make the best of the situation. The exilic state that he faces can thus be read as a reconciliation of his need to develop a hybrid identity that is shared by many Cuban-Americans in Miami.

When Armando finally reunites with his family and friends in Florida, he is overcome with a mixture of joy and sorrow. He is thankful for the opportunity to be with his family again, but expresses sadness for the loss of his friends, family, and country. He says, "So much has happened. We don't have many close friends. Though we went our different ways, Felix seemed really sincere yesterday about putting the revolution behind him. I'd like to rebuild what we once had. I wish José were here" (203). I do not believe that Armando regrets

returning to Cuba, but it is evident that his expectations, how he imagined Cuba would be, were proven wrong. His disenchantment is directly related to his voyage and the experience while visiting the island. Armando finds himself “a stranger in his native land.” He suffers a sense of “unbelonging” that ultimately convinces him that what once was his homeland has now ceased to exist. After the invasion, and regardless of his nationality, he is not only looked upon as an outsider, but he is treated as a hostile enemy. Undoubtedly, Armando struggles to maintain his sanity during the eighteen months of prison. Still, he seems confident about his decision to return to Cuba, knowing that “he’d face his incarceration with dignity, never compromising José’s sacrifice...” (139).

Forty years later, Armando and Ana own a Latin grocery store and a Cuban restaurant in Miami. On their menu they print the slogan, “If you go to Miami and don’t go to La Guayaba y Queso, you didn’t really see Miami” (214). Armando elects to create a life for himself and his family in Florida, where his store is billed as authentic (if you don’t see it, you won’t have really seen Miami). Just as in the case of the characters in Singing to Cuba, Skywriting, and Havana Split, he has found his “in-between” space in his adopted homeland.

Rieff proposes that Miami Cubans actually share a common bond by imagining a time to return to Cuba after Fidel Castro has finally disappeared. This, of course, is contrasted by the select few who choose to return to the island to visit while Castro remains in power. By this measure, most Miami Cubans respond ambiguously to questions about their national identity. Rieff quotes a response he was prone to hearing:

We [Miami Cubans] are many things, including pro-American, but we are not Americans, not yet anyway. We won't even know what we are until things actually change in Cuba...Once the exile is over, things will change, because we Cubans will finally have the freedom to make up our own minds about whether we want to be immigrants or go home. (28)

Such emotions, though more finely tuned among the older generations of Cuban exiles, are commonplace within the Cuban-American exile community in Miami. In her novel, Matlock creates a story that explores the reasons why many Cuban-American exiles immigrated to South Florida. In the case of Armando, the release from prison in Cuba allows him to return to his family in the United States and become a representation of the Cuban Miami that still exists to this day.

In Margarita Engle's Skywriting and Singing to Cuba, Teresa Bevin's Havana Split, and Tina Matlock's Guava and Cheese, a return to Cuba is made by one or more of the characters residing in the United States. The voyage is always followed by a return to the United States. By expounding on ideas proposed by Said, Davis, Luis, Rieff, Rivero, and Alvarez Borland, I have shown that the voyage to Cuba is an integral part of the plot in these four novels. Moreover, there is a correlation between the return to island and the reconstruction of the protagonists' identity. In each novel, we have seen how the voyage to Cuba has aided the re-identification process for each Cuban or Cuban-American character. More specifically, after returning from the trip, each character chooses to address his or her personal search for a comfortable "in-

between” space in which to reside. There are feelings of disillusionment shared by many of the characters after returning to the United States and it is, in fact, the trip itself that adds to this disappointment because the characters realize that Cuba’s reality is not what they imagined. In effect, these fictional characters return to an unchanged Cuba, a country that seems to be stuck in the past. Lost friends and family on the island have been closed off from the rest of the world for decades while the returning exiles have begun the process of defining their hyphenated identity. This particular situation in Cuba creates a sense of “un-belonging” for visiting exiles who have returned looking for answers for their life-long questions concerning their national and personal identity.

In the end, the characters return to the United States, many disenchanted, knowing that they cannot nor do not belong in Cuba. As Cuban-Americans or Cuban exiles, their home is the United States and, at one point or another, they leave their native country for good. Furthermore, characters such as Lara and the protagonist in Singing to Cuba depart from Cuba with more questions than they had when they came, making the process of self-identification even more complicated and frustrating when they return.

Just as Andrea O’Reilly Herrera has suggested that Cuba is both real and imagined for Cuban exiles, there exists a similar dilemma for the fictional characters in Singing to Cuba, Skywriting, Havana Split, and Guava and Cheese. The Cuban-American experience allows for the possibility of imagining a paradise or “lost world” solely based on fragmented memories and nostalgia. This specific condition may help create the overall desire for Cuban-Americans to

return to the island. O'Reilly Herrera proposes that Cuban-Americans cannot identify entirely with Cuba or the United States and are “spiritual exiles” that exist between two nationalities. As Bhabha explains, exiles experience an estranging sense of relocation of the home and the world: “the unhomeliness.” This is “the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (13). He adds, “The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (15). The result of this moment can lead to a redrawing of public and private spheres, which questions an exile’s individual identity and her relationship with the larger nation-state. As a consequence, the exile suffers from an *unbelongingness* that stems from trying to exist in the space between two identities.

The characters analyzed in this chapter suffer from *unbelongingness* until their trips back to Cuba. After that, they choose to continue living their life in the United States, encounter a “newness” that is not part of the “continuum of past and present,” but a hybrid cultural space that can represent the “beyond” or “in-between” space to which Bhabha alludes. In her article, “Homeland in the Politics and Identity of the Cuban Diaspora,” María de los Angeles Torres concludes by saying “A new vision of identity requires a new vision of power and organization across the borders of nation-states. Such a vision inevitably leads to an expansion of the boundaries of citizenship beyond any *one single* nation-state” (60, my emphasis). In other words, the Cuban diasporic community must negotiate its identity in relation to various states and cultures; in this case, between the United States and Cuba. Their experience may be significant in

developing new ways of thinking about hybrid identities and the exilic experience.

As Pilar in Dreaming in Cuban states, not *instead* of Cuba, but *more* than Cuba (236).

Chapter 4: The Obsession with Family History: The Intersection of Memory and History

La memoria y la historia están íntimamente ligadas –son recíprocas e intercambiables-, no existen aisladas y separadas una de la otra. Por ser así, no se llega a una verdad absoluta sino al reconocimiento de verdades múltiples que no permiten que se entienda la historia como un pasado completo, cerrado, sino como una búsqueda continua que hace de la memoria una red de recuerdos fragmentados, incompletos, porosos.

-from “Memory Mambo: Un paso hacia adelante, dos pasos hacia atrás”
Yolanda Flores

What I want to know is what really happened.

-From *Memory Mambo*
Juani Casas

In his article, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall suggests a two-prong approach in studying diasporic identity. The first proposes viewing cultural identity as one shared culture, a sort of “collective ‘one true self,’ hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves,’ which people with a shared history or ancestry hold in common” (393). The second prong of his proposal argues that there are “points of similarity” in cultural identity that coexist with “points of deep and significant difference...which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become.’ We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about ‘one experience, one

identity,' without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness'" (394).

Although Hall is not speaking specifically of the Cuban-American diasporic identity, his observations can be applied to this group's particular situation.

Moving towards the Cuban diaspora from Hall's first definition, we can assume that there is an unbroken connection, both inside and outside a historical and political context, for Cuban exiles and their children living in the United States.

This suggests a lack of fragmentation of memory and variation in exilic experiences with Cuban family members. But his second definition or refinement emphasizes and recognizes that identity can be multiple and fragmented, and engages difference instead of denying or excluding it.

In his autobiographical text, Cuba on my Mind: Journeys to a Severed Nation, Román de la Campa introduces a reading of his personal experience as a Cuban-American who belongs to what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls the "one-and-a-half" generation. In addition, he offers his expertise and experience to analyze the dense framework that includes Cuban communities on and off the island. After moving to the United States as a young teenager (via the Peter Pan program), de la Campa remembers his constant reevaluation of his national identity. He explains, "During these years my sense of national identity—a construct always bound by language and culture--came under constant adjustment, beginning with the experience of Americanization" (65). While his continual search for his national identity played out, de la Campa tells of the Cuban-American idealization of the country they had left behind. He says, "We

could only imagine – or remember, from the context of our refugee status – a Cuba that was urban, middle-class, filled with trained professionals, and without any racial discrimination” (64). Here, de la Campa acknowledges the Cuban exile’s wish to “remember” specific details of their homeland that were clearly not true representations of Cuban society before the Revolution. He therefore juxtaposes the words “remember” and “imagined” in the same sentence to question the legitimacy of what many Cuban exiles actually remembered about Cuba.

