Writing Memory: The Latino Community and Continuity in the Writings of Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Achy Obejas.

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WRITING MEMORY: THE LATINO COMMUNITY AND CONTINUITY IN THE WRITINGS OF JULIA ALVAREZ, JUDITH ORTIZ COFER, AND ACHY OBEJAS.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... v

1. WRITING MEMORY: AN INTRODUCTION ................................................................................ 1

2. RECUPERATING THE NATION: JULIA ALVAREZ’ IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES AND IN THE NAME OF SALOMÉ .......................................................... 27

3. THE SELF AND THE COLLECTIVE: JUDITH ORTIZ COFER’S SILENT DANCING .............................................................. 53

4. CONTESTING IDENTITY: ACHY OBEJAS’ MEMORY MAMBO AND DAYS OF AWE .............................................................. 74

5. CONCLUSION: COMMUNITY AND CONTINUITY ................................................................. 103

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................................. 117

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .............................................................................................................. 123
ABSTRACT

This is a study of narratives of three women authors of Spanish Caribbean origin writing in English in the United States—Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Achy Obejas. The investigation theorizes the function of memory in narratives, used to carve a collective ethnic identity of the specific Latino groups, in order to maintain a continuity of the displaced community. The texts target the second generation immigrants who find themselves in conflict with a society where they are at the margins because of differences from the dominant norms of society. Marginalization is countered by the creation of a link to the continuing cultures and establishing a collective identity, molded out of the collective memories of the people of the community. The texts look at three kinds of memories, namely the historical, the autobiographical, and the ethnic memory, which are instrumental in the construction of a collective, at different levels—the national, the personal, and the cultural. The textual narrative as an implement to circulate the notion of a common bond between the author, the narrator, the text, and the reader allows for the emergence of the Latina voice, as the subject through the female narrator and the characters, indicative of a social force resisting marginalization, and telling her history in her own terms.
CHAPTER 1
WRITING MEMORY: AN INTRODUCTION.

The continuity of an ethnic community resides in the collective memories of a group. These recollections create a popular and contemporary history, which unlike traditional histories, do not necessarily look for archived evidences and facts, and rely on the personal recollections of the people of the community. On one hand the truth factor of these memories may remain questioned, but no official history ever provides us with a just and complete history either. There always are various histories just as there are memories that tell different stories.

A personal memory is an integral part in the process of the reconstruction of the community, but only when the recollection moves from the personal plane to the collective, through the validation of the community, does it become significant. A collective memory does not have a specific author or origin. It is part of the unconscious of the community, and promotes a sense of solidarity within the group.

The construction of collective memory is not an apolitical process. The understanding of the agency of this process is very essential. As in trying to understand the Latino groups in the United States, it is important to identify who composes the social group, especially the socio-economic class and the ethnic makeup or origin. Gender also plays an important role in this process. It is key to recognize who speaks for whom and what comprises as the content of the process of the creation of the collective. What is remembered and what is forgotten is imperative as to understand the groups’ agenda in projecting themselves in their present realities, associated with a particular kind of history and culture. This process is to be understood as a creation of an ethnic group. It primarily outlines a group in terms of its origins, shared beliefs, behavior, experiences, and memories. A person may choose or denounce to be part of an ethnic group as a conscious choice.

The second-generation immigrant, whose reality lies within the adoptive country, forms his identity within the space of the mainstream culture. The mainstream culture may not always
be accepting because of the differences of cultural habits, skin color, accent variations, and physical appearance, making it an issue of conflict. The Latino communities in the United States face the conflict of identity because of the differences from the norm and from a need to be part of the mainstream. Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco note that the second generation differs from its parents, whose ties are stronger to the culture of the land of origin and grateful to the adoptive land (325-26). As citizens of this country the latter generations feel the complete right to be part of the mainstream culture, even though his or her original culture is located off the mainland. This claim is called “cultural citizenship,” a term coined by Renato Rosaldo:

Cultural citizenship refers to the right to be different (in terms of race, ethnicity, or native language) with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one’s right to belong, in the sense of participating in the nation-state’s democratic process.

(Rosaldo and Flores 57)

**Historical Presence**

The Latino communities and their cultural productions have been present in the United States since the times of European colonial explorations and expansions. These simply remained unnoticed by serious academic thought until the mid-twentieth century. The Mexican American community has been part of the United States as the result of the annexation of Mexican territories after the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. The Spanish Caribbean communities, in which my work focuses, also have been present in the United States since the nineteenth century. Many came from Cuba to work in the cigar factories, and the growing dissident climate of the Caribbean colonies under Spanish Colonial rule forced many to immigrate for political and economic reasons. John A. García analyzing the 2000 census writes that the Latino population was recorded to be 12.5% of the total population with more than 35 million people. The U.S. Census Bureau projects this population to grow to be more than 47 million by the year 2010, 15.5% of the total population. Based on the 2000 census the Chicanos compose the largest block with almost 60% of this population. The Puerto Ricans comprise another 10% and Cubans and Dominicans 3.5% and around 2% respectively. The remaining Latino population is composed of
Central and South Americans (32-35). My study of the Spanish Caribbean Latino groups and their representative writings is not an attempt to establish their long-standing presence, rather to explore their contributions and make this presence more visible as part of American life and literature.

The beginnings of Latino Studies emerged as a consequence of the awareness and inspiration generated by the Black Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. This movement gave the marginalized Latinos to imagine a better future for their community through an organized movement, just like the African Americans were starting to get their voices heard. In the 1960s and the 1970s the Chicanos and the Puerto Ricans were coming together under organizations. They were politically motivated, searching for socio-economic changes for the working classes. Cesárr Chávez of the United Farm Workers is one of the leaders of the Chicanos from this period. As a consequence, Latino Studies was born out of the need to study the immigrant groups from Spanish America. For bureaucratic reasons all sub-groups of Latinos were put under one program. Latino Studies is varying, trying to accommodate changes, which are constant, in “demographic, social, cultural and historical fluctuations” within this country (Aparacio, “Latino Cultural Studies” 6). Only in the 1990s Latino studies was institutionalized in most of the country. This was possible with the growth of academics, writers, theorists and critics working with the specific Latino sub-groups (Aparacio, “Latino Cultural Studies” 3-31).

José María Heredia, a political exile from the Spanish colony of Cuba is probably the best-known earliest writer to have captured the American reality in his “Oda al Niágara” (1824) and Cartas sobre los Estados Unidos (1826). As Efraían Barradas (7-9) notes, 1868 was a crucial year for Cuba and Puerto Rico not only in their struggle for independence, but also in their history of migration. They were still the last remaining colonies of Spain. In the same year political leaders of Cuba and Puerto Rico declared their War of Independence with the organized call to revolt. They have been called the Grito de Yara and the Grito de Lares in the respective countries. Political exiles—intellectual and political leaders—from Cuba and Puerto Rico were the first ones to immigrate to the United States. The economic hardships of Spanish rule also made large working class immigrate to the east coast of the U.S. They were mainly tabaqueros or cigar makers. José Martí, the Cuban independence leader and intellectual, no doubt is the most
significant chronicler of the American life during this period, which he observed during his years as an exile. *Memorias de Bernardo Vega* written in 1940s but not published until 1977 is an early example of Puerto Rican immigrant literature. For the most part, early Latino writings are in Spanish with the readers of the writer’s birth nation as the target audience. These writings may be argued to be part of the colonial literature of these countries in question. Never the less these writings are the origins of a new literature arising from the immigrant population (Barradas 11). Notable Dominican immigration did not take place till the mid-twentieth century.

The Caribbean connection to the United States goes back to the nineteenth century. The present day Latino marginal position, not only in literature but also in other aspects of life, can be traced back to the imperialistic attitude of the United States towards this region, in an attempt to compete with European powers, who until then ruled over the Caribbean countries as colonies. Eric Williams, the Caribbean historian, notes that U.S. connection to the Caribbean of this period was based upon the sugar production, and the intervention in the Caribbean was further motivated by the U.S. ambition to grow territorially and remove any threat of European political or economic stronghold (409-10). The 1823 Monroe Doctrine, the 1898 Treaty of Paris, the 1901 Platt Amendment with Cuba and, the 1907 convention with the Dominican Republic and the later 1915 military occupation of the same, are simply a few examples of U.S. attitude towards these Caribbean countries (Williams 411, 419-24). It is hard to deny that the Caribbean nations passed from one colonial hand to another.\(^1\) Puerto Rico still remains in parts a ‘colony,’ however the name of the political status might be different. Cuba and the Dominican Republic are no longer under direct political control of the U.S., yet the policing eye is never too far, and it might just be an understatement in the case of Castro’s Cuba.

The Latinos in the United States are not colonial subjects, except maybe the case of Puerto Rico might be argued separately. Yet they do not form part of mainstream American society. Their culture, their value systems are not considered mainstream. They are marginalized like many other minority cultures of the U.S. The Native American and the African American cultures are just few examples with similar status but with different histories and struggles.
The Theoretical Frame

I consider the post-colonial theoretical structure a significant method of investigation of the Latino narrative when trying to examine their writings as a historical continuity within the U.S. setting. It is not simply the historical ‘colonial’ ties, which make me examine the texts within this theoretical structure. The issues emerging from the Latino texts, of construction of ethnic identity, are far more convincingly close to those, which have been studied, in post-colonial studies.

It might be argued that post-colonial theories used in the context of the United States diminish the actual political agenda of the post-colonial nations involved in a reconstruction of their worlds as a result of the aftermath of colonialism. As Ella Shohat points out, in the 1980s “post-colonial” was replacing the “older paradigm” of the “Third World,” which was a political-economic term used for the new anti-colonial nations emerging during the 1950s through the 1970s (100). The United States, even though a former British Colony, is not to be confused with the ‘post-colonial’ situation in which the above-mentioned nations found themselves. I use post-colonial theories and concepts only because of the similarity of the relationship between the Latino groups and the United States to the colonized and the colonizer respectively, and the similar issues and conflicts of ethnic construction emerging in these texts. Many intellectuals like Fredric Jameson have applied the term “internal Third World” to literatures of the United States, referring to the marginal position of Black women’s literature or Chicano literature (49). Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of specifically, the Chicano experience as the Third world which, “grates against the first and bleeds” (Borderlands 25). Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga’s edited text called The Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color (1981) identify themselves and the contributors as Third World Writers, as each writer draws their feminism and position themselves as part of a culture, which is part of the Third World (xxiv). Dexter Fisher in the Preface to the anthology The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of United States (1980), explains the use of the term “Third Woman:”
Just as the nations of the third world are “emerging” in the sense that the “Euro-American” world has “discovered” them, so is “the Third Woman” revealing herself to us, though she has always been present. Her hyphenated existence—Asian American, black American, Mexican American, or American Indian—imbues her angle of vision with perceptions that revitalize our concepts of tradition and folklore, language and imagination. (xxvii)

The bond of the minority writers of the United States with the Third World arises from similar issues encountered in their existence. In order to understand the creation of the Latino ethnicity in the present times, it is essential to position the communities as the ‘other,’ or that which is separate from the self. (The self’s way of life is considered ‘normal’ and the ‘other’ is the one who does not follow this norm.) The issue of identity arises because of the differences between the many groups present within any society. The dominant group with more power-political and economic-makes the norms practically in any society. The socio-cultural practices are one of the many factors, which determine these standards. In a multi-racial group, the racial appearance is of a great importance as well. Any divergence from these models generates the threat of exclusion. Under such threat the question of identity becomes important. Proving one’s similarity or difference and yet asserting the right of inclusion in mainstream is the conflict. The assertion of identity also questions the “legitimizing narratives” of the dominant group, reminding them of the injustices done to the minority groups (Martín Alcoff 26).

The Latinos and other minority groups have undergone the similar process of “othering,” a term coined by Gayatri Spivak (132-135) to explain the process how an imperialistic discourse creates its ‘others.’ This is the initial step towards positioning the subject communities within the post-colonial framework. That is to say, the group in control treats the Latinos as the ‘other.’ The otherness does not arise simply from their status as a minority group within the United States, but also due to the politico-historical relations between the U.S. and the Caribbean countries. Edward Said’s Orientalism (1979) is an example of othering of the ‘Orient’ or the Near East, which he traces out as a creation by the Western power groups in order to justify their own dominance (1). This involves projecting a negative identity of the ‘other,’ very much prevalent in the colonial discourse; not only in the deviance from the standard norms of behavior of the dominant group but also in representing the cultural habits and norms of the ‘other’ as
despicable, wicked, and shameful—worthy of nothing but absolution through acceptance of subordination.

The process of decolonization and the entrance into the post-colonial stage arises after the realization of the subordinate state and thus rejecting the marginal position, by the subject. Established as the ‘other,’ the subordinate group resists its marginal status, which brings about the question of a post-colonial agent. It is the post-colonial subjects’ need to ascertain their identity in their own terms as part of this process. This identity is not a return to a pre-colonized state, because not only is that impossible chronologically but simply because the dominant system prevails, in some degree or the other. In case of the Latinos who live within the culture of the power group there is an obvious constant contact and clash with the system.

The idea of a hybrid cultural identity has been available in works of anthropologists and sociologists studying cultures in contact. The colonial contact has been the emerging point in it’s history, which has since then given impetus to the understanding and theorizing of this phenomenon, both by the colonizer and the colonized or the de-colonized, and my interest is in the latter. The Cuban intellectual Fernando Ortiz as early as 1940 theorizes the Cuban national identity with the term transculturación or transculturation (254). Since then the term and its variant ‘transcultural’ and synonyms like ‘hybrid’ gained popularity. Ortiz’ ‘neologism’ is a post-colonial stance to explain his country and also dismiss the ethnocentric term ‘acculturation,’ which presupposes the moral superiority of the culture of the politically powerful. Ortiz’ syncretic theory defines the term as a step-by-step syncretism of cultures in contact with no superiority.

Homi Bhabha theorizing a similar concept like that of Fernando Ortiz, terms the place of contact the “Third Space,” which is the “precondition for the articulation of cultural difference” (38) and where it is “possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people’. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (38-9). The Latino community too is not simply a product of its Hispanic roots but also of the contact with the multi-ethnic/racial United States.

Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chavez-Silverman’s theoretical adaptation of the concept of transculturation is their edited collection Tropicalizations: Transcultural
Representations of Latinidad (1997). Starting with Ortiz’ theoretical framework of transculturation they embark on a project similar to what Said calls “Orientalism.” In this anthology the group of critics study cases of “tropicalization” of Latin Americans and Latinos. The editors explain, “To tropicalize, as we define it, means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values”(8). The collection, juxtaposes essays, which perceive Latin Americans and Latinos as the ‘other,’ with Latinos defining themselves. This allows for a dialogue to reconsider the stereotypical essentialist notions of Latin Americans and Latinos. My work too will look at some of the Latina narratives as a project of self-defining tropicalization, and thus provide a space to reconsider the groups in non-essentialist categories.

The dissertation intends to look at the narrative of three women authors of Spanish Caribbean origin writing in English in the United States-Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Achy Obejas who belong to the Dominican, the Puerto Rican, and the Cuban ethnicity respectively. The texts under investigation will be analyzed for the use of memory to carve a collective ethnic identity of the specific Latino group highlighted in the narratives. This emphasis, in the narratives, arises from a yearning for a community to define itself culturally because of a temporal and spatial dislocation from its land of origin.

