

Imposed Memories: Revisiting Iconic Images of the Cuban Exile in Daína Chaviano's "The Island of Eternal Love"
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Introduction

In the introduction to *Cubanisimo*, Cristina García states that for almost half a century Cuban writers have been evoking three distinct Cuban cultures in their literary productions: "that of the Revolution, uneasily in place since 1959; that of nostalgia in Miami, where the exiles' dream of reclaiming the homeland is kept alive daily at the dinner table and on radio shows that proclaim "Next year in Havana!"; and that of the cultural hybridism found in the thriving Cuban Diasporas in New York, Mexico City, Madrid, and other hospitable cities" (xiii). In correlation with these three traits, literary productions by Cuban writers have also defined and celebrated Cubanness—being it in the island or in exile. García's quote seems to reveal certain homogeneity among the discourse created by Cuban writers around the revolution, nostalgia and hybridity. However, despite the commonalities aforementioned, one would expect some divergences and plurality in the literary (re)creations.

After all, in this fifty years there have being at least three distinct waves of migrants: the first one got to Miami in the 60s, the following ones in the 80s and the third ones during the special period in 1994. The circumstances and socio economic reasons that moved the former group to migrate are somehow different to the ones that led the Marielitos (80s) and the group of during the Special period¹. Though divergent, on the amount of people that formed each of these groups and their socioeconomic level, as García points out, they all shared the drive to create a narrative that could explain their experience as exiles. They have being doing so by establishing a specific set of images and practices that compose their Cuban identity outside of the island. Among these cultural practices we can include the celebration of bolero singers like Benny Moré, the image of the Malecón, the Vieja Habana, etc.

In this sense, it is interesting to consider Daína Chaviano's literary production both within and outside of the Cuba. Since the beginning of her career in Cuba she has been considered one of the three most important female fantasy and science fiction writers. Her literary production has changed significantly since she left the island in 1991 to live in Miami. Previously to the trip, her work was mainly described as science fiction, however, from the moment she moved to the USA her work acquired a more realistic attitude. In the words of the author herself, to leave the island enabled her to establish some distance from her life in Cuba and realize that 'I had confused my country with an ideology. Then I began to miss my city, its people... Trying to recover them, I found books that recounted facts that I had never heard of or of which I knew altered versions,'² (quoted in Escobar 2000: 2). The physical and emotional distance, as well as the access to other perspectives and viewpoints made Chaviano face her own history and consider building a narrative of such history not specifically enlisted to the commonly accepted images and cultural practices, but linked to the negotiations and reinterpretations of such history that she faced when living in Miami.

This article explores the way in which the narrative created in *The Island of Eternal Love* rewrites images that were established as sources of cultural identity for the Cuban community in exile during the last fifty years to accommodate the new generation of exiles: those that arrived during or following the special period of 1994. The normalized discourse

imposed on cultural performances and images in Cuban exile in Miami, by the previous generations of migrants (those arriving in the 60s and 80s), as it is portrayed in Chaviano's *The Island of Eternal Love*, creates a set of cultural values that appears meaningless to the new generation (arriving in 1994) throughout the novel. This posits the need for a new approach in order to create meaning. Chaviano's narrative proposes a re-evaluation of cultural images in order to change them from source of alienation to that of self-recognition for the newest wave of Cubans settling in Miami during the last years of the twentieth Century. On the one hand, Chaviano's narration includes the quintessential icons of the Cuban nostalgia in Miami (boleros, the Malecón of Habana, etc) to bring them to live under a different light. On the other hand, the novel revisits historic figures that have been included in the standardized discourse as symbols of the Cuban identity.

