

FIGURES OF THE “OTHER CUBAN”:
TRAUMA, PERIPERFORMATIVITY AND THE EVERYDAY

By

CHRISTINA A. LEÓN

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2005

Copyright 2005

by

Christina A. León

For my mother, with all my love

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my family. Each of them taught me in ways that only they could. I also thank the bear for her endless companionship. This project could not have been possible without Kim Emery and Leah Rosenberg. Their guidance and critiques have been invaluable. Finally, I thank Cameron for his insightful questions, patience and support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vi
CHAPTER	
1 TRAUMA AND FIGURES OF THE “OTHER CUBAN” IN THE AGÜERO SISTERS.....	1
2 NARRATION OF THE OTHER CUBAN IN “WE CAME ALL THE WAY FROM CUBA SO YOU COULD DRESS LIKE THIS?”	31
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	40
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	41

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

FIGURES OF THE “OTHER CUBAN”: TRAUMA, PERIPERFORMATIVITY AND
THE EVERYDAY

By

Christina A. León

May 2005

Chair: Kimberly Emery
Major Department: English

This thesis expands on Cristina García’s notion of the “other Cuban.” Through readings of García’s *The Agüero Sisters* and Achy Obejas’ *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?*, I locate figures of the other Cuban that have periperformative relationships to trauma. Instead of focusing solely on the catastrophic, they enforce the need to think of the everyday. Through testimonio as a narrative technique, these texts show how traumas exist alongside and intersect with each other. These texts, through the other Cuban, also insist on a need to understand issues of queerness in relation to heteronormative citizenship. García and Obejas invoke figures of the other Cuban that offer up a viable identification for Cubans outside of the hegemonic discourses of Cubanness.

CHAPTER 1
TRAUMA AND FIGURES OF THE “OTHER CUBAN” IN THE AGÜERO SISTERS

In an interview, Cuban American author Cristina García comments "As far as Cuban identity goes, there are three concentric circles—The Cubans, the Miami-Cubans, and the other Cubans. I'm in the third ring three times removed" (García qtd in Kevane 71). Implicit in her statement is a binary that the “other Cuban” disrupts. This binary consists of the Cubans that remain on the island and the exilios that live in Miami. These two groups have been the main options for a political Cuban subject since the Cuban revolution. One could either remain in Cuba and subscribe wholeheartedly to communism or move to Miami and hope for the overthrow of Castro’s regime, all the while remaining virulently nostalgic for a Cuba that has passed. García seeks an option outside of these two political stances. Despite the stark opposition between these two stances, they share one narrative of the Revolution as a traumatic, binary split for Cubans. This narration of the Revolution, though not the traditional explicit performative, has had an enormous performative effect on Cubans by creating such a dominant binary surrounding Cuban identity.

Julian Wolfreys, in his text “Occasions of Trauma and Testimony: Witnessing, Memory and Responsibility,” writes that the traumatic event makes an incision in the self and clarifies that "This is the case, whether by 'self' one indicates a single subject, an individual subjected to a catastrophic experience, or a national, communal or cultural subject, such as a nation or race" (198). The Cuban community effectively split, due to the trauma of the Revolution. Cubans have an event in their pasts that has changed their

lives forever and has haunted them. Indeed, Cristina Maria Garcia, author of Havana USA, writes about Cubans in Miami that "The new Cuban émigrés perceived themselves as exiles, not immigrants. They did not want to begin life anew as norteamericanos" (Maria Garcia 1). The trauma of these Cubans is that they never thought of themselves as leaving their country permanently. Because of this, they have an intense nostalgia for the past that freezes a notion of what Cuba was. This nostalgia has homogenized the political view of Cuban exiles in Miami. Garcia notes this when saying, "Miami is such a political hothouse that suffers little dissidence. It can be an intolerant place. It is frequently monolithic in its approach to Cuba" (Garcia qtd Kevane 71). While Cubans in Miami seem to have a monolithic approach to Cuba, fervent Cubans who have remained staunchly loyal to the Revolution are the other extreme to the traumatic self that has been split.

As García showcases, there is a need to move beyond this split in Cubanness. I'm interested in expanding on García's notion of the "other Cuban." What sort of ramifications would this entail? How might an "other Cuban" perspective shift the way in which we receive the Cuban story? What sort of relationship to trauma might this other Cuban have?

Both García's novel The Agüero Sisters and Achy Obejas' short story "We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?" performatively make the perspective and political subjectivity of the "other Cuban" possible. A perperformative structure focuses on narratives and performative events in relation to each other. These texts weave together national and catastrophic traumas alongside everyday traumas. National and catastrophic examples are the like that make the news. They are usually the

traumatic events that history is structured around: wars, revolutions, genocide and such. Often, catastrophic or national traumas have lingering, everyday traumas that form folks' lives. Everyday traumas might take the form as the residual effects of catastrophic traumas. Or they might be the trauma of institutionalized oppressions: sexism, racism, classism, or heterosexism.

The periperformative storytelling of García and Obejas has an intertextual structure that showcases the importance of thinking of the quotidian, material constraints that affect certain lives. These narratives not only contain multiple perspectives, but also have characters that inhabit the "other Cuban" identity. Such characters break down the binary of Cubanness by focusing on everyday traumas in a way that remains critical in relation to both the Cuban and U.S. governments. One significant example of an everyday trauma is the trade embargo on Cuba. Not only does this embargo prohibit material exchange, it also prohibits dialogue. In contrast, the figure of the other Cuban seeks dialogue.

Obejas and García offer narratives that present views and perspectives that work outside of dominant discourses on Cuba. Together, they problematize staunch loyalty to any monolithic narrative on Cuba. Furthermore, both authors employ a periperformative critique elaborating that partial, fragmented stories exist alongside other traumas and within the vicinity of trauma. One storytelling technique they invoke is testimony or testimonio. Testimony is the key narrative technique of trauma. This particular storytelling technique is also used by Latina Feminists because it presents a personal, political narrative that defies one, univocal version of history.

These narratives also resist a language of nostalgia. Ann Cvetkovich's innovative work on trauma in her book, An Archive of Feelings, focuses on everyday traumas in relation to lesbian publics. Cvetkovich notes that there is a need to "move beyond narratives of assimilation or national belonging that demand feelings of unambivalent patriotism or that restrict the language of loss to sentimental forms of nostalgia" (119). The figure of the other Cuban, because of its suspicion of the nation-state and the binary of Cubanness, works outside of such a language of loss and nostalgia to form a new subjectivity of Cubanness.

García's and Obejas' narratives, the figure of the other Cuban has a queer quality. Nationalist discourses, both in Cuba and the U.S., seek to nationalize a particular heteronormative citizenship. People who fall outside of this strict notion of heteronormative citizenship have a queer relation to the state. Ann Cvetkovich states that the importance of "the interventionist potential of trauma histories to disrupt celebratory accounts of the nation that ignore or repress the violence and exclusions that are so often the foundation of the nation-state" (119). These exclusions are imposed disproportionately on queer citizens. Both in Cuba and the U.S., there have been exclusions and violent silences surrounding queer folks living with everyday discrimination, violence and AIDS.