In Cuban Writers on and off the Island: Contemporary Narrative Fiction, Pamela Maria Smorkaloff argues that memory is a significant factor in both Cuban and Cuban-American literature. However, many Cuban-American writers seem to struggle specifically with this challenging topic. She states:

Memory, competing visions and versions of events in the narration of a nation, and the tensions between home and world inform all Cuban literature of this century, But the off-island production of contemporary Cuban-American writers, in addition to such tensions, is much more weighted by memory, and the challenge of finding narrative strategies for engaging with the past without falling into the trap of idealizing it. (8)

Smorkaloff includes off-island Cuban writers within the strictly “Cuban” literary tradition. She argues that in many cases their works approach particular themes or dilemmas from a different angle. The concept of memory, she proposes, is one of the distinguishing themes of contemporary Cuban-American writers. This

recalls Andrea O'Reilly Herrera's explanation of Cuba becoming a kind of "real-and-imagined" space. Cuban exiles seek the image of a lost and fragmented world that is partially "re-remembered" through nostalgia or reconstructed by those who either have never been to Cuba, or were too young to remember when they left. It appears that this phenomenon is quite applicable when speaking about a particular topic Cuban-American writers explore in many of their characters: the obsession with family history. Children of first-generation Cuban exiles tend to seek out their family's past by asking older relatives. For them, memories of Cuba and their relationship with the island are often based on the conversations and experiences described by their parents and grandparents.

Yolanda Flores, in an article about Memory Mambo that stands as an epigraph to this chapter, proposes that, for many Cuban-Americans, memory and history are intimately related (765). Therefore, memory and history must be evaluated not as two separate entities, but as one collective experience. The novels I have chosen to include in this chapter all contain Cuban-American characters that are obsessed with what they know—or do not know—of their personal family history. Their information is often received from earlier generations and, instead of turning to history books, news reports or other sources, these characters choose to piece together their fragmented history from the stories inherited from their family members. As a result, they face many conflicting versions of their histories and doggedly pursue these variations in order to find a truth that informs them but which they either did not experience or cannot remember.

The relationship between individual and collective memory has been amply studied. In his book, On Collective Memory, Maurice Halbwachs argues that individual memory is a part of group memory, “since each impression and each fact, even if it apparently concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent that one has thought it over – to the extent that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from the social milieu” (53). Halbwachs suggests that one of the social frameworks of memory is the family. He says:

It is true that all sorts of ideas can call to mind recollections of our family. In fact, from the moment that the family is the group within which we pass the major part of our life, family thoughts become ingredients of most of our thoughts. Our kin communicate to us our first notions about people and things. (61)

In other words, Halbwachs acknowledges the close relationship that individual memory and the family share. He emphasizes the importance of the family in forming personal memories by reminding us that the family helps define and determine our thoughts and recollections of the past. Cuban-Americans are particularly susceptible to this because, for the younger generations, the family holds the key to memories of things past. Children of Cuban exiles struggle to remember what happened to their family during the Revolution and often must re-create and re-imagine their family’s past with fragments of family history that is frequently distorted, consciously or unconsciously.

Marianne Hirsch considers how family is an often fractured construction that is subject to conflicting historical scripts. She suggests that photography is a “prism through which to study the postmodern space of cultural memory composed of leftovers, debris, single items that are left to be collected and assembled in many ways, to tell a variety of stories, from a variety of often competing perspectives” (13). Much of her study addresses the complex situation of the survivors of the Holocaust. However, Hirsch coins a term which I will apply to my study of the Cuban-American condition. She proposes the term “postmemory” as a particular form of memory that is “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection” (22).

She states further:

Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (22)

Hirsch’s argument advocates a re-examination of the definition of memory and how it relates to the family structure. By suggesting that visual images from

photography capture that which no longer exists, she offers an explanation of a particular memory that is driven by external narratives and imagination.

Hirsch's "postmemory," I believe, can be applied to written as well as photographic texts, and will be useful as I undertake my analysis of the four novels I have chosen for this chapter. They are: Achy Obejas's Memory Mambo (1996), Cristina García's The Agüero Sisters (1997), Beatriz Rivera's Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express (1997), and Himilce Novas's Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story (1996). These four novels address the theme of memory, which is prevalent throughout each story, and in this chapter I will focus on the relationship between memory, family, and history.

Memory Mambo explores the complex identity of Juani Casas, a twenty-four-year-old, Cuban-born lesbian living in Chicago. Narrated by Juani, this novel is a vibrant deconstruction of false memory and nostalgia with representations of the continual search for Cuban-American identity. It is a dynamic story that follows the narrator's obsession with evaluating *her* reality, which weaves between Juani's relationship with her own family and the overall dilemma of living in the diaspora. Surrounded by her blood cousins and "cousins in exile," the protagonist sorts through an array of stories and memories passed down to her from her parents and relatives. Throughout the novel, Juani is obsessed with those stories and especially with her father's claim to be the inventor of duct tape, a complex tale involving how the CIA stole his idea. Furthermore, she frequently revisits her thorny relationship (and violent break-up) with her ex-lover, Gina.

The Agüero Sisters recounts the complex history of the Agüero family.

Told from multiple points of view, García's second novel examines the murder of the mysterious Blanca and the suicide of her husband Ignacio. The story is structured with a mosaic of narrations from Blanca's two daughters, Reina and Constanica, their daughters, Dulce and Isabel, Constanica's father Ignacio, and an unnamed third-person narrator. Sisters Reina and Constanica have been estranged for thirty years. After moving to Miami from New York City, Constanica is haunted by the memory of her father and decides to find out what really happened to her parents. Reina, however, moves from Cuba to Miami (where the two sisters meet) in order to leave her family's dark past behind. In the end, Constanica hires a boat to drop her off the coast of Cuba to find her dead father's lost relics. Thus, the history of this family is re-examined from the sisters' present in the 1990s. After realizing that Ignacio's personal diary fails to shed light on the death of their mother, Constanica understands that her search for her accurate family history may never be truly successful.

Novas's Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story tells of two lovers who finally meet after 29 years of waiting for the "right one" to come along. After Arnaldo Saavedra is converted by Methodist missionaries in Cuba, he experiences physical and mental changes, including the ability to perform miracles. His lover, Patricia, dies during childbirth. Arnaldo, who is unaware that he was the father of twins, takes his daughter, Esmeralda, to New York City. Esmeralda grows up in New York while Juan (her twin brother) is raised in Miami by his grandparents. When Juan and Esmeralda finally meet, and not realizing

that they are brother and sister, they fall deeply in love. The ensuing love story recounts various surprises in the way that Esmeralda's love for Juan changes her relationship with her father. In the unexpected and violent conclusion of this novel, Nova's protagonist commits murder and lies about her forbidden, incestuous relationship with her brother.

In Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express, Trish Izquierdo, a young upwardly mobile Latina lives in West Echevarria, New Jersey with her daughter, Gardenia, and her ex-husband, Cristobal. She struggles with the feeling of otherness living in West Echevarria and makes her life more difficult by cohabiting with her ex-husband, who has a long history of sexual conquests. She is contracted to write the history of her town, which she later discovers is based on the creation of an imaginary hero. Caught between her ex-husband's past and the absence of her family's past, she decides to write a new history that tries to recount the truth about her small town. Her book of West Echevarria's history becomes a metaphor for the lives of many Cuban-Americans, whose pasts are often recreated or rewritten by the older generation.

Memory Mambo

In her article, "*Memory Mambo: Un paso hacia adelante, dos pasos hacia atrás*," Yolanda Flores observes that, for children of first generation exiles, there exists a constant searching for a true history, not one subjectively colored by those who remember it. Flores concludes, "Sin duda, en *Memory Mambo*, la historia no es indicio de un pasado definitivo y dado por terminado sino una búsqueda continua" (773). Juani is committed to finding the "truth" about her

family's history among the vast sea of lies told by her relatives, including herself. Many of these "lies" are variations of the famous duct tape tale which is frequently recounted by her father, Alberto José Casas y Molina. Other family legends tell of Juani's aunt, Titi, who lives in Cuba and is possibly a homosexual. Ironically, Juani, who is obsessed with gathering the truth among all the family stories is not exactly truthful herself, as her break-up with Gina is recounted in various false versions to different members of her family.

Obejas opens her novel with a chapter completely dedicated to the examination of memory, history, and the relationship between the two. In her book, Pamela Maria Smorkaloff studies Obejas's novel in meticulous detail, suggesting that Memory Mambo clearly falls into a category of Cuban-American literature that attempts to overcome the obstacle of false memory and "start afresh" (31). She argues that the questioning of reality, not unlike what is found in texts by Alejo Carpentier and José Lezama Lima, aids her willingness to weed out contaminated memories that have been distorted by family members. She states:

In a concerted effort to extirpate false memory, the narrator develops a strategy all her own, a foolproof method for isolating the fragments of her own consciousness by teaching herself to identify the particular slant each family member has put on the narrative of departure she memorized long ago, creating the false consciousness she is now determined to shed, layer by layer. (35)

In Obejas's work, Juani must shed her false consciousness by identifying her family members' influence. Juani questions, "If these aren't my memories, then whose are they? Certainly not my father's--he always casts himself as the stoic hero in his stories, unshakable and inscrutable" (11). She is convinced that she has somehow "absorbed" someone else's recollections and that these experiences, even though she knows they are false, seem imprinted in her memory (9). However, instead of basking in the colorful collage of borrowed memories, Juani fights against them, questioning everyone and everything.