Generational memories

In the same line as García's previous statement William Safran in *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Returns in Diaspora*, proposes that diasporic discourses have the impulse to enunciate the experience of displacement by 'constructing homes [both physical and psychic] away from home' (85). Due to the uprootedness derived from having left the native land, or the feeling that one has been deprived from such homeland, diasporic narratives try to create a home within the nursing culture. This home, says Safran, can be found in a set of cultural performances as well as memories. *The Island of Eternal Love* depicts this search for meaningful images and cultural practices to construct a home in exile through the multiple generations of the Cuban family represented in the narrative. The text travels back to the ancient origins of Cuba to bring to life past memories in an attempt to build a sense of belonging for a young Cuban woman (named Cecilia) living in Miami. Throughout the novel, multiple metanarratives describe the three ethnicities,—which are embodied by three families—(African, Asian, Spanish) that form contemporary Cuban culture and their role in the construction of memories. All three families come together in Amalia, the narrator of the novel. She is an old Cuban woman, who meets with Cecilia—a young Cuban journalist who left the island recently: the 1990s—night after night at a bar in Miami. Through this family saga, *The Island of Eternal Love* presents the construction of memory in exile through different generations.

Amalia's narrative reveals that the exile appears as a crucial feature in the construction of memories. However, the exile described by Amalia differs from that exposed by the accepted discourse created by writers, and cultural representations over the last fifty years. From the beginning, Amalia set migration and exile as reality deeply rooted into the Cuban nation. Each one of the cultures (Asian, African, Spanish) that contributed to today's population and culture were not native to the island. In this sense, scholars agree to point out that, due to its physical location as well as its sociopolitical history, Cuba is both transnational and multicultural in nature. Herrera in *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced* proposes that Cubans living within and outside the island 'possess multiple and sometimes conflicting stories, and inhabit various shifting cultural spaces and perspectives' (4). Due to this fact, it can be said that Cuban cultural manifestations, independently of the physical space in which they happen (the island or the exile), represent a transcultural reality. In other words that which is Cuban cannot be limited to a fixed area limited by the boundaries of the island. This is reflected in Chaviano's novel through the portrayals of the family from Canton, Nigeria and Cuenca, and evidences of how these families were transplanted to the island.

Herrera's findings in *ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora* further support the borderless of Cuban identity. In the introduction she explains that when researching for the book she discovered that most Cuban Americans she interviewed attested that they felt that their identities were as shaped by Cuban culture as those born and raised on the island. Besides emphasizing the wide variety of opinions about and approaches to the cultural legacy in exile that Herrera found, she also pointed out her difficulty in finding racially diverse testimonies of Cuban's living in exile. Regarding that matter, a contributor she interview for the book suggested to her that 'this silence is symptomatic of a larger cultural silence regarding race and, consequently, class that can be applied as readily to the Cuba of today as it could to the prerevolutionary Island' (xix). I agree with this scholar's perception in the sense that in most cases it is the mainstream group that gets to voice its opinions and preferences while the other groups which are also part of the community are reduced to being defined. Consequently, as Herrera's work shows³ the apparent multiplicity and wide variety of images and memories around which being Cuban in exile is imagined or remembered tend to be forced to collide into one single discourse which represents a mainstream group. By doing so, the meaning of cultural practices and images are reduced to just one, leaving other possible acceptations out of the construction.

Despite the lack of racial diversity encountered by Herrera's research, one can observe some variety among the discourses about images that constitute objects of memory for the community in exile. The divergences lead one to believe that if and when given the opportunity, other other groups, besides the mainstream, would also come up with their own discourses and, consequently, memories. This is, in fact, what Chaviano portrays in *The Island of Eternal Love* by revisiting several iconic images and figures that have constituted the cubanidad in exile.

Images of the past (60s and 80s)

Instead of hearing the experiences of groups that have already established themselves in Miami, the novel presents how cultural practices are perceived by those arriving during the special period (around 1994). In the act of rewriting these cultural images the narrative provides a plural and evolving voice to the Cuban discourse on exile. This is what happens at the beginning of the novel. The opening scene of the narration brings the reader to Hoy como ayer, a bar in Miami in which the walls are decorated with 'the photos of the sacred dead: Beny Moré, the genius of the bolero; Rita Montaner, adored diva of Cuban composers; the night-black chansonnier Bola de Nieve, with his smile, white and sweet as sugar' (Chaviano, 5). This location, which is depicted as a modern bar spattered with and melancholic elements of Cuba becomes a space in between in which the past (Amalia and her stories) and the present (Cecilia) try to reconcile a meaningful relationship.

