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## Translating Worlds of Pleasure: Dialogues of Cuban Diaspora from the 1960s, to the Post-Soviet Generation

Ismael-Vicente G. Delgado  
*Bard College*, id2562@bard.edu

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Translating Worlds of Pleasure: Dialogues of Cuban Diaspora from the 1960s, to the Post-Soviet  
Generation

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Ismael-Vicente Grady Delgado

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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I dedicate this project to my mother, my *tia*'s, and our family across the globe.

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# Introduction

This project is an independent study in translating snapshots of Cuban dialogue, pulling scenes from the 1960's of revolutionary Cuba to Whatsapp chat rooms of Post-Soviet emigrants. The material that I have produced is a compilation of texts that mirrors my own development in defining conversation, language, translation, and *Cubanidad*(Cubaness). In composing the final product, this investigation has shown me that the translator's task still reveals new creative and intricate ways that humans speak to one another. Inversely, the innovation and spontaneity of daily speech is a reflection of the way language keeps secrets from its users. The surreptitious play between the creative voice and linguistic easter eggs has been a wonder to extrapolate as the end(or beginning) to my anthropological journey. In an older version of this project, fiction and ethnography was the backbone to my methods. My transition to translation was a reevaluation of why I started the project and who it was for. I remembered that my excitement for this opportunity nestled in the hopes of developing a deeper connection to my family by wholly engaging in the Whatsapp world of my mother and *tía's*(aunts). Although, when investigating the poetic and ethnographic components of every transcription and phone call, I would spend half my time translating language and culture. Instead of producing a text that would give "direct access" to the core mechanisms of Cuban dialogue, and have me jump through linguistic hoops *for* my readers, I decided to make those obstacles the site of inquiry itself. My readers will jump as high as I have to and we'll be surprised *together* with what's on the other side. This was the motivation for translation to be the medium of this project, and out of it I am left with a sharper, keener, eye for the mechanics of my family's Cuban voice.

What exactly is translation? What are the limits and bounds of what can be considered a translation, and how do we translate? Within anthropology, one of its basic tenets is to translate culture into text. My peers and I have misinterpreted this tenet to be a reference to the finished project of an ethnography(a text). Instead this principle points to keeping one's eye wary of experiencing culture *as* text. In the book review, "An Anthropology of Translation", Catherine Tihanyi summarizes that translation studies and social sciences have had to consider the "invisible universes of verbal and nonverbal meanings"(Tihanyi 739)<sup>1</sup>. Text, or semiotic(meaning) systems, live all around us. Translation without socio-historical context, nonverbal language, and pragmatism, becomes isolated text that lives in an absent void. Susan Gal, a linguistic anthropologist, summarizes translation to be "in its broadest sense... the expression in one semiotic system of what has been said, written, or done in another. It is a metasemiotic activity"(Gal 227)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Tihanyi, Catherine. Review of *An Anthropology of Translation*, by Paula G. Rubel, Abraham Rosman, Maria Tymoczko, Edwin Gentzler, and Scott L. Montgomery. *American Anthropologist* 106, no. 4 (2004): 739-42.

<sup>2</sup> Gal, Susan. "Politics of Translation." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015): 225-240.

Gal's word of choice of translation being interested in communicating expression becomes a term I utilize in thinking through the linguistic tools of Cuban dialogue and the political subjectivity of Cuban voice. What I mark as "particularly expressive" in Spanish, will be what I have the most trouble translating, which clues me into the fact that there is more ethnographic analysis to be had in the text. To borrow both John Jackson's superheroic iconography of the "Anthroman", and Marvel's classic motif of the "Spidey Sense", my "anthro-sense" is what I follow rather than a strict linguistic criteria

Gal's simple definition of the concept clarifies that translating itself is a metasemiotic process, in which you use language to understand language. Therefore, in this project when I take on the ethnographic position my analysis requires a metalinguistic perspective that may be able to think of English and Spanish separately and conjointly. Not all translators approach translation from the same position. My bilingual and diasporic identity places a different complexity onto the linguistic process, compared to the translator who learned a "foreign(ized)" language and attempted to "domesticate" it<sup>3</sup>.

Ruth Behar, a Cuban-Jewish anthropologist and fiction writer, reframes the type of translation for diasporic, bilinguals as self-translation<sup>4</sup>. In a strictly technical sense, every part of my project is self-translated. I produce the transcription and translation for every text I investigate. At first, I was under the impression that being an anthropologist calls for the training of the language of one's interlocutors. But in a social setting, I was asked by a professor "have you found your preferred translation app?" He followed up by specifying, "I found one that can transcribe an interview as your recording and translate it at the same time, it's super helpful". I realized that I had just presumed the language proficiency of my professors, because how could I gauge such a thing if they studied a language other than Spanish? I called my mother after the social event, thinking that I had to discover the difference between that professor and my relationship to language, because my work simply could not be done that way. I asked her "are you always translating English into Spanish in your head, as people talk to you?" She responds, "oh no, I don't translate English in my mind anymore. I have my own English to think with now". In my own linguistic matrix, I have both languages at my disposal. When I hear someone speak in Spanish, I am not repacking that meaning, I am only deciphering it inside its own linguistic context. This is the difference between translation and self-translation, when the translator can separately toggle between the two semiotic systems, and deals with the oddly shaped language world of trying to formulate a complete translation from one language to the other.

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<sup>3</sup> Gal, Susan. "Politics of Translation." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015): 225-240.

<sup>4</sup> Melian-Zamora, R.E. and Behar, R. (2020), Translations of the Self: Moving between Objects, Memories, and Words: A Dialogue with Ruth Behar. *American Anthropologist*, 122: 568-580.

This oddly shaped linguistic process of self-translation is a common difficulty for many authors who self-translate their fiction. Xiaolu Guo, a Chinese novelist, writes about the difficulties of self-translation from the artistic perspective. Whether he starts writing in either Chinese ideograms, or English, or switches between the two. He writes “The process of self-translation and linguistic translation is like crossing a wild river from one bank to the other. To get across, you have to deal with treacherous weeds and hidden rocks and whirlpools of culture and concept. And the other bank is not always in view. But you swim on”(Guo 2023)<sup>5</sup>. Self-translation brings with it a mental strain that actively complicates and discomforts the linguistic packaging that a language presupposes. The double-edged gift of feeling what is missing in transmuting meaning compared to simply *knowing* defines the mark of self-translation.

Walter Benjamin, a Frankfurt school philosopher and literary critic, furthers the scholarly objective of understanding translation through his contribution in the “The Task of the Translator”. He takes his time and caresses the issues and implications of translations, the translator character, and what rests between two languages. He proposes that there exists an intrinsic relationship between all languages, in which he names the “kinship of languages”. In a sense, the kinship between English and Spanish is a similar relationship that other languages have with one another, to communicate or express meaning. Can the English word “pain” deliver the same meaning as “dolor” in Spanish? What if a language has more than one word for pain, how do you choose as the translator? Languages propose to communicate the same thing, but in their separate histories and social realities it becomes challenging to have two languages reach the same place. Benjamin describes that “same thing”, or “same place”, as the “pure language” or “God’s language”, that connects the meaning behind language to its universality. The language between languages that exists outside of communication and practical conversation, but rests in the abstract space of intention. That “pure language” is the building block for the “kinship of languages”, which reframes the metasemiotic system that Gal mentions by naming the distance between language and its messages. It is the “pure language” that exists for the self-translator to define through linguistic expression and creativity. In an interview with Ruth Behar, the interviewer Rita Elena Melian-Zamora asked her about Behar’s book, *Translated Woman*. In Behar’s account of her work with her illustrator and the several translators that she needed to complete the sheer mass of text she had to work with, she walks Melian-Zamora through some examples of translation encounters that deal with Benjamin’s “pure language”, along with clarifying what might the uncomfortable feeling of self-translation may be. The Spanish title for *Translated Woman*, is *Cuéntame algo aunque sea una mentira*(tell me (a story), even if it’s a lie), and its subtitle is *Las historias de mi*

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<sup>5</sup> 10, Xiaolu Guo March. “Xiaolu Guo on Translating the Self.” Literary Hub. Random House Trade Paperbacks, March 10, 2023. <https://lithub.com/xiaolu-guo-on-translating-the-self/>.

*comadre Esperanza* (The (his)stories of my godmother(co-mother) Esperanza). Behar describes the gap between the English and Spanish titles of her book, laying out what properties of English and Spanish connect and separate them: “I could use the word *historias* in Spanish, which I couldn't use in English because it didn't make sense in English to talk about her “histories.” I was able to recover that word in the Spanish edition. That expression “Tell me a story even if it's a lie” doesn't quite work in English either. But it's a popular expression in Spanish. The word *cuéntame* incorporates the word *cuento*, which can mean a story but can also mean an exaggerated tale, as in the phrase “Ay que cuentista” to refer to someone who tells made-up stories”(Melian-Zamora 578). Behar's engagement with her book titles exemplify the experience of the translation encounter, in which the meta semiotic worlds of English and Spanish collide, revealing the limits and innovation of both languages. In my own translations, I will be looking for how and why certain meta semiotic collisions occur, over others.

Self-translation also proposes a complex relationship to the values and morals that are attached to the languages being used. My high rate of linguistic intimacy and contact with English and Spanish, while critical in certain ways, makes me more susceptible and at the mercy of the ideologies attached to these languages. Behar's reasoning for why some translations “don't work”, is rooted in the language ideology that Spanish speakers have developed for themselves. Through translation and repetition, speakers of a language can affirm their own language ideologies. Why must there be a difference between history, and story? Or *cuéntame* compared to *dime*? It is through the social history of language that speakers have decided what the interiority of certain words or phrases are, and what isn't. Susan Gal's “Politics of Translation” describes this process with the key reference to relevancy: The uptake of some similarities, while ignoring possible others, is constrained and inspired by the projects, roles, situations, and language ideologies of participants (Goodman 1972). Language ideologies regiment what counts as a repetition or translation because they shape how participants compare and discern relevant similarities and differences (Irvine & Gal 2000). The process behind language ideologies is one of constant discussion of language relevancy. Certain polysemic(multiple meaning) words are adored, while others are given strict constraints. Phrasal language that can be made up on the spot can be considered profound and innovative, while other attempts can be interpreted as made-up metaphorical garbage. Even the use of American English words in non-English languages as metaphors can somehow be seamlessly weaved into complex semantic deliverances, as a borrowing of another ideology. Translation and linguistic ideologies are bound together by the same tether, which is the dedication to communication and dialogue. Even if “pure language” is transmitted through speech and/or translation, one cannot stay in that realm. As a self-translator in this project, I chose not to be afraid of these linguistic ideological choices that I would have to make. Instead, I'd rather use translation to actively smash the two ideologies together and see which ideas of communicating “a meaning” are victorious over



the other. How can something that seemed innovative in English become barren when placed next to a better delivery in a Cuban-Spanish metaphor. Which pieces of ideology survive, this fascinating question will be underlined in my analysis of my translated texts. Among the various intricate ideologies of language, there are two ideologies at work for deciding the proper expression of Cuban dialogue. For Cuban-Spanish, it is in the hiddenness of language, behind polysemic and poetic arrangements, that the ideological influence of censorship and Castro's statehood will be present in a majority of the examples I'm interested in. And in the remaining cases, it will be the absence of the Castro-influenced state ideology that will interest me. The other will be the ideology Castro actively fought against, which will be the English fetishization and demonization of Latin American cultures and Castro's communism. These ideologies frame the picture of these dialogues, but what are they saying in these conversations? The theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Martin Buber help answer this question.

The theoretical infrastructure that comes with reading and studying about linguistic/language ideologies and self-translation helps us understand the grounding for my analysis in the following chapters. The last key component is what we (the reader and author) are looking *at*. When I theorize Cuban dialogue, what is the topic or subject that is at play? Borrowing Martin Buber's--a religious scholar and philosopher--use of the I-Thou relationship, that replaces the I-it relationship. For the latter, the relation is defined by subject-to-object, in which we speak *of* the world around us, instead of *with* it. In the I-Thou relationship, all things are spoken to one another as subject-subject relationships. Buber has mentioned that this philosophy comes from the teaching that God sits between one and another, rather than above<sup>6</sup>. Mikhail Bahktin, a literary philosopher, defines dialogue with a similar dynamic in mind. He apparently read lots of Buber when he come up with his theory of "dialogic speech"<sup>7</sup>. Bakhtin specifies that to be in dialogue requires a response to another voice, speech doesn't happen in a vacuum. Bahktin and Buber's theories on dialogue help us remember that it is between the two voices where we find the content that we need to speak on, and not around.

For this project, it is pleasure that is on everyone's mind. Through race, sex, and memory, the (dis)pleasure of what Cuba used to be, to what it is now, traces itself through every conversation. In section 1, I take pieces of dialogue from the famous film *Memorias de Subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment) and investigate how the Castro Revolution impacted daily speech by placing ideologies of censorship, a listening subject, and a Castro

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<sup>6</sup> Buber, Martin, 1878-1965. *The Martin Buber-Carl Rogers Dialogue : A New Transcript with Commentary*. Albany :State University of New York Press, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Friedman, Maurice. "Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogue of Voices and the Word That Is Spoken." *Religion & Literature* 33, no. 3 (2001): 25–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060095>.

modernity into the fabric of Cuban society. The reaction to these structures were notable in two linguistic expressions of speech that become visible when speaking of (dis)atisfaction. Through out-sourcing a metaphor to describe distaste, and speaking in a common, yet ambiguous, language that describes the wonderful or pleasurable aspects of life. These tools actively constructed a new avenue to think and critique the social reality of Cuban society, outside of Castro's chronological and sensorial (hearing and seeing) clutches. Complaining and enjoying became the new journalistic form of media that Cubans could rely on when the state failed to offer a space for public voice.

For section 2, part A, this project looks into the construction of virtual space and how cultural backgrounds, Whatsapp channels, and memory are all critical to building new linguistic spaces for dialogue. In the first vignette of part A, I describe what it is that Whatsapp commodifies about social networks, and how place/object-names are the nodes that connect different Cubans into their social networks. In my own memory of hearing a classic Cuban joke, *Pero Come Yucca*, we see how the cultural knowledge of Cuba is embedded in the language of everyday conversation. Names and places are constructed from a cultural background, but even if the speaker travels, that cultural background could be used to revive those names and places. In part B, the topic of conversation inside these virtual spaces is about sexual bodies and race. The intimate ways in which Cubans relate to one another, outside of Castro's listening subject, involves the racial ideologies that come with Latin American sexuality. The linguistic tools of expressing pleasure are still utilized in the Cuban Diaspora, but instead of critiquing the social reality of Cuba, they are used to define the pleasurable ways we all relate to one another.