Amy Villarejo comments that conservative rhetoric surrounding Cuba is an "ideological project of naturalizing drift, of condemning Cuba and the Revolution in the names of capitalism and democracy requires ammunition, and it has come in a surprising, indeed astonishing, alternate name: one that I shall call *gays-and-lesbians*" (Villarejo 124). Both of these texts invoke queer Cuban subjects, yet they succeed in avoiding what

Julien Schnabel's Before Night Falls does with the queer Cuban subject of Reinaldo Arenas. Villarejo locates Before Night Falls as one of the films that has been taken up in the name of capitalism to denounce Castro, communism and revolutionary politics. The film denounces the Castro regime for the inhumane treatment of queers. Yet, it makes no mention of the fact that Reinaldo Arenas committed suicide during advanced stages of AIDS in New York City during the 1980s. Indeed, to invoke that fact would invoke a history of American state sanctioned homophobia. New York was one of the most hostile places for people with AIDS due to homophobic and classist government decisions. Hospitals were closed in the neediest parts of town. The film does not even mention AIDS. By silencing the crisis of AIDS in New York and for Arenas, the film posits that the only homophobia and heterosexism Arenas encounters is in Cuba. Thus, the film implicitly participates in a discourse that condemns Cuba in the name of gays and lesbians in order to promote capitalist ideology and condemns communism.

In the Agüero Sisters, Cristina García works outside such hegemonic frameworks on Cuba, capitalism and communism. Instead, she weaves together the narratives of many characters to challenge a patriarchal, monolithic history. Her book opens with the Ignacio Agüero murdering his wife, Blanca Agüero while they are on an expedition in Cuba. Throughout the rest of the novel, her two daughters, Reina and Constancia, struggle with the lingering trauma of her mysterious death. Their children have their own struggles, quite different from the Agüero Sister's. The incessant hauntings and responsibilities of family lead the Agüero sisters to negotiate their mother's death and compare their own partial histories of their familial past. Each sister is haunted by Blanca to bear witness to her death. Not only do the sisters create a dialogue in the

narrative, but the narrative also structurally performs a dialogue or relay between the different narratives of the characters. By breaking up the novel into smaller, fragmented narratives of each character, which alternate section by section, García creates a constant shift in perspective. Because each section is a personal perspective, these sections employ the Latina feminist technique of *testimonio*. The partial and personal aspect of *testimonio* makes it open for conversation. It is not a closed or totalizing narrative. This structure, which creates dialogue amongst *testimonios*, works to open up histories, instead of seeking a univocal history.

García's microcosmic narrative allegorically illustrates the macrocosmic situation of Cubans and Miami Cubans. Her narrative posits that there is a specter of the past—the revolution—that haunts both Cubans and Cuban-Americans. As a family, they have a filial responsibility to each other. Familial ties and the phantom of the revolution place an ethics of responsibility for dialogue between exiles and non-exiles. The novel also pushes an analysis that moves beyond the trauma of the Revolution and focuses on everyday concerns through the younger generation characters, Dulce and Silvestre.

The Agüero Sisters begins with the traumatic event of Blanca's death. This spectral event haunts the entire novel and, specifically, Blanca's two daughters. It is important to note that Blanca's name literally translates to "white." This name is significant because of her racial privilege. Also, her early, unexplained death contributes to her opacity and her overall figure as a phantom for both of her daughters. Indeed, her death is not fully explained to her daughters. The opening chapter of the book, where Blanca dies, is also the prologue. It is part of the book, yet sectioned off from it as well. This structurally mirrors how events work. An event happens, haunts the rest of the

narrative, but always remains inaccessible in its entirety. In García's novel, the haunting is performative. It eventually spurs dialogue and change. Dated September 8, 1948, Ignacio and Blanca Agüero go on an expedition in the Zapata Swamp. Blanca spotted a rare hummingbird and "turned to alert her husband and found him staring at her, fixed as a muscle behind his double-barreled gun" (García 5). Ignacio shoots Blanca in the throat and then "carried his wife seventeen miles to the nearest village and began to tell his lies" (García 5). With this last statement, García signals that the subsequent memoirs from Ignacio, scattered throughout the rest of the novel, are lies. Unlike the other narratives that weave together in the text, García specifically sections off Ignacio's narratives in italics. This italicization functions as a warning of Ignacio's propensity for lying and juxtaposes Ignacio's version of the family history against the other histories in the novel. Indeed, the rest of the novel, barring Ignacio's letters, works to reconstruct, through partial perspectives, the traumatic event of Blanca's death. By beginning with this prologue, García sets up a mistrust of Ignacio and his monolithic, patriarchal history. The structural separation of the prologue places Blanca as the phantom or ghost whose haunting perpetuates a history that requires dialogue to bear witness to her death.

The novel, after the prologue, begins 42 years after Blanca's death. The narratives of three women are woven together, along with the italicized memoirs of Ignacio (the murderer and husband of Blanca) and Silvestre (Constancia's son), to form a multi-voiced narrative. These women are Reina Agüero and Constancia Agüero, Blanca's two daughters, and Dulce Fuerte, Reina's daughter. Both daughters are haunted by the traumatic loss of their mother, and the eerie incompleteness of her death. Their personal narratives sharply juxtapose the monolithic, oppressive history presented to them by their

father. They respond to the haunting of Blanca through a “form of testimony, a bearing witness or being called to witness” (Wolfreys 185). Wolfreys warns that “the radical otherness, the alterity of that which we must respond, is understood when it comes to be recognized that testimony, as with responsibility and in order to be responsible, *in order to be testimony and not merely an account generated according to some protocol*, has to be transformative or inventive” (186). Indeed, the novel responds to this call of testimony in order to transform the history of their family. The partial perspectives of the women’s narrative strive to give voice to Blanca, who was silenced by Ignacio. As shown structurally through the event being placed in the prologue, the daughters will never be able to fully reconstruct Blanca’s death. Neither of the daughters experienced this particular event. As Wolfreys says, an exact recreation of the event is not possible; instead the task “becomes a matter of addressing the ‘impossibility and necessity’ of bearing witness to the ‘unexperienced experience,’ and it is through the structural gap, in that grammar of absence and loss, that the other comes to be heard” (190). By structurally sectioning off Blanca’s death, García’s text performs this “grammar of absence and loss.” She showcases the difficult responsibility of bearing witness to an event that, through its alterity, remains inaccessible in its entirety. While the event remains inaccessible to most characters in the book, the readers are granted the privilege of knowing what happened at the Zapata Swamp. Because the readers have access to this event that is so inaccessible to the characters, García can better show the alterity and singularity of historical events. Her characters periperformatively work to reconstruct their familial history, yet García structures her novel in a way that shows they will never know their mother’s death in its entirety.

The Agüero Sisters works to challenge a monolithic history through a “reorientation towards the reading of history, of reading ‘history’ and its representations differently in relation to trauma” (Wolfreys 183). As mentioned, the text takes on this responsibility through testimony. In the opening of Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios, The Latina Feminist Group (TLFG) writes that “From our different personal, political, ethnic, and academic trajectories, we arrived at the importance of *Testimonio* as a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (TLFG 2). Indeed, García’s own characters have differing personal, political and ethnic identities. Yet, that disparity enriches the use of testimonios. Instead of having a univocal testimony that stands as the only homogenizing history, these personal, partial perspectives weave together to create conversational histories. The Latina Feminist Group goes on to assert “Our testimonials continually disrupt the essentialized, homogenized understanding of Latina as we present our respective genealogical and historical inheritances” (TLFG 6). Again, testimonio staves off essentialist notions of subjects and history. This is achieved through the specificity and particularity of testimonio. It emphasizes the singularity of witnessing. Yet woven together, the testimonios create a dialogue as they comment on each other. The Latina Feminist Group explains, “To write and theorize about a range of Latina experiences, however, required being in *sustained dialogue* with one another” (TLFG 9). This constant dialogue remains crucial to understanding the past because “the materiality of the historical event is *only ever available* through the relay and concomitant deferral that is the condition of the materiality of signifiers” (Wolfreys 183-184). These testimonios also offer a way to understand the individual experience in

relation to historical and institutionalized oppressions. Ann Cvetkovich offers that “Individual testimony, trauma’s paradigmatic genre, plays a significant role in providing a point of mediation between systemic structures and lived experiences of them” (123). García weaves together the testimonios of her characters, 42 years after the event of Blanca’s death, to create a both a deferral and relay surrounding their familial history and to situate their singular narratives into the larger Cuban narrative.