Faced with this image, the reader immediately draws back to a romantic and melancholic discourse of exile driven by nostalgia.⁴ These singers not only represent an aspect of the Cuban culture, well-known beyond the island, but they are also an element of unity and nostalgia for Cubans living in other parts of the world. Also, completing the pictures as another part of the bar's décor there is a big screen on which 'scenes of an antiquated Cuba, resplendent and colorful, paraded' (5). The pictures as well as the images on the screen try to reproduce a memory of Cuba beyond the island. The soothing Atlantic waves sway in an idealized image of the bygone homeland while the portray hides the harsh economic and political situation producing a memory.

Of course, Cecilia knows the names of these singers, the same way she recognizes the images reproducing the Malecón of Habana. However, contrary to what happens with the previous generations of migrants to Miami, these objects do not awake a nostalgic sense of memory or belonging on her. The two images (bolero singers and the Malecón) have been used by authors and works from the first and second migration waves as objects of memories. They generally had the goal of bringing the observer back to Cuba's tropical socialist utopia. As such, these two images correspond with successful and uplifting moments in the island's history while they fail to mention the economic, racial, political and social harshness the country was and is going through. In this sense, in her study of the production and of images from Cuba/Habana Ana María Dopico defends that the values promoted by images exported from Cuba reveal an hegemonic vision, artificial memories and "fractions of the real capital, offering a consumable geography that symbolically abolished everything else around it" (453). Certainly the combination of the colorful, lively Malecón and the upbeat boleros compose a frozen, nostalgic and utopian Cuba within the bar *Hoy como ayer* in which the exiled community can enjoy a taste of home outside of the island. However, as with all it has an expiration date, or in this case it is bound to a generation.

Chavianos' narration approaches nostalgic elements such as the ones mentioned in the previous paragraphs by questioning their meaning to show that they do not necessarily stand as sources of nostalgia anymore. Her narrative includes the image of the bolero singers and the Malecón but instead of using them as the source of nostalgia, they are the cause of dis-identification. Cecilia shows the discrepancies between the generalized and normalized images of Cuba in exile created and established by the previous generations (1970s and 1980s) and the actual reality when she acknowledges that boleros told nothing of her life, since 'as an adolescent she had devoted herself to listening to songs about stairways reaching to heaven and trains that passed through graveyards' (8). Contrary to the impulse of reader and the Cuban community in Miami since the sixties, Cecilia finds no identification with those images; neither the worldwide-known singers nor the nostalgic reproductions of her home country bring memories around which she can build her identity. Therefore, besides the official popularity of the singers, at this point, these images do not awaken any sense of belonging in Cecilia.

Faced with Cecilia's situation, the narration of *The Island of Eternal Love* goes back in history to trace the steps of the three branches that converge on the island to contribute to contemporary Cuba. This journey into the past also entails a reshaping of the construction of memories by shifting from a monolithic presentation to the inclusion of multiple and varied reactions to the same cultural practice. The narration gives a more prominent voice—both in terms of gender and race—to those groups not considered mainstream and silenced by the official discourse and for which experience is not so widely used in the consolidation of historical and cultural memories. In racial terms, Chaviano's narration escapes the common binary opposition—Spain, Africa—and adds to the equation the Chinese articulation of history and culture. Gender wise, different women, most of them from a low social status with low income and who belong to other racial groups besides the mainstream, speak up through the way they have come to live 'being Cuban,' and in the process provide Cecilia with meaningful memories.