Isabel Alvarez Borland's analysis of Obejas's novel similarly examines the role of memory and the relationship between Juani and her lover Gina. Alvarez Borland suggests that the novel "does not center on issues of the first Cuban exile generation; rather, it explores how the experiences of the first generation affect their children" (117). Specifically, Juani must resolve the "problem of factuality" that plagues her daily life. Intriguingly, Alvarez Borland argues that even though the power of remembrance unifies Obejas's story, it is the issue of internal politics of lesbian communities that really defines Memory Mambo. Therefore, Alvarez Borland chooses to focus on the area of sexual politics and how it is played out by including the novel in her chapter entitled "Gay and Lesbian Images of Community." While Memory Mambo does provoke the reader to think about the issue of sexual identity, it also calls for a deeper study of the representation of memory and Juani's desperate obsession with finding the "truth."

Obejas clearly situates her novel around Juani's reflections on memory in relation with her family. In the first chapter, the protagonist-narrator questions the definition of memory and how it has particularly affected her, as a Cuban-American woman. She describes her "foggy" recollection of her arrival to the United States in a small boat as a young child. Juani describes other personal memories as being vivid and exact. She states, "Some memories are precise. Ever since I can remember, I've always been surrounded by cousins" (11). Juani's immediate surroundings always seem to include her relatives, especially her female cousins. Alvarez Borland suggests that this is one of the reasons why Juani is defined by the expectations of her family, because "Juani, the fictional 'I' of this narrative [...] defines herself through a web of women"(117). Precisely for this reason, Juani depends on her "web of women" for support and reflection, especially when recalling her family history. When she recounts the story of her father's version of the family's trip across the sea, Juani considers what her cousin has told her, saying that "[she] says this is because his [Juani's father] tales are almost always lies" (11). Hence, not only does Juani question the reliability of her father's stories, but she relies heavily on her female cousins to set her straight.

Thus Juani concludes that her history is intimately and ultimately connected to her family. As much as she would like to separate herself from the "web of women," Juani recognizes that she is "stuck with blood cousins" (13). She explains, "They [her cousins] assume we'll tell them our most intimate thoughts, even if we've just met them, because they're family, because they're

links in the chain of our history, even the history we don't know" (13). Flores agrees with Juani's conclusion stating, "[L]a memoria no es únicamente personal sino comunitaria; es decir, los personajes intentan llegar al conocimiento personal de la verdad por medio de la interpretación de las memorias individuales, por lo general, puesta en diálogo con las memorias de los otros miembros de la comunidad" (765).

Reminiscent of Halbwachs studies on collective memory, Flores argues that Juani struggles to completely remove herself from the above-mentioned "links in the chain of her history." Halbwachs emphasizes the significance of the family in forming personal memories. He argues that the family aids in constructing our thoughts and recollections of the past. In the case of Juani, she acknowledges the close relationship that her memory and her family share. In retrospect, most of her social interaction is with her extended family living in Chicago. Juani lives, works, and goes out with her female cousins and is almost always surrounded by family. As the assistant manager at a laundromat, her world revolves around the family's business and the family members who work there. Furthermore, when Juani decides to leave Chicago for a short vacation, her sister, Nena, awaits her in Miami.

Juani's extended family goes to great lengths to verify that all their "links in the chain" are connected. An interesting example of this is the family's claim to the bloodline of the famous Bartolomé de Las Casas. Not surprisingly, Juani is wary of these claims saying, "Curiously, that Bartolomé de Las Casas was a Catholic priest sworn to celibacy is always left out of the family stories so how,

exactly, we're supposed to be directly related to him is a bit of a mystery" (33). She is not only suspicious of her family's allegations about Las Casas, but also mentions that a governor with the same name, famous for inventing one-way streets, shows up about two hundred years later in Cuban history. Obviously, she argues, no one in the family has expressed much interest in being related to him (34).

One of the central episodes of Obejas's novel is Juani's frantic obsession with her father's claims of having invented a sticky and highly practical substance known as duct tape. She explains, "My father believes he invented duct tape. He sees it as the great tragedy of his life because, if the Americans hadn't stolen it out from under him, he'd have been rich and we'd have been much happier" (24). Unfortunately Juani was too young to clearly remember her father inventing the formula for the cloth tape, naming it "cinta magnética." Juani describes what she does recall, saying "I don't know how much of any of this is true. I have a vague memory of shirtless men in the patio of our home in Havana brushing whole strings of black cloth with some horrible, stinky glue" (24). As much as she would like to believe her father's story, Juani is apprehensive and relies on Nena and Patricia for clarification, but they cannot seem to agree: "Nena says it's all true, although her memories aren't quite the same as mine, but my cousin Patricia says it's just a fantasy created in exile, a group hallucination based on my father's constant retelling of the story" (25).

Clearly, Juani struggles between the boisterous account told by her father and her cousin's steadfast rejection of his "fantasy." Flores adds, "Lo que es

verdad y lo que es mentira depende de la perspectiva de los varios miembros de la familia” (766). Alberto José Casas y Molina has told his story “at least a million times” to family and friends and anyone who has come by his house, from beginning to end. Juani describes the reaction of their visitors, saying, “Most of our pals are nice about it; they nod and ask a few questions to make Papi feel good, but we know they’re incredulous, laughing inside the entire time” (25). Here Obejas allows for the representation of the “imagined” past life in Cuba. Patricia argues that what Juani’s father has done is to create a “fantasy” while living in exile. Curiously, Patricia’s own experience as a Cuban-American differs from her other cousins’. Patricia’s parents, for example, “emigrated to the U.S. before the revolution and always had different ideas about everything” (61). Patricia, once infatuated with the Revolution, has become disenchanted with Fidel’s antics and expresses remorse, explaining, “He was selfish and had no patience for others and their revolutionary development” (101). Juani, although skeptical, does not write off her father completely. Even though Patricia firmly refuses to accept Alberto José’s claim, Juani continues to search for a verification of his story throughout the novel.

Hirsch’s work on postmemory and her ideas of the fractured family as subject to conflicting historical scripts can serve as a functional critical base when addressing Juani’s particular situation. Just as Hirsch argues postmemory is characterized by the experience of those who grow up flooded by narratives passed down from older generations, Juani’s own personal memories are shaped in a similar fashion. Juani’s “postmemory” not only aids in her constant

skepticism, but also in her obsession with finding the truth. In the case of her father's possible invention, Juani feels she must know "what really happened." Even while visiting her sister in Miami, Juani cannot seem to let go of the infamous tale. She explains, "I don't know what had come over me – why it suddenly became so fucking important – but I was obsessed: I had to know the truth about this stupid thing and the human cost seemed irrelevant" (178). At that moment, Juani admits her fixation and the importance she ascribes to it. Thus, with the aid of Bernie's computer and the advancement of computer technology (the Internet and the electronic encyclopedia), she takes the time to research techniques and recipes for adhesives. Calling home to literally assess her parents' (especially her father's) knowledge of natural adhesives and compounds, Juani explains her intention, "I wanted to know what my father really knew about duct tape, I wanted to test him, I wanted him to fail that test, and to nail him. I wanted to throw myself on the floor and kick and scream and cry" (179). Hirsch suggests that postmemory is collective memory that is driven by external narratives and the imagination. Juani's only recollection consists of shirtless men on her patio working with some sticky substance and therefore must rely on her parents' narrative. However, instead of just accepting what they tell her, she decides to find out for herself, consciously hoping to prove her father wrong. After reading Bernie's email, Obejas's protagonist realizes that casein glue, (a key component of duct tape) was used in the thirties to make balsa surfboards. Curiously, she fails in resolving this internal conflict even after Bernie

sends her “definitive proof” (204). Flores explains that Juani’s search actually just makes the duct tape story even more blurry:

Si inicialmente Juani busca obsesivamente la verdad, creyendo que encontrando el origen de la cinta magnética la llevará a la verdad, lo que encuentra, sin embargo, es la ilusión de la verdad. Ella no descubre algo que le revele la verdad; al contrario, la historia de la cinta magnética se bifurca, no se resuelve, no localiza su origen. (770)

Juani’s obsession leads her to react uncontrollably with her parents and sister. She screams at her mother over the phone, justifying her right to know the truth and dramatically claims to be enduring a slow “death” due to the “venom coursing through her veins” (180). This manifestation of both physical and verbal violence is, if not directly, at least indirectly related to Juani’s failure to reach any sort of resolution with her family’s past. The urge to “throw [her]self on the floor and kick and scream” exemplifies Juani’s violent streak, which Obejas had already indicated in the violent encounter with Gina. Remarkably, this disturbing brawl with Gina soon becomes another fuzzy memory for the protagonist. Even though it leaves them both hospitalized, the bloody fight is retold with a string of lies suggested by her cousin-in-law, Jimmy, and reinforced by Juani. Obejas’s narrator thus struggles with postmemory that is affected by not only family members speaking about a long-lost past, but also by a recent and traumatic occurrence.