These testimonios showcase that trauma narratives happen alongside each other. Such narratives work periperformatively. As the added prefix suggests, periperformatives, “though not themselves performatives... are *about* performatives and, more properly ...cluster *around* performatives” (Sedgwick 68). Periperformatives emphasize spatiality because they exist in reference to other performative acts. By having a spatial and relational dimension, periperformatives invoke communities. Instead of having simply one narrative, different narratives of different people exist next to each other and influence each other. Indeed, they are intertextual as they function alongside other performative acts. This gives them a more historical relevance as Sedgwick states, “It also seems to me that the periperformative dimension—and oddly, just insofar as it invokes the spatial and the analogic—also has more aptitude than the explicit performative for registering historical change” (79). Because it exists alongside other acts, the periperformative invokes a “multidirectional” narrative of history, rather than a monolithic narrative. Rather than locating one factor in historical change, it can reveal intersecting histories surrounding particular issues and challenge monolithic histories.

Sedgwick emphasizes thinking of the spatial position of *beside*. Such a move disrupts dichotomous and monolithic logic. She writes

Invoking a Deleuzian interest in planar relations, the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos. *Beside* is an interesting preposition also because there's nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. *Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who's shared a bed with siblings. *Beside* compromises a wide range of desiring, rivaling, leaning twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations. (Sedgwick 3)

Emphasizing the preposition “beside,” for the Agüero family, invokes a heterogeneous intersection of subjects and histories in the same space. Their histories intersect with each other and affect each other. García represents this periperformative quality of history structurally by arranging various testimonios that add to and comment on each other. This structure focuses on the multiple subjects affected by a traumatic event. Also, it shows that traumas exist alongside each other. Instead of emphasizing what many would assume as the victims of trauma, which focuses on the pathologization of subjects, a periperformative and *beside* spatiality would focus on communities. And thus, it would focus on a productive aspect of trauma and traumatic events by showing how whole communities and subjects emerge from trauma.

Such an analysis figures quite importantly in Ann Cvetkovich's study because she is “interested not just in trauma survivors but in those whose experiences circulate in the vicinity of trauma and are marked by it” (3). She writes, “I want to place moments of extreme trauma *alongside* moments of everyday emotional distress that are often the only sign that trauma's effects are still being felt” (my italics 3). By having multiple, partial

testimonios, García highlights that events affect many people in various ways and that their narratives exist alongside and intersect with each other.

After the prologue, Reina Agüero's is the next narrative we receive in the novel. It begins on December 1990 in El Cobre, Cuba. García describes Reina as "five feet eleven, a good four inches taller than most of the men with whom she works. Her mouth is large and flawless, with barely discernible corners. The most daring of her colleagues call her *Compañera Amazona*, a moniker she secretly relishes" (García 10). This physical description stands in sharp juxtaposition to her sister's physique. Her dark skin and curvaceous body are more representative of the type of folks who remained in Cuba. Indeed, roughly half of the Cubans who remain in Cuba are of African descent.

In this chapter, we discover that Reina is suffering from a persistent case of insomnia. Reina lives in her father's former study. Her lover "blamed the anarchy of books in the study for Reina's insomnia" (García 11). The books are her father's legacy and "nothing has changed here since her father's death, forty years before" (11). Her father too suffered from insomnia, "but his was complete and incurable and drove him to suicide two years after his wife's death" (13). Something concerning Reina's familial history keeps her awake at night, haunts her. For example, "On the worst of nights, Reina feels herself trapped as if on a magnetic plateau, with no fix on the blackness. She thinks often of her mother, hears her voice again, feels the warm press of her breast against her cheek. Reina was six years old when her mother died on the collecting expedition in the Zapata Swamp. How is it possible that she has existed without her all of these years?" (García 14). The memory and loss of Blanca haunts Reina, refusing to let her sleep.

Ignacio's insomnia leads to his death. Reina remembers Ignacio's last written words before he committed suicide: "The quest for truth is far more glorious than the quest for power" (Garcia 13). After writing this line, he shot himself in the heart. Interestingly, Ignacio was a scientist who continually searched for the truth. Yet, his truth was always the monolithic, "objective" truth. This notion of the truth is something that only those in power can designate. He not only studied nature, but collected specimens by killing animals and preserving them to provide a natural history for Cuba. His way of writing history is to kill, so that subjects of history can no longer move. For Ignacio to know and to understand things, they must be static, dead and frozen. Indeed, he impossibly strives for an immobile, univocal history.

Katherine Combs finds these tendencies in the memoirs scattered throughout the novel. She says, "Because of his dedication to the pursuit of scientific truth and the meticulousness of his prose, his audience members feel they can trust his claims implicitly, even though they are made aware in the first chapter of the novel that he is a liar and a murder" (Combs 26). While Combs points out that the scientific ideologies of truth and objectivity infiltrate Ignacio's writing, she assumes that this makes his writing trustworthy. On the contrary, I would argue that through the warning in the prologue, that Ignacio tells lies, García sets Ignacio up as the writer who cannot be trusted. She showcases that one should be immediately suspicious and critical of any "objective" or monolithic narrative of history. We can only know history and the world around us through language. Therefore, what we call history always comes down to a matter of reading, and equally, rereading and rewriting in as responsible a manner as possible, however neutral we seek to be, or (mis)believe we can be. At the same time, the work of

reading history must necessarily take place precisely because “the historical occurrence is neither fully perceivable in the event nor subsequently accessible after the fact of its occurrence” (Wolfreys 184). My claim is not that Ignacio's compulsions for writing history are inherently wrong or oppressive. Rather, the way he writes is irresponsible. He precisely misbelieves that he can write a neutral, totalizing history and fails to acknowledge that the historical event can only ever be relayed through language, language that slips, disseminates and exceeds any mimetic representation. Precisely because they are dead, Ignacio’s specimens cannot relay a history of natural life in Cuba.

Reina's haunting and insomnia pushes her in a very different direction than her father. In *El Cobre*, Reina gets struck by lightning while working in the rain. After the accident, Reina's insomnia persists, but now she doesn't even enjoy making love as she used to. Now, when she makes love, “nothing, not even Pepin, whose hands erase all borders, whose mouth clashes against her in love, can make bliss return” (Garcia 66).

Reina ponders over her current state ...

Well, what is it she wants now? Reina wonders whether it's nostalgia to yearn for her mother, nostalgia to gather her shadows all these years. Why else would she choose to live like this, amidst the debris of her childhood and Papa's dead specimens? What truths can they possibly reveal to her after so long? Can they tell her why her mother died, why her sister was sent away? (67)

Her haunting leads her back to her mother and her sister. Instead of having a nostalgic, static view of the past, she searches for a feminine history that has been kept from her. Furthermore, she searches for truths, not one truth like her father. Indeed, Blanca invokes in Reina a yearning to piece together the different shadows that she has cast on people's lives. The shadows are yet another sign of the specter of Blanca—she is not there but has left an imprint and is therefore always present in the negative.