Through these translations, I discovered that ideological stressors and social conflicts become apparent in our linguistic expression of pleasure and dissatisfaction. Pleasure becomes the site for change, and to speak of pleasure means to ask "who would you like to be? Who would we like to be?" Listening to the pleasures of one's neighbor, family member, friend, loved one, may clue us in to the social reflection that is behind all of our bedroom mirrors.

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## Section 1: Reliving Memories of Underdevelopment

My first memory of watching *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* was as a family-friendly film, sitting in my living room eating spaghetti with my mother. She was excited to show me Cuba's greatest artistic triumphs, and yet within the first five minutes of the movie I was lost. There were constant references to military attacks, government officials, and older ways of Cuban life (more like Soviet ways) that I had never even heard of or seen in history class. Although, the moment I saw the protagonist get into an argument with his wife, that I recognized. The hilarious insults, the manipulative mind games, I turned to my mom and said, "*Que rico está esto, (it's so delicious)*". She

laughed and smacked me over the head. It wouldn't be half a decade later, with a new lens that I would investigate the linguistic practices of fighting, loving and yearning in *Memorias...*

*Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*) is a 1968 Cuban drama written and directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, who is commonly referred to by his nickname, Titón. His voice among 20th century intellectuals and artists in Cuba is highly respected for his nuanced and clever insights into post-Revolutionary Cuba. As censorship became the legacy of the Castro regime, Titón's technical abilities to keep a delicate balance between his dedication to the revolution and his criticisms of Cuba's socio-political reality canonized his work. When Cuba's bourgeois emigrated, fleeing Castro's cleansing of private property and materialism, they left Cuba with a small intellectual and artistic scene. Titón, with a young cohort of new academics, directors, and writers, founded ICAIC (Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria) and led the cultural voice of Revolutionary Cuba through film. *Memorias...* is his fifth film, and his most famous. Inspired by Italian neo-realist films for being low-budget and capturing mundane activities, Titón crafted a style that blended politics and art and propelled the revolutionary mentality to think of itself with more awareness. Titón was the Cuban representative for a new global cinematic movement happening all over the Third World, "Third Cinema" or "Imperfect cinema", which tackled themes of neocolonialism, modernity and cultural identity<sup>8</sup>. Using limited resources, and rejecting the lackluster popularity of Hollywood movies, this movement's goal was to engage with the self-awareness of the audience and present them a social issue that they would leave thinking about after the film was over. The term for this form of persuasion was later coined "consciousness raising"<sup>9</sup>. *Memories...* is an emblematic film for this movement, and curiously entangles the audience with societal fabric, without much grandstanding or political declarations. In simple shots of the protagonist people-watching, the texture in the air of post-revolutionary Cuba becomes tangible.

Before diving into the film, and demonstrating how it is a perfect sample of the relationship between dialogue and political thought in Cuba, there are certain structural features of Castro's Cuba that frame my research question and the film. The first is that censorship is the primary method for Castro to keep the Cuban population absorbing education, social services, and nutrients from his ideological perspective, and his alone. The second is that Castro stripped the country of privatization, making state run institutions a total dominant force. And the last is that the freedom of expression and the right to vote are not constitutional rights. To this day, insulting

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<sup>8</sup> Alea, Tomás Gutiérrez, Dennis West, and Joan M. West. "ANOTHER CINEMA, ANOTHER WORLD, ANOTHER SOCIETY." *Journal of Third World Studies* 11, no. 1 (1994): 90–113.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45193504>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Castro either symbolically or literally can put you in jail for three months or longer<sup>10</sup>. The Cuban people have not voted for a president, or for other smaller positions, since Castro took power. Sovereignty dictated by military power is the history of Cuba, remains that way. Castro usurped Batista, and Batista seized power from his predecessor with the backing of the States. This is the political history behind both the film, and [the references in] the conversations I am interested in.

The protagonist of the film is Sergio, a bourgeois aspiring writer who spends his time reading literature, going to the cinema, and taking strolls through La Habana (the capital of Cuba), all from the comfort of his private apartment (which gets confiscated eventually). The film walks us through the consequences and decisions of Sergio staying behind in Cuba as his wife and friends flee to the States. Those consequences end up including but are not limited to the arguments and fights Sergio has with his wife, new girlfriends, and friends. Outside of the scattered documentary-style footage Titón adds between sections of the plot, the plot of the movie is defined by 3-4 relationships. 1) Walking around the city with his friend, Pablo and listening to him complain 2) Meeting an eccentric girl named Elena, who wants to become an actress, and the rise and fall of their relationship 3) The last fight Sergio has with his wife, that he tape-records and listens to throughout the film 4) Sergio falling in love with a Swedish woman Susan. These relationships are the core basis for the plot, but why does he add real-life footage in a fictional story?

The film makes a meta-reference to Titón's own cinematographic style, with Titón as a character describing what his new vision for film will be to Sergio. He explains how he will use a collage style including shots from censored footage during the Batista regime, to give the audience a fragmented sense of place, functioning similarly to our memories. Titón is describing how *Memorias...* is already shot, and the audience realizes they are experiencing Cuba through Sergio's fragmented memory and the socially fragmented history of Cuba. The scrap footage of his collage-style in *Memorias...* is much more intentional than he comments in his own movie. He includes footage from public trials, executions of Batista officials, and anchors on national television. These shots are voiced over by Sergio's monologues in which he offers his critiques and social reflections of those events. Sergio's internal conflict, which represented a critical question for Castro and Cubans in the 60s, was about development and growth. With the legacy of Cuba being a Third World nation and a neo-colonial extension of the States, how were Cubans going to become a world power and a developed society now that Batista's Americanized foot was removed from Cuba's neck? Sergio believes throughout the film that La Habana, the capital of Cuba, still has that aftertaste of "underdevelopment". Sergio's personal conflicts with his girlfriends and wife become

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<sup>10</sup> "Freedom of Expression in Cuba." English Pen, June 9, 2020.  
<https://www.englishpen.org/posts/campaigns/freedom-of-expression-in-cuba/>.

his case studies for the dichotomous classification between those who are “cultured/europeanized/civilized” and others who are still “uneducated/barbaric/lazy”. Sergio’s egotistical desire to dote over women he constantly critiques, is a figurative device that parallels Sergio to the contradictory bourgeois, and is a side-glance to Castro’s Cuba<sup>11</sup>. The audience is encouraged to view Sergio as a hypocrite, and through him the hypocrisies of the State and the upper-class become equally visible. Overall, *Memorias...* is a character study of alienation during the turmoil of social changes. Even though the film tackles a range of topics, constantly toggling between critique and complacency, the reception of the movie in Cuba was quite positive. It was seen as a pro-revolutionary representation of anti-bourgeois culture, and Sergio’s character was meant to be disliked and looked-down upon as a misguided remnant of an unfortunate past. Decades later, as the country began devolving and the film’s audience entered the global stage, was the nuance of political doubt and anxiety of a rising dictator acknowledged in the film. Titón’s cinematic genius is not only being able to film such a refreshing film about the Castro state, which was extremely dangerous at the time, but that he walked away from the project with a career intact and funding for his next movie.

In this chapter I will take a close look at speech tendencies and linguistic ideologies of Cuban dialogue in film. I have transcribed and translated several conversations that Sergio has with supporting characters at different points of the film. My method of transcription was to transcribe by ear instead of using an automated program, like subtitles or transcription apps. I self-translated the transcription to mark the places where I could sense a meta semiotic conflict between English and Spanish. In the beginning of each scene I add a symbolic key of how I note certain patterns throughout my translation. Color coding specific phrases and placing asterisks on words that were interesting to translate, builds a part of the dialogue itself. Even though my translation wouldn’t be very efficient to use for an audience, or for watching the movie in real-time, I was able to slow down the process of translation to have a closer linguistic look at the language. I sought to discover the tools that were specific to Cuban expression, and the ideologies behind those tools. How did state repression impact every day speech, and what about those changes successfully adapted to the times?

In translating dialogue on-screen there were two linguistic modes in Cuban speech that piqued my interest. When a supporting character, or Sergio himself, spoke of what dissatisfied them, whether it was their personal life or how hot the weather was, the use of a poetic metaphor would be the choice of expression, rather than describing what the feeling was itself. This utilized

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<sup>11</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, and Wayne C. Booth. “Dostoevsky’s Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment in Critical Literature.” In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, edited by Caryl Emerson, 5–46. University of Minnesota Press, 1984. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt22727z1.8>.

an ‘out-of-the-box’ creativity to describe anguish and discomfort. Metaphors of decrepit zombie’s or stomach fat filled with black beans, are among the many poetic deliveries of describing distaste or dissatisfaction. On the other hand, when speaking of satisfaction it is the common but intentional words that are used. Words like *bueno*(good) or *bastante*(enough), whose meaning is generally ambiguous, but highly contextual. This emphasizes the use of a social connection and index with two speakers from the same cultural background. While the poetic metaphors could deliver their meaning when heard in an isolated setting, these common words would be difficult to translate. These words are among the classification of polysemic words that have multiple meanings, but have the same rooted definition(some polysemic words have completely separate meanings, such as the English ‘bat’, which could be an animal or a toy). These two tendencies or language patterns formulate a linguistic ideology of expression, a proper way to communicate (dis)pleasure. A mode to speak of satisfaction and dissatisfaction; pleasure and discomfort. These modes of expression in the film become a proto-claim on political critique that Titón underscores, but keeps subliminal. Castro’s understanding of modern development was influenced by the Marxists ideology of an educated class guiding the proletariat class, and he actively believed that certain ways of expressing intellectual and artistic thought was harmful to the national effort to fight capitalism, imperialism, colonialism. Titón’s foresight to a corrupted sense of justice, with actively making references to Cuba’s past as a comparison of similarity, change the expressive comments in the film as forms of political critique. To speak of what you liked and didn’t like was the only way to explain the state of the country, without alarming Castro’s statehood. Interestingly, within these two tools of linguistic expression, the use of memory, recollection, and desires to change, actively shift the speaker’s relation to time. The past and future of Cuba is re-oriented to personal experience, so that regardless of the sovereign ruler, there remains a community perspective of the history of Cuba. Following Titón’s thread of creative expressiveness in the film, regardless if it’s a positive or negative use of expressive language, it carries with it a cultural text of time and uses language to place themselves as subjects, but also the nation, in a different relationship to time then their sovereign rulers. Within these shifts of time, the simplified and technical utility to the poetic function(metaphor and semantic ambiguity) in Cuban speech transforms into a journalistic report. Similar to the way the Infrarrealistas of Mexico City used poetry to subvert the state’s misinformation and corruption, the expressiveness in Cuban speech is the journalism that can be trusted, rather than the students and leaders of political science on the island<sup>12</sup>. Listening to what Cubans are saying, when they appear to be saying nothing, brings one closer to hearing what the island yearns for.

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<sup>12</sup> Alonso Alonso, María. “Infrarealist Journalism of Mexican Female Authors: Information Meets Literature in *The Sorrows of Mexico*”, *Hispanic Research Journal*, 19:4, 382-398, 2018. DOI: [10.1080/14682737.2018.1492671](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682737.2018.1492671)

## Pablo : Political Critique in Distaste

This is one of the first conversations that Sergio made just after his wife left for the United States. Even though his wife's argument is the first debate he has chronologically, the audience is introduced to the movie through Pablo, his "best friend". Pablo is driving on the coast of La Habana (the Malecón) on his way to get gas with Sergio in the passenger seat. They had just gone to the pool together to check out girls in their bathing suits. Pablo begins here...

P = Pablo

S = Sergio

\* = Tingly Translation Senses

Underlined : Poetic Deliveries

**Bold**: Polysemic and Common Words

P: Esta gente dice que están haciendo la primera revolución socialista de América, ¿y que?

(P: These people say their doing\* the first socialist revolution in America. So what?)

P: Para regresar a la barbarie, van a pasar un hambre como los haitianos. Derrotaron a Napoleon y que? Hubo la primera industria azucarera del mundo antes de la revolución y míralos ahora, descansos convertidos en 'zombies'.

(P: To return to \*barbarism\*, they'll \*go hungry\* like the Haitians. They \*defeated\* Napoleon, for what? They had the \*best\* sugar industry in world before the revolution, and look at them now, \*sleepy heads\* turned into zombies.)

S: Los tiempos cambian.

(Times change.)

P: Además eh, esto no es un problema nuestro, es un problema entre los rusos y los americanos, a nosotros no nos ha perdido nada con ese problema. Oiga bueno lo que voy a decir Sergio, aquí se va formar tremendo muña. La primera galleta que se queda aquí en este mundo, tu sabes quien la coje, nosotros. Y sabes por qué, porque somos

muy pequeños, un islita muy chiquito Sergio. **Bueno**, la galleta le cojen ustedes, porque yo no voy estar aquí, oíste.

(P: \*Besides\* eh, this isn't our problem. It's a problem between the Russians and the Americans, \*we have nothing to get lost in that problem\*. Listen well to what I have to tell you Sergio, \*a super bow/ribbon is gonna form here\*. The first \*hit\* that is gonna \*stick\* here in this world, you know who will \*take/catch\* it, us! You want to know why, because we are very small, an \*itty bitty\* little island Sergio. \*Well\*, y'all will \*take/catch\* the hit, because I won't be here, you hear me?!

S: (narrating) a pensar que durante 5 años hemos andado juntos todo el tiempo.

(S: To think that during these five years we've spent all our time together.)

P: Porque la verdad es cuando Batista, la cosa llegue a un punto que no se podía seguir así. Yo no, porque nunca me metí en política. Tengo la conciencia muy tranquila. Lo único que he hecho toda mi vida es trabajar, trabajar como un animal.

(P: The truth is that with Bautista, it got to a point where things couldn't go on. I was fine, because I never \*meddled\* in politics. I have a \*very calm conscious\*. The only thing I've done my whole life is work, work like an animal.)