The texts of Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Achy Obejas explore the ideas of collective memory and the continuity of the Latino communities. The study analyses the Dominican, the Puerto Rican, and the Cuban communities residing in the United States. They are at the borders, temporally and geographically. The past is not simply a temporal reference but also a spatial. Resemblance between the two spaces of then and now, and here and there, creates an impression of continuity. The two geographic regions that constitute the border are the land of origin and the United States--the adoptive land. The temporal space is that of the two generations--the first generation immigrants and their children. The first generation immigrant carries the memories of the land of origin as a lived reality. For most of the second generation it
is a passed-down memory, an inheritance of the past. This particular study will focus on the latter
generations who reconstruct these memories to retain continuity as a community.

Collective Memory

Studies of memory for a long time focused on the individual memory and the discipline
of psychology and the workings of the mind. A lot of work has started in the area of collective
memory in the disciplines of social sciences, especially history, anthropology, and sociology.
Historical fiction is one of the many literary genres, which easily gives to the study of the
collective memory because of its proximity to the discipline of history and historiography. Pure
fiction rarely is considered as a true study of the collective memory as an apparatus of cultural
continuity. Nostalgic narratives of lost pasts revive images of a past cultural ethos, but they
represent the discontinuous time and space, as seen in many Western Modernist texts. Richard
Terdiman expresses similar preoccupations in his book Present Past: Modernity and the Memory
Crisis, where he studies some of the influential European texts dealing with the problem of
memory and modernity. Terdiman coins the term “Memory crisis,” which is an uncertainty of
relation with the past, and he sees it as an aftermath of the French Revolution. It is “[. . .] a sense
that their past had somehow evaded memory, that recollection had ceased to integrate with
consciousness”(4). The critic sees a “cultural stress,” generated from the French Revolution:

The loss of a sense of time’s continuous flow and of our unproblematic place
within it, the disruption of organic connection with the past evidenced in
numerous texts from this period-such representations indicate an epochal rupture,
a perception by those who are living within it that the world had decisively
changed. (5)

Terdiman’s ideas of “memory crisis” are influenced by French thinkers of the twentieth
century, like Pierre Nora, who have invested a large amount of time and energy to understand the
problem of memory, as an outcome of changing time especially with the advent of Modernity,
where a whole new set of value system would erase the old. Pierre Nora’s les lieux de mémoire
or the sites of memory indicate that we need to locate our pasts as we come to terms with the
passing away of our history. Nora points out that the modern world and globalization has forced
such tremendous change in societies that memory is no longer safe and sacred. In saying so he differentiates real memory from the modern notion of memory. Real memory belongs to a collective, and is “[. . .] without a past that ceaselessly invents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated times of heroes, origins, and myth. . .”(8). On the other hand, memory, as understood today, is nothing but traces of a selected past similar to history, which is simply a reconstruction of past-never complete never sacred.

In the former ideas, we see a sense of melancholy and sadness at the passing of a time and space, which will never be attained. These emotions are common in modernist texts and early immigrant narratives. Although my investigation looks at the changing cultural and value systems, the emotions concerned are different. There is a loss, yet there is a possibility of continuance of that past, modified to suit the present times, and projected as a communal force rather than an individual’s struggle to come to terms with the personal loss.

Maurice Halbwachs’ sociological theory proposes that memory is a social construct. No individual can escape the presence of society and social products, which does not limit to living beings but also to inanimate products created by living people, for example, books, buildings or food. For a recall or remembering to take place, the memory has to be triggered off by a contact with the society. The more frequent the recalling, the stronger the memory. Forgetting emerges from discontinuity in recalling—“[. . .]to forget a period of one’s life is to lose contact with those who then surrounded us” (30). Thus, for continuity to survive, a constant contact with a social group with similar memories must be maintained. An individual’s memory of an incident from the past may have personal experience and perceptions yet it moves onto the plane of the collective once it is recalled within a social group, that of family or friends.

The examination of the narratives in this study looks at the commemoratory nature of recall, celebrative and establishing the continuing connection. At this point I wish to ascertain again as I already have done earlier, that these narratives are not claiming authenticity as history writings do. As Halbwachs says of history and historiography:
General history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up. So long as a remembrance continues to exist, it is useless to set it down in writing or otherwise fix it in the memory. (78)

In the recent studies of social sciences, especially history, historians have started considering memory as a relevant factor and an alternative way of understanding history. Traditional Western historiography sees memory as a subjective factor to an otherwise scientific and objective discipline of the study of the past. Yet present day historians have dared to understand this subjective feature in their studies. Bill Schwarz in his essay “Already the Past’: Memory and Historical Time,” looks at Fernand Braudel’s path breaking innovation of the three historical times- the geographical or the environmental time, the social time and, the individual time. The latter being the primary focus of history where events come into the spotlight.3 Schwarz proposes that memory is the fourth dimension of Historical time, “a conception of time of the inner life, of the mnemonic itself”(139). This conclusion arises out of what Schwarz saw inconclusive in and troubling to Braudel. The individual time, which is the focus of history is not only the conscious aspect of the human action but also entails the unconscious aspects. Memory being the subjective dimension is difficult to theorize. Schwarz feels that over time the subject of history has broadened. The rulers and their actions took place of what was contrary to the understanding of the world as a creation of the gods and their whims. Further more the ruler’s actions have been replaced by the actions of the ruled, actions of men replaced by the action of women. Schwarz proposes an interesting idea that of the movement of time in memory and history. History, slow or fast is always forward moving and is unidirectional, and the harbingers of modernity, but memory is different:

In memory, past and present are compressed, such that the past itself remains peculiarly resistant to transcendence in the present. This requires us to think in terms not only of speed, but of direction--or better, in terms of the realms or locations of memory. (141-42)

Anthropologists and historians working with oral histories have shown again and again that history is located in the memory of the people of the community. However suspicious the Western scientific tradition may be of the claims of authenticity, it remains the way of life for many groups of people to remain connected with their past. It is this idea of the past and its link
to the present of the pre-writing stage of human existence that becomes crucial in understanding certain human behavior when threatened with extinction of a continuing culture. Pierre Nora sees a similar pattern in minority groups who tend to create a semblance of continuity so as to defend themselves from the onslaught of becoming part of the dominant culture, with which they are unable to identify:

The defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory that has retreated to jealousy protected enclaves in this sense intensely illuminates the truth of lieux de mémoire—that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them. (12)

Ethnic Identity

The anthropologists Jacob Climo and Maria G. Cattell find memory as an integral factor in the differentiation of ethnic groups. They write:

Without memory, groups could not distinguish themselves, one from another, whether family, friends, governments, institutions, ethnic groups, or any other collectivity, nor would they know whether or how to negotiate, fight, or cooperate with each other. (1)

Identity is not a stable phenomenon, all though we might want to believe it to be so, but the origins are, and that is why we wish to return to them, in the only manner possible and, sometimes they are through memories, personal and collective.

Werner Sollors talks of the term ‘invention’ as a popular word not as a “fad”, rather as a need to capture the change in perspective of understanding the world. Ethnicity too is an invention, not an individual’s work, but a collective propagation through language and literature. He provides the essentialist meaning of ethnicity and later problematizes it:

Ethnic groups are typically imagined as if they were natural, real, eternal, stable, and static units. They seem to be always already in existence. As a subject of study, each group yields an essential continuum of certain myths and traits, or of human capital. The focus is on the group’s preservation and survival, which
appear threatened. Conflicts generally seem to emerge from the world outside of the particular ethnic group investigated. (xiii-xiv)

The question of ethnicity by many for a long time has been considered to be a pure, static entity, yet time and again it has been proved otherwise. The assimilationist theory or the ‘melting pot,’ which was popular for a long time in the United States, hoped that all immigrants would finally accept the culture and ethnicity of the United States, which was primarily an Anglo-Saxon derivative. Many studies have shown the possible assimilation through time especially of European immigrants, yet this theory has been dismantled as we continue to see the very existence of many ethnic groups in this country. Suzanne Oboler in her book *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives* points out that it is necessary to consider the non-white racial factors associated with the Latinos. She further draws attention to the differences of historical, economic, and political experiences of power relations of the Latin American countries and the U.S., which attribute to the Latino failure to assimilate, in contrast to the European immigrants of the earlier generations. European nations never faced US economic or US political/military intrusions in their countries like in Latin America, which defines the power relations even before immigration. Yet these experiences have been so varied for the immigrants of each Latin American country that the idea of a homogenizing label of an US Latino needs to be reassessed (7-11).

The homogeneric Latino label in the United States is a problematic one. In order to understand the Latino communities, it is important to understand the politics working within as much as outside, the particular ethnic groups. Historically the Spanish American nations are a product of mainly three cultural groups with the many ethnic varieties of Spaniards, Africans, and Amerindians. Latin America too has seen immigration from other European and Asian nations, which further forms the texture of their societies. Although racial mixing was achieved in many parts of Latin America, residue of the colonial power structure in the independent nations is still present. Constitutionally all men and women have similar rights yet racial preferences still dominate the cultures, with Amerindians still living in similar conditions as under colonial rule. The Caribbean nations with a high population of African origin, descendents of the colonial slave system, too have continued to suffer the remnants of the colonial hierarchization. This racial privileging is carried through the immigrant communities as
well. Therefore it is important to maintain caution while studying the voice of the agency and how and why they label themselves the way they do.

A Pan-Ethnic identity is a concept, which reoccurs in the national rhetoric over time and again. It has been promoted in many instances, especially in Latin America. In the struggle for freedom from the Spanish rule, América as opposed to Spain or Europe has been espoused as an unified geo-political space, even though each region has its specificities. Simón Bolívar idealized an united free Latin America, which he achieved in parts for a short period with the creation of Gran Colombia, a merging of present day Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia, and Panamá. Yet he was unable to fight the separatist political ambitions of Creole leaders of the nineteenth century like Francisco de Paula Santander and José Antonio Páez which culminated in the break of Gran Colombia in 1830. Bolívar in 1815 in his “Carta de Jamaica,” cautious of the differences among Latin Americans, writes:

Es una idea grandiosa pretender formar de todo el mundo nuevo una sola nación con un solo vínculo que ligue sus partes entre sí y con el todo. Ya que tiene un origen, una lengua, unas costumbres y una religión debería, por consiguiente, tener un solo gobierno que confederase los diferentes Estados que hayan de formarse; mas no es posible porque climas remotos, situaciones diversas, intereses opuestos, caracteres desemejantes dividen a la América. (Doctrina 72)

The idea of merging the entire New World into a single nation with a single unifying principle to provide coherence to the parts and to the whole is both grandiose and impractical. Because it has a common origin, a common language, similar customs, and one religion, we might conclude that it should be possible for a single government to oversee a federation of the different states eventually to emerge. However, this is not possible, because America is divided by remote climates, diverse geographies, conflicting interests, and dissimilar characteristics. (El Libertador 27-8)

National rhetoric of José Martí spoke out against the division of people on the basis of race and hoped to unite Cubans against the Spanish colonialism on the island of Cuba, and make it strong against future invasions. In 1891 in his famous essay “Nuestra América,” he writes:
No hay odio de razas, porque no hay razas. [. . .] Peca contra la humanidad el que fomente y propague la oposición y el odio de las razas. Pero el amasijo de los pueblos se condensan, en la cercanía de otros pueblos diversos, caracteres peculiares y activos, de ideas y de hábitos, de ensanche y adquisicion, de vanidad y de avaricia, que el estado latente de preocupaciones nacionales pudieran, en un período de desorden internos o de precipitación del carácter acumulado del país, trocarse en amenaza grave para las tierras vecinas, aisladas y débiles, que el país fuerte declara perecederas e inferiors. (Martí, Obras escogidas 486)

There can be no racial animosity, because there are no races. [. . .] Whoever foments and spreads antagonism and hatred between races, sins against humanity. But as nations take shape among other different nations, there is a condensation of vital and individual characteristics of thought and habit, expansion and conquest, vanity and greed which could-from the latent state of national concern, and in the period of internal disorder, or the rapidity with which the country’s character has been accumulating-be turned into a serious threat for the weak and isolated neighboring countries, declared by the strong country to be inferior and perishable. (Martí, Reader 119)

In the context of North America, Pan-ethnic identity of the Latinos takes on a new shape. It is the sentiment, which led to the label of Hispanic for all immigrants from the Latin America in the United States, irrespective of their origin and history in their land of birth. Moreover it is a name that was given to them, and not chosen by them. Ramón Grosfoguel and Chloé S. Georas point in their essay “Latino Caribbean Diasporas in New York,” that Latino immigrants (of New York) are homogenized because of the residual influence of the Euro-American colonial power culture in the United States. These critics use Aníbal Quijano’s notion of “Coloniality of Power” in which, “Coloniality” is differentiated from colonialism as that which, “… names the contemporary process of colonial/racial domination of a racialized/ethnic group by a dominant group without the existence of colonial administrations” (Grosfoguel and Georas 102).7 They go on to show how in the early twentieth century the North American popular imaginary infested with the colonial structures, based upon the images of African Americans, racialized the new immigrant groups of the Caribbean irrespective of their national origin, race, or economic and
social class. The US popular imaginary colonized/racialized the Latinos based on the existing prejudicial images of African Americans. The Puerto Ricans, mainly rural and unskilled immigrants were already part of a colony of the United States since 1898. The migrants to New York settled near the African American neighborhood. Later the Dominican immigrants without any resettlement programs by the government, unlike the Cuban exiles of pre 1980 era, were also racialized as the Puerto Ricans irrespective of the fact that they belonged to the middle class. They were associated with the Puerto Ricans and in many instances with African Americans because of their skin color. Yet, the Cuban exiles who entered the US after 1959 and before 1980, and received the benefits of the Cuban Refugee Program, where able to resist the degrading stereotypes and assimilate as a model minority. The US governmental Program against Castro and Communism, allowed some of these Cubans to merge into the social structures with training for and facilitation to the professional world. The Marielitos-Cuban exiles leaving from the port of Mariel in 1980-did not receive the same welcome and were racialized in the similar fashion as the other Latino immigrants (97-116).

The differences of the sub-groups of the Latinos needs to be stressed because many a homogenous label not only obliterates histories but also promotes generalized stereotypes. Furthermore, one sees internal resistance within the sub-groups. They resist the generic label. Miri Song, a sociologist states that according to a study done on “ethnic options,” Cuban Americans oppose the Latino label; whereas Mexicans and Puerto Ricans do not show too much resistance to the label. Cubans’ higher socio-economic status makes them reject the pan-ethnic label. This is not simply an act of defiance against the groups who brand and marginalize, but is also a strategy to disassociate themselves from the lower class Mexicans and Puerto Ricans (28-9).

Juan Flores in his essay, “Latino Imaginary: Dimensions of Community and Identity,” proposes that the Latino community is an “imagined community,” referring to Benedict Anderson’s theory of nationalism. He suggests a self-representation of the Latinos is imminent to breaking the dominant stereotypes created by outside approaches to Latino unity (185). The process of the creation of the “Latino Imaginary,” is a “critical, historically based analysis of diverse and changing realities that underlies and sustains” it (188). The uniting factor of this diverse group is “shared memory and desire, congruent histories and meshing utopias” (188).
People unite or resist a label according the specific needs of the group. It may be used as a strategic tool to combat the authority of the oppressors and promote the group as possessor of power and autonomous identity.