These questions lead her to a memory of the events surrounding her mother's funeral. She was kept from her mother's corpse, by her father. Yet, she snuck away into "the last embalming chamber, her mother laying on a rusting pedestal, her throat an estuary of color and disorder, as if a bloody war had taken place beneath her chin" (68). Despite her father's lies, Reina knows that something happened to her mother, far different than what she has been told. Blanca's corpse testifies a different story than the one Ignacio has told. After yet another sleepless night, Reina is driven to leave her father's study where "the past she combs through is long dead" (95). Reina realizes that the stuffed birds and specimens will not lead her to any truths and do not convey her history. She runs to a University's biology building and searches for her mother asking "Would her mother be there, stuffed and inert like everything Papa killed?" (99). She finds nothing, but feels "burning with a forged history"(100). Reina realizes that the answers to her questions, to her hauntings, to her insomnia are not to be found in Cuba, but rather in Miami with her sister. Hence, she demands to leave Cuba, and finally makes her journey across the ocean to Miami.

The text moves from Reina to her sister, Constancia. Her physical description sets her starkly apart from her sister. Garcia writes that Constancia is "fifty-one years old, but her skin is soft and white. Her dark hair is arranged in a French bun, and her nails are lacquered to match her carnelian lips. Constancia is partial to Adolfo suits, which set off her petite figure, and she completes every ensemble with a short strand of pearls" (Garcia 20). This image of Constancia sharply contrasts the image of her sister. Instead of having the large, strong body of a worker, Constancia has the petite frame of a lady. Furthermore, her description emphasizes her whiteness and her class level. This contrast

is significant because, as Reina resembles a population of Cubans in Cuba, Constancia's whiteness and upper-class status resembles the exilios in Miami. One wears a worker's jumpsuit, and the other wears Adolfo suits. Where Reina is dark, Constancia is light. Indeed, they are disparate in their colors, class and gender displays.

The two sisters not only have different images, but have also received different versions of their mother's death and, thus, experience the haunting of Blanca differently. While Reina saw her mother's corpse, Constancia never did. Instead, her father told both of them that Blanca had drowned in the swamp. When Reina said what she had seen, Ignacio said it was impossible. Later, "Papi finally confided to Constancia that what Reina had seen was no lie. Their mother had shot herself in the Zapata Swamp, aimed the gun at her own throat. He made Constancia promise never to tell Reina, that the secret would only reopen wounds" (80). This promise kept Ignacio's version of history alive, even if it was a lie. The promise kept the sisters separated as they had been for most of their lives. As Constancia kept this secret, she and Reina failed to reopen wounds, to reopen their traumatic experience of their mother's death. Constancia "remembers thinking that Mama may have died, but she'd be impossible to bury, that she'd remain in their lives forever, sulfurous as her absence"(80). Again, Constancia confirms that the phantom or specter of Blanca is very persistent. The sisters' versions of their mother's death stays separate until they meet again.

Indeed, their meeting in Miami is so significant because most of their lives have been lived apart from one another. Constancia recalls that when she was only five months old her mother left their house. She returned over two years later, pregnant with Reina. We do not have a full account of what happened to Blanca during those two

years, but we do know that Reina's father was a man of a color. When Reina was born, Constanca tried desperately to torture her and make her cry. Because of this, Blanca threatened to leave again. So "Papi took Constanca to stay on Abuelo Ramon's ranch in Camaguey. It was supposed to last only the summer. It endured for the next six years" (48). She finally came home after her mother died. Then the sisters were separated by the Cuban Revolution. Constanca went to New York, while Reina remained loyal to the revolution. Reina realizes that "she understood as little of her sister's life in America as she had in Cuba" (69). The two have been exiled from each other by two traumatic events. Yet, the traumatic event of their mother's death leads them back to each other twice.

Blanca's ghost haunts Constanca quite differently than Reina. Because Constanca received the patriarchal history of her mother's death, she was not as willing as her sister to remember and reconstruct her mother's history. Furthermore, because she was sent away from her home at the threat of her mother leaving, Constanca was more allied with her father, who still visited her on her abuelo's ranch. Because of all these obstructions, her haunting had to be more apparent and came not merely as a haunting, but also as an apparition. Blanca, the ghost of Blanca, manifested on her face. Blanca's face took over Constanca's face, which had given her so much pride as a cosmetics retailer. The specter of the past is much harder to ignore when it is literally written all over Constanca's face. Garcia writes "it's impossible to avoid her reflection entirely, the reluctant dialogue on every surface in the house" (106). Blanca haunts Constanca to force her into participating in a dialogue, no matter how reluctant she may be.

When Reina first arrives in Miami, the exchange between the two sisters starts easily as they take comfort in being reunited once again. At first they do not tackle the issue of Blanca's death. They do not reopen wounds. But then Reina convinces Constancia to take her husband's boat out. Here, with the fluidity of the water, Reina first feels the urge to discuss her mother's death. Reina "wants to tell Constancia again what she saw at the funeral home. Describe the colors of Mami's devastated throat. Force her to listen. Shout it loud in her sister's face. Mami couldn't have drowned, like her father said. No she couldn't have drowned, which means their father must have lied. And if Papa lied, what the hell was the truth?" (167). Indeed, Reina already knows that Ignacio's version of Blanca's death should be mistrusted.

Constancia wants to delve into a dialogue with Reina, but then stops herself because it upsets her. Garcia writes, "During their first days together in Miami, Reina asked Constancia to grant her small intimacies. Intimacies that Reina and their mother had shared. But soon Constancia found this too upsetting to sustain. Her memories of Mama are altogether different from her sister's, hardly benign" (174). Garcia sharply juxtaposes the different perspectives, experiences and histories of the sisters to show that no memory is benign. The past, always reconstructed into a partial, particular narrative, is cancerous and spreads throughout the novel. As Reina ponders "the past is little more than this: a series of erasures and perfected selections" (Garcia 163). History is only ever the work of a reconstruction of singular events. It is only ever accessible after the fact, through a relay of language. The narration necessarily erases and selects, as every aspect and perspective would be impossible to relate. The past can never be reconstructed mimetically, as it actually happened. Indeed, the history can only ever

encompass specters and ghosts; it is hauntological and not ontological. Regardless, Constancia still clings onto the hope that Ignacio's version of history is correct. She decides to tend to the specimens that Reina has brought from Cuba that Ignacio himself killed and preserved. No matter how much she cleans them, "the birds still look dead" (181). The only thing that looks alive is her mother's face, staring at her through a mirror, "as if she knew someone would ask her a question long after her death" (181). Constancia strives to uphold a monolithic, patriarchal history, yet Blanca's specter won't let her.

Constancia resists being "faced" with her mother's death and, instead, capitalizes on the intense nostalgia Cuban folks in Miami have for Cuba. She begins a line of face and body products called *Cuerpo de Cuba*, literally meaning body of Cuba. García writes that each bottle "is affixed with a label featuring a cameo of her mother's face (now her own) beneath the ornate logo *Cuerpo de Cuba*" (129). Her advertisements have an antique and tropical look to "appeal to her client's memories, to the remembered splendors of their Cuban youth. Her motto—*Time may be indifferent but you needn't be*—appeals to their anxious vanity" (132). Indeed, Cubans in Miami today spend much money on Cuban memorabilia and the internet company, Ebay, even has a special section for Cuban memorabilia. This nostalgia represents a frozen image of what Cuba was much like Ignacio's specimens. These folks feel the trauma of exile, but refuse to negotiate the fact that Cuba has gone on without them. They suffer from the same delusion that Ignacio invested in. They believe that these preserved objects can actually, mimetically represent Cuba. Indeed, this marketing scheme appeals to the nostalgia that wants to forget that time has passed. It also tries to homogenize a notion of the body of

Cuba and Cubanness, as if there is just one type. And this nostalgia is certainly vain. It focuses on a first person, monolithic narrative of Cuba and falls prey to Ignacio's logic concerning history.