At the pool... (La piscina)

P: imaginas Anita, tan **buenas** como está todo, y tiene la barriga llena de frijoles negros. Hoy le habíamos danda la terraza

(P: imagine Anita, so \*hot\* like everything here, and \*her belly is filled with black beans\*. Today she was \*walking\* by the terrace.

Back to the car...(El coche)

P: Pero sin definitivo yo tengo todo los recursos Sergio, el 'know-how' para desarrollar la economía del país. Lleno

(P: \*Without a doubt\*, I have all the \*answers/resources\* Sergio, the "know-how" to develop the economy of the county. -Fill it-)

S: Ah sí?



(S: oh do you?)

P: Sí, el ‘know-how’ el ‘know-how’. Los americanos saben **hacer muy bien las cosas**. Ellos **saben hacer que las cosas caminen**.

(P: Yes, the “know-how”, the “know-how”. The Americans know how to do things \*right\*. They know how to make things \*walk\*.)

Gas-pumper: Three.

(Gas-pumper: Tres.)

P: Llène el aceite.

(P: Fill the oil tank)

GP: No, aceite no hay. Si lo quieres, te lo miro **de todas maneras**.

(GP: No, there isn’t any. If you want, I can look at it \*all the same\*.)

P: No, (turns to camera) o tal para que?

(P: No, I mean, what difference does it make?)

P: **Con las ganas que tengo para gastar lo todo**. Que tengo que entrarlo como antes,

(P: With the \*wants\* I have to spend it all. I’ll have to \*put it in/fix it\* like before)

## The Aftertaste of Censorship

How do Pablo’s complaints translate into cultural critiques of his own, and the social reality of Cuba? On a bigger scale, what does political critique (freedom of expression, access to information and independent press) look like in a communist-socialist country? More specifically, how does the absence of freedom of speech reshape the idea of political critique? In Cuba, political commentary can get you thrown in jail for 10 months or longer<sup>13</sup>. Meanwhile, in the United States the precedent that state or federal laws are to be discussed and challenged over the span of history is embedded in state practice. From this comparison, the two couldn’t seem to be further apart. But, The United States government deploys censorship tactics, voter suppression laws, and wrongful arrests of protestors. How does censorship in the United States differ from what we see in Cuba?

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<sup>13</sup> “Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Cuba.” Amnesty International. Amnesty International Publications, 2010. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/amr250052010en.pdf>.

The difference is in the value of voice and expression. In the States, the development of mass media and a public conception of an en-masse voice; newspapers, news channels, news magazines, makes for value of voice to be in presence, not necessarily quality. It doesn't matter so much what you say, as long as you are allowed to speak and think freely without retaliation from the State. With that being said, the limit of what you can say has been and is still debated in courtrooms. The exercise of freedom of expression in the United States is best exemplified by shows like "Patriot Act" from political commentator Hasan Minaj, or the Daily Show by Trevor Noah. These shows craft various critiques of the state, although in their cases and similar ones along radio and/or mass media, their critiques are developed into a product of consumption. An entire industry on sound-bites and "a story that sells" relies on a constant and instant response to the behavior of the state and the citizen. Although, how is it possible that these critiques are not interrupted by the state? Why are the political commentaries from hosts Trevor Noah and Hasan Minaj, who actively reveal and speak on the state's oppressive tactics, not considered dangerous? It is the gap between individual liberty and state influence that is kept wide and distant from one another. This way, citizens can feel free to express themselves, without that freedom being an impediment on the State's ability to manage the population. In the United States, political critique is not the antidote to censorship. The two can co-exist and possibly enable one another. Political critique is a non-threatening exercise of one's freedom to think, speak, and conclude. But ideology is not seen as a state-threat, unless it leads to action. In Cuba, the ideology is the live threat.

Political critique of the revolution, regardless of the medium, is illegal because it supports counterrevolutionary ways of thinking and "threatens national independence and the economy of Cuba". Not only is it illegal to critique the state, but Cuba actively imprisons and refuses to give journalist/writers/protestors medical attention. Cuba has the second highest number of journalists in prison, with China taking the number one spot<sup>14</sup>. So, why the need for total control and domination over ideology? Censorship in the United States can exist without micromanaging the dynamic flow of political ideologies, meanwhile every conversation, signage, art piece, and intellectual thought in Cuba must go to the support of the revolution. The root of this importance is connected to how Fidel Castro(1926-2016) rose to power, how his character of heroism became attached to communism, and the threat of imperialism. When Castro and his revolutionaries were fighting with guerilla warfare in the Sierra Maestra mountains against Fulgencio Batista(1901-1973), the previous president of Cuba, Castro had crafted his fight as a "humanist" fight<sup>15</sup>. The revolution was a war to defeat what Batistia represented, him being a

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<sup>14</sup> "Freedom of Expression in Cuba." English Pen, June 9, 2020.

<https://www.englishpen.org/posts/campaigns/freedom-of-expression-in-cuba/>.

<sup>15</sup>Szulc, Tad. "Fidel Castro's Years as a Secret Communist - New York Times."

figurehead to the imperialist United States, and the neoliberal private companies of the First World(including the mafia). The revolution was a symbol of a man of the people, fighting against the bourgeois, and freeing the Cuban laborers who had been abused by First World interests. In 1959, Castro became the prime minister after driving out Batista who fled to the Dominican Republic and would eventually find refuge in Portugal.

While the revolution happened swiftly, and Castro had a massive following, he had plans to make Cuba a communist nation long before he made it to the Sierra Maestra mountains. Castro was slowly but surely implementing communists into mid-level managerial positions all over the government, so that when he took the presidency, the transition would look natural. Castro saw management as an issue for his movement. His populous base were mostly illiterate farmers(in which he planned to make literacy a key part of his campaign) and the majority of his team had not had any experience with government management. He relied heavily on the intellectuals that had Marxists-Leninist training. The symbol of Castro's revolution evolved slowly but surely from a discourse on labor rights to a complete cultural-intellectual development, implementing Marxist-Leninist ideals, principles, and teachings, onto the Cuban subject. All of this with the guidance of the intellectual leader, Fidel Castro. Castro saw the social tide he caused as his revolution, his victory, his government, they were simply extensions of himself. He was a great hero, and the greatness of his heroism is what would develop the country. The populace needed to be taught, and he knew best. The key difference between state control of freedom of expression in Cuba, and in the United States, helps specify how we're defining censorship and understanding its role in state formation. For in the States, it was in the equally distinct ideologies, inside the contestment, that made the populace find its understanding of development. For Cuba, it was Castro's heroism and his philosophies that would develop the nation, so no other interpretation of Marxist teachings would do the job. Ideological pluralism cannot exist because that would throw Cuba into uncertain development. Fidel Castro's overdetermination of his characters in own mind, becomes the anchor to his censorship tactics.

So, in a nation, with its modernity being born from the audacity of one man, how do Cubans express a critique? 1) They complain. They wine and nag and spit on what they dislike, for in the tropical fantasy that was constructed for foreign consumers, learning to express pleasure(especially the pleasure to trash on what one dislikes) becomes a natural talent in everyday conversation. Cubans find a million new ways to speak ill of quite literally anything, it becomes commonplace. It falls under the radar. And in this sense, it evades the imperial eye of Castro. Complaining is the

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<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/19/magazine/fidel-castro-s-years-as-a-secret-communist.html>, October 19, 1986.

curative speech form of political critique. Along with 2) satisfaction. A constant lurch over what is wonderful, marvelous, gorgeous, objects of desire are quickly and precisely named. In the special cases when an object of desire becomes abstract, and enters into the realm of political ideology, that is when desire becomes critique. Wanting something different from whatever one does have, which becomes a hunger, then becomes language for the critique of what is one's immediate reality. Political critique in a nation that has no freedom of expression looks like two writers/dancers/car mechanics/waitresses/cleaners/teachers sitting around a pool thinking about what they like and don't like.

## A Polysemic Undertaking

Between two of the linguistic patterns that I've noted of these conversations, one of them is an interest in common words that happen to be polysemic. Polysemy, or polysemous words, make up one-half of the semantically ambiguous words in any language's vocabulary. What is semantic ambiguity? Words that have multiple meanings are considered ambiguous, like the English word 'bark', for both the sound a dog makes and the label for tree bark. The ambiguity comes from the lack of distinction between the signifier and the multiple signified meanings for that signifier. In the case of 'bark', in both instances they are written and are phonetically the same, but they have separate meanings. Semantic ambiguity is the linguistic area of language that operates within this ambiguous line between words and their distinct definition, which is apparently more common in language than is acknowledged in a majority of formal learning environments. There are two types of semantically ambiguous words: polysemes and homonyms. Polysemous words are words that have multiple meanings that diverge from the same origin. Homonyms are words that have the same spelling and the same phonetic pronunciation, but have separate and distinct definitions. The various definitions of polysemous words are referred to as senses, for they are related meanings from a core concept. My interest in referring to polysemic words as "common" words comes from the fact that these are words that have some abstract core definition. Even if someone uses the word in a different context than is typical, there is still a core idea of the word that could be extrapolated from that new usage. An example is the English word, agenda, since it can refer to a notebook or document that serves as a planner, but the same word always refers to a conspiracy. Polysemy is more common than homonymy, as it is more common for words to have multiple related senses than multiple distinct meanings. One example from a doctoral thesis on the word processing of semantic ambiguity is the Spanish word *Bueno*: "For instance, the ambiguous word *bueno* means "de valor positivo" as well as "gustoso, apetecible, agradable, divertido". This type of ambiguity is called *polysemy*, and the related meanings of a polysemous word are known as *senses*"(Rodríguez

18)<sup>16</sup>. Among the senses lies another important classification is if ambiguous words are balanced or unbalanced due to the frequency that certain senses are used. Unbalanced ambiguous words are more common, and in these cases there is a dominant sense and subordinate sense. The senses that are more frequently used become dominant, and the ones that are less used are subordinate. In Spanish, the word “llamas” can mean ‘flames’ and ‘to call someone’, although the verb usage of “to-call” is more frequently used than referring to ‘flames’. ‘Flames’ would be the subordinate meaning, and ‘to call’ would be the dominant. The words that are bolded in the dialogues that I transcribe stand out to me as possibly semantically ambiguous, and somehow express the a sense of familiarity. The reason that speaking pleasure through these ambiguous words is that pleasure is allowed to be less specific and constrained by a particular definition. To say, “eso esta bueno”(that’s real good\*), can express the value of goodness but could also be referring to food, enjoyment and pleasure. In dialogue, speakers are accessing a cultural familiarity with the object of sentences that enjoys the ambiguous room. This is the frame for understanding the common words that are one-half of linguistically expressing critique.

## Elena : References in Speech and Memory

Sergio, on his way to the ICAIC, the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (The Cuban institute of the art and industry of Cinematography), makes a pass at a girl at the steps of the entrance to the institute. Elena was waiting at the steps to meet with a man that set her up for an audition when a man made a pass at her. After exchanging glances and teetering looks back and forth, she and him get to talking on the balcony of the institute. He asks her out, quite relentlessly, and promises her that he knows a famous director that could help her out with an audition, but he doesn’t like to eat alone... That director happens to be the director of this very film.

P = Pablo

S = Sergio

\* = Tingly Translation Senses

Underlined: Poetic Deliveries

**Bold**: Polysemic and Common Words

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<sup>16</sup> Rodriguez Haro Juan, *Semantic Ambiguity: The Role of Number of Meanings and Relatedness of Meanings in Word Processing* (Universitat Rovira i Virgili, 2018)

S: Tienes unas rodillas preciosas

(S: You have \*precious\* knees.)

Sergio walks upstairs and looks at her from above ... Elena slowly makes her way to the terrace

S: Tsk, oye. Quieres comer conmigo

(S: Hey, do you want to eat with me?)

E: Está **loco!**\*

(E: \*Your\* crazy!)

S: No, verá es que no me gusta comer solo.

(S: No, you'll see, it's that I don't like to eat alone.)

S: ¿Qué haces por aquí? ¿Estás esperando alguien? Hm? ¿Tu novio?

(S: What are you doing around here? Are you waiting for someone? Hm, a boyfriend?)

E: (sucks teeth)Está loco.\*

(E: You're crazy.)

S: A tu edad es peligroso andar sola por estos lugares.

(S: At your age it's dangerous to walk alone in these kinds of places.)

E: ¿Está loco?\*

(E: Are you crazy?)

S: No mira, es que...

a small person walks by carrying a double bass on his shoulder.

S&E: (they laugh)

S: ¿Por qué no vienes conmigo? Te lo juro, no hay **buenas** digestiones cuando como solo.

(S: Why don't you come with me? I swear, there are no \*good digestions\* when you eat alone.)

E: Es que estoy esperando el señor de ICAIC que lo necesito para un trabajo.

(E: It's that I'm waiting for \*the man\* from ICAIC, \*I need him\* for a job.)

S: El ICAIC?

(S: The ICAIC?)

E: Si, eso del cine, me van hacer una prueba.

(E: Yes, \*that movie stuff\*, they're going to give me a test.)

S: A si, yo tengo un amigo ahí que **es bastante** importante, es director.

(S: Right, I have a friend there who's \*real/pretty\* important, he's a director.

E: En el ICAIC?

(E: In the ICAIC?)

S: Sí, si quieres mañana mismo voy y te lo presento

(S: Yes, if you want tomorrow I'll go and \*present you/him\* myself.)

E: ¿Qué hora será?

(E: At what time/would it be?)

S: Oof, a las 6:30.

(S: Oof, at 6:30.)

E: Ya es tarde, seguro que ya no viene.

(E: It's already late, I'm sure he isn't coming)

S: **Bueno, bien.**

(S: \*Well good.\*)

At a restaurant, Elena and Sergio get dinner... La Cena

S:(at the waiter) A mire, pero antes me traen un martini seco eh.(at Elena) ¿Por qué no tomas algo antes?

(S: Great, but before could you bring me a dry martini. Why don't you drink before the food comes?)

E: No puedo, me están poniendo unos inyecciones para los nervios. Mira

(E: I can't, \*they're\* giving me injections for the nerves. Look...)

She shows him her wrist and he caresses her hand. She pulls away ...

S: Y porque tu quieres ser actriz

(S: So why do you want to be an actress?)

E: Ay, estoy cansada de siempre ser la misma. Así puedo ser otra gente sin que la gente me crea **loca**. Además, **me interesa mucho desdoblar mi personalidad**.

