

**UNIVERSIDADE DO RIO DE JANEIRO
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS**

Bruno Ferrari

**Of Selections and Erasures:
History, Memory and Identity Politics
in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo***

**Rio de Janeiro
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Dissertação submetida à Pós-Graduação *Stricto Sensu* em Letras, área de concentração Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, como requisito para a obtenção do grau de Mestre em Letras.

Orientadora: Professora Dra Leila Assumpção Harris

**Rio de Janeiro
2006**

CATALOGAÇÃO NA FONTE
UERJ/REDE SIRIUS/CEHB

C579 Ferrari, Bruno.
Of selections and erasures: history, memory and identity politics
in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo* /
Bruno Ferrari . – 2006.
103 f.

Orientador : Leila Assumpção Harris.
Dissertação (mestrado) – Universidade do Estado do Rio de
Janeiro, Instituto de Letras.

1. Cisneros, Sandra. *Caramelo* – Crítica e interpretação. 2. Obejas,
Achy. *Memory mambo* – Crítica e interpretação. I. Harris, Leila
Assumpção. II. Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Instituto de
Letras. III. Título.

CDU 820(73)-95

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Esta dissertação foi julgada e aprovada, em sua forma final, pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação *Stricto Sensu* em Letras, área de concentração Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, para a obtenção do grau de Mestre em Letras, pela seguinte Banca Examinadora:

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Prof^a Dr^a Maria Aparecida Ferreira de Andrade Salgueiro (Suplente - UERJ)

To mom, for being a great story teller and for her incredible capacity of seeing beauty everywhere.

To my aunt Elvira for nurturing me with her faith and her tireless support.

To my sister Nana for always asking me why.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are lots of people I have to thank:

- CAPES, for the scholarship;
- Professor Leila Assumpção Harris, my adviser, for the pleasure and honor of working with her during these six years, for her attention, commitment, patience and friendship and for the careful reading of my dissertation;
- All the teachers in the Masters program, with special thanks to Professor Peonia Viana Guedes, for her love for teaching and literature and Professor Ana Lucia de Souza Henriques, for not having allowed me to kill “a beautiful thing I had inside” when I was still an undergraduate;
- Professor Carlinda Nuñez, for her passion for literature, commitment to her profession and support of her students;
- Mônica Castello Branco de Oliveira, more than a friend, an accomplice in all moments;
- Marina Espírito Santo, for always showing me that things are simpler than I think they are;
- Rosangela Freitas and Simone Menezes, for their generosity, for their pieces of advice and for the amusing talks that made the long journeys back home much shorter;
- Lêda Lucia dos Reis Falcão de Queiroz, for her generosity, for her inspiring enthusiasm and for encouraging me to take this journey;
- My friends – Alessandra Telles, Carol Coutinho, Elena Corrêa, Helaine Albuquerque, Felipe Gomes, Jacira Corrêa, Juliana Costa, Luana Gama, Amanda Garruth, Danielle Conceição, Hanny Saraiva, Marcello Caldas, Paula Leão, Rafaela Verçosa, Renata Maccari, Teresa Filardo, Gabriela Fróes and Ricardo, Rodrigo Alva and Tatiana, Maíra Lacerda, Marcella Sousa, Max Pinheiro and Sílvia Pantoja – for understanding my tendency to drama and accepting my eccentricities. All these are people who make me want to be a better person everyday!

*Forgetfulness is white – white as a blasted tree,
And it may stun the sybil into prophecy,
Or bury the gods.*

I can remember much forgetfulness.

Hart Crane

RESUMO

O objetivo desta dissertação é investigar o papel da memória como forma de desnaturalização da história tradicional e como instrumento importante na articulação de uma política de identidade em *Caramelo*, da chicana Sandra Cisneros, e em *Memory Mambo*, da cubana-americana Achy Obejas. O trabalho focaliza as estratégias narrativas e temas utilizados pelas escritoras a fim de subverter a história tradicional. Em *Caramelo*, através do uso da polifonia e de elementos paratextuais e metaficcional na narrativa, Cisneros cruza a fronteira entre o público e o privado, entrelaçando história e memória. Partindo das recordações pessoais que a personagem Soledad compartilha com sua neta Lala, Cisneros acaba por narrar a história do povo chicano, conferindo-lhe um caráter memorialista. Em *Memory Mambo*, Obejas também cruza a fronteira entre o público e o privado através do entrelaçamento das memórias contraditórias da família de imigrantes/ exilados Casas y Molina com eventos da história cubana. Ao problematizar a memória no exílio, Obejas rompe com uma tradição na literatura de exílio cubana de produzir representações históricas nostálgicas em relação a um passado idílico. Assim, ambas as escritoras questionam o status de verdade absoluta da história, enfatizando seu caráter artificial e contraditório, ao mesmo tempo em que ressaltam a natureza construída dos modos de representação.

Palavras-chave: literatura latina nos EUA; história, memória, identidade; pós-modernismo.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the role of memory in the de-naturalization of history and in the articulation of an identity politics in *Caramelo* by Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros and in *Memory Mambo* by Cuban-American writer Achy Obejas. This work focuses on the narrative strategies and themes used by the authors in order to subvert traditional history. In *Caramelo*, through the use of polyphony and of paratextual and metafictional elements in the narrative, Cisneros crosses the boundary between the public and the private, interweaving history and memory. Starting from the personal recollections, which Mexican Soledad passes on to her granddaughter Lala, Cisneros narrates the history of chicanos, giving it a memorial character. In *Memory Mambo*, Obejas also crosses the boundary between the public and the private through the interlacement of the contradictory memories of the Casas y Molina – a family of immigrants/exiles – and the history of Cuba. As Obejas problematizes memory in exile, she breaks up with a tradition in the Cuban literature of exile of producing nostalgic historical representations, fixed on an idyllic past. Thus, both writers question history's status of absolute truth, emphasizing its contradictory and artificial nature and highlighting, at the same time, the constructed nature of the modes of representation.

Key words: Latina literature in the US, history, memory, identity, postmodernism.

SINOPSE

Investigação sobre o papel da memória na desnaturalização da história tradicional e na articulação de políticas identitárias através da ficção. Análise dos romances *Caramelo*, de Sandra Cisneros e *Memory Mambo*, de Achy Obejas, baseada nos estudos pós-modernos sobre identidade, ficção e história, bem como nas teorias feministas – em especial a chicana e a cubana-americana.

SYNOPSIS

Investigation about the role of memory in the de-naturalization of traditional history and in the articulation of an identity politics in fiction. Analysis of Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo*, based on postmodern postulates about identity, fiction and history, and on Latina feminist theories – especially Chicana and Cuban American theories.

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INTRODUCTION

*“Diaspora, like death, interrupts all conversation
We are as if bewitched, ecstatic before these high walls
Of History? Now we hear tell that history has ended...”*

Jorge Luis Arcos, Epistle to Jose Luis Ferrer

The cover of the May, 30, 2005 issue of *Newsweek* carried a picture of Antonio Villarraigosa, the newly elected mayor of the city of Los Angeles.¹ Large block letters announced the feature article of that issue of the magazine: “Latino Power”. Villarraigosa’s election is presented as evidence of the role Latinos are playing in reshaping American politics. The first Latino to enter the city’s office in 133 years, Villarraigosa has pledged to unite the city’s many ethnic minorities, a very challenging task to say the least.² The article includes a political and demographic panorama of the Latino presence in the USA, showing us that this segment of the population has been undergoing a tremendous growth.³ They are the largest minority group in America since 2003 and constitute 14% of the US population. From this percentage, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and Cubans are the most numerous, comprising 77% of the population of Latin American origin.

Much has been discussed about the labels used to describe the people of Latin American origin in the US – whether to call them Hispanic, Latinos or to use some other terminology. Chicana ethnographer and literary critic Alvina Quintana says that the term Hispanic, usually employed by governmental agencies, refers to a European language rather than to a national or ethnic origin.⁴ Quintana points out that she prefers

¹ CAMPO-FLORES, A and FINEMAN, H. “A Latin Power Surge” In: *Newsweek*, May,30, 2005

² The latent tension that exists among minorities in Los Angeles is portrayed in *Crash*, a film directed by Paul Haggis and released in 2005.

³ See Appendix , figures 1-4, pages 91-92.

⁴ In recent publications from the Department of Census, there are signs of changes in the official posture of breaking the “Hispanic composite down, now conceived as Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban-origin, Central and South American origin (FLORES, 1997: 187).

the term *latino/a*, because it takes into account the cultural hybridization that emerged from the encounter of the Spanish with indigenous, Asian and African populations (QUINTANA, 2005: 3-4). Such view is shared by Chicana writer and activist Ana Castillo, who considers the term Hispanic a misnomer, since the word “promotes an official negation of the people called “Hispanic” by inferring that their ethnicity or race is exclusively European rather than partly Native-American (...) or Afro-American” (CASTILLO, 1995: 27). Castillo adds that the term is a misnomer because it excludes a Portuguese speaking portion of Latin America –Brazil –, cultures whose members speak indigenous dialects and Puerto Ricans, who have little fluency in Spanish because of their education in an English-dominant society ⁵(CASTILLO, 1995: 27).

In his article “The Latino Imaginary: Dimensions of Community and Identity”, Juan Flores affirms that Latinos can be classified according to three different approaches: a demographic, an analytical and an imaginary. Under a demographic approach – more superficial and commonly used by governmental agencies, campaign managers and ad writers – Latinos are considered more as a “quantifiable slice of the social whole” (FLORES, 1997: 186), because such conception is established on the basis of numbers. Therefore, it fails to recognize cultural lines and reinforces stereotypes. Latinos or Hispanics – a term that is usual in this level – are depicted as a homogeneous group (FLORES, 1997: 186).

Under the analytical approach – more widely used by business and social sciences – the opposite happens: what we see is the de-aggregation of Latinos due to the acknowledgement of the different perspectives that exist in Latino groups. Categories such as country of origin, social class, gender, race, time in the US, place of settlement are established as the primary focus without any sign of cohesion among Latinos. Such approach steers away from stereotypical images; nevertheless, it is still close to the demographic approach because, as Flores affirms, it “is still dealing with a community in itself, constructed in terms of relatively inert categories with their appropriate labels and stereotypical representations” (FLORES, 1997: 187).

However, Latinos are not just spectators of such processes. They posit their homeland attachment as a primary feature for identification in order to negotiate their relation to some more wide-spanning term or classification. In “the imaginary

⁵ In *Feminism on the Border*, Sonia Saldívar-Hull also offers insightful contributions regarding the inappropriateness of the term ‘Hispanic’.

approach”, interests are also at stake but they are the object’s interests. Furthermore, the analysis is guided by the personal experience and historical memory, categories that tend to be overlooked by the mainstream/dominant approaches. As Flores argues:

Differences are drawn among and within the groups not so as to divide or categorize for the sake of more efficient manipulation, but to ensure that social identities, actions and alliances are adequately grounded in the specific historical experiences and cultural practices that people recognize as their own (FLORES, 1997: 187).

Most Latino historical experiences in the USA involve some form of diaspora and have their origin in colonial practices of exploitation and exclusion. As Alicia Arrizón e Lillian Manzor state:

Latinos in the United States are both postcolonial and neocolonial subjects: post-Spanish colonialism and neo-U.S. colonialism. Thus, Latino/a identity in the United States is a product of a creative process of understanding the self in relation to paradoxes and contradictions caused by conquest, annexation and migration (Arrizón and Manzor, 2000: 12).

Thus, the notions of diaspora and displacement are central to any work concerning Latinos in the US. The movement of peoples from one place to another has always been part of human history since ancient times. In the twentieth century, the advent of new forms of transportation and technological advances has contributed to maximize and enhance the frequency and speed of these movements. Moreover, as María de Los Angeles Torres observes, colonizing forces have imposed political and economic boundaries, which are being suppressed in Late Modernity by “larger scale economic units” (TORRES, 1995: 188). Such panorama contributes to the reshaping of national borders and identities because it “simultaneously rigidifies and erodes First world/Third World economic divisions, creating ‘first-world zones’ in formerly developing countries and ‘third-world zones’ in supposed ‘First World nations’” (BRAZIEL and MANNUR, 2003: 11). Thus, the notion of nation-states defined as geopolitical boundaries which produce coherent and cohesive identities becomes reductive and can no longer be used to articulate any social or economic analysis. As Brian Osbourne highlights in his article “Landscapes, Memory, Monuments, and Commemoration”:

National cohesion, in other words, requires a sense of collective awareness and identity that is promoted through a shared sense of historical experience. What we are talking about, therefore, is the choreographing of the power of imagination by locating it in an invented history, and grounding it in an imagined geography. The orchestration of such collective remembering and, if necessary, collective amnesia, constitutes the crucial underpinning of national-state identities (OSBOURNE, 2001: 7).

The nation-states not only obliterate the existence of movements across borders and of multiple ethnic-racial social formations but they also ignore the differences that exist among the members of the nation.

Diaspora is interrelated to issues of race, class, gender and sexuality and thus, can be analyzed only under the light of such categories. In order to analyze diasporic groups, it is necessary to take into account their historical specificities which will create different responses to the displacement and to the homeland. Stuart Hall argues that the diaspora experience “is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, but by a conception of identity which lives in and through, not despite difference; by hybridity” (BRAZIEL and MANNUR, 2003: 5).

In this sense, as diasporic identities are marked by hybridity, there should be no privileging of the geopolitical space of the homeland as an authentic space for belonging. Thus, we can see that diasporas have indeed had a huge impact on identities and have also transformed the modern notion of nation and made third and first world intermingle, making nations multicultural. As anthropologist Henry A. Giroux affirms in his article “Insurgent Multiculturalism and the Promise of Pedagogy”, “multiculturalism has become a central discourse in the struggle over issues regarding national identity, the construction of historical memory (...) and the meaning of democracy” (GOLDBERG, 1994: 325). The USA, as a world and colonial power, has attracted several migrant groups from third world countries, which led to the formation of a Third World in the US. As theoretician Arjun Appadurai argues:

The United States, always in its self-perception a land of immigrants, finds itself awash in these global diasporas, no longer a closed space for the melting pot to work its magic, but yet another diasporic switching point (APPADURAI, 1996: 171).

In this dissertation I will deal with two diasporic Latino minorities in the US: Mexican-Americans (Chicanos) and Cuban-Americans. In his article “Diasporas”, James Clifford affirms that diaspora experiences are always gendered, since diasporic women become “caught between two patriarchies” (CLIFFORD, 1997: 259). Thus, my main aim is to propose a discussion of the way both history and memory are central to the formulation of an identity politics for feminist writers, and to a challenge of patriarchal hegemonic practices which lead to social exclusion. In “El Desorden,

Nationalism and Chicana/o Aesthetics”, Laura Pérez argues that through artistic imagination Chicana feminist writers destabilize “social and cultural, spatial and ideological topographies of the ‘proper’ in the United States”. Pérez’s observations can be extended to the counter discourses articulated by all Latina feminist writers in the US. In order to accomplish such task, I will use as theoretical basis the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, Rodolfo Acuña, James and Judith Olson, María Cristina García and also those of Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, James Clifford, Chandra Mohanty and Linda Hutcheon, upon whose postulates I will base my theoretical discussions and analyses of the works.

Along the centuries these minorities – Cuban Americans and Chicanos – had their history erased by Spanish and US colonial enterprises. In Mexico, several waves of colonization worked to undermine native traditions. First, the Spanish conquest erased the native culture, imposing European values in order to facilitate social and political control. Centuries later, the United States, in an imperial expansionist impulse, invaded and incorporated part of the Mexican territory, displacing its peoples, who started being treated as second class citizens and perceived as alien in a territory that had been previously theirs, living “in internal exile”. As Gloria Anzaldúa declares in her *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, “*Con el destierro y el exilio (...) we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed and separated from our identity and our history*” (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 30).

Cuba, as several critics point out, was always in “the crossfire of Empires” – Spanish and American in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and American and Soviet during the twentieth century. Political crises and social instabilities, common in the island’s history, culminated in the Cuban Revolution and in the massive migration of hundreds of thousands of Cubans to the US. The US government, involved in the Cold War, developed a politics of immigration in order to accommodate Cuban refugees, who, according to María de Los Angeles Torres “came to have a symbolic and ideological value by demonstrating that communism was a system worth fleeing” (TORRES, 1995: 177). The rupture and displacement were so severe that Cubans in the US started conceiving a mythical image of their homeland – a pattern in Cuban exile in the US – which only began to be broken down after decades, as other exiles arrived

from the island and generation 1.5 started growing up, breaking up monolithic paradigms for the Cuban history and identity⁶ (TORRES, 1995: 187).

In order to forge their identities, diasporic subjects have to come to terms with their specific historical past. As their everyday world and its “relations of rule” – such as organizations and institutional frameworks – tend “to obscure and make invisible hierarchies of power”, the necessity to rethink, and remember their own personal experience becomes a crucial element in their politics (MOHANTY, 2004: 78). This recovery of history is also part of a political feminist agenda. For centuries, history consigned women to a secondary role in it or simply obliterated their presence. As Cristina García states in “...And there is only my imagination where our history should be: an interview with Cristina García”, “traditional history, the way it has been written, interpreted and recorded, obviates women and the evolution of home, family and society, and basically becomes a recording of battles and wars and dubious accomplishments of men” (BEHAR, 1995: 107). Bearing this in mind, US Third World feminists aim to fill in the gaps of history, so that their histories and voices can be heard.⁷ As critic Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues in *Feminism Without Borders*:

Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history as a process that is just significant not merely as corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstanding of hegemonic masculinist history but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity (MOHANTY, 2004: 78)

In their search for politicized consciousness and self-representation, diasporic feminists write alternative histories, using varied modes of representation such as fiction, oral narratives, poetry, testimonial narratives. These narratives come to subvert hegemonic historical representations and engender new ways of resistance and new

⁶ Generation 1.5 is the term coined by sociologist Rubén Rumbaut to define Cubans who was born in Cuba and came of age in the US. In “The Agony of Exile”, Rumbaut affirms that “children who were born abroad but are being educated and come of age in the United States form what may be called the ‘1.5’ generation. These refugee youth must cope with two crisis-producing and identifying transitions: (1) adolescence and the task of managing the transition from childhood to adulthood and (2) acculturation and the task of managing the transition from one sociocultural environment to another. (...) [M]embers of the ‘1.5’ generation form a distinctive cohort in that in many ways they are marginal to both the old and the new worlds [their homeland and host country], and are not fully part of any of neither of them” (RUMBAUT, 1991: 61).

⁷ Third World feminists are women committed to a “theory and method of consciousness in opposition to social hierarchy and capable of aligning a variety of social movements with one another across their differences of gender, race, class, and/ or sexual orientation” (DAVIDSON, C & WAGNER-MARTIN, L., 1995: 881).

forms of remembering (MOHANTY, 2004:79). For this, writers make use of their community's past, social practices and traditions, which form what Juan Flores calls a "Latino imaginary" (FLORES, 1997:186).

Thus, Latina feminist writers establish a rupture with official history, since they subvert our assumptions about history, re-telling it through their point of view – relying on their collective memory. Chandra Talpade Mohanty affirms that they promote a challenge to the hegemonic culture through writing and "create alternative spaces for survival". She also argues that:

Writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself. (...) Writing discursive production is one site for the production of (...) knowledge and consciousness (MOHANTY, 2004:83).

Thus, through writing, Latina feminists react against colonial categories of knowledge, which have the power to make them "see and experience [themselves] as others" (HALL, 1994: 395).

My main aim in this dissertation is to investigate the uses of collective memory to fill in the gaps of a history that was obliterated by the hegemonic culture and to show how this recovery serves to challenge values in the hegemonic culture and to help forge autonomous identities. I also intend to investigate how diasporic memories, which are full of ambivalence and contradictions, work in the subjects' responses to their parents' culture and to the US culture.

In order to carry out the discussion proposed, I chose a fictional corpus composed by two novels – *Caramelo* by Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros (2002) and *Memory Mambo* by Cuban American Achy Obejas (1996), which display challenges to both WASP and Latino cultures, since they are works written by feminist writers who are involved with the project of a literature of resistance. Obejas and Cisneros challenge traditional notions of representation of history and of the subject, pointing to new multiple paradigms of both, encoding resistance through different modes of articulation and through the exploration of a Latino imaginary.

In the first chapter, I will present a theoretical background concerning the crisis in representation in course in postmodernity, which has had a huge impact on identities and their processes of construction. The social global changes and diasporic movements which led to the de-centering of the subject and challenged the notions of nation-states

and identities will also be analyzed. The postulates of Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur, Eric Hobsbawn, Benedict Anderson and Homi K. Bhabha will serve as the main theoretical basis for my discussion of the issues addressed.