Juani concludes that her attempt to find the truth via cloudy, invented memories makes her feel as though she is “dancing one step forward, two steps back” (194). For Obejas’s protagonist, there is really no choice in the matter. Juani realizes that the Cuban-American has a precarious identity, one that weaves back and forth between Cuba and the Florida Straits. Moreover, as much as she would like to find a way to come to a conclusion about her family history on her own, she knows that this is an impossible task. She adds, “The stories they [her relatives in Cuba] tell are always slightly incredulous, but those of us who are here have no choice but to believe them” (74). Juani, like many Cuban-Americans, must mediate between representations of the “here” (United States) and “there” (Cuba), another way of saying that they must deal with not being here nor there. Knowing only bits and pieces of the “there” allows her to become cynical and suspicious, since she cannot find any proof to back-up her family members’ claims.

Towards the end of the novel, Juani breaks down, saying “everybody in our family’s a liar” (194). Of course, this statement must also include Juani herself. When talking with her sister Nena, she clearly recounts Jimmy’s false tale about what happened between Gina and herself (195). Instead of telling Nena the truth, Juani chooses to add another lie to the Casas family repertoire. She, however, acknowledges her own hypocrisy, which makes her ill: “And though I should have been comforted by her [Nena’s] faith in me, I was sickened instead. Her utter confidence in the fact that I couldn’t lie betrayed how little she knew me, how far we’d already drifted from each other” (195). The family,

uprooted from its native Cuba, drifts apart yet comes together in a sea of lies. Juan's search for truth, even as she lies herself, ends in frustration and the recognition that the family history is unverifiable but is her own.

The Agüero Sisters

In her second novel, The Agüero Sisters, Cristina García combines a medley of narrations from various characters that weave together the past of the Cuban nation back to 1902 and the present situation in Havana and Miami in the 1990s. Similar to Dreaming in Cuban, García's novel introduces various perspectives from different generations to tell the story of two half-sisters who tragically lose their mother as young children. The Agüero Sisters twists back and forth between the magical setting of the Cuban natural habitat and the cosmopolitan city of Miami. The large range of detailed descriptions of scientific terminology – from ornithology to cosmetology – speaks to García's meticulous research for this particular novel. Ignacio Agüero is only known to the reader through the words left in his diary. Although likely guilty for the murder of his wife Blanca, Ignacio is painted as a sympathetic character. His diary entries take on a life of their own, and describe the rich, historical past of Cuba's natural history. Sisters Constancia and Reina both share a mother, Blanca, but have different fathers due to Blanca's adulterous relationship. Although the two sisters have lived in different places (Constancia in New York and Reina in Havana) the two eventually meet in Miami, a focal point of their story.

In a chapter entitled "Collecting the Tales of the Community," Alvarez Borland comments on García's novel, alluding to the many similarities with

Dreaming in Cuban. Alvarez Borland observes The Agüero Sisters' ability to examine Cuban history via the sisters' present, adding that García seems to draw a parallel between the disastrous events of the Agüero family and "the violence and repression of the first years of the Cuban republic" (144).¹¹ She argues that Reina seems to be the luckier of the two sisters since she was "[r]aised and educated in her own country" (143). However, Alvarez Borland admits that they both struggle with their dark and dense family's past. She explains:

Together, they find out that they are both haunted by the fragmentary memories surrounding their mother's death. It is their common need to search for the truth that eventually brings the two women to confront each other and to face the consequences of a life of silence and geographical separation. (143)

In the case of Reina, it is obvious that her personal character and geographical situation helps her in dealing with the death of her mother. She stays with Ignacio and Blanca and thus spends more time with her mother and stepfather. Jealous of her half-sister, Constanca drops spiders into Reina's crib and forces mud down her mouth (47). She is consequently sent away to relatives living in the Cuban countryside at the age of three. Rejected by Blanca, Constanca eventually leaves Cuba in the 1960s in a cargo ship. Here, Alvarez Borland stresses the difficulties that both sisters must endure. The likely murder of Blanca deprives the two sisters of growing up with their mother, even though

¹¹ While studying at Havana University, Ignacio alludes to the repressive state of Eduardo Machado's Cuban government (151-52).

Reina shares more time with her. This is complicated by their father's suicide two years later. Due to the tragic loss of their parents, the sisters struggle to make sense of what has happened. Reina and (more importantly) Constanica must find the truth of their mother's mysterious death and an answer for their father's (or stepfather's) lies.

Alvarez Borland suggests that The Agüero Sisters succeeds in its rendition of Cuba's natural world even while it fails to resolve many of the issues that Reina and Constanica experience: "García's novel leaves the reader with only the permanence of Cuba's physical reality and makes no predictions about the future of its unhappy characters" (145). Just as in Obejas's Memory Mambo, the Cuban-American protagonists in García's second novel grapple with the secret and divergent stories of their family's past. Her novel traces the desire and need for Constanica (and in some part Reina) to (re)discover her lost childhood.

In her article, "En búsqueda del paraíso perdido: La historia natural como imaginación diaspórica en Cristina García" Adriana Méndez Rodenas addresses the parallels between the representation of Cuba's natural history and the diasporic imagination in García's work. She argues that second generation Cuban-American writers are more prone to visualize the island as a lost paradise. Looking specifically at the correlation between García's fictional character, Dr. Samuel Forrest (Ignacio's mentor and professor), and Thomas Barbour, Méndez Rodenas proposes that the former is based almost entirely on the latter, author of A Naturalist in Cuba (1948). Thus, according to Méndez

Rodenas, García relies on the “intertextual” dependency to create a more convincing role for Cuba’s natural history and the conception of the lost paradise. Cuba’s natural history, in turn, becomes a metaphor for “el puente” that Cuban critic Ambrosio Fornet calls “el discurso de la nostalgia” which is shared by many members of the Cuban-American exile community.

Méndez Rodenas’s suggestion that “*A Naturalist in Cuba* ha servido a García de gran utilidad para el re-descubrimiento de los orígenes y la ensoñación de la isla” is interesting indeed (416). Barbour’s work aids García in creating a novel that rediscovers both Cuba’s natural history and the Agüero family’s past. For Constancia and Reina, the island’s natural habitat serves as a background for Blanca’s death. In the prologue, the narrator describes the ambiguous incident saying, “Ignacio Agüero waited until nightfall, watched and waited until a lone red-tailed hawk soared above them in the sky. Then he carried his wife seventeen miles to the nearest village and began to tell his lies” (5). The third-person omniscient point of view begins García’s novel with a twist, allowing for the reader to evaluate each character’s perspective as each appears in the text. This, however, only makes it more difficult to determine the legitimacy of the sisters’ past. In a sense, García forces the reader to share Constancia’s frustration when she tries to separate fact from fiction.

Several examples in García’s novel demonstrate the character’s obsession with family history. Just as Memory Mambo’s Juani dances between various “truths,” Constancia and Reina must weed through multiple stories told by their own parents in order to find out what really happened. In the end,

Constancia (with the aid of Reina) must make the trip back to Cuba so that she can read her father's diary. Curiously, even with a written confession from her father, Constancia still finds it difficult to believe her father was culpable of the murder of Blanca.

While still living in her father's house in Havana, Reina questions what she actually wants to know about her stepfather, Ignacio. She ponders, "Why else would she choose to live like this, amidst the debris of her childhood and Papá's dead specimens? What truths can they possibly reveal to her after so long? Can they tell her why her mother died, why her sister was sent away?" (67). While in the Flores y Jorganes Funeral Home, Reina secretly observes her mother's body, describing Blanca's throat as "an estuary of color and disorder" (68). Knowing that a gunshot to her throat, and not a drowning while unconscious, killed her mother, Reina must choose who and what to believe. As much as she would like to tell Constancia what she has seen, she worries about the implications it might suggest about their father. Reina considers, "if Papá lied, what the hell was the truth?" (167). She expresses her desire to know what actually happened to her mother; however, Reina questions how much the truth will really help in the end. Knowing that the past cannot be changed, she decides it is best to leave her parents' mysterious history alone.