My project is interested in the multiplicity of the Latino communities and certainly does not wish to generalize them under a simplified group called the Hispanics or Latinos. This is further problematized by the economic and social status of the target communities discussed in the different texts of the three authors. Furthermore it also provides three different approaches to the community construction and its continuity.

**Narrative**

Collective memory is not simply marked in physical space, although location and sites play a commemorative role in keeping memory alive. In diasporic communities loss of the physical space of their land of origin is an unfortunate fact. It may not be regained but duplication is always possible. The barrio is a duplication of the lost space for the Latinos. Yet it is the new space of the immigrant and those born within it. Other acts that keep alive the memory of the collective are traditions, which are reenacted and revived to keep the continuity. Speaking the language, celebrating rituals- social and religious, wearing the clothing, eating the food are just simple ways of keeping the collective memory alive. New festivals are added on to the tradition simply to commemorate the connection. It is the duplication of the life that is lost due to migration or exile.

Steven Knapp, in his article “Collective Memory and The Actual Past,” argues that narratives preserved in the collective memory play an essential role in creating normality in a society. The choice to remember and forget certain narratives emerges from the “locus of authority,” which is located in the present and not in the past. This theoretical position is seen throughout post-colonial literature, where the post-colonial narrative emerges not only to counter the colonial narrative but also to defend its own narrative as “normal” in the present times.

… the locus of authority is always in the present, we use, for promoting and reinforcing ethical and political dispositions, only those elements of the past that correspond to our sense of what presently compels us. (131)
The narratives for this investigation are literary texts, both fiction and non-fiction. I make this distinction because there exist other forms of narratives. Textual narrative no doubt refers to the written text constructed in a language, which in this case is English, the language of the dominant culture of the United States.\textsuperscript{10} The circulation of a narrative is crucial for it to achieve the state of collectivity. It starts with the author and his/her stories, the publishers and editorial houses, bookstores, reviewers, and largely responsible are school and university curriculums.

I investigate three forms of literary narratives, the historical, the autobiographical, and the fictional. All of them have the common basis of what any narrative does--tell a story of events arranged and related and, structured in time with a beginning, middle and end, although not always in that order.

Michael Bell maintains that the narrative seeks to convince the reader so as to make him or her negotiate, “… between his or her ‘real’ world and the ‘world’ of the book…” so as to produce literary meaning (179). A narrative, aspiring to be part of the collective, needs to transform lived or true-to-life experiences into a meaningful continuity. They should no longer be separate events in life, rather logically and aesthetically connected, to which not only the narrator relates but also the reader. This relation is a kind of communication between the narrative or the text and the reader, reinforcing the validity and normalcy of one’s behavior and way of life. Furthermore through structured narratives the marginal groups are made visible to the mainstream breaking the exotic and stereotypical images.

The emotional aspect of a narrative brings the reader closer to the related events and experiences, which is crucial in the formation of the collective. The critic Iwona Irwin-Zarecka notes that:

> Whether recounting actual events or fictionalizing the account better to capture their meanings, the artist-as-witness is perhaps the most effective of all memory workers. The unique combination of the art’s power to evoke feelings, to build empathy, with “empirical” claim to authenticity frames remembrance in the greatest intellectual \textit{and} emotional depth, as it were. And when such combination
is used, as it often is, to speak of the ultimate good and evil, the call upon us to remember is complete. (Irwin-Zarecka 153)

The choice of women writers for my study is not as much of a gender issue as an issue of marginality. These women writers tend to highlight women as characters and speak of their conflicts, yet I will not approach them solely from a feminist standpoint but rather from their marginal positions in terms of class, ethnicity, and gender. Anglo or Eurocentric feminist theories are inadequate for understanding the complexities of women of color, minority groups, and the Third World. Their experiences are defined not simply by their gender, but also by their group’s history and economic and political relations with the dominant powers, other than just men. The choice of women writers on one hand is one of convenience, as it narrows the choice of authors but on the other, it also provides a possibility to see the emergence of similar or dissimilar issues in the texts written by women. The question of collective memory as a tool of ethnic construction is of an essential nature, as there seems to be a lack of studies in this area especially of these women writers.

Each author approaches the issue of memory in various ways so as to bring out the many subtleties involved in the process of recalling and remembering. The writings encompass a whole range of memories, from the personal to the borrowed, yet each tends to create a new hybrid space for the subject community to emerge as a continuous group. This new space involves changes, due to readjustments to the actual new space and time. The issue of the style and emplotment of the narratives will also be discussed in each chapter dedicated to each author, as to determine the targeted emotions arising from the narratives, which remain open to interpretation.

The Texts

In Julia Alvarez’ *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995) and *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), I explore the concept of historical memory. Alvarez’ narratives are an intent to re-connect to the national past of the Dominican Republic, which is lost to many Dominicans off the island of Hispaniola, and unknown to a large English speaking audience. The recuperation of this
historical memory takes upon itself other bigger issues dealing with nation or patria and being a Dominican away from the homeland.

The Mirabal sisters are the protagonists of the novel In the Time of the Butterflies. The fictionalized characters are based on the four sisters, who resisted the totalitarian regime of Trujillo and were assassinated for their act of defiance. A Dominican American woman, referred to as the gringa dominicana by the omniscient narrator, comes to interview the sole surviving sister, to know of “unsung heroines of the underground”(3). This history’s unconventionality lies in the fact that the narrating sister decides to talk about “the simple facts” that give “the illusion that hers was just an ordinary family, too- birthdays and weddings and new babies, the peaks in that graph of normalcy”(6).

In the Name of Salomé is a fictional narrative about the Henríquez-Ureña family of the Dominican Republic. It revolves around the two female characters -Salomé Ureña-Henríquez and her daughter Camila Salomé Henríquez-Ureña. The Henríquez-Ureña family was very much involved in the political and intellectual scene of their times. Salomé Ureña was named the national icon because of her strong nationalistic poems speaking against the dictatorial times. It is a journey of both the mother and daughter who in real life have very little time to each other. Camila’s life on the other hand is a constant journey from country to country and city to city. It also is a continuation of her search for her mother. This novel also delves into the historical connections of the United States and the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean in general.

Alvarez’ narratives bring forth a history of Dominican women who suffered and resisted along with their male counter-parts during times of tyranny and oppression. This historical reconnection is, for Dominican Americans, a moment of pride to be part of that national tradition, along with being an ethnic minority marginalized in this country. The narratives targeted to the North American audience also undertakes the role of unmasking a history of a neighboring country of which so little is known, thus creating a space for better understanding of a group of people living in the margins. Alvarez in the postscript dedicates the novel, In the Time of the Butterflies, to the Dominicans as she writes,

To Dominicans separated by language from the world I have created, I hope this book deepens North Americans’ understanding of the night-mare you endured and the heavy losses you suffered--of which this story tells only a few. (324)
Judith Ortiz-Cofer, a poet by style, approaches her narrative with a very personal and lyrical tone. I will investigate the concept of autobiographical memory in her autobiographical narrative *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990). Through the author’s personal recollections an idea of a Puerto Rican immigrant life in the 60s is recreated. Though there is a minor presence of male figures yet the female figures dominate throughout the narratives, especially in the figure of the grandmother, the mother, and the author-narrator herself. There are other female figures, either part of the grandmother’s tales or from the author’s own observations, all giving a voice to the Puerto Rican woman, who rarely receives any attention in her doubly marginalized state as an ethnic minority and a woman. The recreation, through a narrative, reaches an English reading audience irrespective of their ethnicity and thus negotiates on a collective level what it means to be a Puerto Rican of a certain class and gender. This negotiation is not simply within the ethnicity of the Puerto Ricans but also among non-Puerto Ricans. In the former case it intends to validate similar experiences of readers and creates the bond of solidarity amongst co-ethnics. In the latter case it expects to expel prejudices and stereotypes about Puerto Ricans, as the sociologist Miri Song suggests that organized discourse and narrative help in the promotion of ethnic options available to a minority ethnicity. Assertions of ethnic identity and processes of self-invention necessarily engage with dominant representations and discourses about minority groups in the wider society. (38)

The Ortiz Cofer’s text is a celebration of the island culture, and achieves to create an extension of this culture in the barrio or the Latino neighborhood of New Jersey. The barrio of New Jersey may as well be the Barrio of New York, where more Puerto Ricans live than in San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico. The continuity of the island and the mainland culture is a living one, especially because of the absence of travel restrictions. The island is part of the United States political boundary. Outside the island the Puerto Ricans are a minority. The main reason of their migration is economic. This community faces the threat and discrimination of being economically weak and ethnically different. The community creates itself as an ethnic group around these constraints. Judith Ortiz Cofer commemorates the continuity despite the restrictions this community faces.

The third and last author is Achy Obejas and I look into the concept of ethnic memory in her texts. The Cuban American author’s *Memory Mambo* (1996) and *Days of Awe* (2001) are
the two novels, which I investigate to understand cultural identity as a repository of the ethnic memory. The novel *Memory Mambo* begins with a discourse on what we believe to be our memories, yet they happen to be lived experiences of the others and are borrowed memories. The narrator protagonist Juani, a Cuban American who arrived to the United States when still very young, declares,

> It’s just that sometimes other lives lived right alongside mine interrupt, barge in on my senses, and I no longer know if I have lived through an experience or just heard about it about so many times, or so convincingly, that I believe it for myself-became the lens through which it was captured, retold and shaped. (9)

Obejas’ take on memory and ethnic construction is one of questioning the believed reality. In accepting that personal memories and collective memories tend to collide and intermingle, her narrative questions the truth of what one believes to be as an ethnic self, based on the past-individual and communal. Obejas’ text contest the idea of the collective memory in case of her subject community, that of Cubans. Cuba’s ethnic and class history come into question in *Memory Mambo*, and it further juxtaposes the Cuban culture of the lesbian protagonist to her Puerto Rican partner’s culture, producing the different issues involved in the construction of the two Latino groups of the United States.

The Cubans’ status as exiles in the United States has created an antagonistic stand against the regime of Fidel Castro and his communist Revolution. This antagonism is believed to be part of the ethnic memory and the Cuban American identity. In the narrative of Achy Obejas this antagonistic stance goes through scrutiny. In the first novel the memories of the father about the Cuban regime and the CIA are questioned, and in the latter the connection with Cuba is established through a pro-Revolution father figure.

*Days of Awe*, looks into a more specific aspect of Ethnic memory and that of the Cuban Jewish history. The protagonist Alejandra, who comes to the United States as an infant with her parents, recovers the Jewish heritage inherited from her father’s side. In this much more complex narrative the protagonist establishes contact with Cuba as a lived experience with visits to the island and through correspondence. The recuperation of the Cuban Jewish memory is problematized by the use of the character Moisés, who remained committed to the ideals of the revolution of Fidel Castro and never left Cuba, hoping the Promised Land would be achieved. In
choosing a character, who is the mediator of the ethnic memory, faithful to the Revolution the
author permits two things. First, she vocalizes the people, whose voices never get heard in the
United States, who have, in most cases, been unvoiced with the belief that they live an awful life
under the terrible communist regime of Castro. This voice may partly speak for a section of the
island, yet we must be cautious that it is not the voice of everyone. Secondly, Moisés
characterizes a moral choice, which applies to all Cubans, on or off the island. This mainly is an
ethical question of how much of a Cuban is a person without any responsibility towards Cuba as
a nation and its people.

In the final chapter of the dissertation I will draw conclusions from the texts of all the
authors and establish patterns and dissimilarities among them. The possible conclusions that I
look forward to are a celebration and a contention of the cultural continuity. In other words,
some texts are celebrating a participation in the Latino cultural memory and, on the other hand,
some texts are contending what is presumed to be the cultural continuity. This seems to be so
because of the specific histories of each nation and their political positioning with the United
States. The other conclusion that seems to be emerging through the texts is that of a literary
function of literature and the author. The literary texts are creating a space for the growth of the
latter generation Latinos as a hybrid ethnic group. The texts and the readers are reenacting the
ritual of recalling and remembrance as a social group so as to keep alive the memory of the
continued community.

The conclusion will also address the issue of the act of writing and of narrative as a
conscious attempt to keep alive an appearance of continuity in the face of threat of the loss of the
past ties. The role of the narrative along with the role of the author will seek to establish the task
to reinvent the role of the ethnic groups, which usually being a minority has no voice of its own.
Further I also wish to see the place of U.S. Latino Literature in the meta-structure of American
Literature. This includes the processes of resistance against the canon and the right to a
conscious self-representation.
NOTES

1 Paul McCartney in his essay “Anglo-Saxonism and U.S. Foreign Policy during the Spanish-American War,” argues that Social Darwinism in the final decades of nineteenth century helped make the case for the leaders of supporters of racism and Anglo-Saxon supremacy. This further shaped attitudes and policies towards people of other race and ethnicity, and the Spanish-American War is a good example of this theory.

2 Terdiman looks at the texts of Alfred de Musset, Charles Baudelaire, Marcel Proust, and Sigmund Freud from the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, yet his thoughts on memory and cultural traditions are worthwhile to understand any loss of past.

3 Fernand Braudel, the most famous historian of the Ecole des Annales, brings geography, political economics and sociology to history. His path-breaking concepts of time and space have since changed the way of looking at human history. The first of the three historical times that Braudel theorizes is the geographical or the environmental time. It is the time, which moves at a glacial speed, over million of years bringing about changes in climate and land and seas. The second historical time is the social time, which looks at the changes in social, economic, state structures and society in general. This moves faster than a glacial speed yet is slower than what Braudel calls the individual time, which looks at specific events.

4 Milton Gordon in his Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins traces the histories of theories of Anglo-conformity, assimilation and cultural pluralism till the 1960s. He himself promotes the idea of acculturation or cultural assimilation (241-245). Werner Sollors’ edited work Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader is a compilation of essays about ethnicity and assimilation from the early twentieth century to the late seventies.

5 Melting Pot is a term coined by the playwright Israel Zangwill in 1909, which to begin with was an amalgamation of all cultures of the United States, but over years it came to be understood as a culture derived of the Anglo-American traditions.

6 Critics like J. Jorge Klor de Alva studying the postcolonial Latin America argue that their Wars of Independence were more like Civil wars rather a postcolonial struggle. The criollos
simply took over the economic and political control from Europeans, which did little to free the Amerindians from their colonial status.

7 Aníbal Quijano in his essay, “Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad,” proposes that the modern day global capitalist economic system is based upon the power relations established during colonialism, and whose birth took place at the same time as colonialism. In another essay, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentricism, and Latin America,” he argues that the “model of power” of globalization is based on the fundamental elements of social classification around the idea of race, which too was born out of colonial domination, and the construction of a new structure of control of labor and resources and product, inexistent before the colonization of the Americas (533). Speaking of Latin America he says, “The coloniality of power still exercises its dominance, in the greater part of Latin America, against democracy, citizenship, the nation, and the modern nation state” (568).