The second chapter is divided in two main parts. The first is a historical background of the Mexican-Americans in the USA. Taking Chicano historian Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America* as a point of departure, the chapter comprises an analytical account of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico and its legacies to Mexican society after independence as well as the subsequent US invasion of Mexico and the establishment of a neo-colonial relationship. The emergence of a Chicano national movement is also discussed. In the second part of the chapter, I focus on literary representation. Based on Linda Hutcheon's postulates, I analyze the postmodern narrative strategies used by Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros to subvert the traditional notions of history and coherent subject in *Caramelo*, her most recent work. In the novel, Cisneros crosses the boundary between the public and the private, interweaving history and memory. Through the tales about episodes of her life told by Mexican Soledad to her US born granddaughter Lala, Cisneros narrates an alternative history of Chicanos, giving it a memorial character and highlighting the constructed nature of the modes of representation. I also intend to analyze the role of memory as well as the forms through which it is manifested in the novel.

Similarly to the second chapter, the third is also divided in two major parts. In the first I present an account of Cuban history, relying on James and Judith Olson's *Cuban Americans – From Trauma to Triumph* as my main historical source. This section analyzes Cuban history from the beginning of Spanish colonization proceeding to its political independence and its strengthening ties to the US. The forced diaspora endured by thousands of citizens after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the consequences to their lives in the US are also discussed. In a parallel to the previous chapter, the second part of this chapter deals with literary representation. I intend to show how Cuban-American writer Achy Obejas problematizes memory in order to challenge monolithic paradigms used in the representation of Cuban exiles and Cuban past in *Memory Mambo*. In the novel, Obejas – though using strategies different from the ones employed by Sandra Cisneros – crosses the boundaries between public and private by the interlacement of the contradictory memories – of the exiled Cuban family Casas y

Molina – with events in Cuban history. Thus, Obejas questions history's status of unique and absolute truth, emphasizing its artificial and contradictory nature. At the same time she breaks up with a tradition in the Cuban Literature in the US of nostalgic historical representations of an idyllic past. Challenging such tradition, Obejas points to new forms of representation of the Cuban exiles, adopting less monolithic models, which recognize their multicultural and hybrid nature.

It is also worth mentioning that a comparison will be drawn between the novels, trying to highlight the differences both in the uses of collective memory and in the ways of representing identities which result from the different places of enunciation of the two writers featured in this dissertation. As critic Paula Moya contends, the social location of a Latina writer does not necessarily determine but certainly influences the forms of representation, her politics and responses to the hegemonic culture⁸.

⁸According to critic Paula Moya, "The experiences a person is likely to have will largely be determined by her social location in a given society. In order to appreciate the structural causalities of the experiences of any given individual, we must take into account the mutual interactions of all the different social facts which constitute her social location and situate them within the particular, social, cultural and historical matrix in which she exists".(MOYA, 1997:137).

CHAPTER 1

Postmodernity: Diasporas, Identity and the Subject

“Diaspora forces us to rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism while refiguring the relations of citizens and nations.”

Jana Braziel & Anita Mannur

1.1 – A Crisis in Representation

Postmodernity is widely known as a crisis in representation and authority, since it challenges the traditional notion of a unified and coherent subject, emphasizing its constructed and artificial nature. In his article “New Ethnicities” postcolonial thinker Stuart Hall discusses the Black politics of representation, arguing that a shift in these politics is in course in postmodernity, which leads to two distinct ways of seeing representation. The first would be based on a mimetic theory of representation, which would be an imitation of reality, that is, the way “one images a reality ‘outside’ the means by which it is represented”. The second way of seeing representation, which interests us more, is related to culture and discourse. It highlights the fact that the meanings given to things are cultural – since they may change from one culture to another – and are mediated and legitimated by discourse. In this sense, the way things are represented in a culture and its systems of representations play a prominent and constitutive role in it (HALL, 1997: 224).

This problematization of representation makes cultural questions and its politics very relevant in contemporary social discussions. Postmodern writers and thinkers display a strong concern with themes such as subject representation and construction of identity. These concerns come from the de-centering endured by the concepts of subject and identity in late Modernity. The concept of subject had been until then strongly influenced by humanist and rationalist ideals – such as the Descartes’s and Locke’s ideas of a sovereign and rational subject with a stable identity. However, during the

modern age, both the subject and identity stopped being seen as coherent and stable entities to be seen as discontinuous and fragmented representations. Such fragmentation of the subject is one of the legacies of Modernity, with dramatic changes that provoked a crisis in both representation and identities. In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall points out five crucial moments that led to the de-centering of the subject and to the subsequent crisis in representation.

The first moment mentioned by Hall is the emergence of Marxist theory. Karl Marx placed social relations – instead of an abstract notion of Man – at the center of his work, challenging a humanist belief in a universal essence of Man. Moreover, Marx denied men's agency in history, affirming that, though Man makes his own history, he does not make it on his own terms, but based on historical and cultural contingencies, which are handed down by previous generations. In this sense, Marx challenges and displaces the Cartesian subject as his theory denies any notion of individual agency (HALL, 1992: 34).

Sigmund Freud's discovery of the unconscious is the second moment that Hall considers instrumental to the de-centering of the subject. As one of the states of the human psyche – besides the pre-conscious and the conscious awareness states –, the unconscious “operates under an entirely different logic to the conscious mind, which is based on prohibition; in contrast, the unconscious knows no negation” (ANDERMAHR, LOVELL, WOLKOWITZ, 1997: 230). Such conception of the human consciousness displaces the Cartesian subject, creating a gap in its constitution and challenging the idea of man as the rational subject of a coherent and fixed identity (HALL, 1992: 36).

The third point mentioned by Hall is French linguist Ferdinand Saussure's theory that language precedes human beings. Language, his theory suggests, is a social, not an individual system. Therefore, speaking a language does not mean that subjects are expressing individual, idiosyncratic thoughts and feelings. Rather, they are activating a network of social signifiers that are already part of their culture and language. When speaking, we would not be authors of the messages; we would just be positioning ourselves within its rules and signifying systems. Similarly to Marxist theory, Saussure's theory refuses man's agency in the production of messages, since these messages would come from culturally inherited systems (HALL, 1992: 40).

The fourth point would be French philosopher Michel Foucault's genealogy of the modern subject, according to which, a new form of power is concerned with regulating and disciplining citizens so that they become docile bodies. Collective institutions such as hospitals, schools and asylums would be the entities responsible for that kind of power, with technologies which involve measures that promoted the individualization of the subject. Paradoxically, the more isolated and individualized the subject is, the more collective and organized the nature of institutions (HALL, 1992:42). In this way, any claim for universality of the subject is denied.

Finally, the fifth de-centering is the impact of feminism as a social movement. Despite having its discourses made possible because of those of Enlightened Modernity with its universal paradigms of reason and autonomous subjectivity, feminism has foregrounded the contradictions of the Enlightenment thought. In her article "Modernism, Postmodernism, Gender – the view from feminism", feminist scholar Patricia Waugh states:

In articulating issues of sexual difference, the very existence of feminist discourses weakens the rootedness of Enlightenment thought in the principle of sameness; it exposes the ways in which this universal principle is contradicted by Enlightenment's construction of public/private split (WAUGH, 1998: 119).

Therefore, Feminism contests the idea that both men and women are counterparts of the same human identity, replacing it with the question of sexual difference at the same time it questions and reorganizes the relationship between language, experience and power (HALL, 1992: 46).

All these changes in the perception of the subject have also provoked a shift in our assumptions about the concept of nation. Since the subject is de-centered, the nation and national identities are challenged in their desire for continuity with past and future. The aspiration for homogeneity, which denies difference and which is rooted on essentialist paradigms is also questioned, as we are going to see in the following section.

1.2 – Nation-states and National Identities

The concept of nation is very controversial because it has generally been defined in relation to several dissimilar features such as people, language and State. In its

modern sense, which is highly influenced by the Enlightenment and liberal ideals, the nation was seen first and foremost as a political unit. It coincides with a sovereign state, based on liberal principles of equality and freedom. Such equation between the people and the state gave origin to the expression nation-states. Besides being considered a community of citizens who shared traditions and common interests, the nation had as its main characteristic “the fact that it was subordinated to a central government, which was in charge of the maintenance of the unit within the group” (HOBSBAWM, 1990: 30, my translation).

Moreover, the nation state played a prominent role in the development of liberal capitalism, which was closely connected to the national economies of developed territorial states. The fragmentation of humanity in nations was useful in the sense that it developed extremely powerful principles of economic competition, free trade and free market. In this way, the nation represented a stage of evolution reached in the Modern Age and, through this identification between nation and state, a connection between nation and territory was also established, because the states’ definition and structure were, mainly territorial (HOBSBAWM, 1990: 32, my translation). A nation, thus, should be unique, whole and indivisible, limited by borders.

However, inside a nation-state, there were obvious differences among its people, which the nation contradictorily attempted to universalize and deny at the same time, through its culture and nationalistic discourses. Historian Ernest Gellner highlights this contradictory nature of the term nation that, according to him, refers to an entity in which “neither cultural nor political boundaries are neat; cultural traits such as language, religious adherence or folk custom frequently cut across each other. Political jurisdiction may be multi-layered” (ANDERMAHR et AL, 1997:146).

Considering all the differences inside the nation-state mentioned by Gellner, we may say that citizens are, then, united through discursive nationalistic strategies, which seek to represent them as a unified whole. Historian Benedict Anderson, in his influential work *Imagined Communities*, underscores the discursive nature of the nation. According to Anderson the nation is “an imagined political community” that is conceived at the same time as “limited and sovereign”. It is imagined because the nation is always conceived as a metaphor of its citizens’ communion; a deep, “horizontal comradeship” in spite of all “the inequality that may prevail”. It is limited because it has

“finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind”. It is considered sovereign because as it was already mentioned, the concept of nation-states was created in the Enlightenment, when the legitimacy of the divinely ordained was being put into question (ANDERSON, 1991: 6-7).

Therefore, departing from Anderson’s definition of nation, we can see that it is not just a political entity but a system of representation. In *Narrating the Nation*, post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha points out that “nations like narratives lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the minds’ eye.”(BHABHA: 1990:1). Thus, nations would be formed by discursive strategies that are manifest in their cultures.

In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall mentions several elements through which a national culture is narrated, such as the nation’s narrative through myths and traditions, the emphasis in continuity and in atemporality, and the idea of a pure and original people (*folk*). The nation’s narrative would be a way to establish the nation as a common point of identification and to give significance and importance to the ordinary lives of its citizens, connecting them to a common national destiny pre-existent to them (HALL, 1992:52). National subjects are, thus, bound to a past, emphasized through traditions and myths of origin. As anthropologist Anthony Giddens sees it, “tradition is a way of dealing with time and space, inserting any particular activity or experience in the continuity of past and future, which are structured by recurrent social practices” (GIDDENS, 1990:55, my translation). Maintaining a tradition consists in working in a series of identifications that should establish continuity with the past. Therefore, traditions and the existence of nations are inherent to one another.

In this sense, as tradition connects citizens to a remote past, which would avoid the recognition that the nation is in fact created, it expresses the necessity of a historical continuity. Historian Eric Hobsbawm coined the expression “invented tradition” to describe such necessity:

By invented traditions is understood a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (HOBSBAWM, RANGER, 1983: 9).

Good examples of these invented traditions are the foundational myths that situate the origins of the nation and its people in a mythical past. Such accounts provide material through which a nation's glorious counter-history can be told. Another important point that contributes to the narration of the nation is the idea that it is formed by a pure and original folk. The belief in such principle represents a totalizing impulse since it denies individual differences among the nation's citizens.

All the elements mentioned above serve as artifices to enhance the notion of the nation as a whole unit. National cultures aim at constructing unified and coherent identities through different foci of identification and systems of representation. As Hall sees it, "no matter how different its members can be in terms of class, gender or race, a national culture tries to unify them in a cultural identity, in order to represent them as members of the same big national family"⁹ (HALL, 1992: 59). Nevertheless, national cultures do not erase all the differences that exist in a nation and they are not free from contradictions, despite contributing to unite these differences in a unique culture.

Thus, similarly to the narrative of the nation, national cultures are discursive artifices that represent the nation's differences as a unit through different forms of cultural power. Questions such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class are all overlooked in the search for one single national identity. As Chicana critic Norma Alarcón sees it:

In attempting to consolidate its nationalist power for the well-being of the people, the nation-state overlooks the effects its decisions and consequent events may have on diverse populations whose differences, often marked through concepts such as sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity and class may situate them as adversely as center (ALARCÓN, 1999: 6).

The affirmation of these differences often sparks political crises in a given community.

1.3 – Globalization and Hybridity

With the advent of postmodernity, subjectivity and identity are being dramatically displaced by the forces of globalization, which is displacing identities and making them more plural and particularized. Globalization should be understood as the intensification of fluxes and interconnections that imply in a re-working and reorganization of both

⁹ In all further quotations taken from this work, the translation is also mine.

time and space. All societies are organized under these two categories. They are situated in a continuity with a symbolic time, which is established through traditions that tie past, present and future and are also situated within a sense of place, which theoretician Edward Said calls “imaginary geography” (SAID, 1990 apud HALL, 1992: 71) As the world is getting closely connected, the compression of both time and space is taking place. Owing to the speed at which global events are happening, the world seems to be getting ‘smaller’, that is, events in a certain region of the globe have an almost immediate impact over people in distant places (HALL, 1992: 69).

Furthermore, globalization transcends the nation-state, having several consequences to the world’s economy, politics and national cultures (ANDERMAHR, et AL 1997: 90). Economically, it represents an increase in the mobility of capital. Differently from what happened in Modern Age when, as it was already said, the capitalist development depended on the existence of nation states, the economy in postmodernity is basically transnational with a high flux of goods and working force. In this way, the economy in postmodernity is less dependent on the existence of the nation states.

According to theoreticians Jana E. Braziel and Anita Mannur, in *Theorizing Diaspora*, during the globalization processes, the nation as a political entity “has undergone significant transformation if not massive ideological erosion” (BRAZIEL and MANNUR, 2003: 7). What we see in fact is the declining of nation states’ instruments of control within their own territory. Diasporas force us to stop seeing the world under the dichotomic perspective center/margins, highlighting several perspectives that result from the transnational circulations of peoples, goods and information.

Another point that needs to be considered is the fact that due to the compression of time and space, national boundaries and the notion of nation-states are being superseded. So, with such mobility of goods and cultural signifying systems, culture and cultural identities are modified, especially in the relation between identity and location. Hall argues that the general effect of global processes are those of weakening and overcoming national forms of cultural identities, since other forms of identification and loyalties are being reinforced. The interconnections among the nations and global consumerism produce the possibility of shared identities, since people from different

and distant places can share the same services. This process of identification would be homogenizing identities while it would also be undermining national powers of identification (HALL, 1992: 76).

Nevertheless, as Hall argues, believing that globalization will homogenize all foci of national unities and identities is at once simplistic and exaggerated. The theoretician proposes that it would be better to imagine a new articulation among global and local processes of identification instead of viewing the former as substitutes for the latter. In his words, “it is more probable that [globalization] is going to produce new global and local identifications simultaneously” (HALL, 1992: 78). Hall adds that globalization is not equally distributed throughout the world and that it is still an essentially Western phenomenon. Therefore, the complete homogenization of identities would be impossible.

Globalization would, then, promote the production of new identities, more plural and diverse and less coherent and unified. As nations have become more and more interconnected, because of the flux of people, goods and cultural signifiers, their boundaries have got blurred and their cultures interweaved. As Alarcón puts it, “As borders become confused, the subject that would be contained has to be perceived as an interstitial deconstruction” (ALARCÓN, 1996: 6). This subject that should be perceived as an interstitial deconstruction is what Bhabha calls a “hybrid subject.”

Since hybrid subjects are also “the product of cultural blendings, which are common in a world affected by globalization”, they take their resources from different cultural traditions simultaneously, a practice common in a globalized world” (HALL, 1992: 88). Therefore, to construct their identities, hybrid subjects have to negotiate between these cultures and their traces, traditions, languages and histories. These hybrid subjects are never completely assimilated by any of the cultures; their identities remain fragmented because, as Bhabha observes, “such negotiation is not assimilation or collaboration. It makes the emergence of an interstitial agency possible, refusing the binary representation of social antagonism.” (BHABHA, 1990: 59).

All nations are influenced by cultural hybridization; this infiltration influences the processes of construction of national cultures because they become more exposed to external influences and, due to this, weaker. As scholar Susan Bassnet puts it:

All Western nations now have increasingly mixed populations. The ease and rapidity of global communication have created an international mass culture,

which competes and interacts with local forms (...) The idea of culture as a set of unchanging and coherent values, behaviors and attitudes has given way to the culture as negotiation (BASSNETT, 1996: 152-153).

Indeed, postmodern cultures are sites of negotiation, since the desire of national cultures for historicity and continuity, represented by traditions and social practices, are confronted and questioned by the immediacy of global processes. As cultural practices are central to the production of subjects, rather than simply reflecting them, we can say that these cultures' subjects are in a contradictory movement between tradition and translation. According to Gustavo Pérez-Firmat in *Life on the Hyphen*:

'Tradition', a term that derives from the same root as the Spanish *traer*, to bring, designates convergence and continuity, a gathering together of elements according to underlying affinities or shared concerns. By contrast, 'translation' is not a homing device but a distancing mechanism. In its topographical meaning, translation is displacement, in Spanish *translación* (FIRMAT, 1996: 3).

The term cultural translation has also been adopted and discussed by anthropologists to refer to hybrid subjects' mediation between cultures. The term translation in anthropologist Peter Burke's point of view:

has the great advantage of emphasizing the work done by individuals or groups in order to domesticate that which is foreign. In other words, the strategies and tactics employed. It is obviously a neutral term, with associations with cultural relativism (BURKE, 2003: 58, my translation).

The translational culture is seen as a new site of cultural production; a new speaking position which destabilizes cultural identities. In this process, hybrid subjects stand on the edge of these borders, having their processes of construction of identity informed by more than one culture, which means having to deal with two (or more) cultural systems. Such experience can be very oppressive, because as Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa points out:

Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power" (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 16).

Perhaps the best examples of hybrid subjects who must negotiate between cultures, are those who experience diasporas and who will be discussed in the next section.

1.4 - Diasporas and Identities

Previously considered a term with religious significance, diaspora is the expression used nowadays by several scholars and theoreticians to encompass all the extensive movements of migration, immigration and exile, that occurred in the XX century, especially after World War II, such as the waves of refugees seeking asylum in other countries, migrations from previously colonized areas which had become independent and people from underdeveloped areas in search for better working conditions and opportunities, among others. Diaspora also implies a displacement from a nation-state or a geopolitical place of origin and a subsequent relocation in another. (BRAZIEL and MANNUR, 2003: 3)

The subjects who undergo diasporas have hybrid identities, since they have to deal with two different cultures: the culture of origin and that of relocation. In this way, we can say that diasporic subjects in their most different attachments subvert and disrupt the nation-states. Diasporas are strictly involved with and defined against the norms and features of nation-states, such as citizenship and borders. As scholar Luce Irigaray argues, “the nation-states sharpen the lines of citizenship for women, racialized groups and sexualities in the construction of a socially stratified society” (ALARCÓN, 1996: 1). Once these citizens are displaced and they form allegiances to more than one culture, they are situated in a liminal state, “in between” two cultures. Thus, we can notice the existence of more than one culture inside the territory of the same nation-state, which constitutes a disruption of the notion of boundaries or borders.

Though it is not possible to avoid recognizing that nation-states still have value as administrative powers which bind communities legally and politically, insisting that a nation is defined by geopolitical boundaries is simplistic and exclusionary. (BRAZIEL and MANNUR, 2003: 15). Diasporas have blurred borders so that we cannot view the world as constituted only through margins and centers, which according to Alarcón, “leaves us within the discursive cosmos of colonial power relations, helpless to recognize the complex and nuanced manifestations of transnational circulations of peoples, goods, and information” (ALARCÓN, 1996: 4).