Judith Butler's new book Precarious Life warns against such first person, monolithic narratives. While it focuses on U.S. relations with the Middle East, it also provides interesting critiques for U.S. relations with Cuba. Butler warns against the danger of starting any monolithic narrative with 9/11. To do this erases all of the explanations for such an event. Indeed, if we take seriously a notion of post sovereign subjectivity (an understanding of individuals in circumstances), then we must not search for only one point of origin of violence within isolated individuals. Instead of vilifying or exonerating such individuals, we must instead ask how they occur.

Such limited narratives that focus on individuals and one event to explain historical change necessarily omit other narratives and perspectives. And although the Cuban revolution remains a very different event than 9/11, monolithic narratives and perspectives prove to be a large political and ethical problem in both. Butler's insight is useful for the very different, monolithic narratives that constitute contemporary discourse on Cuba and Cuban identity.

Butler, instead, calls for a decentering of the first-person narratives. This particular shift creates a better understanding of power and agency. Instead of fully volitional subjects, we get a notion of subjects in context. She says,

We have to shore up the first person point of view, and preclude from the telling accounts that might involve a decenter of the narrative "I" within the international political domain. This decentering is experienced as part of the wound that we have suffered, though, so we cannot inhabit that position. This decentering is precisely what we seek to rectify through a recentering. A narrative emerges to

compensate for the enormous narcissistic wound opened up by the public display of our physical vulnerability. (Butler 6-7)

Butler urges us to think of wounds and of trauma as an opportunity to see our own vulnerability, instead of re-asserting a narrative that focuses solely around the sovereign subject. She maintains that vulnerability and trauma can be opportunities to re-imagine a world in which we are connected and tied to others. This sort of de-centered narrative gives us a better understanding of how events happen.

Such a de-centered narrative would benefit analyses concerning Cuba. They would not only de-center the upper and middle class that left Cuba, they would also avoid using Castro as a synecdoche for Cuban Communism. Indeed, to truly believe that one man has brainwashed an entire island is a naïve and grossly reductive notion of history, agency and power. Many things must be considered and problematized when addressing Cuban and the Revolution: race, gender, class, sexuality, memory, history and trauma. Trauma figures in this narrative as many Cuban Americans remain traumatized by the Cuban Revolution as an event. This event creates a rupture in their lives and many of their identities are figured around this event. Indeed, their politics focus on this event as a powerfully motivating source. But figuring trauma solely around this event, much like starting a narrative about Cuba monolithically with this event, erases many histories and people. García's use of multiple testimonios decenters any one narrative surrounding the Agüero family. This decentering and pluralizing of narratives presents us with subjects in context.

García does not write a narrative that allows Constanca to profit from such a first person narrative. Constanca receives a letter from her uncle, who died many years before in Cuba. In the letter, he writes that he "buried Papi's last papers there...*I could*

not trust myself to stay silent, as your father asked" (255). These buried papers compel Constancia to go back to Cuba. Before she leaves, she decides to consult the santero she has been seeing since Blanca's face has appeared on her own. The santero tells her "that she must go with her sister to the sacred trees by the river before returning to Cuba. That in Cuba, the secrets will lie buried in their original grave" (260). Before receiving more memoirs from her father, she must first engage in active dialogue with her own sister.

Both sisters proceed to the ocean to carry out some ceremonies prescribed by the santero. Here, they finally confront each other with their particular versions of the familial history. This scene takes place in the chapter entitled "The Flowers of Exile." Indeed, these two sisters have been in exile from each other for the majority of their lives. Constancia thinks to herself, "What separates her from her mother's resemblance? What ultimately divides their blood? And to whom does she owe allegiance? All these years Constancia thought it was her father. She's no longer certain" (274). This prompts Constancia to talk to her sister. She goes on to confess what she promised to never tell, that Mama didn't drown and Reina affirms that she didn't drown. Her sister then replicates Ignacio's story, saying "Mama shot herself. Papi told me not to tell you, Reina, that it would only make things worse" (274). As the tension between the clashing stories mounts, the ocean becomes more violent. Reina says it's impossible, that Blanca couldn't have reached the trigger. She says "You think the dead just lie still, Constancia? Coño, just look at yourself" (275). Reina finally tells Constancia that Ignacio "shot her like one of his birds, and then he watched her die" (275). With this confession finally released, Constancia lunges towards Reina and attacks her "sick and trembling with her father's claim" (275). Constancia still struggles to maintain her father's version of history. Reina

then strangles Constanica "to choke out the final lies. Papa's lies" (276). They continue to physically fight and Constanica pushes Reina off of the boat. Reina comes close to drowning, but Constanica, after realizing that "knowledge is a kind of mirage," grabs her back in the boat and resuscitates her. The dialogue, though extremely tumultuous, brings them together, out of the trauma of their mother's death and out of exile from each other.

Constanica and Reina's reconstruction of their mother's death and of their mutual trauma takes place violently. Indeed, their near repetition of murder appears to be what traditional trauma theorists would call acting out. Cvetkovich comments that "I refuse the sharp distinction between mourning and melancholy that leads Dominick LaCapra, for example, to differentiate between 'working through,' the successful resolution of trauma, and 'acting out,' the repetition of trauma that does not lead to transformation" (164). Through acting out their mutual frustrations and their divergent perspectives of what happened to their mother, Constanica and Reina deal with and work through their ghosts of the past. This narrative resists a pathologization of subjects that grapple with trauma. Instead, it shows how the trauma of their mother's death pushes them to revise their histories and come together again. Indeed, it shows how trauma can produce change. Yet, García resists thinking of a utopian reunion for Cubans and Cuban Americans. Such a writing of the coalition would present a naïve notion of what divides these sets of Cubans. Instead, she knows that the class and racial differences, and the different perspectives produced, would make for an uneasy reunion. Still, she urges dialogue.

The ocean between Miami and Cuba is where this scene takes place. The two sisters, both Cuban, finally speak after being in exile from each other. They provide an

exchange of partial histories, propelled by filial responsibility and the phantom of their mother. Their narrative is a microcosmic example of the current macrocosmic situation between Cubans in Cuba and the Cuban exiles in Miami. These two sets of Cubans are performatively separated by a traumatic event, the Cuban revolution. Yet, the figure of the other Cuban works outside of this separation.

Focusing on Blanca's death and the narrative of the two sisters, in The Agüero Sisters, still focuses on a major, catastrophic event. Some of the more liminal characters, though, reinforce the need for thinking of the everyday in relation to the catastrophic. Many times, it is in the everyday that trauma can be felt and found. Reina's daughter, Dulce Fuerte, has lived with the aftermath and legacy of the Revolution. Her perspective, her testimonios, have a much more straightforward tone, unlike Constancia's and Reina's testimonios which are haunted by memory and nostalgia. Dulce's narrative begins in Havana. She says "*Sex is the only thing they can't ration in Havana. It's the next-best currency after dollars, and much more democratic, if you ask me*" (García 51). From the first words of her narrative, Dulce emphasizes material realities that concern the everyday. Her opening sentences signal the urgency of facing the reality of survival in Cuba. Dulce's narrative not only criticizes the harsh regulations of the Cuban government, but also the trade embargo by stating that sex is a more democratic currency than dollars, the supposed currency of democracy.

She describes the prostitution in Havana that many women are economically forced into to survive. Furthermore, she admits the failure of the economy, saying "Dollars mean privileges. A roll of toilet paper. A bottle of rum. Pesos mean *te jodes*. You're fucked. It's that simple" (Garcia 53). Dulce exposes the corruption of the government by

showcasing that babalawos are the only Cubans who make a decent living. Babalawos are the highest ranking priests the Santeria, a Cuban hybrid religion. Their main function is divine communication. Dulce says, "There's one around the corner from my building who's redone his entire house with money from *santeria* initiations" (56). The government refers clients to this babalawo and they get a cut of his pay. "You know things have gotten desperate when the Party needs to buy off the babalwos" Dulce says (56). Her testimonio ironically showcases the failure of the Cuban government to deliver a secularized type of country and economy divorced from religion.