8 The research referred to is a study by Alejandro Portes and Dag MacLeod. It studies young Latinos’ identity in the U.S. in relation to the class and its significance in adoption or rejection of the pan-ethnic category. Song’s research looks at how persons of ethnic minorities in the US and Britain negotiate the markers of their identities. The methods are varied and are mainly determined by the person’s economic and social status, gender and length of stay (generation).

9 Benedict Anderson proposes that people of a nation live in an imagined society of geopolitical borders and common interests. They associate with every member of the society even without ever having seeing or knowing them, except in their imagination:

It is imagined because the members of even the smaller nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (6).

10 In the scope of my dissertation I do not delve into this terrain although I wish to comment on my position regarding this subject. Western nationalistic identities have been monolithic as in promoting the idea of one race, one religion and one language. Ethnic identity too claims oneness through singular factors, but I believe that is not always the case and certainly in case of the Latinos it is an exception. Latinos are Hispanic, Black, Amerindian, Christian, Jew,
Spanish speakers, and English speakers--mono lingual and bi-lingual. For this study the speakers of Indigenous languages are not being considered although they form a large part of the Latin Americans and a small immigrant population.
¿Qué es Patria? ¿Sabes acaso
lo que preguntas, mi amor?
Todo un mundo se despierta
en mi espíritu a esa voz.

--- Salomé Ureña, “¿Qué es Patria?”

Julia Alvarez is a Dominican American writer, who exiled with her family to the United States in the 1960 at the age of ten, right before the fall of the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. Even though the family never returned to live in the Dominican Republic, they did visit the extended family from time to time. Alvarez incorporates her American and Dominican experiences in her poems, essays, and novels, drawn from autobiographical and historical sources. She also writes for juvenile audiences. Alvarez identifies Spanish as her oral language and English as the language of her craft. English, which she learned while in the Dominican Republic, is a language available to the upper-middle and rich classes of the country, because of the accessibility to US education. As an adult, Julia Alvarez has maintained contact with her homeland, through her travels and projects in the Dominican Republic.¹ The novels In the Time of the Butterflies (1995) and In the Name of Salomé (2000) are two texts about historical Dominican women, who lived through the times of dictatorships and political instabilities. These two novels break away from the traditional space of U.S. Latino literature, which usually tend to focus on the Latino experience within the United States. Alvarez claims the Dominican nation’s history as part of the extended experience of U.S. Latino literature. Through her narratives of the historical past of the Dominican nation, she enters into a debate of historiography and national identity.
In the Name of Salomé and In the Time of the Butterflies are both highly crafted pieces of novels. They are presented as biographies of Salomé Ureña de Henríquez and her daughter Camila Salomé Henríquez Ureña, and the Mirabal sisters respectively. A biography is the life story of a person, and a traditional subject of a biography is a famous person, whose life story other than being entertaining is also instructive. Linda Wagner-Martin writing about traditional American biographies says:

**Biography** meant stories about the lives of prominent male subjects, written with an emphasis on the external and usually historical events of their lives, praising the subjects rather than questioning their characters. (1)

Alvarez’ subjects are famous and important in the Dominican Republic but are practically unknown in the United States, or are becoming a forgotten past among the Dominican Americans, especially the generations born in the US. On one hand Alvarez’ purpose of re-writing the story of the women she chooses to write about, is to keep their memory alive. On the other hand it is because she intends to present them as more than just historical public figures of the Dominican national past. Through a feminist perspective, the author not only validates the actions of her protagonists as women in a patriarchal society, but also appreciates their domestic and private life. The subjects are presented as humane and ordinary people, who performed extraordinary acts in a historical moment. The recovering of women’s role in history has been an ongoing project in women studies.

In the Name of Salomé is a fictionalized story of Salomé Ureña de Henríquez, and in part, of her daughter Camila Salomé Henríquez Ureña, based on historical and documented sources. The Henríquez Ureña family is an important family in the history of the Dominican Republic, especially because of their contributions to liberal politics, nation building and educational reforms. Salomé a nineteenth century poet, patriot and advocate of women’s education is still revered as the Muse of the nation and the national poet, who inspired her generation with nationalistic poems, and has been continued to be admired in the present times in the Dominican national and literary circles. The male members of the family have been well
documented for their contributions in history. Salomé’s father Nicolás Ureña was a liberal lawyer and revolutionary of the nineteenth century. Salomé’s husband Francisco Henríquez y Carvajal, was a medical doctor, and a political and educational reformist. He served as the personal secretary to the President Fernando Arturo Meriño from 1880-1882, and was later elected President, but only for four months, because he had to exile when US Marines invaded the nation in 1916. Salomé’s son Pedro Henríquez Ureña is the well-known Latin American intellectual famous in the United States for his Norton lectures.

The novel In the Name of Salomé traces the personal and the public life of the poet, intertwined with the story of her daughter Camila. Alvarez creates a woman that Salomé possibly might have been, hidden under the iconic public image, while portrays Camila emerging from the shadow of the burden of the memory of famous relatives. Salomé’s life story begins with the birth of the Dominican Republic as an independent nation, and witnesses the political upheavals of the nation’s civil wars, Spanish repossession, and dictatorships. Camila’s life is one of exile and search for herself.

In the Time of the Butterflies is a narrative of the four Mirabal sisters, Patricia, Marisol, Minerva, and María Teresa. Of the four, three sisters, Patricia, Minerva and María Teresa were assassinated by orders of General Rafael Trujillo on the 25th of November 1960. The sisters and their husbands were involved with the underground resistance of the Catorce de Junio or the 14th of June Movement. The name of this movement was inspired by the invasion on the same day in 1959 by Dominican exiles, with the help of the new Cuban revolutionary, Fidel Castro. Minerva and María Teresa were put in prison like many men and women. The growing international pressure led Trujillo to release the female prisoners, but Minerva and her family were put under house arrest. Unbroken and determined the sisters traveled to the prison in the city to meet their husbands still in jail. On the fateful evening upon return, the secret police-SIM or the Servicio de Inteligencia Militar, rounded and killed them with hatchets and pushed the dead bodies along with their jeep over a cliff. The UN in 1999 declared this day as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, although Latin American feminists have been
celebrating this day since 1981. The Mirabal sisters or popularly known by their secret name the mariposas, or the Butterflies have become a symbol not only for Latin Americans, but also for the international community, of female resistance of any kind of violence against women.

The novels portray a patriarchal society spanning over a century, from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth. In such a society a woman’s role in the public life is usually suspected. She has to go through a transformation by either becoming an asexual entity or be masculinized. In the novel In the Name of Salomé the character of Salomé is praised by a male admirer for her poetic achievements and nationalistic spirit in the following terms, “What a man that woman is!” (141). Alvarez’s texts thus narrate the tales of women in the public eye. She intends to break down the iconic images to understand the private women with not only minds and thoughts of their own, but also with bodies and desires.

In the Time of the Butterflies and In the Name of Salomé are historical novels in part, as Seymour Menton defines a historical novel to pertain to a past historical period, other than the lived period of the author (16).3 Both the novels primarily refer to a period before the author’s life, yet some years of her childhood overlap with the time frame of the novels. In my estimation the overlapping of the author’s life with the characters life does not deny the historical nature of the narratives.

Alvarez’ novels may also be classified as novels of dictator/dictatorship, a popular sub-genre of Latin American historical narrative. In the Time of the Butterflies is based during the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, who ruled the country from 1930-1961, and In the Name of Salomé spans over a longer historical period. It starts in the mid-nineteenth Century when the First Republic of the Dominican nation was formed and continues till the dictatorship of Ulises Heureaux, which lasted over the years of 1882-1899. The novel resumes again in the times of the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, of the twentieth Century.

Traditional political and national history reports past events through the vertex of political powers. Dominican historiography too has told the history of the periods of time referred to in the novels of Alvarez from the perspective of the rulers. Novels of dictatorship also
tend to look at the figure of the dictator as the point of reference.\(^4\) Julia Alvarez breaks away from the traditional mode of representing history and dictatorships. She introduces the female voice as the agent of the narratives. It is not simply the female characters and their historical perspective that are given voice, but the authorial voice through her narrative also takes on meaning, especially within the realm of US Latino literature, pertaining specifically to the Dominican Americans. Although the novels are written in English, the writing of Dominican history permits Alvarez’ narrative to be identified also as part of Dominican literature.

A historical narrative, fictional or non-fictional, provides a literary space for the retelling of past events. It recuperates events that might be forgotten if not remembered. It also revives memories of events, which had been obscured by other events. Retelling of a national past allows for the creation of a national ethos, which ties the people of the nation, through the memories of the nation as part of their heritage, some memories of national pride and some of pain.\(^5\)

*In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* are two texts of imaginative literature, based on historical sources. They do not claim to be histories in the sense that each act or event mentioned can be verified. Alvarez’ intentions are not to tell the history of the Dominican Republic, but to reconnect to the idea of the nation, perceived through the female characters located within a specific time and space. It is the representation of a possible understanding of these characters, who have not been given equal importance in the whole question of nation building, yet in their own ways contributed to the same nation as did their male counterparts.

History requires us to be factual and not imaginative, but could we deny that even the historian must make connections and interpret facts and weave them into a narrative to make sense of all the disparate individual events in time and space. Hayden White in this essay “The Burden of History,” critical of historians who continue to treat facts as given believes that facts “[…] are not so much found as constructed by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him” (43). White in his essay “Interpretation in History,” goes on to state that there are always more facts available than the historian can use in his narrative, and
thus must make a selection of only those that allow for a possible explanation, and this he calls interpretation.

A historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative. (White 51)

The author of a historical novel, however imaginative, like any other social scientist must look at the artifacts of history and interpret a life that might have been. Alvarez’ texts are fictional and they are not to be read as history, nor a biography, although are drawn from historical and biographical sources. I look at the novels as a deliberation of the idea of national memory and identity. The concepts and notions of freedom, identity, race/ethnicity, history, hierarchy, and power are reexamined as to understand how they play a role in our construction of the idea of a nation.

Recall is an active act of memory. In recalling the stories of heroes of the national past exist the problem of creating legends and mythifying real persons. Alvarez tries to be true to the nature of the women protagonists of her novels, but there is no doubt that she continues to add to the legend and the long list of narratives that are available about them. Yet she is able to provide a voice to the women themselves, through fiction. They remain tied to the memory of people, who have taken on the burden of remembering them and listening/reading about them. The conscious act of being a guardian of a memory poses the question of its need and the problematics of remembering. Dedé in In the Time of the Butterflies and Camila in In the Name of Salomé are the bearers of the memory of their dead and famous relatives. They are the principal narrators of the stories. Their importance in keeping the memory alive is highlighted, and thus they become integral part of the narratives and vital protagonists of the history narrated. Alvarez even dedicates her novel In the Time of the Butterflies to Dedé.

Dedé recalls the lives of her sisters to a Dominican American woman referred to as the gringa dominicana. In case of Dedé it is a lived history. It is a tale that she has witnessed and remembered over and over again. The journalists and politicians come every year to
commemorate the anniversary of the assassination, yet there is so little remembered of their lives. She has reached a point of exhaustion and is suspicious of each one who wishes to hear the tale. The Dominican American interviewer’s intentions initially are looked upon with suspicion but because the interviewer’s interest is in the life and not simply the historic and mythified assassination, Dedé obliges. Even though thirty-four years have past since the assassination, she continues to remember. As the novel ends a friend of Dedé tells her to move on and not live in the past. To that she comments, “I’m not stuck in the past, I’ve just brought it with me into the present. And the problem is not enough of us have done that (313).”

Camila, like Dedé, has to struggle to accept the role as the guardia or the guardian of the memory of the iconic female relative. Dedé termed as the surviving sister, lives with the guilt of not having participated actively enough like her other sisters in the movement against Trujillo. Camila unlike Dedé has not witnessed the past she narrates. Yet she too, like Dedé is burdened by her mother’s iconic stature. Moreover she has lived all her life in the shadows of her father and her brother’s importance and ideology.

Dedé’s and Camila’s intentions to remember their dead relatives are different. Dedé in this sense is like Ramona, the sister of Salomé. They both appreciate the importance of the heroic acts of their female relatives in a society where women are given little or have little significance in the public life. They preserve this uniqueness to be told to other generations to educate what women have done for their nations as men have. Camila on the other hand is in search of her own identity, independent of the famous family members. She has lived all her life as an exile. She leaves the Dominican Republic as a very young child to Haiti after her mother dies, to join her father in exile from Ulises Heureaux’ regime. The family expatriates to Cuba, and accepts it as their second home. As an adult she exiles again to the United States, this time to escape the Batista regime of Cuba. Her constant state of homelessness leaves her further orphaned. At the end of her life she finally comes to accept that to find herself, she has to accept her mother’s memory. Camila decides to return to Cuba, her second home. She can still not return to the Dominican Republic as she has vowed not to return to the country while the dictatorship of
Rafael Trujillo lasts. In Cuba, the revolution of Fidel Castro gives her new hope to engage in a process of reformation of the nation, even though it is not her land of origin. Yet it is a Caribbean nation, where she spent a substantial part of her life. Cuba too, like her own Dominican Republic has suffered constant instability and domination of rulers concerned little with the progress of the nation. On her journey from New York to Florida, on her way back to Cuba, she starts to narrate her life to Marion, her long time friend. Camila says, “ [...] I’ll have to start with my mother, which means at the birth of la patria, since they were born about the same time” (8). Camila’s life is a journey backwards to find her meaning in her origins—her mother and her nation. She is the exile/immigrant Dominican American who seeks her identity in the past memory of her mother Salomé and all that she meant in the whole project of nation building. Her mother and her nation’s history are guides to her own meaning, which lies in contributing to Cuba’s growth as a nation.

The narratives have multiple narrators. An omniscient third person narrates the memories of Dedé and Camila. Their memories are interspersed by first person narrations by the Mirabal sisters and Salomé themselves. Each woman protagonist has a voice of her own. The novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* is divided into time periods—1938 to 1946, 1948 to 1959 and 1960. The respective sister narrates the chapters titled Minerva, Patria, and María Teresa. The sisters’ voices narrate the events of these years, as they reflect on their life, and in the most part they do not repeat the events, thus giving a sense of continuity, even though the perspective keeps changing. The narrative not only give a voice to each sister of whom this novel is about, but also gives voice to the ordinary people of the Dominican Republic. The events are all weaved within the ordinary life of people, which are not the usual subject of a history. The personal and the domestic life of people are interlaced with the public happenings of the country.

*In the Name of Salomé* alternates the narrative of Camila and Salomé, as each alternating chapter narrates the life of each woman. Alvarex structures the novel to duplicate the narrative frame of the tale as well as to show the interconnection of the mother and daughter. All the chapter titles are repeated twice, once in Spanish and once in English. The titles are poems by
Salomé Ureña. Salomé’s life unfolds chronologically, and is narrated in her voice. Camila’s life develops backwards, as if reaching back to her mother’s memory.

Alvarez’ novels target readers of English in the United States. They are represented in the novels by the Dominican American interviewer in *In the Time of the Butterflies* and Marion, an American, in *In the Name of Salomé*. The connection to the American reader is not simply a necessity of the readership market, but also because of the fact that the histories of the Caribbean and many other Latin American nations are connected with the history of the United States. This connection has been in most cases one of power and domination. Camila’s reaction to Marion’s ignorance about the poet Salomé Ureña of the Dominican Republic is not one of surprise as she says, “Americans don’t interest themselves in the heroes and heroines of minor countries until someone makes a movie about them” (7).