However, as Braziel and Mannur argue, it is worth mentioning that such deterritorializations of nationalism and nation-states do not situate us within a

postnationalist era. Diasporic subjects can be considered as members of the nation, and the destabilization of the border that they promote permits the nation to be re-written (BRAZIEL and MANNUR, 2003: 8). Therefore, what we see is the eroding of center/margin dichotomies, with the emergence of “Third World communities in First World zones” (BRAZIEL and MANNUR, 2003: 11). In her book, *In the Land of Mirrors*, María de Los Angeles Torres points out that,

Precisely because diaspora communities have had to negotiate their identities in relation to various states and cultures, [their] experiences may be critical in developing new ways of thinking about multiple identities in which the nations (that is, the souls of the communities) can survive and states (the mechanisms that control these souls) are transformed (TORRES, 1995: 197).

James Clifford in his article “Diasporas” claims that a different approach should be adopted in the study of diaspora, highlighting the necessity of reflecting upon the ways we think about diasporas as a dispersal marked by displacement. Such idea of diaspora presumes the primacy of an earlier placement, as if there were a coherent center or an originary homeland. Clifford argues that this approach obscures the processes of culture today, where foci of identification are ongoing, hybrid, moving, structured in complex relationships to specific sites (CLIFFORD, 1997: 205).

In her article “Diasporas Old and New: Women in the Transnational World”, postcolonial theoretician Gayatri Spivak claims that women from diasporic groups “have never been full subjects of and agents in civil society: in other words, first-class citizens of a state” (SPIVAK, 1996: 249). In addition to that, James Clifford affirms that women are more affected by diaspora because it reinforces gender subordinations. According to Clifford, diasporic women “are caught between two patriarchies, ambiguous pasts, and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways”. They remember and absorb from the home culture that which nurtures – such as “fundamental values of propriety and religion, speech and social patterns” – under the light of the host country’s paradigms (CLIFFORD, 1997: 259).

Thus, within a diasporic context memory plays a prominent role in processes of identity construction, both at individual and collective levels. It is through the recovery of memory that the connections to the homeland are addressed, re-established and maintained alive.

1.5 – Memory, Belonging and Political Consciousness

As Clifford states in “Diasporas”, “the language of diaspora is increasingly invoked by displaced peoples who feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home” (CLIFFORD, 1997: 255). Thus, a sense of being previously connected with a homeland must be strong in order to escape attempts of erasure. In their relationship with the homeland culture and the host country culture, diasporic subjects have to deal with a mutual denial from both sides. In Clifford’s words, “diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (CLIFFORD, 1997: 255).

Generally, such diasporic individuals’ association with a homeland serves as support against a hegemonic culture’s oppressive attempts to erase the traces of their histories and control their collective memories, which enable them to see themselves as part of an “imagined community”. Therefore, in order to counteract the hegemonic oppression, diasporic subjects try to re-engage with their common past, through their homeland memories. Regarding collective memories, Patrick Hutton affirms that:

Collective memory is an elaborate network of social mores, values, and ideals that marks out the dimensions of our imaginations according to the attitudes of the social groups to which we relate. It is through the interconnections among these shared images that the social frameworks of our collective memory are formed, and it is within such settings that individual memories must be sustained if they are to survive (HUTTON, 1993: 78).

In this sense, we can see that the past is not preserved but socially constructed in the transmission of values and social practices, which, in the case of diasporic peoples, are going to be negotiated through a sifting process in the construction of identity.

Collective memory is first and foremost social, thus, it is also an important element in the struggle for power. Controlling the memory and the forgetfulness of a diasporic group is very important to the interests of hegemonic cultures. As French historian Jacques Le Goff observes, “the silences of history reveal manipulations of the collective memory” (LE GOFF, 1986: 12, my translation). Hegemonic cultures, thus, take advantage of one of the most remarkable characteristics of memory – its selective nature – in order to erase the history of non-hegemonic groups. As Cuban activist María de Los Angeles Torres points out:

Diaspora groups are outsiders, on the margins of their societies. The fact that they have left their homeland puts them outside whatever power structures

may be in place there and as immigrants, they are also marginal to the power structures of their new home (TORRES, 1995: 196).

It is exactly from their respective marginal spaces that Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros and Cuban-American writer Achy Obejas develop their works and address the reading public. The fictional worlds they create are peopled by characters who, like themselves, must negotiate between two cultures, must live in one place while “remembering, desiring another place” (CLIFFORD, 1997: 259).

CHAPTER 2

Mexico: *Un recuerdo? A souvenir? A memory?*

“We [Chicanos] are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness and Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one.”

Gloría Anzaldúa, Borderlands / La Frontera

Chicana contemporary writers are members of a group characterized by cultural hybridization and by social exclusion. The Chicana culture has been forged through two different waves of colonization, involving the blending of traces of Mexican – Spanish and indigenous – and Anglo-Saxon cultures, as well as through transnational migrations.

The term Chicano/a – formerly used as a derogatory way to address Mexican-Americans – has acquired since the 1960’s the connotation of political awareness and engagement. Speaking about Chicanas critic Paula Moya contends that it is “the recognition of her disadvantaged position in a hierarchically organized society arranged according to categories of class, race, gender and sexuality” that distinguishes the Chicanas from Mexican-Americans, Hispanics or Americans from Mexican heritage. Moya goes on to state that although the use of such terminology is not technically incorrect to describe a Chicana activist, it “implies a structural equivalence with other hyphenated Americans (...) that erases the differential, social political and economic relations that obtain for different groups”(MOYA, 1997: 139).

In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Chicana writer and activist Ana Castillo not only acknowledges Chicanas’ disadvantageous position in their society but also traces a socio-historical background of Chicanas’ exclusion. Starting from the premise that “history depends on the view of the chronicler” (CASTILLO, 1995: 3), Castillo argues

that Chicanos' history has always been undermined and ignored by *WASP* Americans. In her ground-breaking work Gloría Anzaldúa describe Chicanos as internal exiles in their own country (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 243). In their struggle for visibility, equality and better opportunities, Chicana feminists promote a revision of historical events and cultural traditions, making use of Chicanos' collective memory; at the same time they challenge the values of the hegemonic culture.

2.1 – First Wave of Colonization: when ‘Quetzacoatl’ comes

The first wave of colonization started in 1519 when Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortez arrived in the Mexican coast – where he established the first contact with the Aztec civilization. By that time, the Aztec Empire comprehended 38 ‘provinces’, distributed by 200,000 km of extension and had a population of about 25 million people. Though the Aztecs had settled in the territory that is now Mexico only in the XIII century, they had built a powerful society. Having migrated from their homeland, Aztlán – situated in what is now the north of Mexico and the US southwest – to the south, they remained for more than 1000 years at the margins of other societies, which dominated the Mexican Central region, before finally establishing themselves there (SOUSTELLE, 2002: 20).

In order to settle and maintain the Empire, the Aztecs, then considered as barbarians and intruders by their rivals, had to subjugate some tribes and make alliances with others. According to French historian Serge Gruzinski, in the three centuries that preceded the Spanish Conquest, the peoples from the North had managed to penetrate in successive waves and merged with the local populations through spontaneous or imposed alliances (GRUZINSKI, 2003: 23).

Cortéz first got in touch with natives in two expeditions to the continent: the first to Yucatan where he met Spanish navigator Jerónimo Aguillar, who spoke Mayan due to his years of imprisonment in the region, and the second to Tabasco, where the local authorities gave young Indian slaves to the Spanish as gifts. Among these girls was an Indian of noble origin who spoke Mayan, Nahuatl and probably other dialects. Baptized

with the name of Marina by the Spanish and also known as Malintzin or Malinche Tenepal, the slave – together with Aguillar – became Cortez’s most famous collaborator and translator. Cortéz himself tried to communicate with the natives, especially those who spoke the Empire’s official language. But Aguillar and Malinche were definitely great assets to the Spanish captain in the domination and conquest of Mexico. Malinche became Cortéz’s lover and had a son with him, Martín Cortez, the first mestizo to have a prominent role in Mexican history and the epitome of a new hybrid race (SOUSTELLE, 2002: 94).

Malinche has become a very powerful myth which carries a great cultural significance to Mexicans in general and Chicanas in particular. She is at the same time the symbolic mother of the *mestiza* race and the traitor of her own culture. According to Chicana critic Paula Moya, “as ‘the dark mother’, ‘the fucked one’, the betrayer of the race, she is the figure against which women of Mexican descent have to define themselves” (MOYA, 1997:130). As a cultural myth, Malinche not only reflects the social structures and cultural codes of the Mexican society but also constitutes a painful legacy to the Mexican and Chicano imaginary, because it is based on the belief in women’s inherent tendency for treachery (MOYA, 1997:131). Chicana theoretician Diana Tey Rebolledo, Malinche¹⁰ remarks that the lack of more accurate knowledge about a figure that played such a central role in history explains, at least in part, why Malinche “has remained an enigma to both Mexican and Chicano literary critics. Rebolledo stresses Malinche’s intelligence, versatility and complexity:

She was able to use words to communicate culture, to integrate culture, to assimilate, to not assimilate, to start a new race and to forge a new culture (...) She is seen as a betrayer of her culture and of her race. At the same time, taken by violence, she is *la chigada*, the forced one, the violated one” (REBOLLEDO, 1995:125).

Language was a very important tool in the success of the Spanish enterprise. French historian Jacques Soustelle points out that the reasons for such success “were mainly strategic and military, biological and religious” (SOUSTELLE, 2003: 98).

To begin with, the Aztecs had not had any news about the European arrival in the Antillean Islands but certainly knew about Cortez’s expeditions to Yucatan and Tabasco. Soon, the Spanish made alliances with the aristocracies of indigenous peoples

¹⁰ For further discussion about Malinche, see Octavio Paz’s influential article “The Sons of La Malinche.”, Norma Alarcón’s “Traductora, Traditora :a paradigmatic figure of Chicana Feminism” and Carla Portillo’s *Contra Escrituras Chicanas*.

who were enemies of the Aztecs. The most important of these pacts was made with the aristocracy of Tlaxcala region, so many scholars claim that the Mexican Conquest can be seen as a hispanic-tlaxcaltecan enterprise (SOUSTELLE, 2002: 96). From Tlaxcala, the conquistadors headed to Mochtezoma's palace, making the Emperor almost a prisoner. Extremely religious, at first Mochtezoma did not make any objections to the Spanish invasion because he believed that the invaders were representatives of Quetzacoatl, a god that had come back to his kingdom. In spite of their emperor's passivity, the Aztecs rebelled against Cortéz and his men, but most of them were brutally murdered (SOUSTELLE, 2002: 98).

Casualties among the Aztecs were also caused by epidemics of small pox, measles and typhus, Old World diseases to which natives did not have immunity. Due to these illnesses, several populations were decimated; the ones who survived were frightened and weakened, making it easier to the Spanish to subjugate them (SOUSTELLE, 2003: 98).

When it came to military power, the Spanish, despite being in a small number, had a great advantage: they fought with guns, cannons, caravels and horses. The Aztecs, though in a large number, fought with obsidian swords, bows and arrows. However, in his memoirs *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, Spanish soldier Bernal Diaz del Castillo offers us a different view of the Aztec military organization, probably with the intention of showing that the Spaniards were not in such advantageous position, making the Aztecs seem better prepared for the war and, consequently, the Spanish's deeds more glorious:

These arms consisted in shields of different sizes, sabres, and a species of broadsword, which is wielded with both hands, the edge furnished with flint stones, so extremely sharp that they cut much better than our Spanish swords (...) Then there were excellent bows and arrows, pikes with single and double points, and the proper thongs to throw them with; slings with round stones, purposely made for them; also a species of large shield, so ingeniously constructed that it could be rolled up when not wanted; they are only unrolled on the field of battle, and completely cover the whole body from the head to the feet (CASTILLO, 1996: 343).

Castillo intentionally ignores in his description the fact that Aztecs's armaments looked like mere art objects in comparison to the Spanish arsenal. Since the conquistadors made use of powder and guns, the natives could do very little to counter the attacks.

Furthermore, Aztecs and Spaniards had different conceptions of war. For the Aztecs, a war was a kind of battle regulated by strict traditional rules and arbitrated by the gods. Its main purpose was to obtain prisoners to be sacrificed. For the Spanish, on the contrary, the aim of that war was to destroy the indigenous religion, replacing it with their own and to eliminate the Aztec state on behalf of their own. The belief of many Aztecs, including the Emperor, that the invaders were manifestations of the god Quetzalcoatl made necessary the murder of thousands of natives and the invasion and destruction of many palaces and temples for Moctezuma to realize that the Spanish represented, in fact, a threat to the Empire (SOUSTELLE, 2002: 99).

Just two years after landing in the continent, the Spanish had submitted the Aztecs and all the other populations in Mexico to their power, enslaving the indigenous populations and plundering their wealth and natural resources. It was the beginning of a colonial period that would continue for more 300 years until the Mexican independence from Spain in 1821. Regarding this period, Rodolfo Acuña in his counter hegemonic account of Chicano history, *Occupied America*, highlights that:

Spain exploited Indian and Black labor to accumulate tremendous wealth. It based its control of Mexico on a division of labor that reflected race, class and gender. Cohabitation between Spaniards and indigenous peoples and between those groups and Black slaves was common (ACUÑA, 1988:1).

Such cohabitation favored unions among members of these groups, something that had already been happening since Cortéz first arrived. A new race had been born: the *mestizos*, who were better equipped than pure blooded Indians to survive; their mixed blood made them immune to Old World diseases. Conversely, the indigenous population was dramatically reduced. It is estimated that after a century of the colonization, close to 90% of the native population had been wiped out (ACUÑA, 1988: 1).

It is also important to mention that Spaniards, Indians and *mestizos* made expeditions and explored the US Southwest in the beginning of the XVI century. Together with the conquistadors and missionaries, several Indians went along in order to help as porters. There, they intermarried with Native Americans, forming a greater level of miscegenation among the races (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 27).

The colonizers ostensibly attempted to erase the indigenous cultures, which were mostly oral, destroying temples and building churches in their places. Worried about getting to know better their newly conquered empire, the Spaniards submitted the

indigenous populations to questionnaires. The formulation of these questions forced the natives to review their own memories about their pre-hispanic past, in aspects that ranged from the mere classification of things to the notion of time (GRUZINSKI, 2003:10). As Rodolfo Acuña notices, “in a colonial society, social control is facilitated by erasing the historical memory of the colonized” (ACUÑA, 1988: 55).

During the three centuries of Spanish colonization, the indigenous populations underwent a process that Serge Gruzinski calls Westernization, because the Spanish colonial domination frequently changed its form – readjusting its aims and following the rhythm of transformations in Western Europe rather than the rhythm of local evolutions (GRUZINSKI, 2003: 409). Spanish conquest and colonization hindered Mexico’s economic development. Besides, as Acuña notes:

Spanish colonialism modified and integrated the Pre-Hispanic structure of trade, agriculture and distribution systems into a colonial externally oriented system that produced for profit rather than for feeding people. The hacienda and the colonial plunder also altered land use patterns (ACUÑA, 2003:2).

Such exploitation led to huge disparities among the indigenous populations and the Spaniards, who had privileged positions. Dissatisfaction was general. Then, in 1810, Miguel Hidalgo gave the ‘Grito de Dolores’¹¹ starting the Mexican Revolution (ACUÑA, 2003: 2).

2.2 – Second Wave of Colonization: when the Yankees come

Around 1800, Mexico, then New Spain, comprehended lands from Utah in the North to Central America in the South. The peoples who lived in these lands were united by a common language, laws, religion as well as by several political and economical institutions. In 1821, Mexico became an independent nation. However, in

¹¹ The Grito de Dolores was the Mexican call for independence given by Miguel Hidalgo on September, 16, 1810 in the town of Dolores. The expression "Grito de Dolores" can be considered a pun, since it may mean both "The Shout from (the town of) Dolores", and "The Cry of Pain", the pain that the Spanish domination caused in Mexico. Online source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grito_de_Dolores. Last access:26/12/2005.

order to consolidate its autonomy and that of its six-million-people population, it needed time (ACUÑA, 2003: 2).

At that time, the situation in the USA was much different from that of Mexico. In *Occupied America*, Rodolfo Acuña states that comparisons are not fair. First, North Americans were not indigenous to the continent. Second, North Americans were colonized by the British, who acted in America the same way as the British did in Australia, Asia and Africa. British colonialism usually exterminated Native populations. Therefore, it did not give origin to a mixed-blooded people (ACUÑA, 2003: 2).

With the US independence from Great Britain in 1776, North American elites replaced British ruling classes in the profitable control of trade. Since the former colonies detained one third of the British business, an influential and powerful merchant class gradually emerged as a force that controlled national politics. On the other hand, Mexico's situation was difficult: it was bankrupt and needed time to foster an infrastructure that would be capable of unifying the new nation. Furthermore, Mexican society was very heterogeneous, both racially and economically. A Spanish-blooded elite, the *latifundistas*, that is, owners of vast farmlands, had the monopoly of natural resources. The lack of political stability and poor transportation hindered Mexican modernization, because it retarded progress in agriculture and in the formation of national markets (ACUÑA, 1988: 2-3).

Regarding trade, the USA was also privileged with fertile and coastal lands with important harbors. Using British technology, the United States had advantage over other New World and European countries of starting early the mechanization of its production. Merchants had invested in industry and in few years formed an industrial class. Therefore, great accumulation of capital and the domination of the world marketplace were possible. In short, the USA was not an agricultural society any longer; it had become an important industrial competitor, which aimed at finding more resources, markets and land in order to maximize profits (ACUÑA, 1988: 5). As Acuña puts it, the USA's wars with Mexico "stemmed from the need to accumulate more land, to celebrate heroes and to prove the nation's power by military superiority" (ACUÑA, 1988: 5).

During the Expansionist Era such need for land and profits made the US expand its territory, declare war and invade Mexico. In North American official history, this

war is known as ‘the Mexican War’ whereas in Mexican history it is called ‘the American Invasion’. The USA aimed at justifying and rationalizing wars and invasions mainly based on Puritan ideals of the Manifest Destiny¹². In *The Story of American Freedom*, Eric Foner says that in the XIX century “territorial expansion came to be seen as a proof of the innate superiority of the Anglo Saxon race (a mythical construct defined largely by its opposites: blacks, Indians, Hispanics, Catholics)” (FONER, 1998: 77).

In the early 1800’s North Americans were already migrating illegally into the Territory of Texas, which, then, belonged to Mexico. The number of migrants kept increasing and gradually Texans, native or from Mexican descent, were driven from their lands in a very violent way (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 28). In 1809, American President Thomas Jefferson, six years after the Louisiana Purchase, foresaw that the Spanish border would be theirs the first time war was forced upon them. With the political and economical instability in Mexico, that process became even easier (ACUÑA, 1988: 6).

In 1819, after Anglo-American’s attempts to invade Texas and transform it in an independent Republic failed; the Mexican government opened Texas for immigrants, as long as those obeyed some rules and agreed with some restrictions. All immigrants should be Catholics and establish an oath of allegiance to Mexico. As years passed, the native Mexican inhabitants of Texas started being treated as alien to the region as if they were intruders (ACUÑA, 1988: 7). Some rich Mexicans, financially helped by Anglo-Americans, supported them and established the Texan Republic, independent from Mexico. Eventually, in 1844, during the mandate of James K. Polk, Texas asked to be incorporated to the USA (ACUÑA, 1988: 21). As Foner points out, in the Anglo-American imaginary:

The annexation of Texas in 1845 and conquest of much of Mexico thereafter became triumphs of civilization, progress and liberty over the tyranny of the Catholic Church and the innate incapacity of ‘mongrel races’. Since territorial expansion meant ‘extending the area of freedom’, those who stood in the way

¹² Manifest Destiny is a term coined by John O’Sullivan in order to justify its expansion and wars to acquire land. It expressed the belief that the United States was a country destined to glory and that it had a divinely inspired mission to expand and spread its form of democracy and freedom. As O’Sullivan states: “America is destined for better deeds (...) We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can (...) All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man -- the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen” (O’SULLIVAN, 1987: 9).

(...) were by definition obstacles to the progress of liberty (FONER, 1998:77-78).

Following such logic, President Polk's election had been first and foremost a mandate for national expansion. During his campaign, he always "publicly asserted that Texas should be *re*-annexed and all of Oregon *re*-occupied."¹³, as if these regions had previously belonged to the USA. After the annexation of Texas, the Mexican ambassador in the USA broke off relations as a way of protesting against the loss of Texas. Troops were sent to the Rio Grande boundary. In fact, the location of the boundary itself was a matter of dispute: the USA alleged that the boundary was in Rio Grande whereas Mexico claimed that it was 150 miles further, in Nueces River. (TINDALL and SHI, 1989: 345).