(E: Ah, I'm tired of always being the same. That way I can be other \*people\* without \*people\* thinking of me as crazy.)

S: Pero esos personajes del cine y del teatro son como los discos rayados. Una actriz, lo único que hace es repetir miles de veces de memoria los mismos gestos y las mismas palabras y los mismos gestos las mismas palabras los mismos gestos las mismas palabras y los mismos gestos y las mismas palabras.

(S: But those characters from the movies and the theater are like \*broken/scratched\* records. An actress, the only thing they do is repeat from *memory*, thousands of times, the same gestures and words, the same gestures and words, the same gestures and words, the same gestures and words, the same gestures and words.)

### A Subspace of Memory

In this dialogue, besides the cases of linguistic patterns we have examined in the previous dialogue, the role of reference and memory add an interesting element to each dialogue. Roman Jakobson was a Russian linguistics and literary theorist that defined the different functions of a speech message. In his breakdown of six different aspects to a message, the referential function was seen as ubiquitous and generally necessary, but not a main star of the show<sup>17</sup>. Interestingly, Elena and Sergio don't know each other, and speak of different topics, the ICIAC, or the anxiety injections, as culturally shared topics. Micheal Silverstein's theory of cultural knowledge and

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<sup>17</sup> Jakobson, Roman. "Linguistics and Poetics" In *Volume III Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*, 18-51. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 1981. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110802122.18>



background will be introduced later in the paper, but is relevant in this chapter as well, since the referential aspect of speech is quite dominant in these first few conversations. Yakobsin defines the referential function as speech that refers to a “referent”, or topic, but what is that? Grammatically, the referential function is the topic or subject that is spoken about, or of, but in many cases when there is no direct label or name to the topic, the referent lives in the context of both speakers.

Castro’s character is a constant referent in Cuban dialogue, because through his focus on modern development he has placed his presence in the context of everyday life. Even between Elena and Sergio there are pictures of Castro in the background of the frame. But separate from Castro, the second most common active use of the referential function in Cuban dialogue is speaking of the memory of Cuba. Nicola Miller, a historian writing in the *Journal of Contemporary History*, explains how Castro has shattered all forms of past, present and future in his political campaign and organization of Cuban society<sup>18</sup>. As Castro repurposed buildings and changed historical names, he erased the historical involvement of the United States, and rewrote Cuba’s history. Miller analyzed history’s role as the ultimate legitimizer for Castro’s movement<sup>19</sup>. Due to this reconstruction of time, the individual and collective memory of Cuban civilians has become the one of the only ways to reclaim a sense of linguistic agency. The notions that begin with “do you remember...” are quite critical to being able to speak on other topics besides Castro. The referent in this way becomes a third voice, or third party, that lives adjacent to both speakers. If Castro hopes through his tactics to always babysit the Cuban citizen intellectually, culturally, and socially, then finding different ways to avoid speaking about him creates space and room to think differently. And memory as a referent inherently constructs a passage of time, and pointing to where one is on that passage. It becomes a chronological foundation that allows for a different perspective of history to occur. In some ways, building the road of time allows for a different ideological train to pass through the speaker and receiver.

Memory might be how Cubans were able to subvert space for themselves, not even just to get away from Castro, but anywhere in the world, which will be explored in-depth in section 2: A .

## Titón : Crafting for the Castro Listening Subject

Elena and Sergio have just gone out to eat and it’s the very next day, the day he promised to introduce her to the director. Elena and Sergio are in a movie theater with Titón, and his peers, watching old movie clips of what in the Batista government was considered “contra-moral”. Clips

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<sup>18</sup> Miller, Nicola. “The Absolution of History: Uses of the Past in Castro’s Cuba.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 1 (2003): 147–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180702>.

<sup>19</sup> Miller, Nicola. 2003.

of women undressing themselves, explicit nudity, and sex on the rocky malécon, are what the characters and the audience are seeing alike. Elena looks disinterested but content to be there, while Sergio and Titon start a conversation just as the last clip ends...

P = Pablo

S = Sergio

\* = Tingly Translation Senses

Underlined: Poetic Deliveries

**Bold**: Polysemic and Common Words

In a movie theater... El Teatro

S: Oye, dónde sacaron todo eso?

(S: \*Hey\*, where did you \*pull out\* all of that?)

T: Eso! Fueron unas latas que aparecieron **un día por ahí**, son los cortes de la comisión.

(T: That! We got that from some \*tapes/cups\* that appeared one day \*around there\*, they're cuts from the commision.)

S: Que comisión?

(S: What commision?)

T: La comisión de revisora de película

(T: The commision of movie reviews.)

Fellow Director: antes de la revolución. Decían que eran contra-moral.

(SC: Before the revolution, they said these were anti-moral\*.)

T: La moral y las **buenas** costumbres.

(T: the moral and \*good\* customs)

S: Si, si, me acuerdo de eso. Ey, parece que esa gente también tenía su preocupaciones de tipo morales.

(S: Oh yes, I remember that. Ey, apparently \*those people\* had their own worries about moral issues too.)

T: Por lo menos se preocuparon de guardar las apariencias.

(T: \*At least\* they had \*preoccupied\* themselves to \*save appearances\*.)

S: Que van hacer con todo eso?

(S: What will you all do with all that?)

T: Pensaba en meterlo en una película.

(T: I was thinking about putting it in a movie.)

S: Una película?

(S: A movie?)

T: sí, una película con un estilo “collage”, se puede **meter de todo**.

(T: Yes, a movie with a “collage” style, where you can put in all kinds of stuff.)

S: Tendrá tener sentido.

(S: It should have some \*reason\* no?)

T: Ya está saliendo, tu vera.

(T: It’s already on the way, you’ll see.)

### The Castro Listening Subject

Titón and Sergio look and engage with the abandoned clips as a potentially new way to think of film, but ironically, they are also conscious about who is in the audience of these films. Titón is commenting, through his chat on how he is recycling new footage that is being uncovered, on the proper expression of morality for the audience member. Sergio makes the comment “Ey, parece que esa gente también tenía su preocupaciones de tipo morales (Ey, apparently \*those people\* had their own worries about moral issues too.). The construction of picking and choosing moral vision, through clips and sequences actively propagates Casrto’s own moral database of the new Cuba. Inoue Miyako places an interesting reorientation as she describes a “listening subject”, by thinking of hearing and seeing as more than senses, but as other ways of constructing subjectivity: Although hearing someone’s voice on the street might seem natural and obvious, perception (whether auditory or visual) is never a natural or unmediated phenomenon but is always already a social

practice. The practice of hearing and seeing, and the subject positions of listener and observer, is as socially constructed and historically emergent as are other corporeal sites and practices of subject formation, such as the body, sex and gender, and race and nationality.”<sup>20</sup>(Miyako 157). About a decade after this movie was released, Castro shifted from his ideology building a listening subject, to active military informants being a proxy for his own ears and eyes.

Among Castro’s notorious tactics to suppress protests and civil rights discourses, one of his most widespread tactics is to employ everyday citizens as informants and hire civilians to beat and attack protestors if there are riots or public protests in the streets. This way, the public appears to be fighting itself, as if he had not meddled in suppressing “counter-revolutionary” ways of thinking. During the 1970s, Castro had created concentration camps for anyone who was suspected of being a homosexual, as homosexuality was a backward, imperialized way of living. These camps were among one of the consequences if a male academic was not willing to cooperate with the revolution and they were deemed a ‘threat’, then they would get an informant, typically a neighbor(regardless if they information was true or not) to relay to a cop or state official that they had seen men coming and going during the night(even if that academic was not a homosexual). This would be enough to arrest the academic and send them to a concentration camp. For the decades that Castro has used informants to maintain his control over Cuban civilians, this constructed a listening subject that extended beyond the boundaries of being within “ear-shot” or visibility of a person. Anyone could be listening to your conversation from anywhere at any time. This created an effect of speaking only of topics and themes that are safe, and never veering off unless you know that you are in an unheard space. Castro’s tactics are to have a listening subject there to babysit civilians so that they can develop in his proper vision. For this reason, in Cuban conversation the style of which you speak matters because of how alarming it is. The assumption that Cubans like to complain and whine, because they are naturally lazy, protects speakers who start complaining about the state, since ‘they complain about everything’.

### *La Pelea*(The Fight) : Kinship, Family and Modernity

The audience finally gets to see the in-person fight that they have been hearing from the beginning of the film through a recording that Sergio will put on in his apartment, by himself, at different points in the film. His relationship with Elena has officially ended, and we see his wife(not sure if her name ever comes up in the film since her leaving to Cuba is the first scene of the movie)

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<sup>20</sup> Inoue, Miyako. “The Listening Subject of Japanese Modernity and His Auditory Double: Citing, Sighting, and Siting the Modern Japanese Woman.” *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 2 (2003): 156–93.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3651520>.

heading to her dresser and taking off her street clothes. Sergio sits down in a chair in her bedroom and begins taunting her...

P = Pablo

S = Sergio

\* = Tingly Translation Senses

Underlined: Poetic Deliveries

**Bold**: Polysemic and Common Words

S: gracias a eso, ha dejado de ser una cubanita chusma para convertirte en una mujer hermosa y sutilmente.

(S: Thanks to that, you've stopped being a \*little gossipy Cuban girl\* to become a beautiful woman with subtlety.)

M: Eres insoportable, nunca sé si estas hablando en serio o estás burlando de mi

(M: You are insufferable/Unsupportable(impossible to put up with), I never know if your talking seriously about me or your making fun of me)

S: Un poquito de las dos cosas querida.

(S: a little bit of both darling.\*)

M: "Vas a burlar de tu mamita querida," te va al carajo.

(sergio laughs)

S: Eso es muy **bueno, muy bueno**

(S: That's a good one, haha a good one.)

M: Ai, que hijo tuyo, tu estas loco idiota. Ai sueltame, sueltame, yo te resisto, te resisto, de vivir aquí no soporto el calor, el sudor, el sudor, no te pones, suéltame.

(M: Ai, what a son you are, you're a crazy idiot. Ai let me go, let go\*, I resist you\*, resist you and to live here in this heat\*, the sweat, the sweat, don't get it twisted\*, let me go.)

S: tú sabes que todo esto que dijiste está grabado, ¿no?

(S: You know everything you said is recorded, don't you?)

M: ¿Qué cosa?

(M: What?\*)

S: Todo, palabra por palabra. Va ser muy divertido después cuando lo oigas

(S: Everything, word for word. It's going to be funny\* when you hear it later.)

M: Ay, eres un monstruo, un enfermo

(M: Ay, you're a monster, you're sick.)

S: Cuidado que lo va a romper, ¡suelta!

(S: Careful, you're gonna break it, let it go!)

M: Dame que lo voy a romper,

(M: Give it to me I'm gonna break the thing,)

S: ¡Suelta!

(S: let go!)

she falls.

M: Suelta...suelta te me. Tu y yo ha terminado, no quiero verte más, no quiero verte más nunca... Yo me voy, me voy sola, no quiero que vengas conmigo, no soporto un día más aquí.

(M:(whispers)let go, let go of me\*. You and I are finished, I don't want to see you anymore, I never want to see you again...I'll go, I'll go alone, I don't want you to come with me, I don't support\* another day here.)

S: ¿Me va a dejar sola?

(S: You're going to leave me alone?)

M: No me importa, **buscate** otra mujer, **que te aguante yo ya no.**

(M: It doesn't matter to me, look\* for another woman, that can hold\* you down, I can't anymore\*.)

S: Me vas a decir-

(S: Your gonna tell me-)

M: Nada, estoy cansada de ser una rata de la laboratorio de tus caprichos de tus jueguitos.

(M: Nothing, I'm tired of being a rat in a laboratory of your whims and games.)

S: Jueguitos?

(S: Games?)

M: Voy a vivir mi vida, ¡me estoy poniendo vieja! ¡Me oyes, vieja! Me voy solo.

(M: I am going to live my life, I'm getting old! Old you hear me! I will go alone.)

### Fortunes of Kin

This fight is the centerpiece of the film. It is perfectly emblematic of Sergio's worst qualities, as an active trope of marital arguments, and reveals where his critiques of Cuban society are personalized into the lives of the women around him, but reflects his misery. And his wife actively defies his pessimistic games, as she calls them, because she doesn't want to be trapped in his misery. As she delivers her only and final in the movie, we see her verbalize that she is finished with Sergio, and interestingly enough, for them both, what was over was not a sexual or loving relationship, but one of kin. He couldn't believe that she would leave him alone, and she was frustrated that she couldn't be his woman, as she says "I'm getting old! Old you hear me!". It is the death of a kinship that both of them are fighting over. But why is family a motif that unpacks Sergio's own understanding of what development looks like for a "third world" country?

The family unit was Castro's medium for modern development, and the governmental and personal contestment of familial symbols marks the tension between Castro's development and "imperialist/First World" development. Castro's own concerns with the influence of imperialist ideologies, and his evolution to a fear of non-communist ideology, makes it so that he's concerned about every individual civilian's educational, biological, and social life. The family unit is the microscopic zoom-in of the control over development, as Castro sees himself as a parent to a nation, and the parents of the future generations he hopes will inherit his Cuba. For this reason in Titon's film, there is a constant address and tension with kinship symbols and the gendered roles that that kinship network is supposed to be built from. A constant argument between characters in the film is their decisions for their future and how they will be able to keep building from that decision. Pablo decides to leave Cuba and start a new life, and possibly raise kids in the United States. Elena's

internal and external conflicts with finding a boyfriend, and not wanting one at the same time. Sergio's wife leaving Sergio is both about their relationship, but also about her virility and youth. Her still being youthful, and attractive, means she'll still be able to find a man outside of Cuba. And Sergio's comments about her shift in social attitude, going from a gossiping Cuban woman, to an elegant and well educated aristocrat, have an impact on how she would be able to find a man outside of Cuba. She's "internationally" attractive. These are kinship bonds that are in flux and change through desire and pleasure. As we saw memory being utilized to reconstruct a past different from the one that Castro augmented, through desire and change we see the role of "future" in conversation. Language around what we want, but who we want to be, as we acquire our desires construct the potential for a different kind of life. This potentiality represents the tension in the present social reality of Cuba that after the film, would end up becoming a national crisis. Pablo and Sergio's wife were a part of a major migration wave of bourgeois, white, Cubans who would leave as the Revolution began. That wave foretold the ways that Cubans would lose agency through not being allowed to own a business or private property. Elena represents the artists that would eventually leave Cuba for the desire to be more than "the beautiful Cuban señorita" as Sergio describes. This later migration wave occurred out of pressure to be censored and silent. These tensions between the people and the nation would eventually erupt years after this film, but somehow Titón was able to mention these particular issues before they were apparent through directly stating the desires of specific characters.