Dulce employs testimonio as a narrative technique by inviting the reader to "take a stroll with me down the Malecon, and you'll see what I'm talking about" (Garcia 51). With candid language and imagery, she relays a very personal perspective of a Cuban who has grown up in post-Revolution Cuba. Indeed, she did not live through the Revolution herself. Instead, she only knows the aftermath and quotidian reality of Cuba post-Revolution. She exists in the vicinity of a major event. Her mother, though, lived through the Revolution. Dulce comments

Like I said, it takes an occasional *novio* to get by. Mamá doesn't understand this. She's immune from the *day-to-day* hassles because she's had that bureaucrat lackey lover of hers since the dawning of *la revolución*. Every night, Pepín brings her a fest from God knows where. Fresh steamed lobsters. Steaks as big as my thumb. Mangoes so perfectly ripe and sweet—not the stringy stuff you get with coupons—they're a kind of ecstasy. He also brings her shampoo that doesn't glue your hair together like the local brand, when you can find it. Let's just say the woman hasn't had to wait in a line since the Year of Ten Million, when the whole country went crazy cutting sugarcane. (García 52)

Her mother, caught up in the particularly heterosexist perks of dating a revolutionary, doesn't understand the "day-to-day" challenges of contemporary Cuban life. But Dulce and many of her peers are forced to hustle for toilet paper and decent nutrition. Dulce, as a sex worker, falls outside of Cuban heteronormative citizenship. Although Reina's sex

gets her state perks, Dulce does not even receive state protection. And hustling, Dulce emphasizes, has its own daily violence: “the hustlers carry knives now, work the strip in pairs...See this scar on my stomach? Some bitch came after me with a metal file when her French boyfriend dared look me over” (García 57). Dulce knows not only interpersonal violence, but also state violence. While trying her luck at a prestigious hotel for tourists, she says “I was arrested at the bar of a Cuban hotel because I couldn’t produce a foreign passport” (58). Indeed, her mother gets privilege for being a mistress, but Dulce gets arrested. The construction of heteronormative citizenship leaves room for mistresses, but not prostitutes. This particular instance drives Dulce to leave the island. She explains her motivations, “The rest is too tedious to tell in detail, but here’s the bottom line: I got booked for prostitution, lost my job coaching volleyball, worked two hours in a cement plant with no cement before walking out, and decided to marry Abelardo”(58). Abelardo is a Spanish tourist who proposed to Dulce. The everyday pressure of survival left an undesirable marriage as the only out for Dulce.

Dulce moves to Spain with Abelardo, spends two weeks with him and then leaves him. She then finds work with a wealthy family as a domestic servant and nanny. There, they barely tolerate her. After overhearing Dulce speaking to a sex client, the Señora of the household throws her out with little money. Her incessant poverty showcases an example of everyday trauma that people experience in Cuba, Spain and the world. Dulce notes that “Back in Cuba, the certainty was dismal, but it was still a certainty. It was hard to fall between the cracks, to starve outright” (204).

By highlighting the material benefits of sex for both Reina and Dulce, García highlights the heterosexist economy of the island. In order for these women to live above

poverty, they have to commodify themselves as lovers: Reina as a mistress and Dulce as a prostitute. One important difference to note is that a mistress does fit into the heteronormative citizenship in Cuba while a prostitute does not. Yet, because of her everyday struggle, this does not shame Dulce. She has grown up in the everyday constrictions of Communist Cuba under the economy of the U.S. trade embargo. Furthermore, while critical of Cuba, she is also implicitly critical of capitalism and the everyday struggles that occur because of globalized capitalism. Dulce labors through two gendered jobs: a prostitute and a domestic servant. Her narrative showcases the ways in which gender intersects with poverty.

Dulce also highlights the trauma of silence surrounding AIDS. She says “The foreigners like us because there isn’t supposed to be any AIDS in Cuba. That’s probably El Comandante’s most successful propaganda campaign yet. But it’s just that. Propaganda” (51). Her testimonio bears witness to the fact of AIDS in Cuba that stands in contrast to Castro’s propaganda. A blatant silence surrounding AIDS has also occurred in the U.S.

Silvestre, Constanica’s son, bears witness to the AIDS crisis in the U.S. He is a gay man who lives in New York during the eighties and nineties. The reality of AIDS for gay men in New York was a harsh, everyday trauma. Silvestre is a very liminal character in the novel. He’s the son of Constanica with her former husband Gonzalo. Gonzalo is an exemplary Cuban exilio. He remains nostalgic about Cuba and even plans invasions of the island with other exilios. Silvestre has never met his father. When he hears of his father dying, he goes to the hospital in Miami. García writes, “Silvestre abhors this proximity to death. In New York, it’s become all too common, almost casual, a forced

acquaintance. He's been celibate since the Christmas before last. It's much easier than living with the certainty of doom" (245). Silvestre has a complex notion of traumatic events. He associates the trauma present in a hospital in Miami to the trauma present in the everyday life of a queer man in New York City during the nineties. Indeed, instead of separating events, Silvestre sees them as periperformatively and intertextually commenting on each other. What might his father's dying have to do with his queerness?

This association brings up not only the institutionalized and government sanctioned homophobia in surrounding AIDS during the nineties in the U.S., but also the homophobia in Cuban American families. Silvestre notes that "Mamá protected him from Gonzalo" and that "[Gonzalo] had no interest in his only son" (242-243). Gonzalo exemplifies the typical, Cuban male exile, and hence has a machismo masculinity. Men with machismo subjectivities scorn queers in order to uphold their machismo identity. And queer sons are often rejected in traditional Cuban families. In this short passage, Silvestre's experience and narrative showcase many traumas existing alongside each other. Instead of having the Revolution as the central trauma, as his father's narrative certainly would, Silvestre's narrative testifies to the homophobia of Cuban American families and in New York City during the AIDS crisis. For Silvestre, this possible doom of AIDS has constricted his everyday life and kept him from sexual pleasure, something that his father enjoyed with many women. This everyday quality and effect of trauma urges Silvestre to focus less on national or catastrophic events. He ponders "What might have changed if he'd ever heard his father's voice? It was a pointless game. Silvestre knows, if he knows anything, that conjecture is less necessary than everyday answers"

(243). He knows that meeting quotidian needs supercedes any intense nostalgia or overwhelming loss.

García does not critique the AIDS crisis in the only U.S., but also in Cuba. As previously noted, Dulce's character notes the oppressive silence surrounding AIDS. She, like Silvestre, has queer citizenship. Indeed, being a prostitute falls outside of the realm of heteronormative citizenship. Yet, meeting everyday needs requires Dulce to hustle. She doesn't have the heteronormative perks that her mother does. And so, like Silvestre, she's faced with the silence surrounding AIDS, promoted by homophobia, as an everyday trauma and danger for her life. Both Dulce and Silvestre know that the state, both Cuban and American, will not put bodily integrity over an enforced ideology of heteronormative citizenship. As Cvetkovich points out, "Queer diasporas contain the promise of public cultures that reject national belonging and virulent nationalism as the condition of possibility for community" (121). The queer testimonios of Silvestre and Dulce—two Cubans who have traveled beyond Cuba and Miami—forge a transnational, queer dialogue that critiques the state sanctioned homophobia of both the United States and Cuba with promise for a possible coalition.