Constancia, on her part, has been physically removed from her native country, living in New York and later in Miami. Unlike Reina, she often relocates¹² and feels no particular attachment to a homeland. Even as a young

¹² I'm referring to Constancia's early childhood and adolescence, when she frequently moves within Cuba and finally to the United States.

child, she struggles “with the burden of this emptiness, of sharing no past but the land’s and no future but the creatures soon to be in her and Papi’s possession” (134). By burying herself in her line of beauty products, “Cuerpo de Cuba,” Constanica finds some temporary relief from her constant and obsessive struggle with her family’s past. Moreover, as a grown woman, Constanica cannot let go of her desire to know her family’s past, even while she rejects Reina’s version of their mother’s injuries. Hirsch, in her description of postmemory, describes how it can be “obsessive and relentless” and just as constructed as memory itself (22). García’s Constanica (as is the case with Obejas’s Juani) offers a good example of Hirsch’s definition of postmemory (a particular form of memory that is influenced by past generations and histories told from multiple perspectives). Constanica tries to negate the fact that she “romanticizes” the past, saying to Reina, “I think we remember a lot of things differently” (174). She relates her own experience as a mother and giving birth, thinking, “[W]hen I’m gone, you [her daughter, Isabel] will live, you will remember. But what is it exactly they’re supposed to remember?” (211).

Here, Constanica questions the reality of her past and what she should pass on to the following generations of her family. She does not know what to ask Isabel to remember and what to exclude from family stories. Hirsch argues that postmemory is not an “absent memory” (terminology Nadine Fresco uses) but acquired stories and memories that have been shared by the community and older relatives. The deep sense of displacement suffered by the children of exile, she believes, “does not create a feeling of absence” (244). She instead suggests

that “the aesthetics of postmemory is a diasporic aesthetics of temporal and spatial exile that needs simultaneously to (re)build and to mourn” (245). In the case of Constanica, her postmemory offers her the opportunity to search for what really happened between Ignacio and Blanca. In her own way, she mourns the loss of her parents and strives to (re)build her own understanding of her family’s past.

Another point worth mentioning is Constanica’s violent clash with Reina during their boat trip to the Florida Keys. As occurred between Juani and Gina, Constanica seems to reach her limit of frustration and disgust with the multiple versions of the past and this somehow results in extreme aggression, almost killing her sister with a boat oar. Reina, who tries to convince Constanica that Ignacio lied about the death of their mother says, “It’s all a mock history” (276). For her, their family’s past is an imagination; a creation invented by their father and passed on to his daughters. However, Constanica admits that she needs to believe him with or without the support of her sister, who refuses to believe her mother shot herself: “Mami couldn’t have done it. She couldn’t have reached the trigger” (275). Thus, for Constanica, the possibility of defending her mother’s killer is too much to handle. In the end, this conflict leads her not only to react violently towards her sister, but also to confess that her life is dominated by memories which are not her own. Hirsch would argue that this can be considered part of the mourning process: “For survivors who have been separated and exiled from a ravaged world, memory is necessarily an act not only of recall but also of mourning, mourning often tempered by *anger*, *rage*, and

despair” (243, my emphasis). In the case of Constanica, her postmemory is powerful and unyielding. She needs not just to feel and to know, but to “remember, to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace, and to repair” (Hirsch 243).

Not surprisingly, it seems as though Reina fares the best at the end of García’s novel, since Constanica fails to completely come to terms with her past. Even with the discovery of Ignacio’s diary, Constanica appears unfulfilled. Since she is determined to find tangible evidence, she reads her father’s diary “until only the stars are left to clarify the sky” (298). In other words, Constanica spends hours re-reading her father’s journal entries, hoping to find the evidence that will, once and for all, conclude her bewilderment and confusion. Her obsession does not end with the unearthing of her father’s hidden journal but rather continues while she mourns the death of both of her parents, now with a new perspective. Reina, however, does not hold onto the past like her sister. There are aspects of her past that she would like to have cleared up, but her approach towards life is much more concentrated on the present. Her relationships with men are an example of this. Constanica has a difficult time with her sister’s promiscuous behavior. The narrator explains:

The only time Constanica seemed in the least bit agreeable toward her [Reina] lately was when Reina told her that she’d had a small part of her cervix removed. The doctors in Cuba said she may have a predisposition for cervical cancer, most likely caused by a sexually transmitted disease. Constanica seemed strangely pleased, as if Reina had gotten her due. (198)

Constancia's stance with regard to her sister is a manifestation of her frustration. Her resentment seems to stem from something more, not just sibling rivalry or moral superiority. Constancia feels rejected, as if she were the outcast of the family. She was forced to live away from home and, ultimately, in another country. Reina had the opportunity to stay in Cuba with Ignacio and to live among his collections and rubble. The narrator describes her bitterness:

Constancia wants to shatter Reina's confidence, to tell her how their mother returned to Havana eight months pregnant, big with another man's child. How the apartment in Vedado became restless then, as if the world were licked senseless by a great wicked cow. Constancia wants to tell Reina that *she* was the unborn baby, that her surname should be not Agüero but God only knows what. (250)

In exile, Constancia leads a financially successful but disheartened life, married to a man she cannot love. In contrast to Reina, Constancia must grapple with a past that seems to elude her. Her obsession leads her to the discovery of Ignacio's diary, but fails to create happiness in her life.

Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story

Himilce Novas's Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story describes a daring love story of estranged twins, Esmeralda and Juan, who meet after 29 years of separation. Unlike Constancia and Reina, who were split up in pre-adolescence, the twins are separated at birth and are unaware of each other's existence. With the incorporation of social taboos, such as incest and

cannibalism, Novas creates a bold novel that tells of two lovers that cross boundaries and question social norms. Esmeralda and Juan are constantly reevaluating their family's past, told by their father, Arnaldo. According to John Noell Moore, the personal search for Esmeralda's true identity is one of the novel's central themes. In his review of Novas's work, he argues that, "The novel is about physical, psychological, and spiritual awakenings that unfold as we learn the story of Esmeralda's parents and her relationship with the novel's other central figure...Juan Ona, who is her twin brother and lover" (98). These "awakenings" stem directly from Esmeralda's exploration of her family's secret past. Throughout the novel, Arnaldo, who is deeply religious and active in his small church in New York, consciously hides aspects of their family's history. This includes the physical transformations that Arnaldo experienced himself. The narrator explains, "If someone had told Esmeralda how her father looked as a boy of sixteen when he was born-again and then at seventeen when he had met and loved her mother, she would have thought it was one more Cuban fable" (30).

On a basic level, Novas's work functions as a comparison between the effects of the community on a Cuban-American raised in a non-Cuban community and one who was raised among Cubans in Miami. Esmeralda is taken away as a newborn by Arnaldo to New York, where she grows up with imaginary friends and a father who sexually molests her periodically. Juan, however, moves to Miami with his grandparents (who he thinks are his parents), a center of Cuban-American culture and community support. Interestingly, both

Esmeralda and Juan feel like outsiders, questioning their physical surroundings and the lack of fulfillment in their lives. The narrator describes Juan's tension by saying, "But although this was so, that Juan had always sensed he had a north or a south living in another part of the world, this notion had not gripped his heart to the point of obsession until he and his twin sister turned nineteen under the same stars at different latitudinal parallels" (54). This is due in to the twins' separation but also to their situation of living in the diaspora. Even though Novas creates a distinction between living in Miami, where residents (including Juan) call themselves exiles, and New York, where Esmeralda bounces between labels we find in the quotation that follows, her two protagonists grapple with their diasporic identity throughout the novel. In the first chapter, Esmeralda is described in this fashion:

[A] Cuban, according to her father, a Hispanic according to the Census, and a New Yorker, as she first called herself before she found a need to cling to her identity by its roots and follicles, and thus called herself Cuban once again, who at twenty-nine sealed her fate by falling in love, and then having fallen in love, committed a foolish act to rectify her mistake. (1)

Looking more closely at Novas's work, it is evident that Juan and Esmeralda are struggling at another level with their family's fragmented past. While living in a Manhattan tenement, Esmeralda hears the story of her birth and rescue "at least once a month" from her father, although her own memories only extend back to when she was four. Arnaldo tells his stories while molesting his

daughter, leading Esmeralda to associate her father's sexual advances with her family's questionable past. As a consequence, Esmeralda describes her "two fathers," her night-father and her day-father. For her, the narrator explains, "there were two fathers and two lives...and neither one spoke to the other or knew whether the other was real or imagined" (32). O'Reilly Herrera's theory of the "real-and-imagined" suits Esmeralda's experience with her father's two personalities. Curiously, it is the "night-father" who would speak of her mother, "of her beauty and how she died of love" (31). Arnaldo tells of the long trip from Cuba to Key West while holding Esmeralda in his arms and, mysteriously, confesses he had done "unspeakable" acts to save her life, though he never explains to her exactly what those were. Thus, Esmeralda is told bits and pieces of her parents' past, leaving her confused and afraid what to believe, imagine, or accept as the truth.