In *In the Time of the Butterflies* United States is not represented to be involved with Dominican politics. Although Trujillo was the direct product of the National Guard created by the United States after the US Marine invasion of 1916. The Marines invaded to stabilize the country from the uprisings and safe guard U.S. economic interests on the island. The distrust towards the Americans is expressed twice, once by the mother of the Mirabals, and again by Dedé. On being asked if the mother had supported the gavilleros the revolutionary farmers, who fought the US Marines, she replies:

> Of course, I sympathized with our patriots. But what could we do against the Yanquis? They killed anyone who stood in their way. They burned our house down and called it a mistake. They weren’t in their own country so they didn’t have to answer to anyone. (57)

Dedé’s doubt of the *gringa dominicana* arises from the fact that on one hand she is in part American, and on the other a Dominican, who has no knowledge of her own nation. Alvarez does not develop the character of the interviewer. Ruth Behar points out that the voice of the author veiled as the inquisitive interviewer the *gringa dominicana*, if had been explored, it would have created a further complexity and nuanced the text from the perspective of the Dominicans who have migrated and are forgetting, while forgiving the times of Trujillo (7). Behar’s interest
in the immigrant/exile’s perspective arises from the fact that she herself is a Cuban American living in an exiled community, because of a dictatorship in her own country. Alvarez instead downplays the authorial voice and the Dominican American’s role in the text of the Mirabal sisters. She makes her presence in the post-script, where she declares her intentions and her research. The Mirabals to her, like to many other Dominicans are mythical figures of history of the Dominican nation. Although she holds them in high reverence she says, “[...] by making them myth, we lost the Mirabals once more, dismissing the challenge of their courage as impossible for us, ordinary men and women” (324). She dedicates the novel to Dominicans as she says, “To Dominicans separated by language from the world I have created, I hope this book deepens North Americans’ understanding of the nightmare you endured and the heavy losses you suffered--of which this story tells only a few” (324).

In In the Name of Salomé the US interventions are made very clear, not just in the Dominican Republic, but in all of the Spanish Caribbean. Marion, who listens to Camila remember Salomé’s and the Dominican nation’s history, is a white North American. She represents the sympathetic reader/listener of history. It is a history, which educates not only about a neighboring country, but also reassesses the role of the United States in the politics of other countries. The United States in the twentieth century becomes the substitute of colonial Spain of the nineteenth century. The narration of Salomé, which spans over the years of 1856-1894, simply mentions certain events and political figures of the United States. These events compliment the events in the Dominican Republic, and provide a different perspective to the notion of a free and independent nation. The narrative of Camila, which extends from 1897-1973, portrays the United States as an active participant in the lives and the histories of the protagonists and the Dominican Republic.

The two novels revolve around the question ¿Qué es patria? or what is a nation? A definition of Nation has eluded intellectuals since long, as there is no fixed example. Many have tried to point out the markers of a nation: religion, language, system of rule, geography, race and yet different nations have proven that there is no absolute. Ernest Renan in his query of what a nation is says:
A nation is a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound complications of history, it is a spiritual family not a group determined by the shape of the earth. (18-19)

A Nation is an imaginary that Anderson Benedict has called “[...] an imagined political community--and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). He calls it imagined because never do all the members meet. It is limited because a nation has political boundaries and sovereign because according to him the concept of a nation was born during an era when the divinely ordained rule was fading away.

In the narratives of Alvarez the definition of nation also remains undefined. The novels instead embark into a study of what entails a nation--the ideas of freedom and equality--and national self-creation. It is freedom from foreign rule, and freedom from fear of the rulers. It is equality of all races, classes, and genders. The establishing of a free Dominican nation has been a long history of struggle. The novel In the Name of Salomé begins with a child’s inquiry to her father what a patria is. Salomé as a child witnesses the civil wars in her country, which found its independence in 1844 from the rule of Haiti, earlier a French colony. France had taken over the colony of the Dominican Republic from Spain in 1795. Once Haiti found its independence in 1804 it continued to rule the Spanish side of the island. The Dominican Republic fought for its independence in 1821, but unfortunately was taken under Haitian control again in 1822. The Dominican Republic fought back in 1844 under the leadership of the Trinitaria--the three leaders, Duarte, Mella and Sanchez. An independent Dominican Republic was plagued with internal political instability. To end the country’s instability Spain was asked by the country’s conservatives to repossess the Dominican Republic. Salomé reacts:

What is this notion of a country that will make so many people die for its freedom only to have a whole other set of its people put it back in a ball and chain again? (25)

The Spanish repossessing of 1861 is contrasted to Cuba and Puerto Rico’s getting ready to launch their freedom movements, and also to United States battle to abolish slavery, in the
same moment of history. When the neighboring countries were moving forward, the Dominican Republic found itself regressing to its original state of slavery.

The process of creation of a nation, in the modern sense of the word as Anderson defines it, is a constant struggle to uphold the ideals of freedom and equality. This requires constant questioning of the system to make it better. In Alvarez’ narrative two areas of contention in a modern nation are the issues of race and patriarchy. They go on to show the nation’s ambivalence. On one hand the Dominicans want to free themselves from the colonizer and the tyrants, and their unfair treatment, but on the other hand maintain control over a section of people because of their race or gender.

The Dominican Republic is a country with a high population of African descent. There is a high resistance in the country to be identified as a mulatto, and most tend to identify themselves as indio to justify their dark skin, although the indigenous population of the Taínos was wiped out by the early Spanish colonizers. Isabel Zakrzewski Brown in her book *Cultures and Customs of the Dominican Republic* notes that this racist attitude has seen improvement in the late 1990s, with the return of many exiled/immigrant Dominicans from the United States, who experienced the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which helped them appreciate their African heritage (47).

Alvarez’ novels are based in a time period when racism had a strong hold of the Dominican society. The question of race becomes important in a creation of a free nation, where everyone proposes freedom from former colonial structures, especially in countries where African slaves formed an integral part of enslavement. Salomé is a mulatta, and she is aware of the prejudices of her society towards people of color. This awareness exists in the mother of Salomé, who too has African descent; and the children of Salomé, Camila and Pedro. Salomé’s grandfather immigrated to the Dominican Republic from the Canary Islands, but married a woman of African descent. The groom’s parents resisted the alliance of Salomé’s mother Gregoria and father Nicolás (19). Gregoria and her sister Ana themselves preferred to be identified as “pure Spaniards,” and thus white, as they could not be identified of their mixed heritage through their skin color (17). The same dilemma arises in Salomé’s mind when she
thinks of the prospect of a marriage to Francisco, who is white. It is interesting to note that the mother on one hand publicly denounces her African heritage, but readily points out the social problems of Francisco being from a family of convert Sephardic Jews (137).

Gregoria and Salomé are both able to marry into white families because of the respective husband’s liberal stand on ethnic heritage, but the social problem remains unresolved and hypocritical. Publicly Francisco, Salomé’s husband wants to project his wife as white, and commissions a portrait of her with lighter skin.

The question of race haunts Camila and Pedro throughout their lives. Camila being light skinned is able to pass off in most instances without being questioned. She feels uncomfortable to bring it up with her closest friend Marion, who is a white American. Camila feels an attraction for Domingo, the Cuban mulatto sculpture, because she is able to speak openly to him not only about her mother and her poetry, but also talk about issues of race. Camila and Pedro both feel the resistance against colored people in the United States, while in exile. Pedro visibly of African heritage is frustrated by the racism that he has to face. Camila involved in a possible prospect to marry an US marine Scott Andrews, is posed with the same predicament by her bother. He says, “Does he know about Mamá?” Camila tries to soften the situation by referring that Andrews is from New Hampshire and “They were early abolitionists” (201).

In the novel In the Time of the Butterflies the problem of race is not highlighted as it is referred to in In the Name of Salomé. Fela is the only character identified as black. She is one of the servants of the Mirabal household. After the assassination of the sisters, Fela is known to have been possessed by the spirits of the girls, and they communicated through the “ebony black sibyl” (63). She set up an altar in the shed, and cures and miracles were attributed to the sisters. This incident is an insight into the practice of Voodoo in the Dominican Republic, associated with the black people. Dedé sees the episode as unacceptable and fires Fela from their service. Her disagreement does not arise from the fact that Fela was trying to exploit the assassination for commercial benefit, but because it was unchristian. She explains to Minerva’s daughter that, “It was disrespectful to your mother’s memory. She was Catholic, Minou, a Catholic”(64). This goes on to show the ongoing cultural conflict that exist in the Dominican society, where the
religious belief system of the people of African descent is in conflict with the Catholic principles. Catholicism came with the Spanish colonizers, and it is well documented how it helped the process of colonization. It helped break down the indigenous and later African cultural systems, by converting the indigenous and African slaves to Christianity, thus defusing the base of ethnic bonding. Present day Santería and Voodoo practices in the Spanish Caribbean, only goes to show that the slaves were able to resist a complete conversion, and still exist as a subversive form to the Catholic Church. Many Caribbean see these practices as part of their lives, along with being Christians.

It is known that the dictator Trujillo, himself of part African descent (Haitian lineage), refused to accept his heritage, and showed open disgust for Black people. The massacre of thousands of Haitian refugees in 1937 by Trujillo was motivated partly by the race of the refugees. Trujillo is also known to have promoted a white and Catholic race in his country. In 1938 Trujillo invited European Jews fleeing the Holocaust. They settled in the northern part of the country, in a small town called Sosúa. Trujillo’s motivations were beyond just a humanitarian act. In the face of international uproar of his racist act against the Haitians, Trujillo hoped to find international appraisal in his act to allow Jews to his country when many countries had closed their doors to the political refugees. Cuba one of the many countries, which welcomed the European Jews, in 1938, had refused the ship SS Louis, with Jewish refugees, as they were unable to control the overflow of immigrants. The United States was also refusing any more Jewish immigrants. Trujillo ceased the opportunity but his greater motivations were to allow the mixing of the white race with his people, thus making the Dominican Republic a whiter nation.

The novel In the Time of the Butterflies does not deal specifically with racism but with just with one war against Trujillo, who had taken over the control of the lives and the liberty of all the Dominicans for more than thirty years. On the other hand In the Name of Salomé takes on the various social battles that one is faced in creating a truly free and equal society. Both the novels look at patriarchy critically. The novels begin by challenging the traditional notion of history, which focuses on men and their contributions to history. The women protagonists despite their society’s restrictions contribute to their history. It must be noted that the women in
the novel both belonged to privileged families with fairly well established economic and social class, which allowed them with a greater chance to fight, than it would have been if they belonged to the working class. All the protagonists receive education. Minerva studied for her degree in Law but Trujillo denied her the license to practice—a way of censor and control. María Teresa also followed her sister’s footsteps and studied Law. Salomé was home tutored in a liberal curriculum, only available to men of her time, and Camila went on to receive doctorates. They both were teachers.

The path of education for Salomé and Camila, have little resistance, because of support of the liberal thinking male members in their families (This does not imply that they cease to be patriarchs, with desire to control women). In case of the Mirabals it is a struggle. The father, Don Enrique, a petty landlord and a prosperous country storeowner in the rural village of Ojo de Agua, does not the see the need for women’s education, except in the domestic space. Minerva who insists to go to school is granted her wish, but only to chaperone her elder sister Patria, to attend the convent school, run by the nuns of Immaculada Concepción. The nuns are seen as apt educators, because of their conservatism as part of the institute of the Catholic Church. Patria, with strong religious beliefs wants to become a nun, and the mother supports the idea, although the father sees it as ‘a waste of a pretty girl” (11). The mother’s argument is that the family has come to enjoy affluence and must have education to match it to move up the social ladder. Even though behind this argument, which is acceptable to the patriarch, is a desire of an illiterate mother to see her own daughters improve upon their lives, and not be dependent nor completely trust their lives to men. The mother, a traditional wife, has led her life, probably like her own mother, sacrificing herself to her husband, only to face the pain and humiliation of being betrayed by the husband with a mistress, and another family. The mother will never be able to fight this battle against the husband, but hopes that the daughters will be able to defend themselves better, if they had education.

Education of women is seen as a defense, especially in a society like the Dominican Republic, where the narratives show a rampant sexual activity of men outside their family. In
case of Don Enrique it seems to stem from the desire of having a male child. His wife has been unable to provide him with one, and ironically, his mistress too, only gives birth to girls. Don Enrique is a male chauvinist and his disrespect for his wife arises from believing in the right of the patriarch to maintain relations with other women and treat them as objects to be owned. He is also aware that no one will resist him.

In case of Nicolás Ureña, there is no apparent reason given for his affair outside his marriage. Francisco’s adulteress affair in Paris is the show of extreme disrespect for his wife. Not only does he secretly have an affair with a woman, while his wife Salomé tries to make ends meet at home, and send him money; but he also tries to keep an eye on his wife’s relationship with men. In his absence his brother Federico keeps an eye on Salomé. Federico reports to Franscico of Salomé’s interaction with men, especially with Hostos, a trusted friend and associate of the family. Pedro keeps an eye on Camila. It is not so much out of brotherly love, as much of his fear that his sister might be involved in a lesbian relationship with Marion. In *In the Name of Salomé* liberal thinking men, who plan to change the future of the nation, are still kept back with issues of race and gender. They seem only to give lip service to these social problems, but not take them face on. For the female protagonists of Alvarez’ novels therefore it becomes important to fight a battle that concerns just treatment for women as well. The private conflicts are projected onto the public life. There is little that these women do to fight their private battles. The Mirabal mother, Mercedes takes a pilgrimage with her daughters to Higüey, to seek solace for her pain and anger for having been left for another woman (57). Unlike the Mirabal mother, Gregoria decides to leave her husband, but later in life is reconciled. Salomé refuses to let Francisco in her bed after his return from Paris, but the outside world remains unaware of it. She too later reconciles with him. Camila never openly accepts Marion as her lover, and is forced to push Marion out of her life. She seeks the love of men to conform to the rules of the society, but is unable to do so.

Don Enrique’s affair causes pain in the family, but nothing is ever done about it. Minerva aware of her father’s adulteress life is unable to object to it, even though she is prepared to fight.
Trujillo. Although Minerva does make sure that after her father’s death her stepsisters are provided for. Alvarez depicts these women as victims of patriarchy but does not seek the readers’ pity. Instead she locates them in their moment of history and highlights how their personal battles took on a public form. Salomé writes a personal poem “Quejas,” expressing her desire for Francisco. She had no plans of publishing it, as she did not seek to create a sensation, and moreover she as the “national poetess” was expected only to write poems to inspire the nation. Yet she feels compelled to publish the poem when faced with the double standards of her society. The neighbor’s family ostracizes their daughter when they learn that she has become pregnant before marriage. The girl’s lover refuses to own responsibility, and prefers to marry a girl who has not overstepped the limits of morals set for women, by having sexual affairs before marriage. Salomé feels enraged at “Why was it all right for a man to satisfy his passion, but for a woman to do so was as good as signing her death warrant?” For Salomé the fight against the unjust treatment of women is as necessary as the need to create a free nation. She says, “There was another revolution to be fought if our patria was to be truly free” (145). Salomé’s tools are her poetry and her knowledge that she imparts to the people of her country and to the girls of her home run institute.