Cvetkovich also notes that "if one adopts a queer and depathologizing approach to trauma and refuses the normal as an ideal or real state, the trauma of immigration need not be 'healed' by a return to the 'natural' nation of origin or assimilation into a new one" (121). This quote offers an insightful reading of Silvestre and Dulce. Neither of these second-generation characters have an attachment to origin. In fact, they both seem to get frustrated with the intense nostalgia of their parents. Furthermore, as Cvetkovich's quote states, a queer perspective rejects the need for natural origins. Silvestre violently rejects

his origin upon meeting his father for the first time. He comes into his father's hospital room and "raises the hem of his father's gown until everything is visible. So this is his origin, his inheritance. His first resurrection. These hairy orbs, so huge and sagging. This limp little snout, still pink as a boy's" (246). Silvestre moves closer to his father's phallus as his father awakens to face his son while stroking his own penis. Silvestre's testimonio ends there. Then Constancia's begins with Gonzalo's funeral after he has been smothered by a pillow in his hospital room. Though it is never stated, García implies that Silvestre has killed his father. And if so, this murder comes as a denial of his origin and a castration of his father's fervently machismo nationalism.

CHAPTER 2
NARRATION OF THE OTHER CUBAN IN “WE CAME ALL THE WAY FROM
CUBA SO YOU COULD DRESS LIKE THIS?”

Like Silvestre, the narrator of Achy Obejas’ short story, “We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?”, confronts her father’s nostalgic narrative about Cuba and the family’s exile. In the Agüero Sisters, García gives the reader two sisters: one in Cuba and one in the US. We see the effects of the Revolution on women who lived through the event in different places. Importantly, we also see the critiques waged by other Cubans in the vicinity of trauma. They reinforce the need for thinking of the relation between the Revolution and everyday needs. Dulce and Silvestre showcase a subjectivity that critiques heteronormative citizenship and nostalgia. Their other Cuban perspective opens up notions of trauma, the everyday and nationalist discourses of sexuality. The narrator of Achy Obejas’ short story, “We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?”, also works as a figure of the other Cuban. The narrator has been in the vicinity of the trauma of exile. Her parents left the island on a raft in 1963 when she was only ten years old. Because of her early departure from the island, most of her political growing up takes place in the U.S. Like Dulce and Silvestre, her narrative provides critique and suspicion of the older generation’s authoritarian discourse surrounding Cuba. Yet, being in the U.S., the discourse she hears is quite different from the discourse heard by Dulce.

Obejas begins the short story with the narrator at the Immigration and Naturalization Services. The narrator begins with a fairly explicit critique of U.S. immigration laws. She notes:

As I speak, my parents are being interrogated by an official from the office of Immigration and Naturalization Services. It's all a formality because this is 1963, and no Cuban claiming political asylum actually gets turned away. We're evidence that the revolution has failed the middle class and that communism is bad. My parents—my father's an accountant and my mother's a social worker--are living, breathing examples of the suffering Cubans have endured under the tyranny of Fidel Castro. (Obejas 113)

This excerpt periperformatively critiques the U.S. immigration laws. It does not openly condemn, yet the tone and language imply the injustice and inequality of immigration laws that seek to performatively interpellate new, Cuban exiles. No Cubans get turned away from Miami or the Florida coast, yet countless other Latino/as, Haitians, and Mexicans fear the INS. The narrator insinuates that rather than goodwill, the reason that Cubans can stay is that they are proof that communism is bad and that capitalism promotes democracy and freedom. Indeed, within the first days of their stay in Miami, the INS workers show the family the sparkles of a capitalist economy.

One of the workers, described as a “fat Hungarian lady,” identifies with the newly exiled family. She explains that she also fled from communism, because in Hungary “they took everything from her family, including a large country estate, with forty-four acres and two lakes, that's now being used as a vocational training center. Can you imagine that, she says” (Obejas 114). Again, without explicitly critiquing this Hungarian woman, the narrator relates her story in a way that leaves her situation quite open to critique. This Hungarian woman does not provide evidence that Communism has failed the middle class. Her family had gratuitous wealth that was turned into something many

can benefit from. The narration technique that Obejas uses opens these stories up for critique.

The Hungarian worker takes the narrator's family to the supermarket, an icon of capitalist choice and accessibility. This trip, the Hungarian worker says, is special because she did this when she first came to the states. She adds "And it's something only people like us can appreciate" (122). This particular incitation to identification seeks to interpellate the family as avid supporters of U.S. capitalism motivated by a disdain for communism. Yet, the narrator hardly identifies with the "fat Hungarian lady." She notes that her mother remains quiet and exhausted from the trip, while her father performs the role of the Cuban exile perfectly. She narrates, "There's a butcher shop in the back, and my father says, Oh my god, look, and points to a slab of bloody red ribs thick with meat. My god my god my god, he says, *as if* he's never seen such a thing, or *as if* we're on the verge of starvation" (my italics, Obejas 123). The "as if" phrases in this passage imply that the family has seen such meats before and that they are hardly about to starve. Still in the store, the narrator's mother tries to calm down her husband, but he continues with tears and states that he and his family have just arrived from Cuba to a place where there is so much. The Hungarian worker adds "Yes, he came on a little boat with his whole family; look at his beautiful daughter who will now grow up well-fed and free" (123). The worker seems to fit the narrator's family into a universalizing trope of the Cuban exile family. It also implies a sort of teleological narrative. They came from oppression and now they will be free and provided for. Their first night in Miami, the government provides a hotel for the family. The narrator notes that "We'll be allowed to stay there at tax-payer expense for a couple of days until my godfather—who lives with his mistress

somewhere in Miami—comes to get us” (114). While the narrator notes the generosity of the U.S. government when they first arrive in Miami, her storytelling remains open-ended and carries a tone of suspicion. Indeed, she remains hesitant to fill the subject position of the Cuban exile that is laid out for her and her family.

The story is narrated in a non-linear fashion. Fragments of the narrator’s life are placed alongside each other anachronistically. This spatializes the traumatic instances of her life alongside each other rather than relying on a telos. This structure counters the type of narrative that the INS workers set up for the narrator. Indeed, a Columbian worker soothes the ten-year-old narrator: “She says she was once Catholic, too, but then she was saved and became something else. She says everything will change for me in the United States, as it did for her” (Obejas 116). Yet, the narrator’s life doesn’t lead up to the same end point. She’s confronted with everyday traumas. She deals with the burden of her father’s trauma of exile. She is a lesbian in a Catholic family and she develops breast cancer.

Even the narrator’s parents have teleological narratives already set up for her. Her father cites her as the sole reason he left Cuba. Obejas dedicates one section of the story to the narrator’s parents’ aspirations and hopes for her. Her father wants her to hold a position of power as a lawyer and then a judge. He does not wish this occupation on her because he believes ardently in democracy, “in fact, he’s openly suspicious of popular will—but he longs for the power and prestige such a career would bring, and which he can’t achieve on his own now that we’re here, so he projects it all on [her]” (117). The narrator notes that her father never imagines her in domesticity, because that would take away from his narcissistic goals for her. In contrast, her mother imagines her in a

definitively domestic space: “The owner of many appliances and a rolling green lawn; mother of two mischievous children; the wife of a boyishly handsome North American man who drinks Pepsi for breakfast” (117). While reveling in domestic bliss, the mother also envisions her daughter as a successful newscaster with an undocumented Haitian maid to take care of the house. Again, critiques are implicit in these aspirations the narrator relates. Her father’s wish for freedom for his daughter is actually a desire for the power and money he has no chance of attaining. Her mother’s wish rests on the assumed privilege of Cuban immigrants over other immigrants.