Of course the most significant aspect of Esmeralda's past, the fact that her lover turns out to be her twin brother, evades her recognition for some time. Moreover, it is her father who discovers this twisted detail first and fails to explain the disastrous situation to his daughter. Unlike Obejas's Memory Mambo and García's The Agüero Sisters, Novas's novel focuses less on Esmeralda's obsession with discovering the truth about her family's past (a proactive search for lost information) and more on how the past is represented as physical and sexual passion. When the two siblings finally meet face to face, the narrator describes her feelings: "She [Esmeralda] immediately understood that he was

Juan Saavedra, her twin soul, her other” (82). They still make love, oblivious to their blood ties:

Juan and Esmeralda stayed there, joined together on that abandoned floor, inventing their lovemaking, a hard lovemaking, fierce and importunate, that suited their *yearning* and their halves and no one else’s. They clung to each other’s lips, their identical pomegranate lips, and breathed each other’s breath, their identical syncopate breath, until night fell around them and they emerged as one. (92, my emphasis)

Throughout the story, Arnaldo aims to teach his daughter the ways of the world, one of them the source of the novel’s title. Women, he tells her, are like bananas, mangos, and coconuts. Intriguingly, Esmeralda, who had always considered herself as a banana, begins to think of herself as a green coconut with mango fruit inside. Novas’s female protagonist remains cautious until she meets her brother, refusing to expose her inner self. By keeping “those who approach her for the purpose of consuming her mango fruit” at bay, Esmeralda stays sheltered, even from the most “sophisticated” types, such as the unwanted advances from her high school teacher, Rob Sanders (45). Ironically, Juan is the only one who eventually helps Esmeralda become unguarded. Her desire and “yearning” for the truth about herself and her family’s past is expressed directly through the physical act of intercourse with her twin. Their mother, Patricia, appears in the night and whispers prayers to Esmeralda while consoling Juan as a silver angel. For both of them, Patricia is the presence “that gave them comfort

in the dark” (95). Thus, Esmeralda’s obsession with Juan (a physical representation of her family’s past), serves as a move towards a resolution of her lost family history.

Halbwachs argues that one of the social frameworks of memory is the family, and Novas’s novel portrays an unorthodox representation of this idea. Esmeralda and her brother reminisce together, not knowing that their family’s past is one and the same. In fact, from the moment the novel begins, Esmeralda learns bits and pieces of her family’s history only through her family members, as she has few memories of her own. Halbwachs recognizes the close relationship that memory and the family share and emphasizes the significance of this amalgamation when (re)forming personal memories and recollections of the past. He explains, “No matter how we enter a family –by birth, marriage, or some other way – we find ourselves to be part of a group where our position is determined not by personal feelings but by rules and customs independent of us and that existed before us” (55). Esmeralda, who is “still wrapped in her cocoon,” knows mostly what her father wants her to know, and he withholds information about her mother and her twin brother Juan (44). It becomes clear later on that Arnaldo wants Esmeralda all to himself, and his worst fears are realized once Juan enters her life. From then on Arnaldo’s jealousy consumes him.

Novas’s novel rushes to its climax, which is reminiscent of both Memory Mambo and The Agüero Sisters. The discovery of his twin children in the act of passionate love sends Arnaldo into a fit of rage that ends in tragedy. I quote this important passage:

While Arnaldo continued his disembodied jabbing into Juan with a force as monstrous as a hurricane, his own daughter, his Esmeralda, who'd pried herself from his Herculean foot that had her pinned against the floor, turned on Arnaldo with Juan's painted hammer, the one he used to nail his canvass on the wall. Without reflecting for an instant or asking the Lord Jesus for His help, Esmeralda dealt her father the deadly blow that felt like melting tar on hard cement and split his brown and blood-red coconut head in two. (141)

Similar to Juani and Constancia's explosive outbursts, though elevated here to involve a murder, Novas's protagonist reacts with brutal violence towards her own father, killing him with a hammer to prevent him from killing Juan. Juan refuses to let Esmeralda suffer from the consequences of the murder, claiming that he killed him. The narrator explains, "[Juan] did not want the records to show, or history to know, or the Cuban papers in Miami to write that his future wife had been guilty of patricide" (144). Here there is convincing evidence that Esmeralda's character represents many qualities that Juani and Constancia share. Moreover, if we return to Hirsch's description of the process of mourning and postmemory, we can find an explanation for the frustration and rage felt by Esmeralda. In particular, we can trace a progression throughout the novel that leads Novas's protagonist to finally kill her "night-father" to preserve her "twin soul, her other." Esmeralda knows, after meeting Juan, that she has discovered true love. Therefore, "She [can] no longer do what she had done for so many

years. She [can] no longer be the vessel for her father's sorrow or the repository of his sad, misguided longing" (96). In other words, she rejects her father's sexual advances, a representation of the rejection of his stories of their family history and his image of Patricia. Instead, Esmeralda must discover her own history, through her union with her twin.

Curiously, it is only after the death of Arnaldo that both Juan and Esmeralda realize that they share the same parents. This moment of recognition, the novel's anagnorisis, reveals a protagonist whose destiny, like Oedipus, leads her to commit both patricide and incest. For Juan, the local police interrogation marks the moment of discovery: "A red alarm had gone off in Juan's head, as loud as the one that had exploded in Arnaldo's ears that first day when Juan and Esmeralda lay together for the first time in the abandoned crack house on One Hundred and Eleventh Street" (146). The realization of her father's death also puts Esmeralda in a state of shock that keeps her "thin and desiccated" from many days of fast and thirst, a penance she imposes on herself as perhaps a way of cleansing (150). What is particularly striking is that the twin siblings choose to ignore their scandalous discovery and continue their relationship. Reminiscent of Obejas's Juani, who creates different versions of her dramatic fright with Gina, Juan and Esmeralda decide to lie not only about who killed Arnaldo but also about their relationship. As Juan puts it, "We will say that your name is something else...Let's say Esmeralda Mendoza, for example, like your friend the lizard...and that your parents died..." (154). In a sense, their search for their family's history only exposes a truth that complicates their life

even more. Ultimately, Juan feels the pressure from creating their lies. He knows that “[s]aying it didn’t make it go away, and knowing it cast a large spider’s web on them, a web...from which he feared their feet would never be untangled” (154). Novas’s protagonists grapple with postmemory that is affected not only by family members withholding details of the past, but also by a traumatic breakthrough created by their search for the truth. Like Obejas’s Juani, Juan and Esmeralda choose to live a lie rather than come forward with the truth about their relationship and what really happened the night their father was murdered. And their lies become history: “The bride’s name was reported in the papers as Esmeralda Mendoza, and the groom, Juan Ona, was happily photographed at her side with his proud parents, [...] distinguished members of the Cuban American community” (157).

Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express

Beatriz Rivera’s Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express tells the story of Trish Izquierdo. Throughout the novel, Trish experiences pressure from her surroundings to assimilate to the quotidian life of New Jersey. However, instead of falling victim to outside forces, she focuses her attention on reading travel books and organizing parades for the town. Although she lives with her daughter, she also shares the house with her ex-husband Cristobal. As the story progresses, the reader realizes that Trish is still in love with Cristobal and extremely jealous of his past sexual relationships. Rivera’s protagonist grapples with her absent family history so she decides instead to write a history of West Echevarria. In his interview with the author, Fredrick Luis Aldama introduces

Rivera, describing her characters in this novel as solid representations of the hybrid Latina identity. He states:

Under the stress of living in a patriarchal US mainstream and a macho Cuban culture, the characters learn to look to the past to assert their presence as Latinas in the present with the power to shape their own lives. Beatriz Rivera's work speaks to the Cuban American experience—especially those of the one-and-a-half generation who seek to inhabit those vital spaces where histories, myths, languages, and experiences rub together and make room for new hybrid Latina/o identities. (152)

In other words, Aldama argues that Rivera's women characters look to the past, many times directly to Cuba, and "invent a world where the lines between national histories, collective myths, and individual memories blur..." (152). This is especially true for Trish, as she attempts to define herself and research the history of her community. As a student of history, she acknowledges her "special bond" with this subject but at first chooses a job that is not related to her interests. The narrator clarifies, "If she chose that career [tax attorney] rather than any other it was because this discipline had absolutely nothing to do with history or with anything of any interest and she was set on becoming less emotional" (34).

Rivera's novel traces Trish's unexpected career change as she becomes the leader of West Echevarria's parades and events. This promotion in her community serves a catalyst for Trish's need to find her roots as a Cuban-

American. She knows that this is the most interesting job she has had thus far. The narrator describes her attitude saying, “Oh, she loved that town! She loved taking care of it!” (36). Besides recent memories of her complicated trip to Cancún with her daughter Gardenia, Trish seems to hold almost no recollection of her family’s past. She is void, empty and hence, “somewhere between two summits, in midair” (10). This is frequently represented throughout the novel by Trish’s desperate attempts to escape her current reality by reading, visiting Mexico’s beaches, or re-writing West Echevarria’s history. Trish wants to start her life over again by taking a leap and creating another personality. In fact, at the beginning of this novel, Trish has no idea who she is or where she is going. Rivera’s protagonist pushes herself to re-evaluate her current situation, with her job, ex-husband, and daughter.