The Mirabals represent a different facet of a woman of the Dominican society of its time, and how and why they joined the revolution, in spite of the restrictions of their gender. Minerva, the righteous one, seeks justice for the atrocious crimes, by leading her nation as one of the many leaders of one of the underground cells. She is outspoken, courageous and a seeker of justice. Minerva’s anger towards Trujillo for the crimes done to her friends, family and herself are combated through her revolutionary activities. Patricia and Mate join her battle late but are convinced through their personal experiences and convictions. Mate, the youngest sister idolizes Minerva. Her admiration and devotion for her revolutionary sister is reflected through her strong faith in her sister’s ideals and her dedication to the cause of the revolution. She follows through till the end without ever asking questions.

Patricia is the representation of the woman who too, participated in the revolution, but followed what her faith told her. The Church for the longest time refused to speak out against
Trujillo’s crimes, finally took a stand against the Dictator and thus was able to create a counter militia, which ultimately joined the existing underground movement. Patria, at heart always wanting to help her revolutionary sisters even though unable to accept their rejection of religion and Church; finally is able to join in, once she herself sees the horrors and the aftermath of the 14th of June, 1959 invasion. Trujillo’s National Guard and the SIM, who with the help of paid informants amongst common people and farmers, were able to hunt down most of the guerillas, and kill them or put them in prison. Patria horrified to see a young boy of fourteen die in front of her eyes and fearing that her own children might die in the same fashion resolves, “I’m not going to sit back and watch my babies die, Lord, even if that’s what You in Your great wisdom decide” (162). Her resolve finds acceptance in the words of the Bible and the leaders of the community’s Church. Patria says:

The Priests had decided they could not wait forever for the pope and the archbishop to come around. The time was now, for the Lord had said, I come with the sword as well as the plow to set at liberty them that are bruised. (163)

Patria’s church group called the Acción Clero-Cultural start to spread the militant word of God amongst the farmers and the rural population and start recruiting the common man. Her home becomes the center of the underground meetings and collection of arms and ammunition. Thus, part of the country was able to come together, even though differing in their belief systems, but concurring on the final goal to rid the nation of Trujillo.

Dedé living with the burden of being the surviving sister represents the woman, who fearful, like many, for her family’s life did not throw herself to the cause of the movement. On one hand she blames her patriarchal husband for not having allowed her to join her sisters, but on the other hand she also accepts that it was her own fear that kept her back. But she in her own way helps the cause, by smuggling food and provisions to her sisters and their cellmates. But she further redeems herself, as being the one who kept the sisters’ story alive, and took under her wings the orphaned nieces and nephews.

Dedé depicts the circumstance of many women of society in turmoil. Gregoria and her sister Ana, Salomé and her sister Ramona, Patricia and Mate like Dedé, at some point, take on the responsibility of the safe keep and survival of their children and older members of their families, in the absence of the male patriarch, exiled or a casualty of war. A role given little importance yet is significant. In a patriarchal society the role of the woman in the public life does
not exempt her from her private role, as the caregiver, like the man. When a woman neglects her domestic role she is looked upon critically. Patria criticizes Minerva for leaving her children in her sister’s care, before she herself is convinced of Minerva’s actions (155). The only path to accomplish the goals for these women is to form a community of support of women. Their fight is not solely against the tyrant or the government but the patriarchal structure, which is as oppressive as the other.

Alvarez through her narratives tries to keep the memory alive of these women and their public function as well as their private role, however mundane and ordinary. It highlights the individual’s role in the process of a national self-creation, whatever be their gender or race. This responsibility is not just of those who reside in the country but also those who live outside the borders. The idea of exile is located very closely with the fight for freedom. Both novels take a closer and personal look at political exile, and the contributions of exiled members of a nation. In the Time of the Butterflies mentions the exile of revolutionaries that indirectly shape the lives of the protagonists of the novel. In Dedé’s opinion the family’s political trouble start with Minerva, the rebel sister’s involvement with Virgilio Morales, the revolutionary. Morales based on Pericles Franco, represents the intellectuals of Latin America who took an active role in the construction of their nation. He is the initiator of Minerva’s political convictions. Morales spent a substantial time of his life in exile. In the novel he returns from Venezuela with a medical degree and becomes faculty at the University in the capital. He returns to the country hoping that Trujillo’s announcement to make changes towards a democratic process is not a hoax. He is proved wrong, but in the two years he remains in the Dominican Republic, he continues his agitations against the regime. Minerva is convinced by Morales for political change through active participation in the revolution. He has to exile himself again, this time to Colombia in the wake of the June 1949 Luperón attack against Trujillo. This legion was formed of men of varying ideological positions and was supported by Caribbean and Central American leaders. After this attack Trujillo tightened the internal security and a rampant of arrests took place (Peguero 165-66). He hopes that Minerva would join him. Unfortunately Dedé, because of sibling jealousy, does not give the final message to Minerva (83). The father, because of fear of political repercussions due to association with a revolutionary, obstructs all letters from Morales to his daughter. Minerva is angered by her father’s invasion of her personal life and she regrets the great opportunity missed, as she says, “My life would have been nobler if I had followed
Minerva and her sister’s noble contributions have been documented, and the novel portrays this active involvement arising from the inspiration of an exiled revolutionary like Morales. The underground movement Catorce de Junio, which was organized by Minerva and her revolutionary companions, was named after another attack organized by exiled Dominicans. This attack took place on the fourteenth of June in 1959, with the help of the new revolutionary leader of Cuba, Fidel Castro.

In *In the Name of Salomé* the exile of revolutionaries and intellectuals is part of the protagonists’ lives. Salomé’s father exiles himself every time the conservative party takes control of the nation, before Spain repossesses. Salomé’s husband exiles himself in the dictatorship of Ulises Heureaux. In a letter to her husband in exile she writes, “[...] Martí exiled in Nueva York. Betances in Brooklyn, Hostos in Chile, Penson on his way north. Our whole Caribbean is living elsewhere!” (226).

Camila lives all her life in exile, first in Haiti, then Cuba, and then United States. Through her we are given an inside look into exile. Her being a woman in exile also provides a different perspective, as in most cases the exiled revolutionaries were men, who may or may not have been accompanied by their wives and family. Camila’s father Francisco Henríquez y Carvajal, was appointed president in absentia of the Dominican Republic while residing in exile. He returns with his family to the Dominican Republic to be exiled again to Cuba, because of the US Marine invasion of 1916. He established a Dominican government in exile, and continued to rally against the United States to return the country to the Dominicans. Camila sees her father’s visit to the United States to see the President as futile, but her brother Pedro feels other wise. He says, “‘Papancho has every right in the world. [...] Look at what the Yanquis have done in Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico. Who is going to stop them?’” (200). Francisco dies in exile in Cuba fighting for his ideals, but loses to the might of the United States and the ambitions of Dominican politicians who see no wrong in having United States as the surrogate Neo-Colonial rulers.

Camila, who accepts Cuba as her home, decides to do her share as an activist against the Batista regime. In 1941 she exiles herself to the United States after she is released from jail for her activism by the help of her brother Max. He worked for Trujillo’s government, and had
favorable connections in the Batista administration. Camila exiled, visits her brother Pedro in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is introduced to Pedro’s friends, mostly poets and intellectuals, and many of them Spanish exiles, like Jorge Güillen, Pedro Salinas. They compare Spain’s condition, under Franco, with the problems of Cuba and the Dominican Republic. The poet Güillen comments on the situation of the exiles, “‘We are the new Israelites. [...] What will become of us? We die if we forget. We die if we remember’” (113). The exile community, from wherever they hail, finds a common bond. It is the common ideals of national self-creation and the concepts of freedom and equality that guide their mission. Pedro commenting on the instable conditions of the Latin American countries and US intervention says, “‘We must pledge ourselves to our America [...] the America our poor, little countries are struggling to create’”(121). In these words he brings out the role of the exiles away from home. (It is a similar question that is also posed in Achy Obejas’ Memory Mambo and Days of Awe, where she questions the distant attitude of the Cuban exiles towards Cuba’s welfare.)

The exile community in both the novels is portrayed as active in the process of national self-creation. Even if the involvement is not directly for the country of origin, it is an involvement with the process of nation building of the country in which they reside. The idea of “our America” as opposed to the United States of America is a creation of a coalition of Latin American countries trying to help themselves in their struggle to establish a nation, and combat the threat of US territorial domination or Spain’s colonial power. Hostos, the Puerto Rican anti-colonialist activist, in In the Name of Salomé is exiled from Puerto Rico, but he continues his educational reforms in the Dominican Republic, until he exiles to Chile. Neighboring Caribbean and Central American countries supported the attacks on the Trujillo’s regime, organized by Dominican exiles, as mentioned in the novel In the Time of the Butterflies. The present day North American reader may seem skeptical at Alvarez’ depiction of Fidel Castro as a hero to the Dominicans of the decade of the 1950s and 1960s, but it remains a fact that he was fighting a dictatorial regime of Batista, a puppet president of the United States in Cuba. Castro was ready to help the revolutionaries of the neighboring countries in similar situations. He was the hope for
the “poor, little countries,” which were being taken over by the new colonial power from the north. Patricia, the eldest Mirabal sister decides to name her newborn child Raúl Ernesto, and Ché for short; in honor of the brother of the revolutionary hero Fidel, and his comrade Ché Ernesto Guevara. Camila returns to the free Cuba of Castro to participate in national self-creation, through her skills as an educationist, even though it is not her birth country.

The principal narrative structure of the novels reflects the continuity of the past in the present. Both the narratives begin at an end, or the present, instead of starting at the chronological beginning of the events in the past. In the Name of Salomé has a separate prologue and the very first chapter of In the Time of the Butterflies is a prologue of sorts. They both retain the structure of beginnings starting with ends. The idea of keeping the memory of the past alive in the present is further marked constantly by moving back and forward in time.

The assassination of the Mirabals is the final event in the succession of events of their lives, yet the narrative begins from this end, which brings the Dominican American interviewer to Ojo de Agua, the town of the sisters. The narrative completes a full circle as it ends in their assassination, as Dedé completes her tale.

The search of Camila of her own self/mother moves through a backward motion, while Salomé’s story unfolds chronologically, as if reaching forward to her daughter’s journey backwards. The “Prologue” begins with Camila as she retires and decides to return to Cuba, her only home, after the Dominican Republic. Her departure is the beginning of her unraveling her own life backwards, as we read of Salomé, her mother’s life, reaching forward to her, as if calling her back to her origins.

The epilogues of the novels stand separate from the principal narratives. They anchor the narratives in the present time, as they comment on the journey taken into the past, and establish a conscious relationship to the present. Dedé continues on with her life in Ojo de Agua, and Camila decides to return to Santo Domingo, her original patria, while they both keep the national past alive by remembering the tale of their female relatives, who are also the nation’s heroines.
Alvarez’ *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* recuperate historical memory of the Dominican nation, mainly for an English speaking audience, unaware of its history, and for the Dominican American readers disconnected from the memory of one people of one nation. Memory of one’s national history becomes important because it defines people and their identity. The narratives revive pride in the historical moments, which were so crucial in shaping the Dominican nation. They are moments in past which reach out to all Dominicans within the borders and beyond, to stand up against injustice. For a community like that of Dominicans in the United States, who are marginalized as Latinos or even as Blacks, these narratives become a connection to a heroic past which provide strength in the face conflictive situations of the present. Dominican Americans continuing with their allegiance to the United States as their adoptive or birth nation can also continue to be part of the land of origin or ancestors. As Pierre Nora says:

> Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. (8)

Alvarez’ narratives are not simply an exultation of the past, which remained unnoticed for so long. It is also a reassessment of history, and thus a re-examination of our selves. Alvarez is as critical of the Dominican people as she is of the United States. She accepts the internal and the external threats that the Dominican nation faces. It is an acknowledgement of the enslaving attitudes of racism, patriarchy, and annexation that have hounded the Dominican nation and the people, but it is also an attempt to change the repressive outlook. It is thus a process of “tropicalization” from the perspective of the subject who creates a self-identity in the present, re-examining the past.

The connection to a nation for the immigrant is defined neither by residing within the national borders, nor with loyalty to the ruling leadership, rather by the ties to the community, which forms a nation. And the national history is one of the many memories, which connects the two communities across the sea. An ethnic community is formed on a basis of shared belief system and memories. In the present the immigrant community has drifted away from the community from which they once came. Yet they both have a common past, a common history, which allows them to come together to form that nation that is imagined yet grounded in a
common system of belief, memory, and customs. Juan Flores writing about the Puerto Rican immigrants, sums up the Latino predicament in the following words. He writes, “A people’s memory and sense of collective continuity is broken not only by the abrupt, imposed course of historical events themselves but by the exclusionary discourses that accompany and legitimate them” (“Broken English Memories” 277).

Exclusionary discourses are created on both sides. People within the border see the immigrants to the United States as assimilated, americanized, and as gringos. Immigrants too exclude themselves from their past to create a new identity and sometimes to oppose the resistance of the Dominicans to identify them as a part of them. Yet it is a strategy of importance for Dominicans of both sides to remain connected. The immigrants when allowed to participate in the distant community will be of benefit to both sides. They will be willing to give back to the land of origin and also create a self-identity anchored in a tradition of past memory. National history is one such system of memory, which needs to be recuperated and revived to continue to exist as a group of people and not get lost in the midst of marginalization and discrimination.

Alvarez, as the author of the narratives of the people of the land of her origin is an agent of the reconnection. She reaches out to the people of her community on both sides. The gringa dominicana retells the lives of the Mirabal and the Ureña women, in an attempt to legitimize herself as part of a continuing tradition, and also to keep the immigrant community connected to the continuance.
NOTES

1 Julia Alvarez sees it as her responsibility to give back to her land of origin. In an interview with Juanita Heredia, she comments on her projects in the Dominican Republic (Alvarez, “Citizen of the World” 29). She has an organic coffee farm on cooperatively owned lands. In the same interview she also comments on the creation of Dominican writers’ and artists’ retreat-workshops, to provide them with the space to create and also connect to the community.

2 It remains controversial to date if the Mirabal sisters were raped before they were killed. Isabel Zakrzewski Brown in her essay, “Historiographic Metafiction in In the Time of the Butterflies,” looks at the persisting debate. Alvarez’ decided to use the version that Dedé, the surviving sister gave her and also what the biographers William Galvan and Ramon Alberto Ferrera record in their texts. Yet there are other historians like Piero Gleijjes and Robert Crassweller who believe that the sisters were raped.

3 Seymour Menton picks this definition from many arbitrary definitions. This one he attributes to Enrique Anderson Imbert.

4 Latin American literature abounds in dictator/dictatorship novels, as it reflects a political reality of many of the countries. The figure of the tyrant remains a fascination of the writers established as a genre in the Galician writer Ramón Valle Inclán’s Tirano Banderas (1926) to this day in Mario Vargas Llosa’s La fiesta del Chivo (2000).

5 The romantic novels of the nineteenth century were crucial in the creation of the national ethos of Latin America during its time. Doris Sommer studies the Latin American and Dominican nationalistic romantic novels in her Foundational Fictions and One Master for Another respectively. Many writers, especially of the Boom period rejected this “romantic” image of the nation to become more critical of the governing system and use writing styles and images closer to the reality of Latin America.