Narrating it in the 90s

Besides revisiting iconic nostalgic images of the island, the narration also uses intersexuality to construct a different perspective of memory for Cubans in exile. There are abundant allusions to the literary and musical (one of the characters is the alter ego of Rita

Montaner, a very prominent bolero singer of the first half of the 20th century) world that have been deemed quintessential of the Cuban history. Among them, the most recurrent references are to Cirilo Villaverde's nineteenth century novel *Cecilia Valdés o La loma del Ángel*—whose protagonist is reinvented by Chaviano in the novel I am analyzing here. Through the re-construction of Cecilia's character, Chaviano's narrative revisits the image of the mulata to change it from a passive, hypersexualized and abused woman to an active agent with a voice of her own.

Vera Kutzinski in his work *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* defends that "As a product of violence, the mulata is indeed the 'supreme flower of injustice'" (196). The mulata as an iconic figure was the representation of the abuses committed by the colonial powers over the black population on the island. In this sense, the mulata has been a product of socio-economic inequality and her body has been consistently abused, exploited and vilified as a "loose woman". Moreover, the mulata has been presented as a tourist attraction for European and USA tourists. At the same time, the mulata has also been brand as an icon of the Cuban national culture throughout its literature. In reference to this conundrum Kutzinsky claims that the cultural visibility of the mulata is inversely proportional to her social invisibility. Though she is named as a representative element of the Cuban culture, she does not have agency or a proper space to act on her own (198). Contrary to the reality described by Kutzinsky, in Chaviano's novel the mulata is presented as an active agent in control of her own wellbeing.

Cecilia Valdés was first published in 1839 and then considerably revised and republished in 1882. It is considered an antislavery novel that describes the hardships and treatment of Cuban slaves on a sugar plantation. The main character, Cecilia, is a beautiful illegitimate woman of mixed race (mulata from now on) who falls in love with her aristocratic half-brother, Leonardo Gamboa. However, neither is aware that Cecilia is the product of a relationship between her slave mother and Leonardo's father, the owner of the plantation. Cecilia, learns that Leonardo is about to marry a white woman, and arranges to prevent the marriage. However, Leonardo is killed in the process and Cecilia is jailed for her part in the plot. All in all, Villaverde's Cecilia is very much the prototype of the abused and silenced mulata, as described by Kutzinski's work. Contrary to Villaverde's account of Cecilia's fate Chaviano transforms a tale of submission and loss into a tale of empowerment.

The stories of Cecilia, both in Villaverde's novel and Chaviano's narrative, have as their background the harsh reality faced by the slaves brought to the island to work on plantations. Chaviano's narration shows how a little girl (named Dayo) is kidnapped, from her hometown in the jungle coast of Ifé (Africa). Once Dayo disembarked she was sold to a wealthy family who took her as a maid and changed her name to Damiana because it was easier to pronounce than the original one. However, while Chaviano's is a celebration of Cuba's multiracial nation, Villaverde was the contrary. Doris Sommer in her essay "Who can tell? Filling the Blanks for Villaverde" declares that despite having a mulata as the center of the narration, *La loma del Ángel* is a story of whiteness and the privileged, filled with constant "defensive denials that end self-destructively" (213). In other words, the 19th Century text was a representation of the white ruling class in Cuba that exoticized the figure of the mulata by making her into an object and not an agent.

The choice of narrator is another significant difference between the constructions of Cecilia in the two novels. In Villaverde's *La loma del Ángel*, the power to narrate lies in a white male voice who tells in third person the events that surrounded the life of Cecilia. Consequently, Cecilia (la mulata) is constructed and narrated through the eyes of the *status*

quo. She is the other that needs to be spoken for. On the other hand, Chaviano's narration let us hear the story from Doña Cecilia's⁵ perspective. In reference to the constructiveness of histories and memories, halfway through Chaviano's novel Doña Cecilia (alter ego of Villaverde's Cecilia) sarcastically comments with another character how the story of her life became a book:

"...later I found through a client that the professor had written a novel and that the heroine had my name."

"He wrote your story?" Caridad asked, suddenly interested

"Of course not! He didn't know the first thing about me. His Cecilia Valdés and I only shared a name and the fact that we were both from La Loma del Ángel."