Like Rivera’s Playing with Light, Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express’s protagonist becomes so carried away with reading that her own mother thinks she is “crazier than a she-goat” (10). For Trish, the best part of reading is not knowing “fact from fiction.” She considers herself a combination of multiple “personas” that are interchangeable. As the narrator explains, “She [Trish] was sick of the old hang-ups, of memories of Trish the Second, the loser, whom she’d killed, of Trish the First, the shy one, whom she hated, and of Trish the Third with her death wish and violent character [...] or Trish the Fourth, the anxious one” (11). At the beginning of the novel, Trish claims her fifth self, “Trish the Fifth” which is “the best of the bunch” (10). In a sense, she establishes

herself as having multiple personalities, a situation that argues for a need to define her identity or a fear of doing so.

In fact, Trish seems more focused on her ex-husband's previous sexual conquests than in exploring her own past. While in Mexico with Gardenia, she cannot stop calling Cristobal, desperately trying to find out what he is doing at every moment. She lets her imagination run wild, thinking: "So someone's touching him [Cristobal] all over. Someone else is fondling that body that [I] one day decided was for [me] only" (31). This frantic obsession with Cristobal's past is fouled by the fact that she is constantly bumping into one of his ex-lovers.

Trish comments on her encounter with Phoebe on the street, saying:

In spite of all these tangled emotions I did manage to say hello to Phoebe. But I couldn't help wishing that Phoebe didn't exist and had never existed. Then just as I was walking away wondering why I had gotten this terrible mental illness of being jealous of Cristobal's past...I had this unheard of, unthought of, never-before revelation. From then on giving up on this parade was out of the question. (54)

Here, Trish reconsiders her obsession with her ex-husband's past lovers, questioning the reasons why his past relationships matter so much. She knows that if she can just concentrate on something else, she will avoid this "mental illness" (54). The narrator explains, "[Work] was the only thing that would make her stop thinking of Cristobal and allow her to stop being jealous and moody and

bored and wanting” (35). Moreover, it is this decision to focus on her job that gives Trish the opportunity to begin re-writing the history of West Echevarria.

Trish’s own family history is almost completely absent from Rivera’s novel. The protagonist spends less than a page describing her background and how she arrived to Miami from Cuba. She paints her parents’ relationship as violent and aggressive, especially after moving to south Florida, and refers to “the hitting and the pushing, every single night” (156). Rather than speaking of her own family, Trish chooses to focus on Cristobal’s parents and relatives. Instead of glorifying her ex-husband’s family, she is critical of them, especially the death of the female constituents. She ponders, “The Arrazcaeta family is a big family. And it would probably be a perfect family were it not for the utter, gloomy, and scandalous absence of females...This has been going on for generations. It’s almost like a curse” (110). Trish goes on to articulate a detailed history of Critobal’s extended family and the various representations of freak accidents that have eliminated all the women. This is a significant reason why Trish must write a complete and non-biased version of West Echevarria’s history (or “herstory”) told from the perspective of a Cuban-American woman.

We also must specifically look at Trish’s unearthing of Rigo Sabato’s lies. Rivera’s protagonist accidentally stumbles on a clandestine file which alludes to her boss’s detailed plan of fooling the community for his own personal and economical benefit. While writing her newsletter, Trish interrogates Sabato about a dead athlete, asking for any and every piece of evidence that confirms his outlandish claims. The protagonist questions Sabato’s perspective (the male

perspective) on the history of West Echevarria. After her investigation, Trish not only has enough evidence to counter Sabato's claim of their infamous dead athlete, but also the proof that he cheated the community. This breakthrough is enough to send him to jail. The narrator explains it this way:

To make long story short, Rigo Sabato, the Number One Man, had been put behind bars for having invented a dead athlete, named him West Echevarria, spun out a never-ending, maudlin tale of his courageous life and his untimely death, enlarged upon the plight of his poor, starving family in Panama, and then proceed to name this town after him. (107)

Ironically, while working on her book, Trish suggests that she might distort the truth of West Echevarria by including her best friend, Doris, in the text, saying "Who cares? I'll just have the names and places changed!" (59). She admits that sometimes she gets the newsletter and her history of the town confused, stating, "I'm getting this *maldita* newsletter mixed-up with the history of West Echevarria that I'm writing!" (50) Just as Obejas's Juani and Novas's Juan and Esmeralda construct more lies while trying to discover the truth, Trish finds herself in a similar situation. In response, Doris tries to convince her friend that she must carefully consider her approach in writing about their town, saying, "West Echevarria is not just a place in your mind, Trish...[Y]ou did not invent West Echevarria, it is real. As to the people here, either they don't like themselves or they don't know shit about themselves or both!" (90)

While discussing the collection of testimonies in her introduction in ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora, Andrea O'Reilly Herrera argues that each one of the contributors "seeks to represent or capture some unique 'reality,' and thereby endow [his or her] life and experience with some sense of historical significance or meaning [...]" (xxx). In Rivera's novel, there is evidence that Trish is trying to do just that. This is most apparent as she becomes more and more dedicated to re-writing her town's history. For Trish, this diversion from reality allows her to create a history that has significance and meaning, while avoiding her own story or that of her husband's escapades.

The lack of information about Trish's own history feeds her desire to create something to replace what is missing. She focuses on re-examining West Echevarria's past and therefore Cristobal's family, which allows her to remove herself from her current reality and obsessions. Her satisfaction of not knowing "fact from fiction" alludes to her need to create, invent, and imagine a past that falls within her comfort zone.

In this chapter, I have carefully examined the theme of the obsession with family history in four Cuban-American novels written in the 1990s. With the help of theories from critics, such as Maurice Halbwachs and Marianne Hirsch, I have tried to address the unique intersection of history and memory and how it is related to the family unit. Within all four of these works, on one level or another, the protagonists must grapple with their family history and their personal memories. Conflict arises when the family's past is told from various perspectives, a situation common to many exiles, and creates a complex web of

stories that contradict each other. My analysis details each character's involvement with the search for the truth in their family histories. In the case of Obejas's Memory Mambo and García's The Agüero Sisters, Juani and Constanca are forthright with their conscious quest to discover what really happened. In Novas's Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story and Rivera's Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express, Esmeralda and Trish are often troubled by the discovering of their pasts and prefer to recreate or avoid their histories.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

These writers, these voices from both shores of the Great Blue River, have Cuba as their common core and their grand plot. Even when it does not make itself explicit in the narrative content, it is there in the perspective, the point of view, the distance that intervenes when they are describing other cultures, the tone, the joy and the pain of the things portrayed, the language, and – even for those who write in another tongue – in the Cuban rhythm and cadence of their words.

-from “Women’s Voices from the Great Blue River”

Mirta Yáñez

In the Introduction to Cubana: Contemporary Fiction by Cuban Women, Ruth Behar explains that it is necessary for Cuban-American women writers to establish a candid discussion. She states, “Most painful of all is the internalized blockade, the silencing that takes place on all sides and ends up eating away at those of us [Cuban-American women writers] who, despite the odds, continue to believe in the importance of open and honest conversations” (xvi). She, here, as in Bridges to Cuba, makes use of the metaphorical bridge that spans between the island and mainland and expresses the hope for reconciliation and resolution for both sides of the Florida Straits. Behar emphasizes that the narratives these “Cubanas” write act as a source and foundation to maintain channels of dialogue open between Cuba and the United States. In a sense, as Méndez Rodenas points out, Cuban-American women writers offer a “counter-plot” or alternative perspective to dominant versions of the Cuban exilic experience (47). Many of

these unconventional stories depict female protagonists who have envisioned the nation, family, and identity across the gender divide. Margarita Saona argues that, unlike male-conceived Latin American literature, women writers articulate national families differently. They do so, mainly, by focusing on lineage that integrates and appropriates questions of the female subject represented in the family and nation.¹³

In this dissertation, I addressed a collection of novels that represent the female writers in the prominent Cuban-American literary explosion of the 1990s. Some of these works, such as García's Dreaming in Cuban or Obejas's Memory Mambo, are quite well-known and have been included in classroom discussions throughout humanities departments in colleges and universities in the United States and beyond. However, other novels in my corpus are not as well-known, though they deserve to be. In grouping the twelve novels I selected, I hope to have provided a more complete picture of the breadth and scope of Anglophone works written by Cuban-American women in the decade of the 1990s. I suggest that narratives, such as Beven's Havana Split or Lamazares's The Sugar Island, have a strong potential in contributing to the overall investigation of Cuban-American studies and Latina writing. The three central themes I considered in Chapters 2 to 4—the mother-daughter relationship, the voyage to Cuba, and the obsession with family history—are an indication of the variety and interconnections that are prevalent in this corpus, as well as the various attempts made by the Cuban-American characters to resolve their national and

¹³ See Margarita Saona's "Do We Still Need the Family to Imagine the Nation? National Family Romances by Latin American Woman Writers."

hyphenated identity. While I chose to consider four novels in each of these chapters, many of the novels explored more than one of these themes, thus reinforcing my selection of these three themes as central in the Cuban-American imaginary.