## Section 2 : Whatsapp, Intimate Memory and Pleasure

In this section, my focus has shifted from Cuban conversation and dialogue between classic Cuban characters, to everyday conversation and chatter of Cuban emigrants living, working, and building new relationships in metropolitan cities across the globe(outside of Cuba). *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* may have used setting, editing, writers, and the effects of movie magic, but regardless, it attempted to display and place viewers in a reality that existed practically and mundanely in the 1960s of La Habana. Who are the people, characters, and voices I'll be translating in this chapter? I am studying conversation and dialogue in the Cuban emigrants of the post-Soviet exodus wave of 1995-2017. These Cubans would have migrated as adults in their early 20-30s, and had been born in 1960-1975. Among the three major migratory waves, this is the most contemporary, and its beginning is marked by the *Bolsero* crisis of 1994. With the fall of the USSR, Cuba experienced an economic recession and living standards dropped dramatically. To avoid the same crisis that occurred during the Mariel Boatlift(the cause of the second migratory wave), the Clinton administration implemented the "wet foot, dry foot" policy. This policy was campaigned to invite



Cuban immigrants to assimilate to the States and differ from communism, but between the two states it was a contingent policy that was designed to alleviate Cuba's social unrest. One of the policy's effects was the largest contemporary migration wave of mainly lower/middle class Cubans with 650,000 immigrants admitted to the States by 2015<sup>21</sup>.

These Cubans were the first generation raised in Castro's Cuba and have experienced the life of the state as parallel to their own, rather than remembering pre-Castro and the Batista regime as we saw in the film. A pertinent characteristic of this group is its relationship to class, particularly the in-between of lower-middle class and professionalism. Even though academic research and data collection in Cuba is state controlled, with no official independent or dissident institution to name, the stories of my family and Cuban public figures (musical artists-writers) have revealed the impact Cuban education had on their own agency<sup>22</sup>. As young people in the earliest phase of Castro's communist education system, the emphasis on supporting the arts, sciences, and humanities was an important trend for Castro. That raised a generation of Cubans with a wide range of skills and talents, building the foundation for the Cuban professional-managerial class (a social class of workers who organize capital through institutes and professional organizations like academic universities or associations)<sup>23,24</sup>. Through positions as social or science researchers, dance performers, fiction or film writers, the opportunities they had to leave the island in the pursuit of reaching higher heights in their respective fields was crucial. The role of grants, fellowships, and exchange programs was originally to have highly educated individuals exchange and learn from other nations and return more developed than ever, but many never returned. Instead, they asked for political asylum or applied for visa extensions; others became undocumented immigrants. Among the details of a sociologist's trip to a workshop in the University of Havana, Orlando Rodriguez mentions that one of the state's interests is in researching the brain drain of post-1987 emigrants. Brain drain is the phenomenon of human capital flight, with doctors, professors, and academics leaving their job to enter the private sector. Brain drain can also happen through emigrations. These emigrants they are studying are the same population as my interlocutors and subjects. That generation of Cubans left knowing that they weren't coming back, and understood the consequences, which was to be banned from ever returning to Cuba, even in the case of a relative who has passed. There were other ways of leaving Cuba without being banned, but every option was nearly impossible to achieve, so anyway you were able to leave, many Cubans took it. My family was able to come to the States through the process of legal marriage and the wet foot, dry

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<sup>21</sup> Jorge Duany, *Cuban Migration: A Postrevolution Exodus Ebbs and Flows* (Migration Policy Institute), 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Rodriguez, Orlando. *Sociology in Cuba*. Fordham University, December 2003.  
<https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/savvy/footnotes/dec03/fn12.html>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, "the Cuban Context".

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case Against the Professional Managerial Class* (University of Minnesota Press), 2021.

foot policy. My family's actions have allowed us to return to Cuba and keep our social ties to our kin on the island, but many of my mother's friends can never return.

In this section, which is broken down into part A and B, I utilize ethnographic traditions and habits and couple them with Latin American literature's politicized fiction style, to demonstrate and repackage the language in these Whatsapp dialogues. In part A, I focus on developing the idea of virtual space and defining how the networks that are commodified in Whatsapp can be built in-person. In part B, I discuss the topics and themes that are talked about in these virtual spaces and networks, which unpacks the racial and sexual relationships within *Cubanidad*. Part A is composed of a memoir-style retelling and an ethnographic vignette, and B contains another vignette and a fictional translation of a transcription via participant observation. My interlocutors for my vignettes and participant-observation are family members that shared their group chat with me, and my Whatsapp dialogues are strictly from that source. My transcription and translation was accomplished, instead of by ear as it was with *Memorias*, through ethnographic participant observation, which gave me the opportunity to ask questions about the language and motifs that were being used. This changed the process of translation to a social dialogue instead of a single removed and independent listener with an unwavering claim to semantic authority<sup>25</sup>. Once I translated these conversations, I engaged in a literary exercise, encouraging myself to continue to rupture my research-based authority, and see how what I feel, as a listener, can tell me about the meaning of the language. I fictionalized the translated conversation and placed them in an augmented context, placing the virtual-physical reality of the chat into an alternate world. The task of fiction in this chapter is to deliver and provide a full translation. With the fictional pretense of the unreal, the transcribed conversation can (re)connect to the convoluted poetic messages and figurative references that are complicated and played with in these Cuban dialogues, without the stop and start of Whatsapp texting. In addition, fiction can allow for the conversations that between real world actors, might put interlocutors at unknown risk. This poetic delivery will let me not solely rely on the singular dimension of English-Spanish translation, but to also translate the unreal worlds I am seeing in both English and Spanish poetics. This would be the difference between text-text translation(which in its own way is poetic), and the fictional translation through the mode of storytelling. I will be paying keen attention in my analysis to how my imagination may contest my critical thought. Similar to the way patchwork ethnography admits failure and complication, this fictional attachment to my work will be the admission that I cannot complete my work in social science, researched-based knowledge<sup>26</sup>. However, there is an important value in

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<sup>25</sup> Byrne, Alex. Review of *Semantic Values?*, by Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65, no. 1 (2002): 201–7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3071120>.

<sup>26</sup> Günel, Gökçe, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe. 2020. "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography." *Member Voices, Fieldsights*, June 9. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>

traditional ethnographic vignettes due to its focus on writing and engaging in real-world social realities with the encouragement of first-person narratives and memoir-style storytelling. The supplementary ethnographic vignettes that are in this section were written as recorded reflections of times I have spent with kin during my travels or on holidays. My reflections will operate as windows into the moments of in-person contact of Cuban dialogue. I respected the request to not record these conversations, but I was given a warm welcome to write about the experiences through my own perspective and share the topics and ideas my family and kin discussed. A dialogue between the Whatsapp conversation and in-person discussions are as equally dialectical as the conversations are separately, which will be a site of analysis in placing the role of Whatsapp, memory/reference, and sex and race.

After the Bolsero crisis, and the migration wave had begun, time passed and the island moved on, continuing to evolve and change. But for those who fled to Europe, the States, or other Latin American countries, they still cherish their memory of Cuba. The isolation that came from living in foreign countries was slightly remedied with the introduction of Whatsapp in 2009. The global phenomenon of Whatsapp became the number one international messaging app. Whatsapp has its own interesting story, an app that started as a way to update each other's status, "I'm at the gym", "My phone battery is low", transformed into a simple instant-messaging app. The privacy and cost-free international calls made it a safe "place" to communicate with family back home. Jon Kaum, one of the founders, joked about how after the app became about instant-messaging, many Whatsapp workers were happy to be able to talk to their families, since many of the employees at Whatsapp were immigrants who made it into the industry<sup>27</sup>. Whatsapp was introduced to me by my parents, a similar story I've heard from other immigrant kids. The particular audience of the app has built itself as the app for immigrants. In a NY Times article, "For Millions of Immigrants a Common Language: Whatsapp", Farhad Manjoo writes, "WhatsApp has cultivated an unusual audience: It has become the lingua franca among people who, whether by choice or by force, have left their homes for the unknown"(Manjoo 2016). After receiving a buyout for 19 billion dollars by Facebook, the issues of security and privacy have become more apparent than ever. Facebook released a statement, claiming that they would include Whatsapp databases into Facebook algorithms to match users. The outcry from privacy advocates has made the issue gain visibility, enough so for the European commission to fine Facebook. For my interlocutors, and many others, Whatsapp is socially accepted as a safe option to communicate open and freely. In many practical ways, it still is, however Facebook's direct access to Whatsapp databases is a major weakness for the user's security. If governments that want access and control to citizens Whatsapp discussions obtain it, many lives will be at risk. But being able to instant-message or speak to your parent, sibling, or loved one in another country is well worth the risk.

Whatsapp has changed the world, and immigrants were a part of it every step of the way. Jon Juam states, "Every feature in the app, he added, was designed in part by someone living the

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<sup>27</sup> Farhad Manjoo, "For Millions of Immigrants, a Common Language: WhatsApp," The New York Times (The New York Times, December 21, 2016)

immigrant experience every day”(Manjoo 2016). Today, Cubans who are scattered around the world are connected by a variety of Whatsapp group chats. They share news, questions, they shop and trade, laugh and mingle, and engage in a global conversation of Cubanidad<sup>28</sup>. The lives of my family and kin(including myself) have become semi-cemented into this social network. And while the majority of Whatsapp's role is quite practical, Whatsapp has also allowed for users to access privacy. The separation from Castro's censorship tactics and the risk of an eavesdropping informant, has radically changed the public Cuban voice, possibly (re)inventing it. This has provided me as a social researcher an opportunity to see the effects of (re)obtaining the freedom of expression, which in *Memorias...* was beginning to be taken away. Interestingly, the speech practices of expressing content have been overshadowed by the drastic change in speaking of discontent. Critique and social thought are predictably now quite explicit, and what used to be spoken in the whispers of conspiracy theories that served as the spread of journalistic news, are now being spoken as biographical information that is based in the disbelief of the Castro State's commentary. Content(fulness) in Whatsapp speech is shown through a performance that was once familiar and had had an audience(on the streets, the bus, or *las colas* of La Habana), but now it surfaces every now and again for these emigrants. In these private groups chats, the connection to memory, whether sensory or collective, reanimates the intimate feeling of home, and in my ethnographic observation I notice an affirmative shift to keep these virtually stimulated memories alive.

Although, the question of Cuban dialogue(in expressing discontent and content) has not been sufficiently explored. What of those conversations that are not political inquiry or critical thoughts? Cuban speech must be investigated from the linguistic corners of the mundane as well, such as, “what should we eat for dinner?”, or “did you have fun last night?” When the journalistic work of discussing the state of Cuba is done, what remains? In the conversations I selected, the power of content and pleasure flipped its head on the discontentedness of political expression, with an utmost focus on sex and race. Whether it was “girl talk”, or *sobremesa* themes of debate, the obsession with sexual, gender and racial preferences, was a constant theme. The immediate intimacy that is curated with the alleviation of ethnic social isolation and the reconnection to a shared memory(having the opportunity in the day to speak to another Cuban), jumpstarts many conversations to speak as freely as one would like with a presumption that the ethnic kinship bond will prevail prejudice or judgment. Whether it's at a family Christmas dinner, a late-night *chappa* in Rio, or a chat between girlfriends, how one has sex, who the ideal sexual partner is, and what about Cuban sex is so much better than the average American, are questions that come up once, twice, and possibly thrice! It was only after collecting the vignettes and finishing the translation, that I also realized how much race is only mentioned when sex is the topic of conversation. Race is

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<sup>28</sup> Köhn, S. and Siré, N. (2022), Swap It on WhatsApp: The Moral Economy of Informal Online Exchange Networks in Contemporary Cuba. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 27: 80-100.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12583>

considered incredibly critical to family dynamics, which trickles down to intimate relationships (the expansion of kinship networks), and these racial ideologies become solidified in individuals through racial-sexual preference. Race happens to never be mentioned outside of social relationships, as the erasure of racial stratification through ideologies of “Mestizaje” and the perfect Latin American prototype of one mixed race, silences the discussion<sup>29</sup>. Within these conversations of race and sex, there is never a consensus on what each preference signifies about the preference bearer, nor are the strict cultural rules of who is allowed to have a particular preference generally followed. When taking into consideration the local racial politics of any Latin American city or town, compared to national standards of beauty of a country, the variety of sexual-racial preference is immensely wide.

Breaking racial segregation through sex is a common trope of Latin American history, as the construction of a racial “mestizaje” in the 20th century is based upon the pretense that those rules have been actively broken since the colonial era.<sup>30</sup> Whenever the topic of preference is brought up, it encourages conflicting preferences (why one prefers a specific race over the other) along with heavy debate over the semantic meaning of reference. Who is the ideal woman? Who is the ideal man? Sex icons, or symbols, become highly contested regardless of where your political allegiance lies. In social atmospheres where Castro is not the omniscient linguistic reference, and where he does not control the cultural references available to Cubans, what we see out of a freedom of expression is the right to argue. The right to disagree, and stay in disagreement, to let contestment and grudges fester, on any topic (in this case, grander debates about a woman’s right to be). While those contestants may have been expressed through ideological Castro-produced symbols while living in Cuba, (such as using the proper revolutionary family or model-woman or man as the debated object) the same debates are expressed outside of the Castro context but without a misnomer to stay in-line. The right to guard one’s desires with one’s own righteous claim to language is returned.

## Part A

### The Christmas Party

For months my mother had planned to travel to Cuba to celebrate the New Year with my family in La Habana. My family always celebrates New Years’ Eve with a big dinner party, and if we’re able to be in Cuba, we watch a human sized ragdoll burn on a metal cross in the middle of the street (a New Years Tradition). The food is usually incredible. My step-grandmother spends all day in the kitchen,

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<sup>29</sup> Telles, Edward, and Denia Garcia. “‘MESTIZAJE’ AND PUBLIC OPINION IN LATIN AMERICA.” *Latin American Research Review* 48, no. 3 (2013): 130–52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43670097>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, Telles, Edward, and Denia Garcia

with my mom and cousin, roasting and basting a pork shoulder with lime and sour oranges. I enjoy helping out in the kitchen. There wasn't much I could ever do to help, but I liked drinking wine and sitting next to my grandfather. He's lost some of his vision, but we would sit side by side at the kitchen table, me watching the women in our family drink wine and cook, and him picking at the finished food to sneak in some extra salt in his unsalted diet (he would get scolded eventually). The kitchen was home to hearing the full picture of what's changed in Cuba in the past year, new goals for the new year, and eventually getting into arguments about the *real* way to eat spaghetti or pizza. I would listen as I slowly sliced tomatoes and salted them for the salad. I didn't want to get in the way, but I wanted to be involved somehow.