President Polk's intention in sending troops to Rio Grande was clear: his aim was to force a war upon Mexico in order to secure Texas and to obtain California and New Mexico. The US soldiers were sent to start a war, but it was necessary that Mexico start it. In May, 9, 1846, Polk obtained approval of a war message from Congress. The same day, news arrived that Mexicans attacked American soldiers north of Rio Grande, a disputed land which the USA saw as American territory. Therefore, the war was started ostensibly as a response to a Mexican attack. As Polk said at the time, the USA had been forced upon war because Mexico shed American blood in American territory (TINDALL and SHI, 1989: 345).

Polk had planned the campaign in four stages. First, Mexicans would be cleared out of Texas. Second, the USA would occupy California and New Mexico. Then, it would be very easy for the USA to march to Mexico City to force a peace treaty. Moreover, the treaty should be done in the USA's own terms (ACUÑA, 1988: 17). In spite of Polk's determination, opposition to the war was very strong in the USA. However, most of those who were against the war condemned it not because it violated Mexico's territorial integrity but because it represented a threat of expansion of slavery (ACUÑA, 1988: 21).

In a short time, US troops, led by General Zachary Taylor, accomplished all the aims established by Polk. They managed to invade the whole Southwest and enter

¹³My italics. Online source:<http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/jp11.html>. Last access: November,2, 2005.

Mexico City. Mexican President Santana resigned and left the country. Defeated, Mexico had no other alternative than surrender and sign the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in February, 2, 1848 (ACUÑA, 1988: 9). According to the treaty, Mexico accepted the Rio Grande as the Texas border and gave up all claims to Texas above the Rio Grande. Moreover, Mexico ceded the Southwest: California, New Mexico, Nevada and parts of Colorado, Arizona and Utah - which represented more than half of the Mexican territory - for \$15 million¹⁴. During the negotiations, one article was omitted from the treaty – Article X, which concerned the rights of Mexicans in the ceded territory. Mexican negotiators, worried about Mexicans left behind, expressed great reservations about these people being forced to merge or blend into the Anglo-American culture. They protested against the exclusion of article X. The Mexican inhabitants of the ceded territories had to decide whether to go to Mexico or remain in the US with all the rights of citizenship, in theory, secured (ACUÑA, 1988:18-19).

American official history tends to dismiss the Mexican War as a second encounter in the American War of Independence, highlighting that both Mexico and the USA were unprepared for the war. However, this proves to be false, similarly to several other ideas spread at the time, such as the myth that there was a tyrannical government in Mexico and that Mexicans living in the invaded regions could enjoy the benefits of democracy. Furthermore, US soldiers committed atrocities not only during the war but also in the US colonization of these areas (ACUÑA, 1988: 15). In an account of history that critic Norma Alarcón classifies as *auto-historia*, Gloria Anzaldúa portrays the brutal treatment received by Mexican families who stayed in the occupied territories:

The Gringo locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it.(...)We were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed and separated from our identity and our history. Many under the threat of Anglo terrorism, abandoned homes and ranches and went to Mexico. Some stayed and protested. But as the courts, law enforcement officials and government officials not only ignored their pleas but penalized them for their efforts, tejanos had no other recourse but armed retaliation (ANZALDÚA, 1999:30).

The relationship between Mexicans (and Mexican's descendants) and the Anglo society grew worse along the years. Poor Mexicans tended to maintain their cultural traditions whereas the aristocracy tended to try to marry Anglos not only as a form of

¹⁴ See Appendix, page 94, figure 7 .

assimilating and being better accepted but also of guaranteeing rights and protection (ACUÑA, 1988: 31-32). Mexicans were also controlled through political machines organized by Anglos or by members of the Mexican aristocracy, who cooperated with them. They supported it because it somehow secured protection, patronage and some form of political participation. In South Texas, for instance, the machine distributed patronage such as jobs, contracts and public utilities. Aristocracy members played a prominent role in such use of elections. As they had control upon Mexican lower classes, they manipulated them in order to be rewarded with power, protection and social mobility (ACUÑA, 1988: 34).

It is interesting to notice, however, that immediately after the Annexation of the Southwest territories, Mexicans were not allowed to vote in some states because of their race. Eric Foner points out that the case of Mexican Americans show how racial lines could be difficult to be established and were affected by local circumstances:

When California entered the Union in 1850, it excluded non-whites from voting. Unlike Blacks, Indians and Asians, Mexicans in California, many of whom claimed Spanish descent or had intermarried with Anglo-Saxons or Irish immigrants, were deemed white. The population of New Mexico, however, was deemed too Mexican (that is, too Indian) for democratic self government (FONER, 1998:79).

During the early XX century, there was a massive migration of Mexicans to the USA – almost one tenth of Mexico's population. Mexicans went to the US because of the problematic political conditions in their country and because of the labor force demand in the US Southwest. As several improvements were made in the region in order to integrate it to the US market system, such as the construction of railroads and highways, the Southwest underwent an era of mechanization and urbanization, which required cheap labor force. Mexicans were given mixed reception: they were welcomed by industrialists but were blamed by lower and middle classes for the disorganization of society, which was in reality caused by the process of industrialization itself. By the 1920's, a substantial number of Mexicans already lived in urban centers and belonged to trade unions and middle-class statewide associations (ACUÑA, 1988: 189).

In the Great Depression years, Anglos' attacks on Mexicans were so intensified that 500,000 to 600,000 forcibly went back to their homeland. Militancy together with ethnic and working class awareness increased during the period. Upper-middle class Mexican organizations were formed in order to improve the life conditions of the poor.

Furthermore, many Mexicans started participating in the Workers Alliance and Spanish-Speaking People's Congress, as well as in middle class and professional groups (ACUÑA, 1988: 243-244). Since labor from *braceros* was cheap, there was less demand for the work of legal immigrants and, consequently, their salaries fell.

During the World War II, in spite of working class' sacrifices for the effort of the war, US industry made a lot of profit. After the war, Mexican migration intensified due to shifts from the farm to the city, from the Middle-West and East to the Southwest. Migration was stimulated by the *bracero* program. The government allowed the immigration of undocumented Mexicans as long as work force was needed. Such program frustrated the unification of Chicanos and hindered the stabilization of the labor market (ACUÑA, 1988: 298).

2.3 – *La Raza* and Chicano Power

By the late 1950's, 80% of the Mexican population in the US lived in urban zones and in the 1960's this number increased dramatically in cities like Los Angeles and Chicago. This was a period of struggle for Civil Rights, which led local and federal governments to sponsor programs for African-Americans. Soon, other minorities started to demand the same opportunities. Mexican workers started to organize syndicates and César Chávez became a symbol of the so called Chicano Movement (ACUÑA, 1988: 320). The number of militants among Chicanos soared dramatically because of the Civil Rights Movements, contributing to raise Chicanos' political awareness. In 1968, there was a world wide revolt among youth and Chicanos' participation in rebellions that year was outstanding (ACUÑA, 1988: 356).

The Chicano Movement opened up space for Mexican-Americans in the American society in many ways – especially in terms of social benefits, education and community organizing (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2002: 93). Moreover, it represented a renaissance of the Chicano literature. One of the first works to be published was *...Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra* (1970) by Tomás Rivera. Considered a landmark in Chicano literature, it was the first book written by a Chicano to be awarded a prize. Though some other works with a Chicano theme had already been written, this was the first to deal with rural

setting and to have a political ideology. According to critic Sonia Torres...*Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra* signals the moment when the Chicano novel came of age (TORRES, 2002: 23, my translation).

As the prejudice against Chicanos had been related to issues of race, the idealization of a race – *la raza* – became mandatory for the invention of an oppositional – and monolithic – Chicano identity and consciousness as well as a counter hegemonic national space. Nevertheless, instead of unifying all the people from Mexican descent as a coherent whole, that strategy in Chicano discourse served to emphasize differences. In spite of its search for equal rights, the Chicano Movement excluded women from full participation in it, because it reflected and perpetuated the patriarchal gender roles assigned to women (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003:93). According to María Antónia Oliver-Rotger,

One of the agglutinating elements of Chicanismo was its stress on traditional Mexican family values. The sanctioned roles of women as mothers, submissive wives and custodians of the unity of the family and the community were taken for granted and considered as natural (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2002: 110)

Such concern with family values ignored the fact that Chicanas were also workers. Their claims to sexual and gender equality and their struggle to acquire voice, were interpreted by male organizations as detrimental to the whole Chicano cause. In order to voice the oppression they suffered for being women in a male-oriented society – which considered them as traitorous as La Malinche, they turned to the Anglo feminist movement, where their concerns about race were not taken into consideration. They were merely used as tokens by the White feminism, which ignored issues that were extremely important to them, such as forced sterilization and hazardous working conditions (HERRERA and SOBEK, 1996: 214).

White feminism excluded ‘women of color’ from full participation in the movement, since it did not consider race as a component of women’s identity¹⁵. As Sonia Saldívar-Hull affirms, “when the European and Anglo American feminists (...)

¹⁵ The term “women of color” is considered by a number of scholars in the US as inherently political. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “the term designates a political constituency, not a biological even a sociological one. It is a sociopolitical designation for people of African, Caribbean, Asian, and Latin American descent, and native peoples of the United States. It also refers to “new immigrants” to the United States in the last three decades: Arab, Korean, Laotian and so on. What seems to constitute “women of color” or Third World women as a viable oppositional alliance is a common context of struggle rather than color or racial identifications (MOHANTY, 2004: 49).

misplaced, displaced, or outright ignored Chicana feminisms and other feminisms articulated by the US women of color, they inadvertently colonized the terms *feminism* and *politics*” (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 39). Chicana feminism, on the other hand, took into consideration the varied Chicana experience. The movement implied some similarities with and differences from the exclusionary White feminism and the Chicano movement, discarding that which excluded and oppressed and incorporating issues that were dear to Chicanas (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 39).

In 1981, Chicana feminists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa organized the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, a landmark publication for women of color. Using several modes of articulation, third world feminists expressed their rage and placed personal experience at the center of their works – in a mode of theorization that Moraga calls “theory in the flesh” using it as a springboard to a mediation of theory (MOYA, 1997: 145). Chicanas then, got the chance to voice the multiples forms of oppression they suffered.

In the realm of literature, many Chicana writers are involved in the project of developing a literature of resistance in order to challenge not only multiple oppressions but also representation. Raising in their works questions of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and social class, they intend to formulate an identity politics. Thus, they react against colonial categories of knowledge, which “had the power to make [them] see and experience [themselves] as others and this kind of knowledge is internal, not external” (HALL, 1994: 395). Chicana writers frequently search for their own voices in historical figures marked by strength and struggle or in ancient female myths from Mexican oral tradition, since they think that searching for mythical and historical references from pre-colonial times is one of the most powerful ways of fragmenting colonial discourse. In order to build an identity that was not stereotypical but that was a symbol of a nation, Chicana/o writers resorted to Aztlán, an imaginary lost territory. This myth and the existence of a language and a culture of their own would give them a sense of national identity.

Recalling and revising elements present in their cultural traces, traditions and memories, Chicana writers question the Western canon and challenge the paradigms that exclude and oppress them. Ana Castillo states that “what is most provocative and significant in contemporary Chicana literature is that while we claim and explore these

cultural metaphors as symbols of rebellion against the dominant culture, we have also taken on the re-visioning of our own culture's metaphors, as they are created by male perceptions" (CASTILLO, 1995: 66).

As their history was erased and replaced by the hegemonic and canonic version, Chicana feminists rebel against dominant colonial values, making use of memory and oral narratives to rewrite their history, aiming to write what Catherine Hall calls a "history about difference" (HALL, 1996: 76). This history can be articulated through the most varied modes, such as fiction and poetry, as we can see in Chicana feminist Lydia Camarillo's poem "Mi Reflejo":

Conquistaste y colonizaste mi gente
 You alienated me from my people
 Me hiciste la "Vendida",
 Ya no te acuerdas de me?
 I am Malinche¹⁶

As Alvina Quintana properly observes, "Camarillo evokes in her poem the spirits and stories of women in Mexican historical imaginary, reappropriating and reinscribing that history in female terms" (QUINTANA, 1996: 76). Camarillo not only subverts history but also makes use of Chicana's collective memories and imaginary. In her article "Literatura Cubana nos EUA: exilados ou minoria étnica?", critic Sonia Torres affirms :

Memory for the Chicano is frequently represented by the attempt to (...) take the American nation out its amnesia, which has strategically erased the language and the traditions from the American soil which used to be Mexican. There is a desire to re-signify America and its literary canon (TORRES, 1999:156, my translation).

2.4 – *Cuento o Verdad?* : History and Memory in Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo*

It is exactly in an attempt to re-signify America and its literary canon that Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros wrote *Caramelo* (2002), her most recent work, adopting postmodern narrative strategies and themes that challenge the traditional notions of representation. Born in Chicago, daughter of a Mexican father and Mexican American mother, Cisneros is the most exponential Chicana writer. Author of other fictional and

¹⁶ CAMARILLO, Lydia. "My Reflejo" In: *La Palabra*. Tucson: Post Litho, 1980, p73

poetry works, namely, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) and *Loose Woman* (1994), Cisneros has been awarded several prizes. Her first novel was translated to twelve languages, and has sold more than 2 million copies all over the world.

In “A salty, greasy hot-dog”, a review of *Caramelo*, Kyrie O’Connor states that the novel is not “about Mexicans becoming Americans, but about people with feet on both sides of the border, who have a complicated, back-and-forth relationship both with Mexico and the United States, never entirely at home in either”¹⁷. In *Caramelo*, the Reyes family live in the USA, but every year they cross the border to spend their summer vacation in Mexico. Their annual journey is emblematic of their negotiating between the American and Mexican cultures.

The title of the novel refers to the name of the most beautiful and intricate patterned shawl used by Mexican women – the *caramelo rebozo*. The *rebozo* has a hybrid origin – influenced by Spanish and indigenous cultures – and can be used for several purposes: as shawl, apron, scarf, headdress, baby sling and tablecloth. In the past, the way a Mexican woman wore one signaled her status. As Chicana critic Gloria Anzaldúa explains, the *rebozo*, besides being a traditional Mexican symbol of beauty, is also a cultural symbol of “protection” (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 39). The Reyes come from a long line of shawl manufacturers. However, one is left unfinished, because Guillermina Reyes, the woman who was manufacturing it, dies. Nobody else in the neighborhood is capable of finishing the work, so it is left incomplete to her daughter Soledad, who will hand it over to her granddaughter, the protagonist and narrator Lala. In the story, the *rebozo* serves as a metaphor for the process of writing/story-telling and for the handing over of family traditions, which Cisneros uses as a conduit for her story. Through the protagonist Lala, Cisneros weaves and interweaves events from the Reyes’ history as if they were strands of yarn, in order to tell the story of her characters, of the Chicano people and, ultimately, of her own family.

In the first chapter, the whole Reyes family has taken a trip to Acapulco, where a picture is taken. The picture seems a perfect portrait of the family, until Lala’s absence

¹⁷O’Connor, Kyrie. A salty, greasy hot-dog Online source: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1252/is_19_129/ai_94960906. Last access: December 30, 2005.

is noticed. As Ellen Mc Cracken suggests “the narrator corrects the ostensibly accurate image of the past by noting that she herself has been left out of the photo”¹⁸, as we can see in the following extract:

Then everyone realizes the portrait is incomplete. It’s as if I didn’t exist. It is as if I’m the photographer walking along the beach with the tripod camera on my shoulder asking, - *Un recuerdo?* A souvenir? A memory? (*Caramelo*, 2002:4)¹⁹

What is going to be told, then, is the story the picture fails to tell. Lala is going to tell her own story, though she makes use of the memories of her grandmother in order to recover and uncover her family’s past. The protagonist also makes an attempt to grasp the country that she misses, but that exists only in her imagination (McCRACKEN, 2004: 5). In a recent interview published in the Internet, Sandra Cisneros revealed that when she wrote *Caramelo*, her intention was to tell her own family’s history. She ended up writing the history of Mexico as a consequence²⁰. Using a Chicana point of view, Cisneros narrates from the foundational myths of Mexico to more recent events, offering the reader an alternative view of history. As Linda Hutcheon puts it in *The Politics of Postmodernism*:

In historiographic metafiction, we now get the histories (in the plural of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, and I might add, of women as well as men. (HUTCHEON, 1995: 66)

In *Caramelo*, Cisneros de-naturalizes our assumptions about history as the only and real truth, highlighting the discursive and constructed nature of its representation. Moreover, she emphasizes the constructed nature of fictional representation, making it transparent by using a self-reflexive mode. The author also breaks up with master narratives, showing that they are constructed and arbitrary. Several are the instances in which she overtly asserts herself as a narrator, calling the reader’s attention to the

¹⁸ McCRACKEN, Ellen. Postmodern Ethnicity in Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo*: Hybridity, Spectacle and Memory in the Nomadic Text”.Online source: <http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/~jast/Number12/McCracken.htm> Last access: December, 5, 2005.

¹⁹ CISNEROS, Sandra. *Caramelo*. New York: Random House Inc.:2002 .All further reference to this work in this chapter will be indicated by page number only.

²⁰ BIRNBAUM, Robert. “Sandra Cisneros, author of *Caramelo*, talks with Robert Birnbaum.” December, 4, 2002. Online Source: www.identitytheory.com/people/birnbaum.76.html.

artificiality of the text, as in the passage where Lala tells details about the Mexican Revolution and anticipates her father's following departure to the US and then corrects herself saying, "but now I'm getting ahead of the story" (125). In *Caramelo*, all narrators are acknowledged, unreliable and self-conscious and their role in giving meaning to brute facts is made visible. As Hutcheon properly observes, the narrator – whether in fiction or history – “constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events Facts do not speak for themselves”. They are given meaning and become discursive wholes by narrators' intervention (HUTCHEON, 1995: 58). A good example of such interference would be Lala's observation before she narrates the family's past:

When I was dirt is when these stories begin. Before my time. Here is how I heard or didn't hear them. Here is how I imagine the stories happened, then. When I was sparkling and twirling and somersaulting happily in the air (89).

Though there is some historical basis in the novel, it is first and foremost a fictional work. This becomes clear in the passages where, Lala, the protagonist and main narrator, and Soledad, her awful grandmother, have different points of view regarding the same event in the story. Lala adds details, changes dates and points out the necessity of inventing and exaggerating when telling stories in order to make them more attractive. Accused by the Awful Grandmother of deliberately lying about the story of her life, Lala answers: “They are not lies, they are healthy lies. So as to fill in the gaps. You're just going to have to trust me. It will turn out pretty in the end, I promise” (188). Furthermore, when Soledad seems to overlook historical events – in her narration, her private life is foregrounded – Lala tries to give more details, selecting what is going to be told so that the story will become more believable and interesting:

What was going through your head, Grandmother? You don't remember or you don't want to remember the details, and for a story to be believable you have to have details. You forgot to mention that the year of your arrival to the Reyes household was the centennial of Mexican Independence, “the era of order and progress (124).

Thus, Cisneros highlights the discursive, arbitrary and constructed nature of fictional representation, showing the interconnections between public and private in the memories of the Awful Grandmother. As Soledad starts claiming narrative control, there is simultaneously a conflict of generations between Lala and Soledad and a

dispute for narrative control, conveyed through Cisneros's use of polyphony and metafiction. This can be evidenced in the passage where Soledad threatens not to tell Lala her stories if she continues inventing and exaggerating them:

Don't you have any self respect? I'm never going to tell you anything again.
From here on, you're on your own.

The less you tell me, the more I'll have to imagine. And the more I imagine, the easier it is for me to understand you. Nobody wants to hear your invented happiness. It's troubles that make a good story. Who wants to hear about a nice person? The more terrible you are, the better the story. You'll see... (205).

Lala represents a post-diaspora generation, an already translated and hybrid subject, ambivalently loyal to both the American and Mexican cultures. Soledad, in her turn, is the Mexican voice, representing tradition. The Awful Grandmother is responsible for the family's memories and her discourse is strongly influenced by patriarchy, whose values she has incorporated and transmitted to her descendants.

The figure of the grandmother is constant in Cisneros's works – always associated to repression and to the necessity of obedience. This can be evidenced through the relationship between Lala and Soledad, in which the conflict of generations is accentuated by the conflict between Mexican and American cultures, requiring negotiation from both sides. Regarding these processes, Gloria Anzaldúa observes that, “Commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture” (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 100). In the passage when Soledad criticizes Lala's behavior, we can see such attacks: “That is what comes from being raised in the United States. *Sin memoria y sin vergüenza*” (205).