"The things Don Cirilo invented! Imagine, in the novel I was an innocent girl, seduced by a rich white boy, and at the end it turns out he's my half-brother. How perverse! Finally, the rich boy pays with his life, because a jealous black man shoots him... I go crazy and end up in a madhouse" (103-104).

Cecilia's remarks on the one hand dismiss the legitimacy of the writing and on the other hand call attention to the process of fictionalization. Don Cirilo, according to Cecilia (Chaviano's character) was in love with her. When she did not love him back, he invented a new life for Cecilia and put it in a book. With this comment the character refers to the fact that writing the story of a person or group of people does not entail knowing that story but in many cases, as it happened with Cecilia, it is a matter of imposing a perspective or point of view on the image at hand. Doña Cecilia's words also ironically criticize the extent to which the male-centered perspective overshadows any other discourse. In this sense, the narration is drawing a parallelism between the way in which histories have been created by those in power (Don Cirilo in this specific case) to represent the other. This action, sarcastically denounced by Cecilia echoes the imposition of a standardized discourse on memory and nostalgia in exile as I described in the previous section of this article.

Moreover, while in the standardized version Doña Cecilia was abandoned by the rich boy, in the text at hand it is the other way around. Leonardo/Don Cirilo appears as the one obsessed with Doña Cecilia: 'he considered me the great love of his life... he wouldn't let me leave' (Chaviano 2008: 104). Doña Cecilia's narration interchanges the roles of the figures presented by the commonly accepted and standardized discourse. The dominant figure becomes the submissive and silent one while the otherwise abused mulata rises as the heroine in charge, providing Cecilia (the young journalist and representation of the new generation of migrants) with an example and a scene she can relate to. As Doña Cecilia's account goes on we learn that contrary to the story presented by Villaverde, she is not just one more worker of the bordello (Chaviano 2008:102), but becomes the owner, thus overcoming the gender and racial unfairness. By including the character of Cecilia in her novel, Chaviano not only questions the monolithic constructions of iconic images that have been used for centuries to describe what is (or not) Cuban but also reminds us of the power of having a voice and narrating your own experience.

Conclusion

The Island of Eternal Love by Chaviano presents a construction of memories that do not lie in static images established in the last fifty years by the Cuban exiled community in Miami. Conventional myths and fictions of Cuban exile are put into question by the discourses created throughout the narrative. Besides shifting from a monolithic to a multifocal narration of memory, these narrators also provide the audience with lively canvases full of memories that turn familiar but alienating mementos into self-identifying ones. At the same time, the narration establishes meaningful identification not only for those

who migrated in the 60s and 80s but also for the ones, like Cecilia who arrived in the last years of the twentieth century. The spatial and temporal connections created by Cubans in exile through memory, in the case of this narration, are not necessarily established through set historical values pre-assigned to static images but by means of shared personal experiences. The re-writing of iconic figures included in the novel provides both the reader and Cecilia with discourses that juxtapose, collide, interweave and by and large open a space for her own framing of memories which shows that though migrations from Cuba to the USA might have a shared ground they also differ.

Notes

¹ The first group's exit coincided with the triumph of the revolution in the mid-1950s. These migrants belonged to the upper-middle class and had good economic standing. The second migration wave took place during the 80s. These groups were mainly formed by people who were deemed against the revolution by Castro and their government and were allowed to leave the island. Finally, the third left the island around 1994, in what has been called the special period. (For more see, Margarita Cervantes-Rodriguez).

² 'había confundido mi país con una ideología. Entonces comencé a extrañar mi ciudad, su gente... Intentando recuperarlos, encontré libros que narraban hechos de los que nunca había oído hablar o que conocía en versiones alteradas'

³ See Herrera 2007.

⁴ Many critics agree on this matter. For more see Lisandro Pérez and Guillermo J. Grenier in their book *The Legacy of Exile: Cubans in the United States*.

⁵ Despite having the same name Cecilia—young journalist living in Miami—and Doña Cecilia—a mulata and owner of the brothel living in Cuba during the 19th Century—are two different characters.

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