6 The Jewish colony of Sosúa in the 1940s was the home of approximately thousand refuges, who became successful dairy farmers. Presently the Jewish population has dwindled as many immigrated to the United States or went back to Europe after the Second World War ended. Tourism is being developed in this area, and soon all traces of the colony will disappear (Symanski and Burley). Trujillo’s intention to whiten his country’s race did not succeed.
7 Alvarez’ novel How the García Girls Lost their Accents look at the marginalization of the protagonists in both cultures, the American and the Dominican.
CHAPTER 3

THE SELF AND THE COLLECTIVE: JUDITH ORTIZ COFER’S SILENT DANCING.

It is a dangerous thing
to forget the climate of your birthplace
to choke out the voices of the dead relatives
when in dreams they call you
by your secret name.

--- Judith Ortiz Cofer, “El Olvido”

Judith Ortiz Cofer is a Puerto Rican poet, novelist, short story, and a creative non-fictional writer. She grew up mainly in Paterson, New Jersey, and presently resides in Georgia. Many of her writings are drawn from her childhood experiences as a bicultural child moving constantly between the island of Puerto Rico and the United States. English, her language of intellectual formation, is the chosen medium of expression of her writings. She maintains a contact with her land of origin through her yearly sojourn, which is reflected in her poems and narrative. Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood (1990), is Ortiz Cofer’s partial autobiography, and speaks of her childhood memories. Her autobiographical memories reconnect her to her past and maintain a continuation of the cultural bond, which has been interrupted due to migration. Ortiz Cofer’s personal meditations create a narrative space in which she recreates a Puerto Rican community, both of the island and of the US mainland.

Autobiography is the genre of non-fictional narrative pertaining to the life story of the author. Self-examination of one’s own life is usually a personal journey; therefore a public narrative raises the question of why one writes an autobiography or memoir. Usually it is believed that famous people write autobiographies, or biographies are written about them,
because their lives are already part of public scrutiny, and in many instances they symbolize success stories, and thus exemplary for the general public. An autobiography of a lesser-known person is thus questioned for its motives. Ortiz Cofer’s writings appear in the academic curriculum of some universities and high schools. Her texts are also taught in courses on minority women writers of the U.S., U.S. Latino, and at times included in contemporary Puerto Rican literature outside the island.

Canonically, the genre of autobiography is the baring of the individual’s life’s story to public scrutiny through a text. Yet this person remains separate from the public, which scrutinizes him/her. The individual examining his/her life, as if independent of the self, takes on a superior role of a dispassionate observer. Ortiz Cofer’s text, an autobiographical piece, and her autobiographical memories create a continuum with not only the past and the present, but also the community of acá y allá, here and there. The autobiographical writings of Ortiz Cofer as part of the western tradition of the autobiography, figures at the margins—like many other autobiographical texts of minority women writers. In writings of minority women one sees an intention not to disassociate from the public. These texts seek to form alliances with the reader with similar life stories, which go unnoticed and unheard of, simply because they are not famous or do not receive the same accolades, as a film star or a politician.

The title of Judith Ortiz Cofer’s autobiography Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood anticipates a narrative of only a part of her life—her childhood—and that too a partial extent. The portrayal of a child as a major character is frequent in many US Latino texts. A child represents a state of mind and a stage of life, where there are no prejudices or pre-conceived notions about people or life.¹ A child’s experiences are an unbiased exploration of the world. A child learns what he observes and what he is taught. In a community a child is the symbol of continuity of traditions that are passed on from one generation to the other. A bicultural child has to live with two realities, which may clash. Experiencing this clash of cultural differences and understanding them is a personal journey, which Ortiz Cofer undertakes in this autobiographical narrative. This preoccupation with the child of different cultural heritage
can also be seen in Ortiz Cofer’s other writings targeted specifically to young readers, where she makes an intentional attempt to write to the bicultural children making choices about being different in a hostile environment.\(^2\)

Ortiz Cofer’s autobiographical narrative is a series of apparently disjoined essays, which culminate in poems. She mixes the two forms with fluidity. In an interview with Rafael Ocasio she comments on the use of poetry. She says it is, “[. . .] what connects me to my memory, to my imagination, to my subconscious life, and to my original language” (“Puerto Rican Literature” 9). Celeste Schenck in her essay “All of a Piece: Women’s Poetry and Autobiography,” speaking of the poetic tradition of women says that in the western tradition there is a dearth of information of women writers before the eighteenth century, and poetry has been a source of autobiographical information (289). In her study of women’s autobiography and poetry Schenck notes that:

\[
\text{[. . .]} \text{ the functional identity between the two genres: the serial effort at sketching a self in time and over time is the poetic equivalent of snapshots recording a process of personal becoming during a period of historical change. (290)}\]

Ortiz Cofer gives the option of reading the poems as separate texts or as part of the narrative pieces, yet reading the poem at the end of the episode ties up the emotions and images evoked in the prose pieces. In an interview with Jocelyn Bartkevicius, Ortiz Cofer states that the poems were written up to ten years before the essays, but the writing let her discover the origins of the emotions captured in the poems (62).

The narrative texts stand on their own by themselves. They do not follow any sequence nor are numbered as chapters, thus the reader is given the choice to read each piece as an essay, or perhaps as episodes. Each in itself is separate yet are tied by the characters and the themes of celebration of Puerto Rican life on the Island and its continuance in the immigrant space, specifically that of Paterson, New Jersey.

The “Preface” of the Silent Dancing the author reflects on her writing process. Ortiz Cofer’s personal intentions to write her autobiography are inspired by the idea of examining those points of origin in her life, which have impacted her life as an adult. Specifically those
points of origin are her childhood memories of family and friends, their stories, and their ways of
being. Ortiz Cofer establishes her contact with a community right at the beginning of the text.
She is selective in the stories she tells as she points out that as the author-narrator she picks the
moments of her childhood, especially the joyful ones, aptly compared to a “summer’s afternoon”
(11). Like any narrative only certain events and moments are chosen to be told keeping in mind
the design of the author. The intention of the author is very much alive in her writings; although
it is for the reader to arrive at his or her own conclusions, as far as the meanings of, and
connections to, the text.

Ortiz Cofer further commenting on her autobiography, a genre considered to be non-
fiction, says that it is not always a true story just as is the case with journalists or historians (12).
Virginia Woolf is a major influence on Ortiz Cofer’s art and life. She quotes the late nineteenth
and early twentieth century British author’s ideas about writing of one’s life as a “ [. . .] combination of memory, imagination, and strong emotion that may result in ‘poetic truth’ ”(11).
Cofer defends her fictionalization of real life events, because she believes that privacy of certain
individuals is necessary, and moreover the truth is not in the name of a person or place, or
accurate descriptions of real life events of her life, but in the way those people touched her life
(13).

Memory no doubt is one of the important elements of Cofer’s autobiography. She does
not hesitate to say that her memory is fragmented and what she has are “moments of being.”3
The importance of these moments to which she attaches “strong emotions,” are to capture the
origin of her craft-poetry and narrative. Moreover working on her autobiography, she
interviewed her relatives to confirm her memories, only to be disappointed that they differed.
She says, “I found out that memory is subject to revision according to gender, age, circumstances
and many other things”(“Puerto Rican Literature” 11).

Ortiz Cofer also accepts that her life, which is “in-progress” has no “extraordinary
accomplishments to showcase” (13), in contrast to most traditional autobiographies of famous
people. Her intentions are to reconnect to her past. She writes: “[. . .] to connect myself to the
threads of lives that have touched mine and at some point converged in to the tapestry that is my
memory of childhood” (13). The author’s intentions are personal, but as she shares them with her reader, she opens up a new world of reception, especially to people who have had similar lives, namely—immigrant Puerto Ricans.

The genre of autobiography in the United States has been a growing form among minority women writers since the 1980s. This non-fictional form has allowed a proliferation of a new kind of genre, unlike the traditional form itself. Lourdes Torres in her essay, “The Construction of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies,” studies the autobiographies of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Cherríe Moraga (1983), Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales (1986). Torres points out that these autobiographies have subversive forms, contents and linguistic norms (272). Ortiz Cofer however is not as subversive as Anzaldúa and Moraga, yet in her form she seems to be similar to these writers. Ortiz Cofer’s autobiography is not a simple chronological narrative in prose, rather they are essays interspersed with poems.

Anzaldúa and Moraga’s edited This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color first published in 1991, is a seminal text in many women’s studies courses. This is important because it was the first anthology of minority writers, writing from the position of women of color, not just Latinas, but also Black, Asian, and Native American. Many of the pieces, theoretical or critical in nature are autobiographical or testimonial. The genre of autobiography provides the instant connection between authors and readers, as to understand the writers’ immediate position and conflicts of their race, class and gender. I refer to Anzaldúa and Moraga’s text simply to demonstrate that even serious theoretical and critical works have adopted the autobiographical mode to express issues of concern to the minority writers and their communities. In this context Ortiz Cofer’s text appears to be part of a similar tradition in which the personal narrative speaks to and of the community.

Ortiz Cofer’s autobiography is different from traditional autobiographies in form and style. It has a fragmented structure. There are no chapter numbers, and is composed of poems and prose pieces, yet maintains an unique yet recognizable pattern. The apparent fragmentation of the narrative actually follows a structure of its own. The text starts with introducing her origins in the island community and then alternates between experiences of the mainland and the island. This movement of the essays represents the rhythm of the author’s own life. She spent her
childhood shuttling back and forth between the two spaces. She ends her narrative with an epilogue, titled “Last Word” and reconnects to ideas presented in the “Preface,” especially speaking of how memory works. She differs with her mother’s memory, but accepts the discrepancy because they speak of a personal perception, to which each one is entitled (Ortiz Cofer, “The Poetic Truth” 117).

The negotiation of one’s origin is an important way of perceiving ourselves. In the following chapters, Julia Alvarez and Achy Obejas too, establish a specific origin, other than just their land of origin, which produce different meanings. In case of Judith Ortiz Cofer, her origins are defined within a very specific matrilineal network. The female lineage is established within the tradition of storytelling of two languages and cultures to which she belongs. On one hand the maternal grandmother is the point of origin of this network. The figure of the grandmother or Mamá becomes the model she emulates and draws her own meaning from. She sees herself as part of the tradition that the grandmother has come to connote, that of preserver of culture and the storyteller, apart from being a strong woman who demands her space and controls her life, even though emerges from a patriarchal society. On the other hand Ortiz Cofer identifies Virginia Woolf as the other maternal/feminine origin of the space she negotiates through her narrative. Both women are from two very different spaces, times, and social circumstances, yet they both provide meaning to Ortiz Cofer’s life as part of her ‘non-intellectual heritage’ and her ‘intellectual formation.’

The opening essay titled “Casa” indicates the location, where the memories begin. It is the grandparent’s home in Puerto Rico. The principal characters are the maternal figures, grandmother, mother, and aunts. The little cousins and the author herself form part of the audience to the matriarchal gatherings in the parlor to listen to the morality tales of how to be a good and moral Puerto Rican woman, and of life in general—at home and away in New York or California.

The aroma of coffee perking in the kitchen, the mesmerizing creaks and groans of the rockers, and the women telling their lives in cuentos are forever woven into the fabric of my imagination, braided like my hair that day I felt my
grandmother’s hands teaching me about strength, her voice convincing me of the power of story-telling. (19)

The traditional space of women is not only associated with the home, the kitchen, the parlor, but also with the act of story telling to children. The domestic space, even though enclosed and segregated from the outside male space, becomes the space of preparation for the outside world. One’s personal tale becomes a tale of the community and vice versa. The notion of orality and oral tales in many communities is the basis of connecting the personal and the public. In Ortiz Cofer’s autobiography it sets the tone of the narrative. Although all the essays are not of the oral tradition, yet emerge from that culture. In an interview with Bridget Kevane, Ortiz Cofer comments, “storytelling is used in a culture to preserve its memories and to teach lessons for the same reasons that artists write their stories” (116).

María la Loca and María Sabida are two examples of female figures of Ortiz Cofer’s storytelling tradition. María is a common Latina, almost a generic name for any Latina woman, apart from being the name of the Virgin Mary. María la Loca is a tale of the immediate community of the grandmother. María Sabida is a figure of Puerto Rican folklore. Both the tales of María are structured within another tale, similar to the Arabian Nights, which is a common structural strategy used by the author in her narratives. In the essay “Casa” the moral tale of María la Loca, who was left at the altar, is prompted by the author’s young aunt’s engagement to a boy from another town, who leaves for New York to make his fortune. The grandmother concerned about her daughter’s future weaves a cautionary tale about the village girl María la Loca who has lost her mind because of her heartbreak and has become the laughing stock of the town. The grandmother tells of this tale to warn her own daughter of the possible dangers, which lie, in being engaged to a man who has left for New York, with no guarantee of return.

The tale of María Sabida is one of the grandmother’s tales for her grandchildren, in the “Tales Told under the Mango Tree.” The Mango tree becomes the site of the enactment of the continuance of the oral tradition from one generation to the other. María Sabida’s mission is to rid her town of the terror imposed by the thief and his band. She also has to safe guard her own
life as the thief plans to murder her. She is the symbol of the “prevailing woman” (76), or the woman who slept with her eyes open. Ortiz Cofer also sees her as the opposite of María la Loca, who represents the woman victimized because of her lack of caution.

Ortiz Cofer selects stories from the tradition of folktales and her own immediate life. In her community of females, the women with “open eyes,” overcome and the naïve are victimized. The author’s female network is composed of grandmothers, aunts, mother, female neighbors, female mythical and folkloric figures, and feminized men. In the narratives there is a minimal presence of male figures. The marginalization of men as part of the primary narrative is a personal choice of the author. Her relation with her father is one of much complexity and she never fully develops it. He is the reason for the family’s constant movement between the two cultural spaces. Her brother, her uncle Hernán and some adolescent love interests form part of the secondary male presence of this narrative. It is not that the male figures did not influence her life, but in defining herself in relation to all the female figures she breaks the traditional mold of defining a female in relation to the male members of the society. Furthermore by highlighting the female experiences the women are given a voice. The perspective differs because of their gendered circumstances.

The male characters in the essays of Ortiz Cofer are represented in comparison to the female figures. When the author speaks of her origin, she mentions the male members of her family, as in a patriarchal society the family unit is described in terms of the patrimony. The paternal side of the author’s family is of Spanish descent with noble blood and the maternal side has its origins in Italy and they were farmers. Not only there exist a different economic and class difference but also a philosophical one which the author sees reflected in her own parents, with the mother being the exuberant and lively, and her father solemn and quiet (39). It also comments on the social hierarchization still present in the Puerto Rican society. Although the author does not elaborate on the issue it is clear that the descendent male members of the Spanish side of the family see themselves in high regard, even though their economic fortunes have changed and social importance of nobility no longer exists.
The maternal grandfather is one of the few male figures to whom she dedicates one essay. The maternal grandfather is remembered fondly for being a poet and a soft-spoken man. The grandmother sees his poetry as a sign of weakness. Further his practice of espiritismo is seen as not a traditional man’s calling. The author never met her paternal grandfather and her knowledge of him is through the memories of others, especially her mother’s. The man was known to have been an alcoholic and a mean assertive male figure of the family (39).