Owing to the oppression she has always experienced, Soledad internalizes the patriarchal values that oppress her and transmits them to her descendants. Lala and the other women in the family have to deal with the oppression exerted by Soledad. In patriarchal societies, and consequently in the Chicana, every female attempt towards independence and autonomy is not acceptable, as Anzaldúa states – “the welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual” (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 40). In other words, the individual identities should always be forged upon a collective identity paradigm. In the following extract, Soledad

has a serious argument with her daughter who wants to be independent and escape her control: “You are selfish, you’ve always been selfish, the Grandmother says, banging both fists on her daughter’s body (...) You’ve always done what you wanted with your life, always, always always. I hate you” (263).

In spite of the innumerable conflicts with Soledad, Lala seems to enjoy listening to her stories. Therefore, we can say that in a sifting process Lala refuses that which oppresses but tries to retain that which nurtures. In the following passage, the necessity not to discard tradition and its social practices is highlighted:

But who listens to what is said of old? It was youth, that amnesia, like a wave sliding forward and then sliding back, that kept humanity tethered to eternal foolishness, as if a spell was cast on mankind and each generation was forced to disbelieve what the previous generation learned a *trancazos*, as they say (157).

Tradition and memory are two concepts which are frequently associated. The existence of a tradition must be accounted by the capacity of retaining references of a common past. Individuals are part of the same tradition if they share similar remembrances. In other words, as Eclea Bosi points out in *Memória e Sociedade - Lembrança de Velhos*, “memory is the element that shapes tradition, maintaining it alive and reinforcing its power of action” (BOSI, 1994: 63, my translation). Soledad’s role in her family is the same of most old people in contemporary societies: that of remembering in order to maintain the family ties. However, such activity may also provoke a reconstruction of the past which according to Bosi is:

An effacing process of that the past undergoes when it is restructured by present ideas and ideals of senior citizens. The ‘pressure of prejudices’ and ‘the preferences of the older person’s society’ can shape his/her past and, indeed, reconstruct his/her individual or collective biography, following ideological patterns and values (BOSI, 1994: 63).

That is exactly what happens to Soledad when she boasts being part of a noble family and denies her Indian blood, because it is not well accepted by the dominant ideology and because of an internalized sense of inferiority.

Through Soledad’s memories Cisneros gives us a historical background in which the public and the private are intermingled, portraying an archetypical history of a Mexican-American family and its processes of negotiation with their culture of origin and the American culture. In her use of different generational voices to narrate the

Reyes's story, Cisneros represents different phases in and reactions to the diasporic experience, such as, nostalgia, cultural shock and the impossibility of being completely assimilated, and tendencies towards assimilation.

In order to deconstruct a totalizing view of history and show its discursive nature, Cisneros makes use of several paratextual elements such as archives, footnotes, forewords and afterwords, titles for chapters, lyrics, among others, establishing dialogues with other areas of knowledge, discourses and blurring genre boundaries in the novel.²¹ However, as theorist Linda Hutcheon notes, “the boundaries may be frequently transgressed in postmodern fiction, but there is never any resolution of the ensuing contradictions. In other words, the boundaries remain even if they are challenged.” (HUTCHEON, 1995: 72). Through the “use and abuse” of paratextual conventions, Cisneros crosses textual boundaries in the novel. Our main interest here is the boundary between history and fiction, through which Cisneros tries to de-doxify the dichotomies truth/lie; reality/fictional representation; history/fiction. Beginning with its subtitle *Puro Cuento* and its epigraph “Cuenta me algo aunque sea una mentira”, we can see that both paratextual elements point to the fictional nature of the work and also alert the reader about the narrator's unreliability. As Cisneros challenges a totalizing impulse, she contests the whole notion of continuity in history and in writing, breaking thus, with the linear reading of the novel. Furthermore, the formal – and chronological – fragmentation of the narrative only comes to reinforce the fragmentation of the identities in the novel.

Caramelo, as a historiographic metafiction, contributes to a reconsideration of documentary evidence since in its use of archives, it also contests their authority. Regarding historiographic metafiction, Linda Hutcheon comments :

They raise the issue of how the intertexts of history, its documents or its traces, get incorporated into such an avowedly fictional context, while somehow retaining their historical documentary value. The actual physical means of this particular incorporating representation are often perhaps not surprisingly, those of history-writing, especially its paratextual convention in particular, its footnotes and illustrations but also subtitles, prefaces, epilogues, epigraphs and so on (HUTCHEON, 1995: 81).

²¹ In “*Caramelo: Cruzando Fronteiras com Sandra Cisneros*”, written with my adviser, Prof. Leila Assumpção Harris and presented in the XXXIII SENAPULLI in June of 2005, we included some considerations developed here.

As Cisneros rewrites the history of Chicanos in the US through the Reyes's saga, she makes use of several elements which are part of Chicanos' collective memory and establishes a dialogue with the epic genre. In his article "Poesia e Memória", Paulo Henriques Britto talks about the important role that memory plays in epic poetry:

The epic memory is collective. The poet (...) tries to find in his people's past foreshadowings of its present grandiosity, or the promise of a future one (...) As he creates this foundational narrative of his people, the epic poet helps forge the idea of this community, which perhaps didn't exist in a clear way in the consciousness of its members before his intervention. When he sings or reads his poem, the poet grants to those who listen to him the pleasure of feeling that they are part of a heroic nation, of recognizing themselves in the old stories transformed in collective myths (BRITTO, 2000: 124).

Similarly to the epic poet, Cisneros tries to give voice to her people and show its own culture, forging a sense of Chicana nation which the *WASP* culture seems to try to obliterate. She refers to a cultural background that is ignored by the American hegemonic culture, but that is common to Chicanos, enabling them to recognize themselves in the narrative and serving as an instrument of subversion.

Such cultural background is present in paratextual elements, such as the section entitled "Chronology" and the footnotes, which are self-conscious and which question their own authorities, calling attention to the constructed nature of the narrative. These elements function as a third voice – alternative to those of Lala and Soledad – which could be described as an authorial voice.

The section entitled "Chronology" is apparently a list of crude historical data about Mexico. However, it consists of historical accounts given from the Mexican's point of view, that is, from the colonized point of view. It includes a wide range of data from famous events in Mexican history – such as The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo – to recordings of songs by Mexican singers. Therefore, despite its appearance of crude historical data, it shows readers that history is nothing more than selection and a matter of point of view. Moreover, it leads to a re-reading of American history. As historian Jean Claude Schmitt affirms, such accounts done by marginal archives are extremely important, because "besides filling in the margins of history, they also make a historical re-reading of the center possible" (LE GOFF, 1988: 285, my translation).

Throughout the novel, Cisneros makes use of over one-hundred footnotes which serve different purposes, such as introducing elements peculiar to the Mexican Culture,

making sense of her story, and above all, including explanations about historical characters and events. In “Postmodern Ethnicity in Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo*: Hybridity, Spectacle and Memory in the Nomadic Text” Ellen McCracken discusses about the role of footnotes in Cisneros’s text:

The multiple, complicated layers of the story and the sense that her audience is not well-versed in the history and customs of Mexico and Mexican-Americans led Cisneros to innovative narrative techniques such as lengthy footnotes in most chapters and even footnotes to footnotes (McCRACKEN, 2004: 6).

According to Linda Hutcheon, footnotes “do indeed function as self-reflexive signals to assure the reader as to the historical credibility of the particular witness or authority cited, while at the same time they also disrupt our reading – that is our creating of a coherent, totalizing fictive nature” (HUTCHEON, 1989: 86). Cisneros’s footnotes, on the contrary, may not be seen as assuring credibility and authority because they are self-reflexive and ironic, as we can see in a footnote about Cuban citizen Gladys Vasconcelos and her relationship with Fidel Castro. After telling Vasconcelos’s whole story, Cisneros distrusts her source in an ironic way:

My friend’s mother who lives in the Colonia Roma and was neighbors with the Vasconcelos Family (...) told me this story but made me promise never to tell anyone which is why I am certain it must be true or at the very least somewhat true (230).

Thus, Cisneros invites the reader to question the objectivity and the truth in historical documents and, as Mc Cracken puts it, “to come to terms with the subjectivity and fictionality of the archives.” (McCRACKEN, 2004: 7)

Other interesting features that highlight the constructed nature of the texts are the foreword and the afterword. The foreword, which is entitled “Disclaimer” is self-reflexive and self-conscious since it reflects upon the writing process and underscores the artificiality of that which is being told, be it true or invented:

I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If in the course of my inventing I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, p rdonenme (...) To write is to ask questions. It doesn’t matter if the answers are true or puro cuento. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern (...) (1).

The afterword is entitled “Pilón”, which means “something extra tossed in your bag as a thank you for your patronage just as you are leaving” (433). Cisneros gives the reader one more story as a *pilón*, addressing him directly and again highlighting the fictionality of her work.

Cisneros also makes use of several icons that are part of the Mexican cultural memory, for example, proverbs, films, lyrics, and soap operas, which are incorporated to the text in allusions and appropriations. As Sonia Torres states, “such use of memory by the Chicanos aims to recover the memory of the USA itself, and at the same time, to search for a discourse warranting them a place from which to speak” (TORRES, 2002: 165, my translation). Part of this Mexican cultural background is present in the chapters’ titles, which similarly to the footnotes and other paratextual elements “move into two directions at once: to remind us of the narrativity and fictionality of the primary text and to assert its factuality and historicity (HUTCHEON, 1995: 85). In *Caramelo*, besides alluding to other texts, the titles function as guides to the reader, since they give a previous idea of the content of the chapter. Some titles allude to Mexican proverbs such as “Cada quien en su oficio es rey” (Chapter 48), a chapter in which Inocencio goes to live in the US in his uncle’s shop where he becomes famous for his work. Another proverb evoked is “God gives almonds to those without teeth” (Chapter 63) when Lala does not want to go to a Catholic school, which is everything a girl might want in her parents’ point of view.

Some titles also set the mood for the chapters. This is clearly evidenced in some occasions when the titles refer to other fictional works such as “The Rapture” (Chapter 75), the name in English for *El Rapto* “a film directed by (...) Indio Fernandez starring Marin Felix and Gorge Negrette, 1954. It is a Mexican version of *The Taming of the Shrew*” (317). In this chapter Lala has a serious argument with her mother, very similar to Catarina’s usual behavior in *The Taming of the Shrew* by Shakespeare. In this way, Cisneros establishes an intertextual play between the two works, evoking elements outside the scope of her own work and pointing to the artificial nature of the modes or representation.

The lyrics in the novel function as a “soundtrack” because they serve to convey the mood of the chapter they are included in. A good example is the Mexican classic “María Bonita” composed by Agustín Lara. In the song, the “lyric I” asks María Bonita,

his beloved, to remember their visit to Acapulco. An extract of the song precedes the first chapter, in which Lala remembers the Reyes's visit to Acapulco where they take a picture as a "recuerdo". Chapter 39 starts with the lyrics of "Júrame" composed by María Grever," followed by instructions about the recording to be played. Soledad and Narciso are in a moment of crisis; his betrayal makes her think he does not love her anymore. The song helps Cisneros to establish the mood of the chapter and the instructions about the recording – similar to a strategy used in dramaturgy – points the reader to a very popular genre, the soap opera.

The Mexican "telenovela" as a genre is parodied in *Caramelo*. Its style and narrative strategies are appropriated by the writer in several occasions. For example, the narrative is interrupted at a climatic moment to be continued only in another chapter in a way which is very similar to that used in soap operas to maintain the spectators' curiosity aroused. This can be seen at the end of Part 1 when after having an argument with Zoila, her daughter in law, Soledad asks her son to choose between them, as we can see in the following passage:

Father looks at his mother. And then at our mother. The mob around us circles tighter. Father raises his head skyward as if looking for a sign from heaven. The stars rattling like a drum-roll. Then, Father does something he's never done in his life. Not before nor since (86).

His decision is known only several chapters later – a sign of the novel's chronologic fragmentation. Thus, Cisneros leaves the reader in a moment of suspense, similarly to the strategy used in soap operas of stopping scenes and chapters in their climax. Moreover, the resemblance of the narrative to soap operas is mentioned all over the novel. The chapter entitled "A Scene in a Hospital that Resembles a Telenovela When Actually it's the Telenovelas that Resemble this Scene", for example, is full of incidents and dramatic twists like a "telenovela", which in Cisneros's opinion "is story telling at its best since it has the power of a true Scherazade – it keeps you coming back for more" (409).

Making use of the same narrative strategy – the cliffhanger – Cisneros also parodies the Victorian novels' conventions. During the 19th century, many popular writers made their career and earned money writing stories in installments for popular magazines. Charles Dickens's novels, for instance, were originally published in this

manner. Therefore, in order to hold the public's interest in the novel, the chapters had to end in a dramatic or suspenseful moment, so that the readers would feel curious and would read the next installment. Regarding parody, Linda Hutcheon says that in postmodern art it is "more than just a sign of the attention artists pay to each others' work and to the art of the past. It may be complicitous of the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is definitely there" (HUTCHEON, 1989: 151). As Cisneros parodies Victorian novels' conventions and strategies in *Caramelo*, she posits her text under a male canonic tradition in order to subvert it.

In this way, we can see that Cisneros makes use of many different narrative strategies and themes such as irony, polyphony, metafiction, allusions, appropriations, portraying the history of Chicanos and their diasporas, processes of assimilation and resistance. According to Ellen Mc Cracken, Cisneros and the other Chicana writers have an important point in common:

Their works point readers beyond the literary frames of these texts to other representations of lived experience and serve as invitations to the larger US public to move beyond myopia and shortcomings of the predominant First World views of the Latino Other, remaining all the while critical, demanding observers and readers" (MC CRACKEN, 1999: 94).

Skillfully using paratextuality such as footnotes, lyrics, advertisements, historical accounts, foreword, afterword, titles, epigraphs and epilogue, Cisneros manages to fragment the narrative, breaking the linear reading of the novel. Thus, the writer de-naturalizes our assumptions about fictional representation at the same time she subverts traditional history, which is not seen as a unique Truth. *Caramelo* is the representation of several types of memories and discourses (history included), that Cisneros recontextualizes, adding new questions to it, such as those of the representations of national, cultural and fragmented identities. As critic Sonia Torres points out, "the reconstruction of contemporary subjectivities is also an act of narrating the historical context in which the cultures come into contact, frequently colliding but also contaminating one another (TORRES, 2002: 166).

CHAPTER 3

Cuba: “Landscapes of the mind”²²

The thing I hate most in the Cuban context is this attempt to limit what it means to be Cuban. Not too long ago at a reading I gave in Puerto Rico, a man stood up and said, "You can't be Cuban because you write in English." The point for me is that there is no one Cuban exile. I am out here in California and may not fit in anywhere, but I am Cuban too. I think I am trying to stake out a broader territory.

Cristina García, At Home on the Page

A part of Spanish Colonial Empire, Cuba found itself increasingly influenced by the rising of the US Empire. In 1898, these imperial histories and interests collided in the Spanish-American War. In the outcome of the war, Cuba got its independence from Spain to become an American protectorate²³. From this period on, Cuba's political-economic panorama – in spite of Spanish or Soviet influences – has been closely connected to and dependent on the US. As James and Judith Olson state in *Cuban Americans: From Trauma to Triumph*, “America and Cuba have had a love-hate relationship, and neither has been able to ignore the other” (OLSON, 1995: 14).

A recent article published in *Newsweek*²⁴ about Latin Americans in the US, showed that concerning political preferences, the great majority of registered Latino voters who are affiliated belong to the Democrat Party. However, if we analyze the affiliation of Cubans, we notice that more than 50% are members of the Republican Party²⁵. Such discrepancy is due to the fact that Cubans in the US are exiles, not mere

²² This expression serves as a title for a poem by Carlota Caulfield.

²³ According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, a protectorate is a country that is protected and controlled by a more powerful country, especially in the areas of defense and foreign affairs.

²⁴ Newsweek, May, 30, 2005.

²⁵ See Appendix 1, figure 5, page 92

immigrants. Having received support from the American government through a series of immigration policies, they have a different status among Latin minorities.

Throughout their history, Cuban Americans have maintained a close connection to the homeland. Obviously, they are not the only immigrant group to do that, but they certainly are the ones who most closely and attentively follow the affairs of the mother country. As Cuban American activist Maria de Los Angeles Torres states,

Regardless where we [Cubans] find ourselves, we are inevitably tied to a common past: the place where we were born. And we have been marked by a period of history when our people sought to create an independent nation. We continue to share this historical commitment (BEHAR, 1995: 35).

Such connection of Cuban exiles to their homeland is a crucial theme in the Cuban-American imaginary and politics, which is explored by fiction and non-fiction.

3.1 – Cuba: from a merely strategic trade post to “the Pearl of the Spanish Empire”

In 1492, after the union of the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile and the *Reconquista* – the Spanish expelling of the Moors from Spanish territory – Spain decided to find a new water route to the Indies, sponsoring the voyages of Christopher Columbus and several other expeditions of exploration and conquest during the following century. In the 1490’s and the 1500’s the Spaniards conquered the so-called Greater Antilles – Cuba, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola (which now corresponds to the Dominican Republic and Haiti). Columbus thought he had arrived in the Asian coast and had made contact with the leaders of ‘Cipangu’ and ‘Cathay’ – Japan and China – and would become rich. When the indigenous people he first made contact with arrived with pieces of gold and told him they came from *Cubanacán*, that is mid-Cuba, Columbus thought they said “*El Gran Khan*”, referring to Genghis Khan, the Asian leader he wanted to meet – since he had heard about him. Columbus died thinking he had established contact with Asia, not knowing that he had in fact arrived in a New World (OLSON, 1995: 2).

However, the Spanish interest in and subsequent conquest of Cuba would happen only twenty years later, because Spain’s main interest was the gold from Hispaniola. The Spanish mercantilist policy to enhance its economy was to take thousands of tons

of silver and gold from its colonies to use in the construction of palaces and churches. They thought that only through the acquisition of precious metals the nation would prosper (PAZZINATTO and SENISE, 1995: 44). When gold became scarce in Hispaniola and the Indian labor force decreased in number, the Spanish turned their attention to Cuba. In 1508, Sebastián Ocampo became the first Spanish to circumnavigate Cuba and prove that it was an island, not an extension of the mainland. Three years later, Diego Velázquez headed to the island and, defying the Indians, established settlements (OLSON, 1995: 3). In order to strengthen his power, he used the *encomienda* system, through which the Spanish settler – the *encomendero* – had the right to exploit Indian labor as long as he Christianized the natives. In fact, the *encomendero* negotiated with the tribe leader, who received presents in exchange for the labor force supply. The Indians worked thinking they were laboring for their tribe leader (PAZZINATTO and SENISE 1995: 54).

Together with Velázquez's men was Bartolomé de Las Casas, who became one of the Spanish Empire's most prominent moral figures. Having participated in the Conquest of Cuba, thanks to which he got rich, Las Casas became aware of the bad treatment the Spaniards dispensed to the Indians. When he returned to Spain, he gave up his wealth and became a Dominican priest and a spokesman for the rights of Indians. Due to this, he got the title of "The Apostle of the Indies". By that time, however, the fate of the natives had been sealed. Long before the Spanish established permanent settlements in Cuba, there had already been a dramatic decrease in the indigenous populations in Cuba because of the Spanish cruelty and of epidemics of small pox, influenza, chicken pox, measles and mumps. As Indians were dying out before significant numbers of Spanish conquistadors arrived, the emergence of a large *mestizo* – from indigenous and European descent – culture did not happen as it did in Mexico and Peru, where there was a significant number of interracial marriages (OLSON, 1995: 4).

The Cuban economy was affected by the Conquest of Mexico and Peru, since the island became the political and economical base for the mainland enterprises. As mineral resources were larger in Mexico and Peru than in Cuba, the island's economy had to be bolstered in some way. So, in 1523, the *Casa de Contratación* (House of Trade) in Seville gave financial help to some landowners to transplant the sugar

industry from its base in the Canary Islands to Cuba. Even with such help and with the arrival African slaves, Cuba's economic and populational growths were slow because the mainland was the place where the heart of the Empire developed (OLSON, 1995: 5).

The political system on the island reflected the values of the Spanish crown and the Roman Catholic Church. The belief in the divine right of the kings was very strong in Spain and political power flowed from the top down to the lowest administrator. There was no democracy and the crown indicated those who would rule and explore the colonies juridically – called *adelantados*. They received the right to build fortresses, found cities and Christianize Indians, detaining military and juridical power (PAZZINATTO and SENISE, 1995: 53). As part of an upper class, the *adelantados* exerted a power that came from God and from the divine right of the king – they had the right to rule. As James and Judith Olson point out:

That Spanish legacy of the right to rule was destined to condemn Latin American politics to the curse of dictatorial government periodically replaced by rebellions and coups d'etat, only to evolve once again into totalitarian dictatorships (OLSON, 1995:5).