My mother had once told me when I was 12 or so, that Cubans don't celebrate Christmas. She said it isn't an official holiday, and generally isn't celebrated, because Castro's Cuba was an atheist one. Over the years it's become more common for gift-exchange to take place, since any excuse to celebrate is a good excuse. One element to Castro's ideology was to disempower and ban Catholic church-goers, as religion was viewed as a medium for transferring capitalist and anti-revolutionary ideals. The hegemonic influence of Catholicism, or any religion, is what Castro feared. In an interesting recount of Cuba, which seems to reflect the tradition of travel writing, in 1989 Peter Lemass, a christian parish, went to Cuba and wrote of what he saw. Upon his arrival he asked his taxi driver about Christmas (must have been that time of the year), and the driver's response was the same as my mothers, Lemass writes "On my way from the airport to Havana I asked the taxi driver how Christmas had been. He replied '*Aqui no hay Natividad*! Here there is no Christmas. No if's or but's. Not 'here Christmas is a lowkey', or 'here there is no public holiday'. No. Here there is no Christmas. Religion has been taken by the scruff of the neck and put away. There is no holiday on December 25. The holidays come a week later, on January 1, when they celebrate the start of The Revolution"(Lemass 368)<sup>31</sup>.

Although, to our own misfortune, or perhaps a stroke of fate, my mother lost her Cuban passport, and we had to postpone our trip until after I graduated. My roommate and I decided that we were going to spend Christmas with my family in Kingsbridge, the Bronx. We wanted to leave the morning of the 23rd to drive two hours downstate from the Dutchess county of NY, to the Bronx, blasting music and massaging our jaw masseter muscles to hopefully finally be rid of our TMJ. Earlier that week my mother got a heads up from our landlord, a sweet old Jewish man, that his daughter decided to put up his duplex for sale. He apologized to us, knowing there wasn't much my mother or him could do about it. I knew this news would make the holiday air damp with the anxieties and stressors about finding a new place to live. I did my best to cook, clean, and shop for our holiday dinner.

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<sup>31</sup> Lemass, Peter. "Fidel Castro's Cuba." *The Furrow* 36, no. 6 (1985): 365-75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27678080>.

As it happens every year we're in New York for Christmas, my tio, one of my mothers good friends, Yoel Rodriguez, his mother and Nephew, Randy, who was staying with him, arrived at our apartment thirty minutes before we finished the food. My sister was making drinks, my grandmother was sitting by the dining table, my roommate was downstairs letting the cold air curb their migraine, and I was trying to keep a clear head as everyone was greeting each other, hugging and kissing cheek to cheek. My eyes met Randy's, a new young face to add to my catalog of my mothers family-friend network. Randy's hopeful look of having a new friend, dissipated quickly the moment it met my anxious eyes. We barely greeted one another, not trying to make the other worried or stressed by trying to over communicate. Every year my Spanish is tested one way or another, as I try to make efforts to speak more fluently and confidently. Some years my efforts are convincing, other years I fall into Spanish potholes more noticeably. This year, I had no energy to be the confident, charismatic supporting character to my mothers wonderful .

Earlier in the day, my grandmother and I made the *masa* for Buñuelos. A Cuban fried dough that's covered in a lime-anise syrup. We prepared the dough first by boiling yucca, extracting the tough veins of the root, and adding flour slowly to make the dough. As is our tradition, I did the laborious parts of the cooking, and she would point out some key details to get the right consistency. The gift of that buñuelo mass would grace me later in the night.

My mother asked me to play some music, which is a daunting challenge to please three generations and two separate cultures, but I do my best and accumulate more insight every year on the DJing matter. She asked me to remind her of the artists I started with, and I told her it was Bad Bunny. Randy said he didn't like Bad Bunny, even though I played it hoping to find a common ground with him, as a younger Latino. I felt a little defeated, but also fascinated by him. He has Hayao Miyazaki tattoos, a clean bald shave, and is wearing skinny jeans(a trend that hasn't once dissipated since the 20 years ago when it started). We sat down to eat, but it was difficult to break the language barrier at the table since my sister and I weren't getting overly involved in the conversation. Our silence was typical since embarrassment accompanies our inability to smoothly express ourselves in Spanish, and translate between the two fluidly. The English-speakers were quiet, and the Spanish-speakers were listening and commenting on my mothers plans on moving out of the apartment and our next options. The English-speakers were nodding along, and eating their food slowly but surely.

When dinner was over, my sister went to her room to call her girlfriend and my roommate went to take a shower. From the silent side of the table, I was the only one left and somehow that encouraged me to engage more openly. Our extended family went to clean dishes and my mother

told everyone, “Ismael, take out the *masa*, let’s fry some buñuelos.” Everyone was very impressed that I had made the dough, and we all gathered in the kitchen. With the Cuban and Brazilian rum flowing, and an exciting dessert on the horizon, the tension completely dissipated. My mother was in charge of frying, my *tio* was putting away the dishes, and I brought out a notebook and pen. I told a joke that at my job, Bubby’s Burritos, I have a coworker that I adore, Victor, who only speaks Spanish and is from San Miguel, Mexico. During the workday, whenever I needed to say a final thought about a topic or theme to get us back on track, I would exclaim any five syllable adjective with a hand gesture (*involucrado, indisponible*) and it would somehow socially reset and end the conversation back to neutral. Those words became my joke for the night, as I would write down any five syllable word during our conversation, as both a way to have a deeper, more complex connection with the language, but also with my family.

What proceeded is what we call a *sobremesa* (at the table), a Spanish tradition that has trickled down into daily Cuban life. It is typically during or after dessert, where everyone sits and chats for an hour or so to let the food and friendships at the table digest. It’s typically a daily to common practice in many Latin American cultures, which can serve as the part of the day where everyone stops what they’re doing that day to talk to one another. Although, in another sense *sobremesa* is critical for bigger meals that involve lots of heavy eating and drinking. Susie Corely, a magazine writer for Delish describes it best, “You remember that one great dinner party, where everyone ate and drank merrily, and before you knew it, it was 3am? That’s *sobremesa*.”<sup>32</sup>

My grandmother was the opener for Christmas *sobremesa*, and started with the genealogy of the word “fula”, which is a common slang word for something, stinky, foul, or ugly. It apparently comes from the word, “mula”, which is mule, and “fula” was the descriptor for the color of a mule, which was gray and dingy. Inside the history of the word, my grandmother explained how Black Cubans developed the slang and how “mula” was a key part of describing a “mulatto”, which is a mixed-race person, but also a person of a medium-dark complexion. After discussing various themes (with race and sex somehow being the predominant theme, once again) over frying Buñuelos in the kitchen, the group gathered in the living room to eat vanilla and strawberry wafers with syrupy Buñuelos.

When everyone started talking about Cuba I noticed something integral, something different in the conversation. Whenever someone mentioned a place/object-name of any kind, a school, a town, a restaurant, a park, everyone chimed in with their memories and thoughts of that place or thing,

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<sup>32</sup> Corley, Susie. “Sobremesa: The Cultural Trend We Need in Our Lives Right Now.” Delish. Delish, June 9, 2021. <https://www.delish.com/uk/food-news/a36186360/sobremesa/>.



who they met there, and told a story. From some point in someone else's story, another person would pick another name or object and offshoot into their own story. Once the chain reaction began, it was unstoppable. I could barely keep a tally of what we were talking about, I just reacted and laughed with wherever and whenever we were in someone's story. The place/object-name I remember profoundly was "titulo", which in this cultural context means, "the degree". In this story "titulo" was specifically referring to the paper one receives as they graduate. My mother told a funny story of how there was a phrase that she had to say as she received her degree. Everyone told their story of when they got their degree, what year they got it, what they remember feeling that day, if they slipped or fell on the way up or down the stage. "Titulo" was only one node that these emigrants, being different ages and races, connected to from their own pool of memories. From "titulo", we had moved onto "Coppelia", a famous ice cream store that only has two flavors, chocolate(for men) and strawberry(for women). The connection was that my uncle celebrated his graduation at Coppelia, which was where my Abuela had met her neighbor in her building in Syracuse, where she now lives, who had worked there in 1972.

I realized that this jumping between connecting place/object-names had a similar jump to the friendly, immediate intimacy that I noticed in Whatsapp group chats. The way of recalling memory was the gateway to a more in-depth conversation that summoned the place and life of Cuba. Although, in Whatsapp the formality and structure of texting can obscure the basic network relationship with its own terminology and software functions. Even Randy, who is half the age of my mother and uncle, could participate whole heartedly in this in-person, place-name network , which in a Whatsapp group chat that has specific pretenses, can be more tricky to navigate.

At first, I figured that Whatsapp was a special form of media because it possessed an integral role for immigrant communities in the First World. However, that Christmas party completely shifted my perspective. The kind of place/object-name network that is constructed through Whatsapp may actually already exist without the app. There was an actor-network of objects and places that correspond to the different life experiences of Cubans and in a social gathering or casual chat, a chain reaction occurs of building a network through memory and story. Whatsapp has simply perfected a process that exists on the physical-social plane. Whatsapp can pre save these networks, make them as big or small as a user wants, and even include images or videos of the place/object-name nodes that are spoken of in-person. The value that Facebook sees in Whatsapp conversation, comes packaged in the unit of these informational networks. Whatsapp capitalized and commodified these types of social relationships, but Whatsapp did not invent or construct something new. Memory is the gateway to returning to a Cuba that many emigrants wish to remember, regardless of Whatsapp opinion or ideological position.

## Cultural Packages - *Pero Come Yucca* -

In a small Whatsapp chat of childhood friends, three Cuban women take a moment out of their busy lives to check up on one another. These friends do what many adult friend groups do; they plan trips, they gossip, they laugh together, but they each live across the world from one another. Yemily, the nomad, is living in Sweden at the moment. While she works from home, in her Stockholm apartment, she takes her breaks dancing, going to see a play, walking in the park, or eating at her favorite German restaurant. It's always on a Saturday morning, just after 10am that her phone gets a notification. "😊🌻🍪: Join Facetime Group Call." She brushes her teeth, hops right back in bed and joins the call. Yemily loves to tell her best friends everything starting from last Saturday, a full update, with one girlfriend in La Habana and the other in New York City, if she can get both of them on the same call she reports her adventures down to the juicy details. The session was alive and well, the typical laughing and crying ensued at the proper moments. It was until Yemily mentioned the grocery store.

"On Fridays, after drinks with the girls from my dance class, I stopped by the store. I tried to buy, ya know, some ah, yuca! But of course one of the guys at the store had no idea what I was talking about, and I showed him a photo, just in case."

One of her girlfriends interrupted, "why would they have yuca in Sweden? Your so weird Yemily."

"You never know! Anyways, after I showed him the picture he brought me to the baking aisle that had pictures of yuca on bags of 'tapioca powder', I was sitting there with my face of 'DO YOU HAVE THE WHOLE THING LIKE THE PICTURE'.

Her friends laughed and she giggled, "sometimes I just miss having our things," she says. Yemily's girlfriends did their best to console her, and reminded her yuca of all of Cuba's cultural achievements is not the thing to be missed. "At least most stores sell cumin, not that it's Cuban, but THAT would really screw us. It could be worse than having to ask for 'whole tapioca' at those weirdly expensive 'healthy' grocery stores. I am glad I won't have to though, the Dominicans have my back." Yemily laughs and says "that's what I need, some Dominicans." and everyone gives a rich cackle. The call ended right at 11:45, just in time for everyone to disperse for lunch.

•••

This conversation between girlfriends reminded me of one of my favorite memories. A joke my step-father told me, we call it, "Pero Come Yuca". My step-father was the first to tell that joke, even though my mother had heard it before. At a small IKEA dinner table, with the Williamsburg bridge outside of our living room window, my sister and I are sleepy and giggly from our stuffed bellies, listening keenly to my step-father begin one of his tangents. He mentioned that he usually doesn't eat yuca--a starchy root vegetable also known as cassava and manioc in other parts of the

world--he laughed until he saw my mother's dirty look, and finished saying that it was surprising how much he loved eating my mother's yuca. She grinned and said, "pero come yuca!", and they both laughed, slapping their hands on the table. My sister and I exchanged a blank stare, missing the joke. My step-father realized we weren't laughing and asked us if we ever heard the story of the homeless man and the dog. We said we hadn't, my mother motioned to him, "tell them, tell them, I haven't heard it in a long time either." My step-father cleans himself with a handkerchief and begins like this:

There's a man walking around downtown La Habana, with no money in his pocket. He passes a restaurant that's got a smell of pork in the air. He walks in and begs the waiter for a box, a little box of that pork for the hungry man. That was his lucky day, the chef felt pity and gave him a paper box of yuca and roasted pork shoulder. The man is delighted, grateful, and walks to the park to eat his box. On his walk, his foot gets stuck in a pothole, and he trips, dropping the box. A dog on the street smells the food and rushes to eat it. The man yells, his foot still stuck, "Go away, go away, leave my food alone!" The dog is eating the pork, and the man keeps yelling at the dog to stop eating his pork. The man stops yelling, looks at the dog, and yells, "Goddamn it, at least eat the yucca!!". My sister and I are cracking up, laughing so much more than we were prepared for.