The narrator reveals the privileged life that her parents aspire for her to lead. Yet, the story also conveys “things that can’t be told” (123). Indeed, many cases of trauma involve the inability to know or to recount traumatic events. In this section, the narrator reveals many parts of her life that run contrary to teleological narratives set up for her. Yet, these teleological narratives do not account for the everyday trauma that the narrator encounters. The section of “things that can’t be told” does not provide the successes of exiles in capitalist U.S. society, but instead the failures. The first untellable thing is “when we couldn’t find an apartment, everyone’s saying it was because landlords in Miami didn’t rent to families with kids, but knowing, always, that it was more than that” (123). In contrast to having a hotel room paid for by tax-payers, the family becomes confronted with racism in the U.S. Yet, this does not fit into the exile success story and, therefore, cannot be told. Then the narrator scores low on the IQ test because she does not speak English. As a result, she is placed into the special education track until high school, when the school finally realizes she does not belong in special education. She recounts how suicidal her father becomes when he’s confronted with the fact that he will

not be going back home. He tries to commit suicide with a light cord, but instead breaks his arm while his wife works as a domestic servant in a nearby hotel. The trauma of exile is paralleled with the trauma of poverty and the very real oppression of many Latina women who are forced into domestic servitude. The family becomes forced to accept welfare checks, “because there really was no other way” (124). Finally, even as working-class Cuban Americans, the family must donate to exile groups which “often meant helping somebody buy a private yacht for Caribbean vacations, not for invading Cuba, but also knowing that refusing to donate only invited questions about our own patriotism” (124). The family is confronted with the prevailing binary of Cubans: pro-Castro or anti-Castro.

The narrator will try to break this binary. She asks her parents for her Cuban passport to return to Cuba. But even the desire to go to Cuba during Fidel’s reign is a sin. Her mother says there is nothing for her in Cuba, while her father emphatically states “Over my dead body” (125). When she asks for her passport, her father says “It’s not here anymore, but in a bank box, where you’ll never see it. Do you think I would let you betray us like that?”(126). For the narrator to go to Cuba, to break the direct opposition to Castro, to see and experience the Cuba that has gone on without the exiles, would betray the dominant exile narrative. It would open up a dialogue that would destabilize teleological narratives of the Cuban exile that must refuse all ties with a communist Cuba.

Yet, the narrator moves beyond both of her parent’s hopes and desires. She becomes a left wing, political activist, something that ill-favored in the majority of Cuban American families. She says “In 1971, I’ll come home for Thanksgiving from Indiana

University where I have a scholarship to study optometry. It'll be the first time in months I'll be without an antiwar demonstration to go to, a consciousness-raising group to attend, or a Gay Liberation meeting to lead" (121). Her mother barely recognizes her in her hippie attire. The narrator's father asks "We left Cuba so you could dress like this?" (121). This question is exceedingly loaded. It exposes the pressure put on the narrator because of her family's exile and their trauma. Also, her father's question brings up class issues.. Her father wants her to be a judge, someone who commands respect and a large salary. Instead, she dresses like a hippie. All this tension is broken, finally, when the narrator stands up to her father and confronts his hypocrisy. She says

Look, you didn't come here for me, you came for you; you came because all your rich clients were leaving, and you were going to wind up a cashier in your father's hardware store if you didn't leave, okay? My father, who works in a bank now, will gasp--¿Qué qué?—and step back a bit. And my mother will say, Please, don't talk to your father like that. And I'll say, It's a free country, I can do anything I want, remember? ... And then my father will reach over my mother's thin shoulders, grab me by the red bandana around my neck, and throw me onto the floor, where he'll kick me over and over until all I remember is my mother's voice pleading, Please stop, please, please, please stop. (Obejas 121)

This confrontation with the things that the father does not want to remember drives him to violence. Her unveiling of those "things that can't be told" counters the narrative that he has imposed on himself, his daughter, and his family. She both acts out and works through her own trauma of living amidst her parents' expectations for her, which come from their sense of loss.

The narrator's father dies of a heart attack in 1990. She attends the funeral with regret that more things were not said, but not wishing for more time with her father. After the funeral, "the women will talk about how to make *picadillo* with low-fat ground turkey instead of the traditional beef and ham, and the men will sit outside in the yard, drinking beer or small cups of Cuban coffee, and talk about my father's love of Cuba, and

how fortunate it is that he died just as Eastern Europe is breaking free, and Fidel is surely about to fall” (128). The women deal with the everyday, with the quotidian, while the men focus on major events and nostalgia. The narrator’s mother, at this point, is going blind. The narrator worries about her mother after her father’s death, but “a week after my father’s death, my mother will buy a computer with a Braille keyboard and a speaker, start learning how to use it at the community center down the block, and be busy investing in mutual funds at a profit within six months” (130). Even though her mother has endured the traumatic events of exile, her husband’s death and going blind, her focus on the everyday gives her resistance to survive and adapt. The narrator’s mother, only after her father’s death, gives her a box containing memories of Cuba, including her passport.

Obejas’ short story, spanning a mere eighteen pages, combines fragments of the narrator’s life that comment heavily on Cuban exiles. Her choice to make the narrator a second-generation Cuban American focuses less on the catastrophic, and more on the everyday because the narrator has a periperformative relationship to the Cuban Revolution. The catastrophic still figures in this narrative, but it does so in relation to the everyday. The narrator is someone who is in the vicinity of trauma and has suffered her own everyday traumas that give her the strength to resist teleological narratives that seek to constrain her life. The narrator herself has a complex understanding of trauma and subjectivity. She says “I try to imagine who I would have been if Fidel had never come into Havana sitting triumphantly on top of that tank, but I can’t. I can only think of variations of who I am, not who I might have been” (125). The narrator understands that these traumatic events are part of who she is. This depathologizes trauma and shows,

instead, how it can be productive and give rise to resistance. Obejas' narrator fits outside of the Cubans in Cuba and the Cubans in Miami. Indeed, she occupies the space of the other Cuban by problematizing nostalgic myths concerning Cuba and the story of the Cuban exile.

In the Agüero Sisters and We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?, the narrative structures work to complicate simplistic notions of history in relation to Cuba and Cuban exiles. These narratives work through the trauma of exile, through subjects that show suspicion for nostalgic versions of history. Both García and Obejas invoke queer Cuban subjects to promote a viable subject position that seeks dialogue and transnational coalition. Instead of lauding one nation-state over another, the figure of the other Cuban, in these texts, works to remain critical of both nationalisms that exclude them. Furthermore, the other Cuban illustrates the need for looking at everyday trauma in relation to catastrophic events. This figure of the other Cuban has a periperformative relationship to trauma. Instead of prioritizing one narrative of trauma, this subject showcases that several narratives of trauma intersect and exist alongside each other. Yet, this subject is not easily pathologized. Through testimonio, this subject speaks out against the terms by which systemic trauma occurs. The figure of the other Cuban, as illustrated by Obejas and García, presents a Cuban subject that exceeds a constricting binary of Cubanness.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Butler, Judith. Precarious Life. London: Verso, 2004.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- García, Cristina. The Agüero Sisters. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997.
- García, Maria Cristina. Havana USA. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kevane, Bridget A. Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000.
- The Latina Feminist Group. Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Obejas, Achy. We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?. Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1994.
- Sedgwick, Eve. Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Villarejo, Amy. Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Wolfreys, Julian. "Events." Glossalalia. New York: Routledge, 2003. 77-88.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christina León was born in Lakeland, Florida, to a Cuban father and country bumpkin mother. After too many years in private, Catholic school, she left home for college in Gainesville. She graduated from the University of Florida in 2003 with a B.A. in English. Her undergraduate honor's thesis explored trauma, queerness and performativity in Jeanette Winterson's novel, The Passion. This thesis is for her M.A. in English at the University of Florida.

After graduating, Christina plans to move to San Francisco and work in the non-profit sector for a few years. After this, she plans to go back to school for her Ph.D. in English.