Such authoritarianism was also exercised by the church, which was fused with the state in the *Patronato Real*, a system through which the Pope gave the crown the control of the church in the New World. Thus, the church had an enormous power in Cuba, acquiring lands and properties. As the Olsons note, “the Catholic Church in Cuba became a wealthy, conservative institution tied to the interests of the elite that dominated Cuban life” (OLSON, 1995: 5).

The authoritarianism on the island brought about a clear split between locals and colonizers, something common to all other Spanish colonies but remarkable in Cuba. The political, military and clerical positions in Cuba went to *peninsulares*, who were born in Spain. Most of them settled temporarily in the colonies, hoping to get better positions when they got back to Spain. Despite the fact that they were in small number, their influence was great on Cuban economic and political life. Below the *peninsulares* were the *criollos*²⁶. Cuban born with Spanish ancestry, most *criollos* were prosperous farmers or merchants, who were looked down on by the *peninsulares* as provincial and

²⁶ The *criollos* were white Spanish descendants born in the New World who controlled the main economic activities in most Spanish colonies. They did not comprise a homogeneous group, since they were divided according to regional economic interests. In spite of their importance in the accumulation of capital for the metropolis, the *criollos* were forbidden to participate in the politics and administration of the colony (PAZZINATTO and SENISE, 1995:145).

uneducated. The *criollos* usually got positions in lower bureaucracy but could never secure the highest ones (OLSON, 1995: 6).

Cuba experienced a huge economical and populational growth in the XVII and XVIII centuries. By the beginning of the 1600's, there was a rise in the consumption of tobacco in Europe, so, in order to supply this market, small farmers began to plant tobacco. Among these farmers there were several Africans and Spaniard-Africans, who formed a very powerful class of free blacks. This happened because in Cuba slaves had the right to *coartación*, that is, to buy their freedom as well as that of their children after seven years' laboring. Thus, free blacks constituted a large portion of the Cuban working-class. As the Olsons properly observe:

Free black farmers and workers coexisted with working-class whites and mixed-race, giving Cuban society and culture, at least within the Spanish Empire, an unusual sociolegal mixture. (...) There was a sense of racial identity in early colonial Cuba, and that sense would become more intense with the large scale importation of new African slaves in the XIX century. Unlike other areas of the Caribbean and North America, however, where the vast majority of black people were slaves functioning under the tight control of a tiny white minority, Cuba enjoyed a large group of free blacks who were politically, if not socially, integrated into the larger society (OLSON, 1995:7).

In the mid eighteenth century, Cuba had already developed its own class system which ranged from the *peninsular* elite to the African Cuban slaves who worked in the sugar plantations – passing through the *criollos* and free blacks (OLSON, 1995: 7).

In the 1740's, Spain – which had already the exclusive right to purchase all Cuban tobacco at a very low price – founded the Havana Company, giving it a monopoly in the importation of slaves, and forced Cuban producers of sugar, tobacco, and cattle to sell all their crops to the company at below-market prices. In doing so, Spain not only harmed Cuban economy but also forbid the *criollos* to be favored by imperial policies. In 1762, a war between Great Britain and Spain broke out – the Seven Years War. For a short period of time, the British controlled Havana, liberating its economy and declaring it a free port. Cuban farmers could then sell their products at market prices and buy consumer goods from European countries. British soldiers were withdrawn at the end of the war, but once merchants and farmers had experienced such freedom, they were more reluctant to tolerate the Spanish imperialist policies (OLSON, 1995: 8).

After the war, King Charles III of Spain, enthroned and influenced by Enlightenment ideals, wanted to modernize Spanish mercantilism, so he opened

important Spanish ports to Cuba, provoking an economic boom. The *criollos* became much more conscious of their rights and prone to protest against Spanish oppression due to their own prosperity and the contradictory remaining domination of the *peninsulares*. (OLSON, 1995: 9). The boom also led to a demographic explosion. Cuban society underwent dramatic transformations because of the arrival of thousands of slaves, which gave it an unprecedented sense of racial identity and tension. Social hierarchy in Cuba had, then, a racial dimension. Since the production of sugar required intensive labor, the demand for slaves soared. In 1821, Spain and England signed an agreement prohibiting slaves' trade into Cuba, but Spaniards seemed to ignore it. Soon, England started propaganda against international slave trade and due to this, it became extremely difficult for the Cuban planters to have new slaves (OLSON, 1995: 11).

In the 1840's more than half of the Cuban population was black, including 436,000 slaves and 153,000 free blacks out of a total population of one million people. Such high number led Spanish authorities to fear a slave uprising, so the crown took measures to counter eventual Abolitionist movements. Many free blacks worked in the skilled trades, since Spaniards traditionally looked down on manual labor as something that should be done by blacks. However, even among free blacks, skin color was an important issue: people of African-Spanish ancestry – the *pardos* – were deemed as socially superior to *morenos* – full blooded African free blacks (OLSON, 1995: 13).

The plantations had increased *peninsulares'* power, since they controlled the import and export traffic and consequently, exercised control over the planter economy. The traditional distinction between *peninsulares* and *criollos* was sharper than ever – *peninsulares* considered the *criollos* provincials, while the latter saw the former as unskilled snobs. Differently from the rest of Latin America, where *criollos'* resentment fostered revolutionary movements, Cuba was a symbol of imperial conservatism. While in the first half of the nineteenth century revolutionary movements erupted in the mainland, the Cuban *criollos* were getting rich because of the sugar boom. The economic prosperity did not favor revolutions and *criollos* feared that the end of Spaniard domination on the island would inevitably provoke a social reorganization that would also displace them (OLSON, 1995:13).

Fear of insurrections led the *criollos* not only to tolerate but to support the Spanish presence in Cuba, since the departure of Spanish colonizers would mean lack of military

authority to keep slaves under control. During the same period, conservatism in Cuba was further reinforced by the arrival of hundreds of royalist refugees from mainland revolutions, who told stories of misery and social dislocation, scaring the Cuban upper classes and enhancing their loyalty to the empire. The Spanish Empire was strong as never before in Cuba and the island, once a mere trade post, was now “the Pearl of the Spanish Empire”, which was by then, ruined (OLSON, 1995: 13). Still there was discontent among the less favored half of the population.

3.2 – Cuba: in “the vortex of an Imperial Conflict”²⁷

By the 1850’s, during the American Expansionist Era, there were about 1,000 Cubans living in the US. Many of them, *criollo* descendants, tried to promote Cuba’s annexation to “the Colossus of the North”, but the idea was stifled by the political debates over slavery in the United States (OLSON, 1995: 17). In the second half of the nineteenth century, some Cubans attempted to rebel against Spanish rule, but all efforts of independence failed. Political and social unrest harmed Cuban economy. Some cigar manufacturing companies transplanted their factories – together with their staff – to the US. During this period, political refugees were also transferred and continued campaigning for Cuban independence in the US. A growing Cuban community settled in the Gulf Coast and the Atlantic Coast cities, such as New Orleans, Boston, New York, Miami, Key West and Tampa (OLSON, 1995: 20). In his essay “The Circle of Connections”, Cuban historian Louis A. Perez offers the following comments regarding Cubans in the US:

They arrived all through the nineteenth century, in vast numbers, an exodus that assumed fully the proportions of a diaspora. They represented all classes, merchants and manufacturers, artisans and professionals, and settled across much of the USA (BEHAR, 1995:167).

²⁷ OLSON, James et Judith Olson. *Cuban Americans: from trauma to triumph*. New York: Twayne, 1995, p.xi.

Americans were growing interested in Cuba and increasingly sympathetic to the ideal of Cuban Independence, since American investments on the island, especially on sugar and mining were rising and Cuba already traded with the USA more than with Spain (TINDALL & SHI, 1989: 576). In the last few decades of the nineteenth century, the US had already succeeded in extending its frontiers to the Pacific Coast and showed little interest in Foreign Affairs. Its main concerns at the time were the industrial development, western settlement and domestic politics. However, influenced by the European Imperialist surge in Asia, Africa and Oceania, the spirit of Manifest Destiny proved to be still alive and returned in full bloom. Mainly economical and based on the quest for market and raw materials – this new form of Imperialism made the US consider that its manufacturers had finally matured and could compete in the world market place, exporting consumer goods. The establishment of the frontier was thought to have signaled the end of the US growing market place and the need to seek market overseas (TINDALL & SHI, 1989: 571-572).

One of the places the USA found these markets was Central America, with its small politically unstable countries. When in 1895 another insurrection started in Cuba, US public opinion sided with the rebels and many Americans helped give financial support to the revolutionaries. The revolutionaries, many living in the US, organized the revolt and planned a propaganda campaign from headquarters in New York. Their strategy was quite simple: to foment, in Cuba, hit and run attacks on trains, railways and plantations. Such turmoil led people to insurgent forces and garrisoned towns, so that it was seen by the Americans as a war for independence. Through such tactics, the Cubans aimed to damage Spain's economic interests on the island, which raised the concern of American investors. In the US, there was great pressure from American public opinion for the country to interfere in Cuba. The government tried to remain neutral but when President Mc Kinley, whose platform supported Cuban independence, took office, the official posture changed (TINDALL & SHI, 1989: 576-577).

Traditionally, the interests of the United States and the *criollo* upper class coincided, since both feared and opposed social unrest, racial equality and political instability, all of which would likely come out of Cuba's independence from Spain (OLSON, 1995: 30). In 1897, Spain offered Cuba autonomy in return for peace, but Cuban revolutionaries, who felt their power increasing, rejected it. Spain then saw itself

in a straight jacket: it could neither prevent the war nor give up claims over Cuba. Then, in February of 1898, the American battleship *Maine* exploded and sank close to the Cuban coast, with the loss of 260 men. Though there was no evidence that the explosion had been provoked by the Spanish, Theodore Roosevelt – then a rising politician – condemned the sinking and demanded a war declaration. Mc Kinley succeeded in pushing through Congress a \$50 million defense appropriation (TINDALL and SHI, 1989: 578), strengthening the US military power.

In early April 1898, the Spanish, sensing a growing propaganda in favor of war, announced that it would cease fire and sent a message that somehow intended to vow surrender: the USA should indicate the duration of the armistice, Cuba would finally acquire its autonomy and the question of the battleship *Maine* would be submitted to arbitration. Nevertheless, Mc Kinley sent to Congress a war message, asking for power to use armed forces in Cuba to protect the Americans shores, property and trade. The Congress's answer went beyond that: it not only declared Cuba independent but also demanded a withdrawal of Spanish forces. The US imposed a blockade in Cuba, which under international law is an act of war. Spain, instead of giving in, declared war to the USA, starting the Spanish-American War (TINDALL and SHI, 1989: 579).

Opponents to the war in Congress were suspicious of the reasons why Mc Kinley decided to start it. Of course, it was not an expression of altruistic concern for the misery and suffering of the Cuban people, as the government wanted it to appear. They thought that the war was just a cover for corporate adventurers using the American government to promote economic interests. In order to guarantee support for the war message, Mc Kinley had to agree to the Teller Amendment, in which the USA disclaimed any intention to control or intervene in Cuba, except for establishing peace and restoring order (OLSON, 1995: 32).

The war lasted for less than four months and the US victory marked the end of the once great Spanish Empire and the emergence of the US as a world power. It took only two big battles to lead the Spanish troops to a surrender. Casualties were one-sided: 474 Spanish were killed or wounded and 1750 were made prisoners. Few American soldiers died, most succumbing to malaria, typhoid, dysentery and yellow fever. Eventually, the Spanish sued for peace and signed an armistice, giving up all claims over Cuba and

allowing the US to annex the island of Puerto Rico and occupy the city of Manilla (TINDALL and SHI, 1989: 585).

The US military forces occupied Cuba until 1902 and when they withdrew, Cuba became independent, but under the terms of an amendment – the Platt Amendment – which maintained Cuba in a neo-colonial relationship with the US. Besides limiting the new Cuban government's contraction of debts and granting the US the right to maintain military bases on Cuba, it also prohibited Cuba to have treaties with any other nation without American consent. The USA also had “the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuba's independence” and “the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property and individual liberty” (OLSON, 1995: 32-33). In fact, little changed with the US intervention, as the Olsons remark, “Cuba simply replaced one master with another” (OLSON, 1995: XI). The great social disparities, rooted on issues of race and social class, remained, since the *criollo* elites continued dominating the economy and filled the power gap left with the departure of the Spaniards.

3.3 – Cuba libre?

The impact the American occupation had on the Cuban economy pleased corporate investors and *criollo* planters. Cuba soon integrated the US economy. The USA companies acquired lands, dominated services such as banking, transportation, public utilities. In addition to the economic domination, the popular culture of the Cuban elites was heavily influenced by the American. A good example of such influence would be the government's insistence that English be taught in all public schools. Needless to say, among middle-class and upper-class Cubans fluency in English was a prerequisite to economic success. The Cuban elites were bilingual. (OLSON, 1995: 34).

Unlike the elites, Cuban working classes' life conditions deteriorated under the American influence and as the Olsons put it, they “began to develop a dual enemy that revolved around the upper classes as well as the United States. Class conflicts in Cuba acquired decidedly a nationalistic tone” (OLSON, 1995: 35). The economical gap

separating social classes and the resentment against US domination would gradually contribute to the growth of powerful revolutionary movements.

Most of the Cuban officials in the early 1900's governments were corrupt and aligned to the *criollo* elites. In 1934, Fulgencio Batista, as chief in the Cuban army, controlled the government. In 1940, he became president of Cuba. Later in 1952, he carried a coup d'état, becoming a dictator and suspending the constitution. During all these years, the Cuban working classes remained sacrificed, since the social structure did not change. Out of their great dissatisfaction emerged revolutionary nationalist anti-Batista movements that received strong support from students and intellectuals. On July, 26th 1953, Fidel Castro attempted to control the Moncada barracks, in the city of Santiago de Cuba. Fidel and his men failed and went to Mexico as exiles. His movement – the July 26th – became one of the most influential left-wing political forces on the island (OLSON, 1995: 36-37).

In 1956, helped by cigar producers of the Cuban community in South Florida, Fidel Castro and his followers managed to get to Cuba, settling in the Sierra Maestra. There, they conquered the support of the rural populations and in three years they managed to depose Fulgencio Batista in a coup d'état and install a new government. The Cuban revolution had succeeded. Without any pre-established ideological background, the revolutionary government started reorganizing the country, aiming to implant a more socially egalitarian regime, through a series of reforms. These involved land reform, the eradication of illiteracy, improvements in health and in social security as well as the nationalization of foreign companies and foreign owned properties (PAZZINATO and SENISE, 1995: 323).

The land reforms and the nationalization of foreign companies promoted by Castro clashed with the *criollo* elites' and American interests, since it took from them at least 2.5 million land acres (OLSON, 1995: 53). As a response to the nationalization of American companies, the United States boycotted Cuban sugar, the main agricultural export of the island (PAZZINATO and SENISE, 1995: 323). The US-Cuba relations only grew worse, as the Olsons note:

The more the United States protested, the worse it got, at least for the Cuban elites and corporate properties. The combination of domestic political forces demanding radical social change and the bitter protests of US interests, as well as subtle threats that the United States would not tolerate the actions of the Castro government, only inspired more radicalization of the revolution (OLSON, 1995:53).

In 1960, Castro signed a trade agreement with the USSR which established that Cuban sugar would be exchanged for Soviet oil and machinery and which led the US to suspend diplomatic relations with Cuba. At that time, the whole world was involved in a new struggle for global power – the Cold War – placing Cuba once again at the crossfire of two empires – this time the USA and the Soviet Union. In her book *In the Land of Mirrors*, María de Los Angeles Torres points out that “the revolution was not only a challenge to the super power position of the United States vis-à-vis the socialist camp but also a threat to the US hegemony in Latin America” (TORRES, 1995:177).

3.4 -Cuba finally *libre!* Or not?

With the end of Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship and the subsequent beginning of Fidel Castro’s regime in 1959, there have been three migratory waves from Cuba to the USA: the first, immediately after the Cuban Revolution, from 1959 to 1962; the second with the freedom flights, between 1965 to 1973 and finally, in 1980, during the ‘Mariel Incident’ (GARCÍA, 1995: 2).

Those who left Cuba in the aftermath of the revolution did not consider themselves immigrants, but political exiles. They aimed to go back to Cuba, because they thought Fidel Castro’s power would be temporary. They came from wealthy or upper middle-class families, many of them supporters of Batista’s regime. Owing to their desire to return to their homeland, most of them worked hard to make money and survive and, in spite of the differences in language and culture, they managed to enter Florida’s marketplace and constitute an enclave, which attracted immigrants from other ethnic origins. As María Cristina García affirms in her *Havana USA*:

Two factors contributed to the Cubans’ creation of a viable economic enclave: their middle class values and entrepreneurial skills which transferred readily across borders, and the Cuban Refugee Program, which pumped millions of dollars into the economy and facilitated the Cubans’ adaptation through professional and vocational training programs (GARCÍA, 1995:2).

Transnational migrations were common in the second half of the century but special programs to accommodate migratory groups were unusual. The *emigrés* or golden cubans, as they were called, were also concerned with the formation of a cultural enclave, through which they aimed to express both their *cubanidad*, a manner of being

Cuban without being in Cuba, and their views on life in the USA. The maintenance of their *cubanidad* was important because they thought they would soon go back to their homeland and because they wanted to maintain cultural boundaries that would allow them to survive as a distinct community. More than this, the sense of *cubanidad* meant to preserve customs and traditions which would be instrumental to the assertion of an identity that would be political as well as cultural (GARCÍA, 1995: 83).

The second wave of immigration happened between 1965 and 1973, a period when Fidel Castro allowed Cubans with relatives in the US to leave the country if they wanted. Such policies were Castro's response to the American government's use of émigrés experience as an anti-communist propaganda. This wave of immigrants was different from the first because of the US government stricter immigration policies, which now restricted admittance only to Cubans with families in the USA. Furthermore, these immigrants' profile was different from the previous generation because most of them did not come from wealthy families; more than 75% were women, children and seniors and there were also members of Cuban Jewish and Chinese communities (GARCÍA, 1995: 43).

In the late 70's, during President Jimmy Carter's mandate, attempts to reestablish a relationship with Cuba were made. Through the negotiations Cuba allowed Cubans off the island to return in order to visit their relatives and Cubans on the island to immigrate to the US. Moreover, the Cuban government granted freedom to political prisoners and their relatives. These negotiations altered the relationship between the government and the exiled community in the US. As Sonia Torres puts it:

From a political point of view, this new relationship was not easy for either side. The extreme-right Cubans from Miami reacted to the dialogue with a wave of terrorism that spread through the North American territory. But most of the Cuban population in the US was satisfied with the possibility to visit the island, which outraged the extreme-right, since it destroyed the ancient myth about the homogeneous nature of the Cuban community and its commitment to the revolutionary cause (TORRES, 2001:133, my translation).

The exiles' visits to their relatives in Cuba certainly made the number of illegal Cuban immigrants to the US increase, since Cubans started, through these visits, to be in contact with American affluence and desire it for themselves. This growing enthusiasm for the American Dream led to considerable increase in the number of ships and planes kidnapped and embassies invaded. In this tense atmosphere, the so called "Incident of Mariel" happened, in 1980, culminating with Fidel Castro's decision that

all Cubans aiming to leave the country could do so by the Mariel harbor, in the northeast of Cuba.

This concession was immediately welcome by the American government, which was campaigning against communism. As a result, hundreds of US boats and ships arrived in Mariel hours later, taking thousands of immigrants to the United States. The members of this third wave of immigration, as they had escaped through Mariel, became known as *marielitos*. They differed from previous groups because they were mostly from African origins or mestizos, members of lower classes and also because most of them did not have relatives in the USA, which made their assimilation to the American culture and their contact with other minorities' easier. According to García, "different from what had happened previously, the Cubans from Mariel were not considered legitimate refugees" (GARCÍA, 1995: 41).

However, unlike the previous waves of immigrants, those who were part of the Mariel boatlift were "not welcome with open arms by the American society in general or even by the Cuban-American community" because of several reasons. Most of them came from lower social classes and were Afro-descendants. To make matters worse, the *Marielitos* arrived in a moment of economic crisis, their migration had not been expected and, they were believed to be social misfits, whom Fidel Castro managed to get rid of²⁸. In reality, prisoners and serious mentally disturbed people were a small fraction of this wave of immigrants (OLSON, 1995: 78).