In the first vignette, told in a third-person narrative style, and in my own retelling of *Pero Come Yucca*, yucca is the central object of interest. Yucca, while a wonderfully filling and nutritious starch, can be often cooked a bit dry and flavorless, and you're usually lucky if it's fried. My sister and I sometimes call it the Latino potato, even though Latinos also eat all kinds of potatoes. Yucca in various Latin American and Caribbean cuisines is the quintessential side dish that can go with a number of hearty meats. It serves a similar role that mash potatoes operate on thanksgiving or christmas. The way in which yucca is socially and culturally organized gives the word, and the physical object, a kind of socio-cultural package. The context or knowledge of how yucca is cooked, eaten, and shared is a key component to the word's usage. In a sense, tapioca and yucca are indeed the same object, but the life of the word "tapioca" has its own history. For the joke, it is the cultural package of yucca that carries the lead up to the punch line. The shared sensorial and contextual relationship with yucca, as a starchy ignored food, engages with the audience's ironic sympathy with the dog and man. Many Cubans have been hungry enough to eat yucca when they have to, as they also have felt or thought, "Wow, if there was only more meat on this plate". When the physical object is repackaged into something else, a different cultural context is given. When yucca is tapioca, white pearls and pudding may come to mind. A cultural package inside the context of migration deals with a process of displacement of a cultural(ed) item, as the cultural frame of the immigrant changes the subjective shift can cause an unsteady or dizzying impact. The memory of

the item lives on in its former package, but what happens when memory is all you have left?

In the first chapter, the theoretical framework of thinking through the referential function and the listening subject helped build an understanding of Castro's role in daily conversation. Jakobson's classifications of the functions of speech built the first understanding that a speech message has operative tools that it engages to deliver meaning. One of his students, building off of Jakobson's basic principle to think of language inside social engagement, Micheal Silverstein developed the basis for "cultural knowledge" in language. Silverstein, building upon the work of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Benjamin Whorf, and Roman Jakobson, has built the basis for the modern state of linguistic anthropology. In Susan Gal's obituary for Silverstein, she explained how he evolved the focus for linguistic anthropologist to think beyond the referential function of a particular message, she writes "Yet, as his teacher Roman Jakobson had shown, there are some speech forms, present in all languages (I/you, here/there are examples), whose referential meaning cannot be analyzed without considering the event of speaking"(Gal 2022)<sup>33</sup>. Cultural knowledge in this case, constitutes the "social organizational glue" that gives speech a "where". This idea bridges the gap between a speech event and the culture in which it speaks. For yucca, and its cultural package, the way Yemiliy and my step-father speak of yucca engages Cuban cultural knowledge, and without it the connection to Cuba and its sense of place would be lost.

## Part B

### Beyonce in Brazil

My mother and I are walking down a street in Ipanema, Rio De Janeiro. It's Friday night. Restaurant waiters are on the sidewalk, looking for tourists' eyes, with scruffy beards and black-tie uniforms, competing with millennial bar(*chappa*) waiters, 5 '8 women in three-piece suits with wavy hair. We were staying in the "Upper West Side" of Rio, according to my mother, Elisa, who had been in Rio for a couple of months while I was in school. This was her recompense after staying put in New York City, near my father, until my sister and I were of age. She walked so lightly over the cobblestone sidewalks and I followed behind. We were a pair of feathers, drifting along the ocean winds, still not sure where to eat dinner.

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<sup>33</sup> Gal, S. (2022), Michael Silverstein (1945–2020). *American Anthropologist*, 124: 236-240.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13691>

Elisa was renting out an apartment in Ipanema from a friend of a friend during her stay. It was my *tia*, Yemily, who had a Cuban landlord contact, Oscar. Yemily is an avid traveler, and “found” him through a Whatsapp chat for Cubans in Rio looking for a place they could rent. Yemily went to school with one of his friends, and they told her that he was staying in Brazil. To her surprise, he already started renting out apartments in Rio and she needed a place to stay. My mother relied on Yemily’s contact, feeling more comfortable with a landlord who spoke Spanish and had some friendly relationship with, and by happenstance, Oscar and her had an old friend in common. Oscar is a gay man, dark-skinned, and has a clean shaven head. Elisa mentioned to me that he had gone out with a New York City friend of hers, another Cuban, when they both were in La Habana. When I met Oscar, he told me that after he left Cuba he continued his studies in Rio, slowly learning Portuguese, and met his husband, Rojelio the sculptor, shortly after. He mentions that being a property owner was a perfect go-between position for him and that he’s been renting out apartments in Rio for over half a decade.

When my sister and I planned our trip to see our mother, we knew that we, at the very least, would be introduced to any Cubans my mother had met or knew in Brazil. After my arrival, to which I hadn’t the faintest idea how much Rio looked like La Habana, I spent a couple days taking in the change of pace. American’s and New Yorkers alike talk about the density of New York City as an impressive feat of urban life, Río not only has the same overwhelming intensity of people, but it is just beyond massive. Among the countless neighborhoods I could recount, there is the same amount of space from the segregated favela area’s that I can’t even begin to proportion. I wish it was only the vastness of the residential neighborhoods and beaches, but there are mountains in the middle of the city. New York City had never felt so small in my life. Carioca's visit to New York City must be like the time my family flew to Denver to see an eclipse, fascinating and exactly as expected. The tropical and colonial architecture of the city, the social love and reverence for Yoruba-based religion and culture, even the trees with deep and thick roots, made me feel like I was in Cuba. But I had to reposition the sensation as I processed the grandness of Rio de Janeiro. This city was closer to a La Habana that fell onto a continent, and every living material grew bigger and pervasive, to grow into the expansive terrain. As a metropolis, there was so much material and produce, markets were several blocks long and moving to new locations everyday, there were juice bars on every other corner, and even high end fashion stores only dedicated to leather(since Brazil had many cows). A single serving size at a restaurant could have fed a family of three. There were restaurants that only sold meat, and were packed every night. The adjustment was not simple, but endlessly intriguing. The unsettling and nerve racking parts of my culture shock were opening my mind to what a tropical metropolis can look like. The capitalism that had never been born in Cuba, was flourishing in Rio. After my third night in Rio, it was Friday night, and my mother and I were

sitting in her apartment. I was looking into the ocean as she started telling me about a man. She told me about a professor who asked her out on a date, and before we got to the good part, her phone lit up. “Oscar just texted. Him and Rojelio want to come by Ipanema and get a chappa nearby, we should meet them after dinner to say hi”. “ok, cute. Let’s do it. But where are we gonna eat...?”

Elisa walked to my left as we walked away from the beach and headed into the shopping district. Throughout my trip, anytime I walked facing away from the beach there was a mountain. Between a mountain, or a beach. At some point I started a game of counting the times that there was no ocean or mountain north, south, east or west of me. I reached 11. On this night, we walked toward a mountain that sat behind hunched over trees whose branches hugged the ground. On every corner there were restaurants, but we attempted to avoid any with photoshopped fish or steak on their menu. Our legs grew tired and stomachs irate, we eventually caved and sat on a street corner across a train station. Oscar and Rojelio found us at the restaurant, after I had just eaten the cheapest and tastiest salmon. We awkwardly laughed and greeted each other, with hugs and kisses, which is common for Brazillians and Cubans alike. We left for a chappa, which is a light beer that comes in glasses, that in my mind, were only fit for Vikings. I had seen chappa bars on multiple street corners, even signs for a chappa at 0.39c a round. There was still anxiety in the air after we met, as we headed to the chappa place. Neither knowing if our Spanish or English was going to cross the divide of the language barrier. We arrived at a shopping boulevard at 11pm, completely empty. The streets after dark are completely empty in Brazil. It took me by surprise every nightly stroll or even after a meal. The ceramic patterns on the floors are incredibly visible, no one is lounging on a tree branch. We walked into the street and found the bar.

We took our seats at a table just by a bus stop, in a wide street. There were some teenagers across the street laughing and practicing some tik tok dances. I loved the graffiti and tile-cemented floors, as the conversation ebbed and rose I would check in on the kids my age, their fluidity was fast-improving. Besides my first impressions of Rio and the addicting fried cheese snacks at every convenience store, and how unbelievably cute Brazilian boys are, our conversations stayed quite mild, light and fun. That is until Beyonce opened the floor. Oscar began, with an innocent crinkle between his eyes, “now I want to ask you a question about something, get your opinion on the subject”.

Oscar: “Doesn’t Beyonce give young Black girls an unhealthy body standard? Women don’t look like that.

Elisa: “No no, don’t do this. Why are you bringing this back up?”

Oscar: "I'm just asking a question, I want to know what he thinks."

Elisa: "No you don't, Rojilio please stop him, this is getting ridiculous."

Oscar: "There isn't that much to disagree about, I just think as a Black person she should be showing off her natural beauty."

Elisa: "We already hashed this out, who cares what plastic surgery people do or don't get done?!"

He puts his hand up at my mother's face, staring directly at me. "If she's going to be famous, she has to be a good role model for little Black girls, not encourage them to get surgery".

Ismael-Vicente: "Well encouraged is a strong word..."

I look at his hand and my mother's face, as she looks at his hand. The unbelievable audacity to physically attempt to silence my mother surprised us both. I have seen Lizbet throw a chair at a man twice her size, and then verbally destroy his spirit; I knew this was about to escalate into a real conflict. She slammed her hand on the table, tipping every chappa glass on its edge, and stopped the bartenders from watching the game (even though we were speaking in Spanish and they didn't have a clue what was going on), and Oscar retracted his hand as if he had just realized the vulnerability of his exposed limb.

Elisa: "HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND!?"

Oscar: "Lise, *por favor*, I just want to hear what someone else has to say, you don't have to get so angry."

Elisa: "I'll say what I have to say, as I already have, as many times as I want, you stubborn, *machista* queen, what do you possibly know about Americans and what's good for them, you've never even been to the States. Black girls shouldn't be insecure about their bodies - fine, but your bringing this up because you're a spiteful feisty cat, grabbing, grabbing, and grabbing until you feel good about winning an argument you already lost (turns to Rojilio), we both know Oscar likes to poke the bear even when he knew it was going to upset me, don't pretend you didn't want this to happen, you don't care about Beyonce-"

Oscar: "I do! Look, Rojilio, show them what your niece looks like, show them."

Rojilio: "Ok ok, but she's right Oscar. We were having a lovely time talking about boys with Ismael and now look where we are."

Rojilio explains that his sister's daughter was an adorable little girl, she had nice thick wavy black hair and warm skin, she had what Oscar called a "natural beauty". Rojilio showed us photographs of her as a little girl, at birthday parties, by the beach, and photos of her going to school. Rojilio begins to say that when she came of age, she started to complain about her body, worried about her curves and her "rough hair". He showed us a picture of her now, with ironed hair, puffed lips, pencil thin brows, and with curves for days. Rojilio and Oscar looked away with disappointment with the photo, my mother and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes, but we took a sip of our beers and rested our faces into a sympathetic countenance. Rojilio says in a bit of a

dry teary breath, “she’ll never be the same even if she wants to take it all off”, my mother put her hand on Rojelios wrist, “she’ll be ok...even if she wants to take it off, it will still be her choice.” Oscar says in an exhale of his breath, “it’s just not right,” my mother gives him a quick look “Oh stop it Oscar.” I started to laugh, which made Rojelio laugh, and then our light spirits returned to us as we ended the night talking about those kids practicing their tik tok dances across the street.

Later that night, after we said our goodbyes, my mother told me the story of the first time Oscar brought up Beyonce. She felt embarrassed because a Cuban poet, emerging in feminist Caribbean circles, was hanging out with them at a restaurant after finishing an event at the institute where my mother conducted her research. She told me that his gall and arrogance to speak confidently in topics he knows nothing about or is remotely connected to is such a classic Cuban man party trick. “Gay men forget who they are sometimes”, she tells me. Although I still couldn’t believe that it was Beyonce that triggered this, and specifically her sex appeal. The way Beyonce’s body was the site for the contestment of defining what are natural and unnatural Black physical features, the need to mark how and why certain fat deposits and bone shapes are the optimal, original form of beauty for certain bodies, but not others.

In every conversation that I have with one of my mothers Whatsapp-connected friends, we eventually talk about the state of Cuba, the cultural differences and “what’s missing” from whichever First World country the conversation takes place in, and how my mother first met the friend; today on that cool night in Rio de Janeiro we didn’t talk about any of those things. In the midst of anger and desire we skipped those references, that cultural framework. The ghost of Castro wasn’t hiding in our languages, or our voices. We were free to speak, and Beyonce was our choice.

Within the framework of expressive speech, that has been written in detail in the previous section(through polysemic words and figurative metaphors of choice), the Beyonce argument advances the expressive approach of daily conversation from utilizing (dis)content to the specificity in defining a content(ful) or discontent(ful) body, and what were the appropriate features to iconize and the ones to not<sup>34</sup>. In a sense, taste and pleasure were the modes in which proper expression over bodies was debated, with different and opposing racial ideologies fueling the argument. And as we have mentioned, racial ideology is the critical driver in speaking of kinship, sexuality, and intimacy in Cuban conversation due to the colonial legacy of interracial dynamics. In *Memorias...* language around content and discontent was still the method to speak on topics that were censored or uncivilized, but here the discrete element was not utilized since it wasn’t required. But even when it’s not a necessity, the impact and influence to find value in speaking about desire

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<sup>34</sup> Andronis, Mary and Runa Shimi. “Iconization, Fractal Recursivity, and Erasure: Linguistic Ideologies and Standardization in Quichua-Speaking Ecuador.” (2004).



and taste is still the preferred channel to unpack and digest the larger, more complex, social structures hiding behind one's preference. When Castro is out of the picture, sexual-racial preference and typology, ideologies that precede Cuba's contemporary political history, return to the surface as the reference to casual Cuban conversation.

## From Virtual Transcription to Fictional Mediums

As a part of the progression of this project, I have moved onto the virtual speech medium of Whatsapp group chats to discover how expressive speech is redefined and explored in virtual space. The vignettes of in-person conversations from Whatsapp connections are wonderful supplements to understanding the linguistic and ideological context for these conversations. In a series of vignettes, transcriptions, and fictional storytelling, I have explored the different ways to express and communicate what hearing these conversations can be like. Cuba is still sensitive to academic and artistic exploration into Cuban life as they fear the impact new ideas and thoughts might incite against the legacy of the Revolution. For this reason, I did not want to do traditional ethnographic work to explore my question of linguistic expression in Cuban dialogue. Instead, I have compiled a collage that can include all of the details that matter, but they are packaged fictionally. In this sense, speaking with no redactions means to speak in fiction. This short story is told to represent a string of texts between my mother and her best friends.

## Transcription

Yemily: Anittaaa, mira quien viene al concierto hoy...