In the second chapter of the dissertation, I focus on four novels where the mother-daughter relationship is particularly well-developed through the Cuban-American characters. In Dreaming in Cuban, The Chin Kiss King, Playing with Light, and The Sugar Island, there are multiple generations of the mother-daughter relationship. In the end, three women characters form a grandmother-mother-daughter triangle. Thus, Adela and Lourdes each find themselves in two relationships, that is, as daughter in one and mother in the other. Playing with Light also contains aspects of the three generations of women, although more focus is placed on the mother-daughter relationship of Rebecca and Nell. Borrowing from Nancy Chodorow's work on mother-daughter communication, I look specifically at how this relationship involves a more "personal" interaction rather than the "positional" relationship shared by mother and son. Chodorow observes that a woman identifies with her own mother and through association with her own child, she "re-experiences" herself as a cared-for child. Similarly, I include work from Luce Irigaray that centers on the mother and her relation to her daughter. Irigaray argues for the need for the woman to recognize and appreciate her particular female genealogy. In doing so, the woman is able to maintain her personal identity and claim a history that is rightfully hers. In particular, I review the aspects of identity confusion between mother and

daughter and how they relate specifically to the mother-daughter relationships portrayed in the texts.

In most of these novels the mother-daughter relationship reflects some aspect of national and political identity that is voiced through the Cuban or Cuban-American female characters. Except for the relationship between Mirella and Tanya in The Sugar Island, this reexamination of self and nation does not harm the preexisting relationship between mother and daughter. In some cases, such as The Chin Kiss King and Dreaming in Cuban, the relationship becomes stronger and more complete. For instance, the bond between Cuca, Adela, and Maribel in The Chin Kiss King allows for an open discourse among the three women. Moreover, Cuca's personal experience living in Cuba permits Adela and Maribel to reflect on their own national identity as Cuban-American women. In the end, the four novels examined in the second chapter all speak to the importance of female genealogy and the mother-daughter relationship. As these characters participate in the process of redefining their Cuban-American identity, they acknowledge the significant contribution their relationship with their mother and/or daughter provides.

The third chapter focuses on the prevalence of the voyage back to Cuba. To illustrate this I selected Engle's Skywriting and Singing to Cuba, Bevin's Havana Split, and Matlock's Guava and Cheese. Using the dichotomy coined by O'Reilly Herrera of the "real and imagined" Cuba, in this chapter I explore how the characters in these novels struggle between the two versions of Cuba as they move between the mainland and the island. The Cuban-American exilic

experience allows for the opportunity of imagining a paradise or “lost world” solely based on fragmented memories and nostalgia. This condition creates an overall desire for Cuban-American exiles to return to the island or make the trip for the first time. Looking at theories that address the relationship between the exilic condition and the return, such as ideas proposed by Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, I suggest that these characters are searching for a comfortable, “in-between” space in which they may reside. Instead of thinking along national borders and barriers, we must approach the Cuban-American condition as a representation of a postcolonial identity. According to Said, postcolonial identities are always in a process of shifting and adaptation. The state of the Cuban-American exile can thus be read as a hybrid identity that shares characteristics of citizens of the United States and Cuba. Cuban-Americans do not fit perfectly within dominant American culture, but represent an “alternative” or fringe community that strives to maintain a balance between their two distinct backgrounds (184). As much as they suffer from an *unbelongingness* while in the United States, they know that they belong there. In each one of these four works, the voyage to Cuba is an important aspect of the re-identification process for the characters. In every case, except for Guava and Cheese’s José, the protagonists return to the United States after visiting the island. In some instances, the characters are deported from the country, such as in Singing to Cuba, while in others, the characters make the personal decision to return.

I also address Davis’s proposal that Dreaming in Cuban represents a need for a regression to the past in order to renew present-day lives (“Back to the

Future: Mothers, Language, and Homes in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*.”) and consider its relation to the four novels included in this section of the dissertation. I questioned the legitimacy of the conclusion of her article, proposing that there is evidence in the novels in my corpus that the return does not always aid in renewing present-day lives shared by these characters. In fact, in some cases, the voyage to Cuba only complicates the situation of these exiles.

In the end, the characters I consider must grapple with the realities of Cuba, personally experienced while visiting the island, which often contradict patchy memories that have been passed down to them by earlier generations or preserved as young children. They realize that their “imagined” Cuba has ceased to exist or never actually existed. This consequently leads to an awareness that shapes their overall sentiment towards the island. In many cases, such as Havana Split's Lara, they become overwhelmed and strikingly disenchanted with the idea of Cuba as a homeland. Cuba, in various ways, has not changed since 1959, remaining stagnant and lost in time. The people, places, and culture have been trapped in the Revolution, unable to progress nor keep up with life in the United States. Eventually, these Cuban-American characters choose (or are gently persuaded) to return to the United States because they know they cannot live in Cuba or call it home.

In the fourth chapter, I analyze four more novels: Obejas's Memory Mambo, García's The Agüero Sisters, Rivera's Midnight Sandwiches at the Mariposa Express, and Novas's Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story. These works address the dynamic theme of memory, which is

emphasized throughout each, and offers a detailed examination of the unique juxtaposition between memory, family, and history. Within each account, the characters wrestle with this intersection, which eventually leads to frustration and conflict. Borrowing from Yolanda Flores's article, I address each character's particular situation in respect to "la negociación de la construcción de la memoria fundacional familiar" (764). What remains constant throughout these narratives is the Cuban-American characters' overall obsession to find "la verdad" among the nebulous array of family memories. In looking at these characters I employ Marianne Hirsch's definition of "postmemory," which alludes to a distinct form of memory that has been passed down from older family members and influenced by external narratives and the imagination. Hirsch argues that the exilic condition serves as a fundamental aspect of postmemory, given that the diasporic experience allows for multiple versions of a single historical event, and thus the term is particularly appropriate in explaining the inner workings of the characters in my novels.

Supported with Maurice Halbwachs's notion of "collective memory," I propose that the Cuban-American condition serves as an excellent example of the correlation between community-constructed and individual memory. For many of these characters, it is necessary to re-create and re-imagine their family's past with fragmented or hand-me-down memories in order to "remember" the effects of the Cuban Revolution. This chapter sheds light on the numerous ways in which these characters ultimately cope with the web of family stories that often contradict each other. For instance, Trish (Midnight Sandwiches at the

Mariposa Express) chooses to re-write the history of her hometown, West Echevarria. She expresses her need to possess or create a true, single history that will allow her escape reality and change fiction into fact. Others, such as Esmeralda (Mangos, Bananas, and Coconuts: A Cuban Love Story), lash out with brutal violence. In a blaze of frustration and un-yielding stress, she murders her own father, a man who has withheld the truth of her family's past for years.

Contributions to the Cuban-American literary cannon continue to appear at a rapid pace. Although my corpus is limited to the decade of the 1990s, many of the authors included continue to publish in the twenty-first century, as in the case of Cristina García's Monkey Hunting (2003) and A Handbook to Luck (2008) or Achy Obejas's Days of Awe (2002) and Ruins (2009). Furthermore, new Cuban-American authors have published novels that fall outside the scope of my dissertation, such as Andrea O'Reilly Herrera's The Pearl of the Antilles (2001) and Ana Menéndez's In Cuba I was a German Shepherd (2001) and Loving Che (2003). As Obejas states in her interview with Eduardo Del Rio, this is a distinctive moment in Cuban-American studies and its literature. Speaking of the future children and grandchildren of Cuban-American exiles, Obejas alludes to the ephemeral moment shared by her specific generation of writers:

Most of them [future generations] will be born in the United States, will barely know Spanish, and will have no sense of themselves as exiles at all. I think there are even people in *my* generation who are already moving very much away from that, and see Cuba more and more as an idea. And soon it will be Cuba as an echo. An echo in

the same way that Irish-American literature, or Jewish-American literature is. (94)

The one-and-a-half generation and Cuban-American ethnic writers are a representation of a transitional movement for Cuban exiles residing in the United States who continue to define their bicultural or multicultural experience. Even though this generation of writers is part of a finite group that will eventually cease to exist, their novels deserve an in-depth study that examines the particular situation of the Cuban-American identity. In this dissertation, I try to offer a cohesive, all-encompassing study of these novels by analyzing original authors, such as Teresa Bevin, Ivonne Lazamares, and Ana Veciana-Suárez, along with more well-known authors such as Cristina García and Achy Obejas. By sharing similar themes and motifs, this group of novels forms a unique category that defines the 90s as a distinct and valuable decade for Cuban-American literary expression.

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