The Cuban Revolution and its aftermath produced not only a transformation of the political landscape but also accentuated a problematic bifurcation that had already existed in the Cuban identity and nation. Political events in Cuba have always exerted a very strong influence upon the processes of construction of identity, no matter whether Cubans were on the island or not. After the revolution, Cubans had a fragmented history and could be divided between Cubans who stayed on the island and those who were on the continent. Golden Cubans considered themselves Cubans living in the USA, differently from their descendants and other Cubans who arrived afterwards like the *Marielitos*. As these younger generations and newly arrived immigrants had more contact with the American Culture, they disrupted this monolithic paradigm.

²⁸ Such conviction made the term *Marielito* have a derogatory connotation.

Negotiating between the cultures they were exposed to, they forged more hybrid, fluid identities. As Maria de Los Angeles Torres highlights:

The Mariel immigration injected the community with a significant number of intellectuals, writers and artists, who brought with them a more contemporary, albeit sometimes complex and antagonistic, vision of Cuba. But this more fluid identity emerged at the margins of political structures because the Mariel immigration had provoked a crisis for the revolutionary government and the exile community (TORRES, 1995:186).

The descendants of Cubans who were born or came of age in the US, the members of the “generation 1.5”, are offsprings of the Cuban diaspora. Most of them know Cuba only from their parents’ memories, which are generally fixed on a nostalgic view of the past on the island, and occasionally from their own blurred childhood memories. This experience is common to several writers and activists such as Ruth Behar, who talks about the difference between her generation and that of her parents in her work *Bridges to Cuba/ Puentes a Cuba*:

For years, U.S. Cubans have been the one Latino group that North American leftists could comfortably discriminate against; weren’t we, after all, the Latinos who long ago sold out to Uncle Sam? (...) In contrast to this stereotype of the ugly Cuban, I found through my work on “Bridges to Cuba” a group of Cuban-American intellectuals and artists who are creatively rethinking their relationship both to Cuba and the United States and forging a sense of multiple identity, multiple nationalities, and multiple allegiances (BEHAR, 1995: 1).

The differences between the generations are also expressed in their literature, which can be considered a literature of exile. Very few works were produced in the first years of Cuban presence in the US. In the beginning, it was difficult for Cuban writers to have their works published by American presses not only because most of them wrote in Spanish but also because editors were mainly interested in already acclaimed writers, such as Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Enrique Labrador Ruiz and Lydia Cabrera. However, as time passed, several Cuban writers started writing under the influence of the Chicano movement, in an attempt to acquire voice and represent their communities (GARCÍA, 1995: 169).

Furthermore, Cuban literature in the USA displays a clear division between the works written by those who share the golden Cubans’ view on identity, and those written by writers who acknowledge themselves as Cuban-Americans. As Sonia Torres points out in “Mapping Memory: Achy Obejas’ Transnational Mambo”:

A clear distinction between ‘literature of exile’ and ‘Cuban American literature’ is perhaps called for: generally speaking, the former refers to

works written by Cubans in the United States, while the latter pertains to the contemporary body of works that can be identified as United States ethnic literature. However, it is important to signal the complexities of these two categories, given that they will depend on the author's positionality vis a vis her status as a 'political exile' or as a 'hyphenated American' (TORRES, 2002: 247).

The literature of Cuban exiles reflected their conception that they were Cubans living in the USA. Their works portray Cuba in a nostalgic and idealized way, adopting essentialistic patterns for representation of the Cuban identity, denying the fact that history informs their processes of construction. The writers who define themselves as Cuban-Americans, on the other hand, challenge these patterns, portraying the plurality of perspectives in the Cuban diasporic experience and acknowledging history's definite influence on their culture and their processes of identity construction. Their posture mirrors Stuart Hall's views when he says that "cultural identities are the points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but a positioning (HALL, 1990: 224).

3.5 – Remembering “*Que Soy de Aquí/ Que Soy de Allá*”²⁹: History and Memory in Achy Obejas' *Memory Mambo*

Among the Cuban writers who share this view is Achy Obejas. She was born in Cuba in 1956 and moved to the US at the age of six, belonging, thus, to the 1.5 generation. Obejas, author of several essays, articles and poetry, became famous for her fictional works, namely *We Came All the Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?* (1994), *Memory Mambo* (1996) and *Days of Awe* (2001), for which she won the *Lambda Award for Lesbian Fiction* in 2002. As a writer and activist, Obejas explores her experience as a Cuban immigrant/exile and despite having lived away from her homeland almost her entire life, she considers being Cuban crucial to her political convictions and career, as she reveals in a recent interview:

I was born in Havana and that single event pretty much defined the rest of my life. In the U.S., I'm Cuban, Cuban-American, Latina by virtue of being Cuban, a Cuban journalist, a Cuban writer, somebody's Cuban lover, a Cuban dyke, a Cuban girl on a bus, a Cuban exploring Sephardic roots, always and

²⁹ TROPICANA, Carmelita. *Milk of Amnesia*. In: ARRIZÓN, Alicia and MANZOR, Lilian, eds. *Latinas on Stage*. Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 2000.

endlessly Cuban. I'm more Cuban here than I am in Cuba, by sheer contrast and repetition (SHAPIRO, 2001:4).

This view on identity concurs with one of identities that Stuart Hall's views of theorizing cultural identities. He recognizes that, "as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what we really are; or rather – since history has intervened – what we have become" (HALL, 1990: 225). Therefore, it is impossible for Obejas to talk about her experience as specific, without paying attention to the rupture and discontinuities that the diaspora to the US caused in the construction of her identity. Obejas does not hold identifications solely with Cuba; they are also extended to US points of reference, as we can see in an interview to the *Philadelphia Gay Profile*, in which she recalls a trip to Virginia Beach. She reveals that there, watching the Atlantic she felt at home:

It felt like home not because Cuba is an island. It felt like home because it reminded me of Lake Michigan, that inland sea. I grew up in Michigan City Ind., and Lake Michigan is more of a centering point for me as Cuba could ever be (VANASCO, 1996:28-29).

Such self-definition, as Obejas gives us, has emerged in Cuban communities in the 1970's. This formulation of a Cuban transcultural identity locates exile as category that influences - not necessarily determining – the construction of Cuban identity, that is, it "does not solely rely on the notion of exile", which is seen here as one of its constituents³⁰ (McCULLOUGH). This view on identity is shared by a younger generation of Cuban American writers of which Obejas is an exponent.

Similarly to other Latina feminist writers, Obejas aims to challenge oppressive systems and beliefs that are presented as unique and absolute truths and that reproduce hegemonic values. Adopting non-essentialist notions of culture and identity, Obejas breaks up with a tradition in the Cuban literature of exile of offering nostalgic historical representations of an idyllic past. Such representations, as it has been said before, are fixed in monolithic paradigms for the Cuban experience in the USA. In other words, instead of representing one unique Cuban experience as genuine among several others, the writer acknowledges the complexities and the hybridization of the Cuban nation and

³⁰ McCULLOUGH. "Marked by Genetics and Exile": Narrativizing transcultural sexualities in *Memory Mambo*. Online source: muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_lesbian_and_gay_studies/v006/6.4mccullough.html. Last access: December, 30, 2005.

identity, historicizing the relationship Cuba-USA. The main concern of Cuban American writers is the issue of identity. Obejas's work and the works of Cuban American writers, as García properly exemplifies, revolve around questions about the meaning of being Cuban and of being American. The retention of one's national identity despite the pressures to conform and assimilate, the balancing between two worlds and the influence of categories of race, gender, and sexuality in the shaping of identities – all these factors are addressed by these writers (GARCÍA, 1995:173).

In *Memory Mambo*, Obejas acknowledges these complexities. Crossing the boundary between history and fiction, she manages to destabilize binary oppositions such as truth/ lie and reality/fictional representation. Juani, the protagonist, is in search for the truth about her hyphenated condition (Cuban-American) and about her relatives' nostalgic and mythical memories. As Sonia Torres³¹ points out, *Memory Mambo* “is structured around a first person narrator, and her attempt to understand the contradictions of her bicultural, feminine, homosexual existence, and above all, the lies her family memories are based upon” (TORRES, 2002: 233). Surrounded by Cubans who spent years fictionalizing their memories, lying for and about themselves, Juani questions herself about the truth in these memories, which come to her in a fragmented way.

Through her protagonist's wonderings and digressions about the reliability of her relatives' memories, Obejas challenges both a mythology of exile and the use of what Pamella Smorkaloff calls “false memory”³². Highlighting disparities and showing the reader multiple points of view on the same event, Obejas offers a different counter-hegemonic version of history. According to Paul Allatson in his article “Memory Mambo: Cuban Memory, ‘American Mobility’ and Achy Obejas’ Lesbian Way”, the dichotomies of remembering and forgetting, and of truth and lies, both move the plot forward and shape the character's narratives” (ALLATSON:10).

Juani recognizes that her relatives' memories have a strong influence upon her identity, even intermingling with her own memories sometimes, especially when

³¹I am indebted to Professor Sonia Torres, for her extensive and insightful work on *Memory Mambo*, which contributed very much to my understanding of the novel and of the situation of Cuban-Americans in the USA.

³²SMORKALOFF, P. M.. “Canon and Diaspora: A Literary Dialogue”, Proyecto Cuba: <http://www.soc.qc.edu/procuba/escritores.html>.

concerning Cuba. Memory, then, can be seen as a collective construction about the past, as experienced from the social conditions in the present. Historian Maurice Halbwachs argues that there is not an independent individual memory – every source of memory is collective (HALBWACHS, 1990: 34). In this sense, collective memory can be seen as a frame of cultural reference that defines which paradigms are going to be used by each individual partaking of it. In the beginning of the story, the protagonist puts her memories' authenticity in check, as we can see in the following extract:

I've always thought of memory as a distinct, individual thing. (...) But I don't know. I'm not that old, just twenty-four, and I often wonder just how distinct my memories are. Sometimes I'm convinced they're someone else's recollections I've absorbed. I'm not talking about hooking into past lives, or other links established spiritually or psychically to other times. I'm not talking at all about suppressed memories. It's just that sometimes other lives lived right alongside mine interrupt, barge in on my senses, and I no longer know if I really lived through an experience or just heard about it so many times, or so convincingly, that I believed it for myself became the lens through which it was captured, retold and shaped (OBEJAS, 1996:11)³³.

In his influential work *History and Memory*, French historian Jacques Le Goff points out that one of the characteristics of the concept of memory is its multiple crossings, interweaving the individual and the collective and involving both remembering and forgetting (LE GOFF apud LIMA, 1998: 123). This is perfectly illustrated by Juani's family's memories. Because her familiar history is strongly affected by the Cuban history, Juani re-tells historical events based on what her relatives remember in order to have mastery over the events of her family's past. As she declares in the end of the first chapter, "What I want to know is what really happened" (14). Of course such attempt is frustrated since "what really happened" can be only recovered through discourse, and thus, is never definite or absolute.

Since individual and collective memories intermingle and overlap here because some of the individual registers are also social, memory becomes a way of de-naturalizing the notion of history as the unique Truth, which is part of the feminist and post-modern ideology of breaking up with grand-narratives. Thus, Obejas subverts history, promoting both its re-reading and rewriting, crossing the boundaries between public and private. In these processes, memory plays a prominent role and as a consequence, it influences the construction of identity. Anthropologist Catherine Hall in

³³ OBEJAS, Achy. *Memory Mambo*. Cleis Press: Pittsburgh, 1996. All further references will be done by the page number only.

her article “Histories, Empires and the Post-Colonial Moment” discusses the role of history and memory and its impact on subject’s formation as well in the recognition of the differences that exist inside a national culture:

History and Memory are central to that process. (...) But it is necessary a history that involves recognition and the re-working of memory. A history which shows how fantasised constructions of homogeneous nations are constructed and the other possibilities which are always there. A history which is about difference, not homogeneity (HALL, 1996:76).

In her search for mastery upon her family’s history, Juani longs for a history that encompasses all differences, giving voice to the marginalized and de-naturalizing myths of homogeneity. Good examples of such process are the stories told by Tío Raúl about his involvement in the Cuban Revolution and its consequences to his private life. Because of a strong passion for Haydée Santamaría, a historical character that Obejas incorporates to her work, Raúl decides to join the Revolution. He ends up driving one of the cars in the attack to Batista’s troops in Moncada. In Tío Raúl’s words, “it was my stupid ego which made go (...) and which started the Cuban Revolution” (104). According to official history, the attack by Fidel Castro to the military barracks in Moncada, which took place on July, 26, 1953, was the official beginning of the Revolution. Many people were killed, especially revolutionaries. Tío Raúl’s version of the events, however, includes outlandish details: Fidel Castro intended to surprise Batista’s soldiers, who would probably be drunk because of Carnival’s celebration in Santiago de Cuba. Having some advantage for being sober and helped by local folks, the rebels would easily defeat the soldiers. Nevertheless, things didn’t happen as planned. Tío Raúl, according to his in his very personal account, played a decisive role, even if unfortunate, in the outcome of the attack. According to Raúl:

For starters half the car got lost in Santiago and never made it to the Moncada. The other thing is, I was very, very nervous, and when we got to the Moncada, I didn’t brake right – this was not my car and I was unfamiliar with it – and I hit a curb by the barracks building. (...) It made a sound - a thud, actually - and it freaked everybody out, especially Fidel, who was driving one of the cars, and who fell on his horn by accident, waking up the whole goddamn regiment (...) If I hadn’t gone, I wouldn’t have hit the curb, and Fidel wouldn’t have honked his horn, and the soldiers would have been taken by surprise and there would have been no dead (104).

Through this alternative and personalized version of history, Obejas de-doxifies our assumptions about history as a master-narrative, highlighting its discursive nature.

Pointing out that history is just another form of representation, the author also posits it in the same branch of fiction. As Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon puts it:

Both History and Literature have been seen to derive their force from verisimilitude rather than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms and not at all transparent in either terms of language or structure (HUTCHEON, 1995: 83).

Juani's father, Alberto José Casas y Molina belongs to a family whose history is closely connected to Cuban history – from the colonial past to more recent events. One of the points where these histories intertwine is in the Casas y Molina myth of origin. Juani's mother, Xiomara, is proud of being married to a supposed descendant of Bartolomé de Las Casas, another historical character that Obejas mentions in her work. Chronicler of the Spanish Imperialism and first priest to arrive in Cuba during the Spanish colonization, Las Casas, also known as “The Apostle to the Indies”, became famous for his humanitarian work and for “protecting the island's indigenous populations from Spanish bloodlust” (32). The inclusion of historical figures is a very common strategy in postmodern novels because it not only helps the writer to give reliability to his text but also de-naturalizes history, pointing out the artificiality and arbitrariness of its representation.

Xiomara admires the legend around Las Casas very much and boasts about being part of his family. Nevertheless, according to Juani, her mother likes it because this legend allows her to ignore her own Black ancestry, since “it positions the question of race between Whites and Indian, consigning the issue of Blackness to silence” (33). Juani and her cousin Patricia notice that several details of the story are strategically forgotten so that it fits Xiomara's and the family's necessities. Thus, we can see that memory often expresses the cultural values of a person or a group because it is constituted of a selection of events and actions that in their point of view deserve to be remembered, demonstrating the paradigms used by them in that process.

One of the details omitted by Xiomara is the fact that Las Casas was a priest, sworn to celibacy, thus unable to have legitimate descendants. The way he protected the indigenous folks is not mentioned either. Patricia, who is responsible for de-constructing the family's myths throughout the narrative, says that:

The whole Bartolomé de Las Casas tale is an elaborate lie. (...) One of the ways Las Casas ‘protected’ the Indians was by making the first suggestion to

the Spanish governor that Africans might be better suited to work in the tropics than the Indians. This (...) is what started slavery in Cuba. (...)If indeed we're descendants of Las Casas, chances are we're spawns of an illegitimate child conceived with some Indian he probably raped (34).

Most family myths in the novel are transmitted by Juani's father, who claims to have had a crucial participation on Fulgencio Batista's escape from the island immediately after the revolution and to have invented the duct tape. These stories told by Alberto contain several inaccuracies and appear in different versions, which he uses depending on the person who is listening to him. One of the versions of the story about Batista's departure portrays Alberto as a wealthy businessman hired by the CIA after the revolution. This is the story told to Jimmy, his niece's husband that is against Fidel Castro. When Gina – Juani's Puerto Rican *independentista* lover – is listening to him, Alberto portrays himself as unemployed and having to submit to the American power, working as an agent, in order to survive. As Sonia Torres points out “his narrative is always open-ended, lending itself to a variety of interpretations (TORRES, 2002: 236-237). As a (his)story-teller Alberto intervenes in it according to his will and to his audience; his posture is similar to that of the narrator in postmodern fiction since he constructs facts by giving a particular meaning to events (HUTCHEON, 1989: 58), which, in this case, we don't even know if they really happened or not.

The tale about the duct-tape invention – and its subsequent stealing by the *Yanquis* – is symbolic of his frustration with the American Dream and obsesses Juani through the course of the novel (TORRES, 2002: 236), as we can see in the following extract where she broods over the authenticity of the story:

I don't know how much this story is true. I have a vague memory of shirtless men in the patio of our home in Havana brushing whole strips of black cloth with some horrible, stinky glue. My father (...) 'd stand in the middle of all the activity, taking mysterious notes on his clipboard, and squinting in the sunlight.(...) I remember all this but I don't know if I remember it for real or because I've heard the story a million times. My brother Pucho doesn't remember anything, but he was just a baby then. Nena says it's all true, although her memories are the same as mine, but my cousin Patricia says it's just a fantasy created in exile, a group hallucination based on my father's constant re-telling of the story (25).

Juani's obsession with discovering the “truth”, which permeates the entire novel, is probably provoked by the impossibility of discovering it, since she knows she cannot rely on the information received through her relatives, who are full of nostalgia. When visiting her sister, Juani sees that Bernie, Nena's live-in boyfriend, can access people's

biographies though the Internet. Impressed by the rapidity and apparent accuracy of the information available, Juani deludes herself that she may finally uncover some information concerning her father's role in the invention of the duct tape.

With the advent of great technological advances in the XX century, a revolution in both history and memory occurred, since documentation in a larger scale was made possible. Leroy-Gourhan calls such form of documentation electronic memory. It differs from human memory in its stability – it is similar to that represented by book, but combined with a greater evocative facility. The emergence of that kind of memory has had two major consequences. The first is the use of computers in social sciences, especially in history – where memory is simultaneously object and material. The second is that history has, thus, undertaken a documental revolution, caused by the data banks and the search engines (LE GOFF, 1986: 51, my translation).

Despite the fact that machines are always associated with an apparent objectivity, the information available in the Internet is organized by humans and mediated through discourse. Furthermore, the number of sources available makes it easier to access different – sometimes conflicting – information about the same subject. Regarding his mother's biography found in the web, Bernie comments that “they pretty much tell you what they want you to know” and adds that “that is the only way you can read her work. I mean that's part of the fun with this stuff, I guess – reading between the lines” (183). What Bernie highlights here is the fact that though electronic memory is faster and apparently covers wider range of events, it is a mere device used and controlled by humans. In order to test the reliability of the search engines' information Juani asks Bernie to search for some information about her tío Raúl – where she finds a divergent version of the history she knows about him:

I couldn't believe it, 'That's not right' – I said. 'Tío Raúl isn't an exile He was here long before the revolution. Heck, he went back after the revolution'
'See, it's what I was telling you.'- Bernie said. You have to read between the lines (184).

Thus, we can see that Ana Castillo's view that “history depends on the view of the chronicler” (CASTILLO, 1995: 3) is pertinent, regardless of the source where we find it – history books or web pages. Nena, talking to Juani about the family's memories/lies, says that the stories in the family are “sort of like singing Guantanamera, everyone gets a chance to make up their own verse” (194). Juani needs to acknowledge the fact that, as Hutcheon states, “we have only access to the past today through its traces – its

documents, the testimony of witness and other archival materials”. (HUTCHEON, 1989: 58) In other words, Juani can only construct her own versions and explanations about the present from representations of the past, which are always biased.