(picture of him in a leather jacket, black collar, round face, shaved facial hair, square glasses, short hair with grays--He seems to be standing behind a screen of some sort with a wall behind him(indoors))

Yemily: Lo invité porque desde Julio que me fui a Brasil no lo he visto mas y me ha llamado varias veces, no quiero que se crea que me estoy haciendo la Sueca con el: 😊

Elisa: El Vecino?

Yemily: Siii

Ana: {scoff} veo un futuro negro por ahi, una par de negras, de lluvia, eh un Churrascon por ahi(1) {laughs}

Susan: Que estoy caminando y no puedo escribir, eh, el tiempo esta ricismo aqui. Hay una temperatura espectacular con sol y mucho fresco. Dale me duele un poco la rodilla, parece que me hice algo indebido.(sent through voice chat)

Yemily: Oye, yo creo que todavía te esta haciendo efecto el alcohol de ayer, eh, la, la negrad te la a, te la voy a aclarar, tu vera, deja que te lo mande, te lo mande pa ya, pa, pa Vedado.(2)

Ana: Nina pero que racista eres por dios santo, por dios,(3) que mal te hecho la cuidad esa Sueca, de verdad de lo que está creando.(4)

Elisa: Pero que barbaridad gente, pero que barbaridad, ven, susie suelta que sabemos que lo tuyo es el tinte natural, nada de qué majo-meno medio tiempo ni café con leche vamos a ver vamos a ver, vamos honrar nuestros sentimientos más profundo, Ali solo te está poniendo fácil, vaya.(5)

Ana: Mamita, como tú me defiendes, como tu me quieres a mi la verdad que sí, y tú qué posición en un intermedio ahi. ¿Como como como como quedas tu, tu como quedas?(6)

Elisa: No soy como ustedes, bueno..."(7)

### I Eat Sticky Skin(*Como Piel Gomoso*)

Off the coast of Havana, is an island called La Isla de La Juventud. In (year of visitation), Fidel Castro allowed for hundreds of Cubans living in foreign countries to visit home. For his special guests, he wanted a remote place to host and hide them from plain sight; he tasked a small government force to revive a neglected, 19th century sugar plantation and turn it into an inn, they named it *Naty*. It was a true mansion. A mamoncillo garden surrounded by a cloister for the fathers and mothers to watch their children from the shade. Fidel was interested in keeping *Naty* to himself. He personally spoke to the local townspeople of *Mariela* that he hoped they could keep his dream of retiring in that inn alive while he continued to fight for the country. The Ortiz family, respected for their diligent work and craftsmanship, whose ancestors had once armed the slaves of the plantation with blades and guns during a rebellion, volunteered to upkeep it. *Naty* hosted various strange characters from around the world, and was rumored to give her guests gifts. These gifts have remained a mystery to the Ortiz family, for they never received any miraculous gifts. After the fall of the Soviet Union, repairing *Naty* from hurricane and flood damage wasn't so cheap and it became a nuisance. *Naty* was abandoned by Fidel, forgotten in his memory, and became an inn with no guests. It wouldn't be until a biochemist Telma Bernal, and her two friends Alysa and Esmeralda, arrived on *Naty's* doorstep bags in hand as her last guests...

Susana, the youngest of the Ortiz's, was taking a break from altering the family's pants and drinking a hibiscus iced tea in the garden when they arrived. Ariela, her mother, answered the doorbell and took exactly five, completely still, seconds to process the arrival of guests. It was hard for Telma to remember her petrified face since for the rest of their stay she was as joyous as an afternoon sun; Alysa swears that the walls become a warmer tint when she walks in the room. Ariela carried their bags in, one stacked on top of the other, held up by what seemed to be

monstrous strength, and proceeded into the house, treating Telma like she had been expecting her all year. Although, no one knew they were coming. No one, except Arnesto. Susana first heard the guests before she saw them, she took her own five seconds, before storming to her father's office. "Who are these women, what is going on?" Her father, Arnesto Ortiz, was typing in a calculator when she walked in, he sighed and took his glasses off. "They're scientists from Columbia, the university, working on some special project. Emilio, from La Universidad de La Habana, you know him, the poet with the weird nose, he asked me if they could stay here. He's doing us a favor you know, they'll pay us." Susana scoffed, "how much?!" Arnesto squints down at his sheet of paper, "umm, wait I'm looking for it." Susana throws up her hands in the air with a dumbfounded look on her face, waiting for her father's excuse. Arnesto removes his glasses, "listen, it's a lot ok, just go pluck some of the nice looking fruit from the garden for Telma and her friends, you'll make me grow grays, go!" Susana gave him a sarcastic smile and walked back to her chair in the garden and finished her tea.

Susana walks to the guest bedroom with a plate of mamoncillos in her hands. Telma and Alysa are sitting on the bed when they hear a knock at the door. Susana cracks open the door, "Hello? Sorry if I interrupted, I brought some fruit." Alysa jumps up all giddy, "*Ai que lindo!*" Telma and Esmeralda gave Susana a firm handshake and kisses on both cheeks. Alysa had already started eating sour fruit before she gave Susana a hug. Susana couldn't believe the immediate intimacy between them, they chatted for hours before she realized the sun had set and it was dinner time. Alysa, with her dark skin and sharp eyes, spoke of their travels and exhausting connecting flights to Cuba. Telma, with suit pants Susana secretly kept admiring, gave Susana a pin from Paris when she had an academic conference there, she told Susana "I bought too many, you should keep it." Esmeralda, blond and fair skin, complimented Susana's hair. She blushed and offered her some mamoncillo, "Oh thank you, but I can't eat too much sugar."

Susana left the guests alone, figuring how tired they might be jet lagged, and went to her room to write. She throws the denim pants on the ground, and takes her daily prescription of one hour a day to write her forbidden romance novel. A hobby born out of the sexual boredom on La Isla. Her family thought she was a prude because she never spoke of love or sexual interests. It was the opposite. She didn't believe anyone could live up to the expectations of her fantasies.

Breakfast starts at 9:00am. Alysa and Telma awoke first, doing their pilates and yoga in the garden. Then came Esmeralda, counting the beads on her necklace as breakfast was being made. Telma took a 15min shower with her coily hair tied up at the crown of head and came down just as food was being set.

Over an assortment of cold cuts, gouda cheese and ham, the guests had their sandwiches and café con leche for breakfast. Between the Ortiz family and their guest no one said a word, waiting until their personalities came alive.

Telma was the first who had to leave. A personal ride came for her to take her to work, she said she'd be back by dinner. Alysa and Esmeralda were busy updating each other about their lives, laughing about Alysa's dates in Sweden. Esmeralda has a kid back home, and tells Alysa how he's doing.

Susana is tending to the neglected denim of the day past, but hears a rattle from the gate. She walks away from the table as if she's headed to the bathroom, or for a breath of fresh air, alarming no one. She sees a man by the iron-grating. Susana notices his face. "Alberto?" It's a tall dark skinned man, with gray hair and square glasses. Alberto is the town butcher, and is the champion for grand romantic gestures. "Susana! One of your guests, walking in the square, brushed right past my window. She was such a beautiful woman, I brought a pork shoulder from the shop. Let me give it to her, I have to see her again, one more time, please Susana." Susana notices the meat in his arms. "I noticed, why don't you come in for a café, but please, leave after you finish, don't stick around." "Thank you, thank you. I owe you one."

Alberto walked into the garden, and sat in Susana's chair. He gazed at Alysa, the woman he saw, as she walked to the bathroom and back to her room. Alberto did not stay for long, but returned three times that day with different excuses, just to get a glimpse of Alysa. After Telma came home and they had dinner, Alysa opened the conversation up.

"That man, Alberto, asked me on a date. Aiii, I can feel the rush of flattery, I love being back home." "So do you want to see him again?" positioned Telma, "I'm not sure yet, he is pretty attractive, no? But..." Esmeralda teases her, "But what? He's certainly a very attractive man. I see a very *dark* future for you, a rainstorm of Blackness to wash you over." (1) Alysa pouted, "Ay Esmeralda, the alcohol from yesterday must have mixed in with the one tonight and has made you drunk. I should send you that rainstorm to your precious Vedado, considering how much you like Black men." (2) Esmeralda feigns shock with sly eyes, "Alysa, that is so racist, I can't even believe what I'm hearing." (3) Both of them are laughing. Esmeralda takes another poke at Alysa, "That Swedish place you call home must have confused you. You're starting to believe you're one of them." (4)

Telma with a face of shock, and a mischievous disgust, "Come'on now, you're both acting barbaric. Esmeralda, let's not pretend like you don't like a natural dark tint, not half-half, nor cafe con leche

or any mix. It's always been your preference, it's been that way since high school and sure as hell stayed that way. Alysa would just be making things easier for you. Let us all respect our natural inclinations honorably, please.”(5) Esmeralda hugs Telma, “you always come to my defense Telmita, thank you. So tell us, where do you fall on the spectrum? Do you like White or Black men?”(6) Telma rolls her eyes, “I don't have those preferences, that's just for you two.(7) But Alysa, do you like Mr. Alberto?” Telma and Esmeralda watch her closely as she looks to the ceiling and exhales. “No, not really, he's sweet but he seems a little thick in the head.” Telma and Esmeralda shake their heads at each other, “go on the date with him, you've been needing a distraction. Ever since Flujencio dumped you.” Alysa takes a quick breath, “I can't believe he left me for that stuck up White woman. I could have looked like her if I wanted to, Blond hair, Blue eyes, Blond eyebrows, Blond lips, blond teeth, I would have done it better than she did.” Telma laughs, “Aly, no one looks like that. You sound like you've never met a White person.”

Susana, Ariela and Arnesto giggled as they're guests chatted, they were already missing them as they started to drink and shout. Arnesto and Ariela had never seen Susana so animated by these women's life stories. They were resolutely proud of Susana's choice in friendships.

In the quietest hour of the night, the guests fast asleep and heavy stomachs, *Naty* was in a particularly giddy mood and decided to depart with a gift...

Breakfast is at 9:00am. Telma, groggy from the wine and rum(she knows all too well she can't handle her liquor), motions out of bed to get to her gym clothes. She walks over to Alysa's bed and goes to nudge her foot. She stops, “oh sorry Esmeralda”, and then walks over to the other bed and see's Esmeralda sound asleep, she turns back around and screams.

Alysa had become the white woman of her own invention. Her hair, from her scalp down to the fuzz on her toes turned blond and fair, her skin pale, orange, and red, with gold teeth and fingernails. The only cool color on her body had been her eyes, which had inhabited an ice cold tundra of blue.

Arnesto, worried about his guests and angry at *Naty* for compromising the good that was brought to their doorstep, for both the family and her own sake! The guest bedroom became a mini-infirmary and she had the town doctor evaluate her. She was considered physically well, but her mental stability was at risk, she was told to keep her friends close and to stay away from the mirror. The dysphoric dissonance could drive one's own psyche to split and cause severe damage. Alysa tried to remain in bed, but her glance in the mirror had enchanted her. She did not share Telma's terror, she planned an escape into town when the house went to sleep.

Alysa was excited to make her new debut for townspeople, but she wouldn't be the one to break the news. Alberto stopped by the house in the early morning on that day to see if he could be allowed to give Ariela a special sausage he hand-made for breakfast. He knocked on the door, but no one

was in the garden. He stopped by the kitchen window, nobody. An anxiety swirled in his stomach, and he itched his scalp. Alberto let himself in, and heard a commotion upstairs. He barged into the guest room, “What happen-!?” and he saw her. He froze, “a g-g-g-ghost, a ghooossttt!!!” Alberto ran away before the Ortiz’s could stop him, he ran far, tripping and stumbling on his own feet down the hill. He shrieked with his tongue wiggling out of his mouth, “there’s a demon, a ghost in the *Naty* inn, the *Naty*, a white ghost...”

Albertos shrieks reached the ear of everyone in town. The people shared their heads and figured, “Naty did it again.” The townspeople locked their doors after dawn, and the roads were empty during the nighttime.

Susana told Alysa that the people in town were staying indoors, hearing that a ghost had come to La Isla. Alysa felt as empty as the ghost that Alberto thought she was. Instead of walking the late night roads into town, she would get dressed to sit in the garden under the moonlight pet the mamoncillo leaves. Esmeralda and Telma were preoccupied talking to every doctor they knew, looking for a scientific explanation for Alysa’s transformation.

Susana could see Alysa from her bedroom window at night, and sacrificed her early mornings to join her in the garden, and sit beside her. Susana asked her if she would like to hear a story she wrote, and Alysa nodded her head. Susana had never shared her writing before, but overcame her nervousness to comfort a friend. She started from chapter one of her forbidden romance novel, and would stop at the end of the chapter, to let Alysa go to bed settled. On the nights Alysa would come out to the garden finding some solace between doctor visits and a newfound loneliness, Susana would come down and read her a new chapter.

Susana and Alysa finished the novel together, and after the final chapter, with the protagonist discovering that her repressed feelings for feet would be her one true love, Susana asked her about the transformation. “Why did you want this new body, querida?” Alysa responded that she didn’t want it, but she wanted what was supposed to come with the body. She would be the princess in a mansion, and her prince would come by the gate to ask for her hand. Susana patted her head and whispered, “it’s time to live a new fantasy *amor*, this one definitely won’t cut it for the adventurous Alysa that we both know is in there.” That night, Alysa shed away Naty’s gift, the blond hair, her white skin, peeled off in the shower and she returned to her own skin.

~ In this short story I pay a deep tribute to representing the Latin American value in living, through family and kinship, to Garcia Gabriel Marquez and Isabel Allende<sup>3536</sup> ~

## Conclusion

This project has explored the operations and ideologies behind Cuban dialogue. It began by outlining how political critique can survive in a nation with no freedom of expression, and evolved into discovering the ways the past, present and future become important ways language constructs non-Castro spaces. In section 1, we learn that the tools to speak of pleasure result from the political ideologies of 1960s revolutionary Cuba. In section 2, we explore pleasure and race in spaces where Castro is not linguistically present, and how those spaces are constructed across the globe. Speaking of pleasure and intimacy involves a vulnerability that can be discomfoting, but reveals how we relate to ourselves and our hopes for the future, more so than describing how we relate to others. These translations will be the first of many for me, and I hope that my work in this project will support me in my future endeavors.

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<sup>35</sup> Allende, Isabel. 2005. *The House of the Spirits*. New York ; London, Everyman's Library.

<sup>36</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000). Márquez, Gabriel García. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.

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