Kate Mc Cullough argues that Juani’s experience is marked by her exile condition and by a deep sense of loss provoked by it. The protagonist aims to acquire mastery over her family’s past, which is impossible, since exile creates a gap – which can only be fulfilled by narrative – between her and her homeland. Loss permeates the whole novel and since Juani’s experience is marked by the entanglement of the public and private spheres, such sense of loss is displayed in both: Juani cannot recover “the truth” in her family’s memories nor recover her relationship with Gina. According to McCullough, “Juani’s efforts to elevate her experience to the status of evidence (...) formally displays her failure to produce a unified chronological narrative, a failure dictated by her desire to master her experience through memory (McCULLOUGH). What Juani does not seem to acknowledge is that even with her own recent past, she can not recollect “what really happened”, as we can see in the following extract:

I don’t know precisely how we got to the hospital. I’ve heard that neighbors busted down the doors, thinking we were being attacked. I’ve also been told that Gina’s mother had come back for some reason, saw the carnage on the living room floor, and, after recovering from the initial horror, called the police and the paramedics to take us apart. Another story says she never called the cops at all, just went screaming out the apartment door, yelling somebody how they’d murdered her baby, her hands up in the air, until the neighbors called 911 in panic (136).

After the traumatic fight with Gina, Juani – similarly to what her family did with the exile experience – fictionalizes her memories, adopting Jimmy’s version of the events, because fits her own interests. As when Juani realizes the entries she wrote in her journal about the incident are about Jimmy’s version, not about her actual fight with Gina:

In the last month my journal had become a nightmare. Not writing about “the incident” right away had been a terrible mistake. Now every time I began to jot down my story, it got confused with Jimmy’s mess. I’d be at the place where I hit Gina when suddenly I’d look down at the page in horror: *And then the guy grabbed the chair and hit Gina in the back, like on a TV show. And the chair broke into pieces, so I grabbed a leg to defend myself and sparred with the guy.* But I knew that wasn’t what happened. Or was it? (173).

Therefore, how can she expect to have mastery upon the past events in Cuba if she is not sure even about the events of her own personal life?

Most characters in the novel are inherently contradictory and challenge a monolithic paradigm which describes Cubans as a homogeneous group. According to Allatson, they are people “cannot be unequivocally located in one or another kinship group, who resist categorising by problematic gender classifications and/or national and cultural affiliations, and who above all, to varying degrees, embody an ‘identificatory slipperiness’ (ALLATSON, 2002: 166). The protagonist – an assumed homosexual – gets involved in a power game with Jimmy, her cousin Caridad’s husband, who is a symbol of Latino machismo. Juani is constantly harassed – psychologically and sexually – by him, but surprisingly and contradictorily, does not tell anyone about it. This silence contributes to a dramatic moment in the novel: the whole Casas y Molina family’s discovery that Jimmy is abusing a little cousin, Rosa. Juani questions herself about her degree of responsibility in the event – because she was silent and thus complicitous about Jimmy’s behavior toward her (TORRES, 2002: 239).

Juani’s mother, as it has already been mentioned, boasts about the family’s connections to Bartolomé de Las Casas, a sign that her family is white and noble. She is a counterrevolutionary and *anti-castrista* because the Cuban Revolution represented a shift in the pre-existing order where there was no mixture between white elites and the black and mixed blooded working-classes. Her racist posture – even though Juani says she is a “*café con leche* mulata” – was transmitted to her descendants. Similarly to *Caramelo*’s Soledad, Xíomara has internalized a sense of race inferiority that makes her attempt to erase her own *mestiza* origin. Several are the instances when Juani’s mother seems to want to promote a bleaching in the family. As Juani remembers:

When we were little my mother was always after us: ‘*Caminen siempre por la sombra*’ – always walk on the shade. She was terrified that too much sun would somehow reveal our real heritage – whether Indian or Black” (34).

Furthermore, when Nena moves to Florida and falls in love with a black man, she holds the news from the whole family because she fears her mother’s reactions.

Not only racial but also political matters interfere even in Juani and Gina’s relationship. Despite being a politically engaged woman, Gina is a closet lesbian, According to Patricia:

“She is like a combination of Fidelista and lesbian separatist”, Patricia would say with a laugh. And the best part of it is she’s not even out! What a hoot! I mean, all this ecological and feminist posturing has little to do with leftist ideology or Cuba. What does she think about nuclear plant in Cienfuegos, huh?”

I didn't have an answer. It's not that I wasn't aware of the contradictions between her politics and her closet (118).

Moreover, as Allatson observes, Gina reinforces Latin American dismissals of gay and lesbian politics as mere “bourgeois individualistic American leftism imported from the USA”, and as a way of deviating attention from more pressing political concerns like Puerto Rico's colonial status (ALLATSON). As Gina tells Juani:

“Look, I'm not interested in being a *lesbian*, in separating politically from the people”, she'd say to me, her face hard and dark. What are we talking about? Issues of *sexual identity*? While Puerto Rico is a colony? (77)

Such differences in politics and in identification are clearly caused by the different historical moments that have informed and shaped their processes of construction of identity. The US politics directed to Puerto-Ricans and Cubans give Juani and Gina different positions from which to speak and such differences influence their relationship: the political intermingles with the personal. Allatson considers that the lovers are influenced by rival imaginaries, which “confront each other in and as political opinions” and that they are “marked by membership of national, ethnic and familial groupings made adversarial by the USA's history of Antillean interventions since 1898” (ALLATSON).

It is worthwhile mentioning that Obejas presents themes that are common in Cuban-American narratives under a new perspective, that of a generation that came of age in the 1990's. These themes – such as the Revolution and its consequences, the family's departure from Cuba and the life in exile, class and race issues – are portrayed in a critical and dialectical way. When Obejas dialogues with the literature of exile, she problematizes the nostalgic memory in their representations (TORRES, 2002: 240). As Cristina García explains, regarding the works of Cuban exiles:

The exiles nostalgic memory is selective (...).Émigrés ignore the social and economic problems that encouraged the revolution. For them there was no racism, no poverty, no terrorism (...) If older émigrés indulge in excessive nostalgia, it is because they feel alienated and marginalized (GARCÍA, 1995:173).

Cuban literature in the US traditionally concerns itself with events on the island. No other minority in the USA is so worried about the affairs in the homeland, so issues such as US foreign affairs and relations to Cuba, the consequences of the politics to the family who lives on the island are portrayed –always in a dialectical way (TORRES, 2002: 240). According to Sonia Torres, “even their favorite trope, Fidel, is dialogized – a rare fact, indeed, in the production of Cubans in the United States” (TORRES, 2002:

240). In a discussion about Cuba with one of Gina's friends, who is an enthusiast of Fidel and the Cuban Revolution, it is said that "Fidel has tremendous *cojones*". Juani, who has never thought of Castro in that way agrees and ponders "How else could he have lasted decade after decade? After all it's not just hate the exiles feel for him, but admiration too (130).

It is also important to mention that *Memory Mambo* is centered in the Casas y Molinas' laundromat Wash-N-Dry, where part of the action happens. The family business – besides evoking Cuban capacity and perseverance to prosper – is the family's meeting place. Juani gradually sees herself alone running the business with the older relatives – her mother and aunts. Her cousins and even her sister Nena become involved with personal projects outside the community and leave, hinting at the transformation the community undergoes. Such distancing from the laundromat is evidence of the dissolution of the Cuban enclave lifestyle and of the adoption of a new paradigm. As Allatson puts it:

From the first to the last page, *Memory Mambo* describes the form and content of a disintegrating social reality. The identity of the emigré community is shifting in the family, in the community and in the enclave. Survival depends on abandoning the myth of cohesion, and on the confrontation to the disintegration process and the struggle to create something new with the pieces as they fall (ALLATSON, 2002: 5).

Juani's decision to go back to Cuba is very common to Cuban literature in the US. Obejas portrays all the difficulties for someone in the US to travel to the island. Juani decides to write a letter to Titi – her lesbian cousin who resides on the island. This symmetry, Sonia Torres highlights, "is suggestive of Juani's desire to encounter her 'other side'" (TORRES, 2002: 243). Though Titi appears in the novel only in photographs, she plays a prominent role – that of attracting Juani's attention and gaze to somewhere outside the community (TORRES, 2002: 244). Looking at Titi's picture, Juani thinks about the difficulties of being a lesbian in Cuba, given Castro's government homophobic posture. But then she remembers that all her lovers had been closeted, which implies that homophobia exists everywhere, no matter which form of government is ruling.

In *Memory Mambo*, the multiple historical versions told by Juani's relatives and the contradictions inherent to the characters are dramatically rooted on ideological, political and generational differences. Because they inform the processes of

construction of identity of the protagonist, they make her the product of several different ideologies and narratives. Since the Casas y Molinas are a transnational family whose history is fragmented due to their diaspora and exile, Obejas portrays a Cuban family whose younger generation does not fit the monolithic paradigm for the Cuban exile. The writer deals with several questions like race, gender, ethnicity, social class and sexuality, showing multiple perspectives inherent to Cubans in the US. Juani lives in a liminal state, constructing her identity ambivalently loyal to both American and Cuban cultures.

We can trace a parallel between the Casas y Molina's diasporic condition and Benedict Anderson's concept of nation. Anderson claims that the nation is more than a geographical delimitation; it is composed of a fraternity of strangers, who share the same imaginary and for whom, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (ANDERSON, 1991: 7). The "*gran-familia*" in *Memory Mambo* represents a miniature of the nation imagined. As Allatson puts it "both family and nation are not only split between Cuba and the USA, but also inside the borders of each geopolity" (ALLATSON, 2002: 2). Therefore, Anderson's definition of nation clearly fits the concept of family for Juani, with ties established during exile and whose history is also her own story (TORRES, 2002: 235), as she explains in the following extract:

Then, there is the difference between blood cousins, like the ones in Cuba and cousins in exile. We're stuck with blood cousins. They are there, recklessly swinging off the branches on the family tree whether we want them or not. They assume they can call on us, just because we crawled out of the same DNA pool, regardless of whether we've shared a word with them or not. They assume we'll tell them our most intimate thoughts, even if we've just met them, because they're family, because they're links in the chain of our history, even if it is a history we don't know.(...)Cousins in exile are different. They are cousins we never had, something far more vital than just substitutes for the ones we left in Cuba (...)We have an affinity, a way of speaking that's neither Cuban nor American, neither genetic nor processed (13).

As Sonia Torres notices, the history interrupted by exile and the split family – dear themes to Cuban Exile literature – reappear seen through a transnational family perspective, instead of the classical family of Cuban-American texts. Moreover, when it comes to the family left on the island, Juani frequently highlights that the information she has about them is filtered through others' viewpoints and due to that, not reliable (TORRES, 2002: 235):

For every Cuban I've met in the US, there is a least one relative left on the island. This is the relative who sends coded messages in letters, who describes how long the lines are everywhere, and all the new ways of making *cafesitos* from used coffee grounds and crushed red beans. The stories they tell are always slightly incredulous, but those of us who are here have no other choice but to believe them. (74)

Therefore we can say that the Cuban nation and the Casas y Molina are separate not just by the 90 miles that separate Cuba from the USA but by different historical and cultural experiences as well as by ideological positions. María de Los Angeles Torres points out that there must be a redefinition of the concept of nation so that it encompasses “those who left Cuba, those who stayed and those who will still leave” (BEHAR, 1995:34). After 1959, Cubans who left have been labeled as traitors in Cuba or heroes in the USA. For Cubans on the island, a constructive redefinition of nation implies an abandonment of the official interpretation of history and the recovery of those parts of the past which have been erased, such as the story of the émigrés (BEHAR, 1995:34). As performer and activist Coco Fusco puts it: “The Revolution and the Cold War created a separate nation, but never completely succeeded in dividing people”. (FUSCO, 1995:4)

In *Memory Mambo*, the challenge to a monolithic paradigm for the Cuban identity and the subject's displacement are evident. Among the strategies and themes used by the author in order to accomplish such rupture are the re-reading and rewriting of history through memory. Memory and history are problematized since they are not shown in a coherent way, but through different perspectives, allowing different versions of the same historical event. Besides, Obejas crosses the boundaries between public and private, intermingling the memories and familial history of the *Casas y Molina*, and events taken from Cuban history. Thus, Obejas historicizes the relationship between Cuba and the USA, subverting the traditional notion of History, questioning its status of unique Truth, emphasizing its artificial and contradictory character, establishing also a parallel with the hybrid nature of the subjects represented in the story.

CONCLUSION

“There is a past to be learned about, but the past is now seen, and has to be grasped, as a history, as something that has to be told. It is narrated (...) It is not a fact that has been waiting to ground our identities”.

Stuart Hall, “The Local and the Global”

In the introduction of this dissertation I proposed to investigate the role that memory plays in the literature written by Latinas in the US – more specifically in Cuban-American literature and in Chicana literature. Memory has a prominent role in Latinos’ processes of consciousness raising and social analyses (MOHANTY, 2004: 78). However, it is necessary to “acknowledge the historical specificities” of their diasporas, in order to understand how their collective memory will be used in their processes of identity construction (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000: 90).

I hope to make clear a distinction between the Chicano/a and the Cuban-American diasporic experiences: Chicano/as have endured several waves of brutal colonization in a historical past of annexation, dispossession of lands, and violent alienation from their homeland and culture, as well as a present of transnational migrations and economic exploitation. As Chicana critic Ana Castillo remarks: “The changing border that divides the US and Mexico (...) has placed Mexicans in a continual neocolonial state providing the US with legislated surplus labor as needed” (CASTILLO, 1995: 3).

Cuban-Americans, in their turn, share from a common past of strong colonizing practices that involve submission to foreign cultures, but their separation from the homeland is much more traumatic because of their conditions as exiles and their impossibility to return due to Fidel Castro’s regime. The first waves of immigrants – helped by the policies of the US government – constituted an enclave, where they tried to express their *Cubanidad* and to reproduce their life on the island, in a Cuba that only existed in their imagination. In the following decades, with the arrival of new waves of

immigrants, who had fewer monolithic identity paradigms, the realization that Cuban-Americans belonged to both nations emerged (TORRES, 1995: 197). Regarding the exile experience and Cuban identity politics, Maria de Los Angeles Torres contends that:

The realization that our place will be constructed in and by both countries does not deny the exile component of our reality. Unfortunately, it will continue to be a critical aspect of our identity, as long as there is a law in our home country that prevents us from returning. (...) We must accept and act upon the multiplicity of places in which our identities are constructed (TORRES, 1995: 198).

Given this difference in Chicano and Cuban-American diasporas and politics, critic Sonia Torres establishes a distinction – which is crucial to this work – between the role of memory for the Chicano and for the Cuban-American. Torres points out that Chicanos’ texts portray other forms of being a US citizen without being Anglo, which influences the role of memory in their literature:

Memory for the Chicano is frequently represented by the attempt to (...) take the American nation out of its amnesia, which has strategically erased the language and the traditions from American soil, which used to be Mexican. There is a desire to re-signify America and its literary canon (...) The texts of [this group] narrate other forms of being a US citizen whereas the Cuban texts narrate other forms of being Cuban without being in Cuba (TORRES, 1999:156, my translation).

Torres still adds that “such pattern is subject to change since we are dealing with a corpus in continual transformation” (TORRES, 1999: 156, my translation). In order to accomplish this goal, these writers also address issues such as the retention of one’s national identity despite the pressures to conform and assimilate the balancing between two worlds, and the influence of categories of race, gender, and sexuality in the shaping of identities (GARCÍA, 1995:173).

In *Caramelo*, we can see Cisneros’s attempt to “take the US out of its amnesia” through her subversion of traditional history. Consistently making use of postmodern narrative strategies, such as paratextual elements, parody and metafiction, Cisneros not only places “the reader in a liminal space between genres but also between fiction and truth, invention and documentation” (McCRACKEN). In the paratextual conventions, we have “traces of events which historians call documents” (HUTCHEON, 1995: 92). The extensive use of footnotes, for example, gives the reader an almost encyclopedic knowledge about Mexico. Similarly to an ethnographer, Cisneros presents a cultural

background ignored by her US public. The footnotes point the reader to other forms of representation and fields of practice and disrupt the linear reading of the novel. As Linda Hutcheon sees it:

They [footnotes] do indeed function (...) as self-reflexive signals to assure the reader as to the historical credibility of the particular witness or authority cited, while at the same time they also disrupt our reading – that is, our creating of a coherent, totalizing fictive narrative (HUTCHEON, 1995:85)

However, Cisneros problematizes and undermines the authority of her footnotes because they do not just contain documentary evidences of historical events; they are also pieces of fictional representation. As we can see in the following footnote, Cisneros disrupts the linear reading of the novel in order to explain why the narrative is taking that direction: “Because a life contains a multitude of stories and not a single strand explains precisely the who of who one is, we have to examine the complicated loops that allowed Regina to become la Señora Reyes” (*Caramelo*, 2002:115). Furthermore, the self-reflexive, metafictional and polyphonic nature of the text points to the unreliability of the narrators and of documental sources – from the footnotes to the “Disclaimer.

In *Caramelo*, Lala is not worried about discovering the truth since, she seems convinced that truth depends on the teller. She knows that history is nothing more than a point of view, as she affirms, when the Awful Grandmother is accusing her of letting her politics interfere with the story:

– Why do you constantly have to impose your filthy politics? Can’t you just tell the facts?
And what kind of story would this be with just facts?
The truth!
It depends on whose truth you’re talking about. *The same story becomes a different story depending on who is telling it* ³⁴(*Caramelo*, 2002:156).

Lala knows she cannot rely on the representations of the past and in her relatives’ memories, as truthful accounts and she does not even seem to be worried about it: the most important thing is to have the story of her family – a (his)story of Chicanos – told, be it true or “*puro cuento*”.

It is also possible to establish a parallel between the fragmentation – in chronology and form – of the novel and the fragmentation of the characters’ identities. Cisneros’ text is marked by a blurring of genres, giving her novel a hybrid nature, which in turn,

³⁴ Italics mine.

reflects the hybridity in the characters' processes of identity construction. The Reyes's sense of displacement in the USA and their annual trips to Mexico emphasize their condition of inhabitants of an "interstitial space", in which their identities are constructed as they translate between cultures.

For the Cuban-American, memory is also very important. It is through memory that Cuban-Americans establish a connection to their homeland, articulating, in the US, other forms of being Cuban. In *Memory Mambo*, Achy Obejas challenges the traditional notion of history, interweaving events of the Cuban history with the personal/ familiar history of the exiles Casas y Molina. Obejas de-naturalizes history, highlighting its constructed nature since in the novel she introduces events of the Cuban history narrated from a personal point of view – such as tío Raúl's participation in Moncada and her father's myths about the participation in the Golden exiles' escape from Cuba and about his invention of the duct-tape. Moreover, she makes allusions to historical figures like Bartolomé de Las Casas, whose image of protector of the indigenous populations is deconstructed as Obejas portrays him as a symbol of colonial power.

Juani wants to recover her family's past on the island. However, the condition of exile makes the process of reconstructing history more complex, since exile represents a definite rupture with the homeland. Therefore, she has to rely on her relatives' versions of the events in Cuba to discover "the truth". The impossibility to go back influences the Casas y Molinas, making them turn to nostalgia when thinking about the island's past. As María Cristina García affirms:

The exiles 'nostalgic memory is selective of course. Many émigrés ignore the social and economic problems that encouraged the revolution. For them there was no racism, no poverty, no terrorism. In casual conversation, émigrés – particularly those who had been upwardly mobile in Cuba – often exaggerate how much property and wealth they owned in Cuba and subsequently lost to the revolution, distinguishing for themselves their experience from that of their compatriots. (...) If older émigrés indulge in excessive nostalgia, it is because they feel alienated and marginalized (GARCÍA, 1995:173).

As Obejas problematizes memory in exile by acknowledging its fictionalization through nostalgia, she breaks up with a tradition in the Cuban literature of exile of representations of an idyllic past and of monolithic paradigms for the Cubans in the US, recognizing their hybrid and multicultural nature. Juani acknowledges such hybridity in her own experience in the US:

We [Cuban Americans] have an affinity, a way of speaking that's neither Cuban nor American, neither genetic or processed (...) We communicate, I suspect, like deaf people – not so much compensating the lost sense, but creating a new syntax from the pieces of our displaced lives (*Memory Mambo*, 1996:13)

In *Caramelo* and in *Memory Mambo*, Sandra Cisneros and Achy Obejas respectively make use of memory to de-naturalize a traditional notion of history – which obliterated and silenced the voices of their communities – and to articulate an identity politics, which takes into consideration responses to the diasporic experience that are varied and influenced by historical specificities. In *The Agüero Sisters*, a novel by Cuban American writer Cristina García, one of the characters caresses a memento from her deceased father's collection and “wonders if memory is little more than this: *a series of erasures and perfected selections*” (GARCÍA, 1997: 163, my italics). This whimsical definition of memory certainly mirrors the ways events acquire meaning in history and in fiction in general and in the novels here analyzed in particular.

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