The representation of the female figures in Ortiz Cofer’s narrative highlight them not only as an individual selves, but also possessors of a distinct identity, other than the gender role assigned to a woman of a certain class and race. The grandmother Mamá, the central figure of the author’s origin is a traditional woman, who bore and raised her children. As commented before, her importance in the narrative arises from her being the symbol of the preserver of culture through the act of story telling, both for entertainment and education. The essay “More Room,” which follows right after the first essay “Casa,” is the childhood memory of the grandmother’s room. It is also an adult’s reflection on a woman reclaiming her physical body and space within the confines of the allocated domestic space. In Puerto Rican culture, where space and economics allow, it is normal to build additional rooms for a newborn baby. In this essay, the grandmother demands her husband, a skilled carpenter to build a new room. This time it is not for a new child, but for the husband. It is the only way a Catholic woman of her time could take back her body and stop the process of reproducing. This does not take away from the woman her nurturing skills.

The grandmother’s room is not only the central room, but also the inner sanctum of the private life of a woman. This space is not only associated with her maternal affection for her newborn children, but also the private space where women exchange secrets and advice. In this particular piece it becomes Mamá’s space alone by banishing her husband to another room.

Helen Buss speaking of contemporary women’s memoirs says that the assertion of a self-identity is seen as an unfeminine act, therefore women do not seem to assert a woman’s identity in terms of “I,” as a traditional male autobiography would, and “I” is seen as “[. . .] the self that
defines its maturation through a process of increasing separation and distinctiveness” (63). Thus a woman’s strategy is to represent the ritualistic everyday details of her life, thus reiterated and not obliterated.

Judith Ortiz Cofer too, asserts the female identity through ritualistic representation of the women and their everyday acts. The author’s memory of the paternal grandmother, Mamá Nanda, is based upon her own mother’s memories of her mother-in-law. Mamá Nanda is the archetypical mother, who suffered under the tyranny of her husband and served him and her sons all her life. The author has a special bond with Mamá Nanda because she was born in her home and raised by her the first few years of her life. Mamá Nanda finds her new self, only after her husband’s death and finds a new meaning to her life in caring for her daughter-in-law and her newborn granddaughter. Even when her husband was alive, she found her freedom in a secret smoke at the back of the house. In the absence of male rule, she is able to freely buy cartons of cigarettes and enjoys her smoke with her daughter-in-law and her divorced daughter.

Ortiz Cofer’s mother has a significant role in the preservation of the author’s memories. The author’s own experience as a child in the island of Puerto Rico and Paterson, are enriched by the memories of the mother. The mother refused to assimilate to the American culture, even though her husband wanted the family to emulate the better life style of the Americans. She follows her husband to Paterson, waits all her life for his return from the Navy, takes care of the children and the home, but keeps her fantasy alive to return to casa. In her intent to continue to be part of Puerto Rico, while in Paterson, she remembered stories that people told each other in Puerto Rico: “They were stories my mother would later repeat to me to pass the time away in the colder climates while she waited to return to her island” (41).

The memories of the mother are nostalgic and a cry to remain connected to the lost space, where she imagines returning. On the other hand the memories passed on to the author, are not nostalgic, as it is not of a lost space, rather just of another space she occupies along with Paterson. The memories of Puerto Rico, of Paterson, personal or borrowed, all form part of a larger whole, with which the author identifies herself. The mother-daughter dynamics helps to
understand the difference of perceptions of generations of migrants. In case of Puerto Rico, where there are no travel restrictions for American residents, the path back to the land of origin is a possible reality. The mother makes her choice to return home; because that is the only home she ever had, refusing to accept the life in the United States mainland. The author on the other hand accepts the migrant space also part of her life, even though faces the harshness of being different. But for her Puerto Rico is also not completely accepting. She is welcome, but she is an outsider to them, as she resides in the mainland. Ortiz Cofer sees herself as a “mosca en un vaso de leche” or a fish out of water, in both spaces. She remembers two incidents of her school days, one of the Puerto Rican school, and the other of the school at Paterson, dealing with cultural and social issues of immigrants. In the episode from the island, the author refuses to go to school, because there she would have to work in Spanish. Although Spanish is the language spoken at home, she has not learned to identify it with school, as back in Paterson it is only English at schools. The confusion of the child is heightened with the teaching of the English language with no context, in the Puerto Rican school. Ortiz Cofer looks on the days when the American government made the teaching of English mandatory, without understanding the cultural context of such an imposition. The imposition was a failure, yet the children were forced to learn a foreign language in utter confusion (54-56). She further feels different because of the treatment she receives from the teachers. As a child she does not understand why, but as an adult reflecting on her memories she figures the issues of class and economics involved in her being a child of a US Navy man. In the colonial hegemonic structure the colonizer enjoys the privilege of a higher social status, than the colonized. The author’s family because of the virtue of their place of residence and the father’s position in the US Navy, enjoy the benefit of a better treatment than the other Puerto Ricans of the island, by the Puerto Ricans themselves. It is a sad yet true commentary of the colonized mind, which refuses to see the injustice in such behavior.

The episode in Paterson makes her reflect on the treatment received by children of immigrants. It is a memory of utter pain and humiliation of a child unable to understand a language. Still learning English, the author as a child, faces the usual unsympathetic and ignorant
treatment of being spoken in a louder voice or not being paid attention to at all (65). She learns to forgive the behavior of the children, but to this date the behavior of her teacher remains imprinted on her mind. In the essay “One more Lesson,” she recounts that wanting to be excused from the classroom, to go to the bathroom the young author turns to the assistance of a Spanish-speaking classmate. This classmate seeking an opportunity to make trouble tells her that she could simply walk out of class. Only if she could have read the instructions in English on the chalkboard, she would have known that she had to write her name on the board first. She is punished and hit on her head by the teacher for being disobedient. She writes, “It was not until years later that I stopped hating that teacher for not understanding that I had been betrayed by a classmate, and by my inability to read her warning on the board” (66). The only solution to surviving the harshness and indifference of people was to learn the language. It is a solution that the author adopts even though she observes that her own mother has refused to learn English, as a resistance to assimilate.

The theme of not fitting in to the norms of society is constant in the writings of Ortiz Cofer. In the essay “Some of the Characters” she narrates the memories of some of the neighbors of her old neighborhood, in Paterson. Vida and Providencia are two women who are part of the author’s childhood memories from the days in the barrio, in Paterson. Barrio or the neighborhood attracted Latino migrants, because of the cheaper rent. It is not a place that the author’s father wanted to live, but out of necessity had to rent an apartment on temporary basis. Of the memories of the barrio she narrates the life stories of people who are transgressors. Vida and Providencia do not capture the notion of the pure, faithful, and submissive woman. They are represented not as victims of their situations, rather just another way of life, just the way the author has decided to live a life, open to criticism, even from her own mother.

Vida moves to the United States with her family as a political refugee. The author recounts her memory from the time when she was twelve, a young adolescent, and is mesmerized by the beautiful sixteen year-old Vida. Vida keeps romanticism alive in her life by dreaming to become a Hollywood star, while she lives in an one bedroom apartment with her sister and her new born
baby, the sister’s husband and the grandmother. Vida unabashed about her beauty wanted to be noticed and liked the attention she received from men on the streets. Men promise to help her achieve her dream, seduce her for their sexual pleasures. Vida is not to be seen simply as a victim, as she herself seeks men and their money to achieve her fantasies. Completely disillusioned one day she disappears from the life of the young narrator. All she ever learned of her is that Vida had taken up a job in a nearby factory as a seamstress, a common fate of many immigrant Latina women of her time. One day Vida is declared the beauty queen of the neighboring parish, to promote the cause of the Church. However small the achievement, the author sees Vida as a survivor. The narrative comments on the stifled conditions of the barrio, a young person’s dream held back because of her social, economic class, and in this case, also her gender.

Providencia whose memory is completely visual for the author was considered the immoral woman of the barrio. She lived on state support with her children, whose fathers were unknown and believed to be numerous. Looking back on the memory of Providencia, the author understands that she was mentally disturbed, yet received neither sympathy from the neighbors, nor the proper medical attention from the government. Furthermore, the men who visited her for the pleasure of her body exploited her. Even though a gloomy and depressing life, the author sees a spiritual calmness in Providencia, who had refused to live by any rules of society and be bothered by them. The author’s memories of Providencia are filled with religious metaphors. She remembers, “[. . .] her face usually wore the beatific smile I was used to seeing on the visages of Mary and other female saints in religious paintings: St. Agnes on her decapitation block [. . .]; St. Theresa in her prayerful ecstasy; and of course, the Madonna holding her Child” (112).

Ortiz Cofer mentions in her “Preface,” that she changed the real names of people to tell their stories and to maintain their privacy. It is not a surprise in this context that vida in English translates to life, and providencia to providence, or the beneficial nature of God or nature, or God itself.

Two other people that the author remembers in her narrative are what I refer in the earlier section of the chapter as feminized men (60). They are men but traditionally perceived as feminine because of their life style choice. The following two reminiscences are from the two
spaces of the author’s life. The first is of Salvatore, the Italian homosexual superintendent of the Building. The author’s family accepts his ‘difference,’ and are not bothered by his homosexuality. In return Salvatore takes extra care when the father is away on mission during the Cuban missile crisis. He drops in from time to time on social visits, bringing over his cooking, and fresh vegetables from his herb and vegetable patch. The father away on the mission is unable to communicate to his family at all, unlike any of his earlier missions, making it a time of high tension for the author’s family. Salvatore’s tale is an important memory, as the author remembers him as a kind of a surrogate father. He represents the male figure missing during the time of need, even though by social standards he is not accepted as a man responsible to take on the role of a parental figure. Sal, as he is fondly called falls in love with the author’s uncle Hernán, who arrives at the door step of his sister looking for shelter. The author’s mother resists the idea because she knows her brother’s knack for attracting trouble, and also because of the strict building policy of not allowing long-term house guests. Hernán, a charming young man not only convinces his sister of his changed ways, but also charms Sal, knowing well that Sal is a homosexual and he is not. Salvatore’s tale also fixes into the author’s memory as she sees him as a victim and in this case of her own uncle, who uses him to get his way. Hernán stays until he starts getting into trouble with the neighbors, sleeping with married women, and losing money in dominoes. Both the author’s mother and Sal have to take the brunt of the uncle’s doing for allowing him to stay in the building. Hernán finally leaves, and Sal is left heartbroken. The author compares her and her family’s situation to Sal’s. The author and her family members like Sal wanting to connect to a loved relative find themselves distanced. The father returns from his mission a changed man, completely distant. She compares her own sadness to that of Sal as she says, “Sal we are as alone as you: Locked inside the bodies of strangers, unable to touch the ones we love most.”(121)

The author in the above memory connects her personal situation to an idea of a more generic loneliness as experienced by the homosexual community, and also comments on the gendering of men. As a child, she and her brother see a father figure in Sal and remember him as an adult in the same breath as her own father.

Complex issues about sexual preferences, gendering, and gender roles are also present in the piece titled “Marina.” In this piece the mother of the author returns to Puerto Rico after her husband’s demise. The two women--mother and daughter--leading different lives, with different
understanding of what it is to be a woman and of culture in general, finally find reconciliation in
the tales of the town. The mother talks of the place she was born and they become the material of
the daughter’s craft as a writer. Thus the bond is renewed, not simply as mother and daughter but
also as women. Marina is the tale of the boy who is forced to dress and pretend to be a girl,
because of the widowed mother’s desire to have a daughter for company than a boisterous son.
Marina is gendered as a girl/woman. He visits the town’s river as custom, with the other girls to
bathe. Even though conscious of his male body and sexuality, he is unable to openly participate
in the adolescent girls wanting to know of sexuality and men, until he is unable to resist his
attraction for the mayor’s daughter with whom he elopes to New York to start a new life. Marina
referred to by his female name, continues to have a healthy relation as a husband, father and
grandfather. He returns to the town and becomes part of the communal folklore. In this piece the
author deals with various issues of gender and sexuality. To begin with Marina’s mother’s
decision to have her son raised as a daughter because her need to company comments on the
traditional insistence of the male child’s distance from emotional needs of the parents and the
female child’s role to respond to parents wellbeing and need for companionship. The author
further comments on the taboo of talking of sex and sexuality, even though women in the
traditional space of Puerto Rican culture are expected to marry young and bear children. The fact
that Marina is actually a man brings back normality in the love relationship between the
apparently two women. The issue of lesbianism is only slightly touched upon, but not developed.
The author chooses to emphasize the idea of gender-roles rather than of sexuality, as Marina is
aware of his sex and is heterosexual. The author’s mother ending her tale comments that
Marina’s competency to please his female partner must come easy to him, as he himself once
was a woman.

The memories of both the places have elements of tragedy, yet in Ortiz Cofer’s world-
view there is a romantic understanding of life. The immigrant life is the harsher reality, and the
life on the island although has it’s own conflicts, is seen through a colored lens of idealism,
especially the past memories of her childhood, even though the reality of the present times are
changed. The illusions and fantasies however transitory, a piece of those are available to all. She
creates a romantic celebration of the island community in both her land of origin and her
personal space in the mainland. This jubilation of life is present through out her narrative. The
lazy summer afternoons of women gathering to gossip and tell secrets, and the busy preparations
of Christmas all pertain to the communal life of the island. In the essay “One More Lesson” there is an elaborate description of the preparation of the food for Christmas (61-62). An almost carnivalesque atmosphere is recreated in the following description:

At Mamá’s house, food was the focal point of Navidad. There were banana leaves brought in bunches by the boys, spread on the table where the women would pour coconut candy steaming hot, and the leaves would wilt around the sticky lumps, adding an extra tang of flavor to the already irresistible treat. (61)

The hot summer afternoons are remembered with the images of women embroidering, while the young girls gathered leaves to do their own imaginative stitching, and the young boys collecting banana leaves to make tepees and pretend like grown up men. The kids would collect fruits, like guava, mangoes from the trees or play on the swings hung from the trees. And when it rained, everyone stayed indoors, and played indoors or took naps (79,81).

Judith Ortiz Cofer remembers the childhood rural landscape of Puerto Rico with the men working with machetes in the heat of the tropical sun in the sugarcane fields. It is a very romantic vision of the island. In the working laborers she sees “survival choreography”, both the melancholy of the hard work and the beauty of being close to land. The image on one hand evokes the romantic vision of the English romantic poet William Wordsworth, as in his poem “The Solitary Reaper,”(298-99) and on the other hand it is juxtaposed with what Pierre Nora qualifies as the passing of a tradition (“Between Memory and History”). Cofer points out that faster trucks would replace the slow ox driven carts transporting the cut sugarcane harvest. The landscape would soon be overtaken by Burger Kings and other symbols of corporate America (151-52). Technology taking over the rural and laid back pace of agricultural life of Puerto Rico is one of the many reasons that a large part of rural population of the island was forced to move to the United States mainland to look for jobs in cities as unskilled laborers (76-77).

Even in the life of the barrio in the city of Paterson, which forms part of the immigrants’ ‘exile,’ there are moments of communal gathering and fun in the fiestas. In the title essay “Silent
Dancing,” the author narrates her memory of a barrio party with men and women dressed up in their best. The memories of the party are primarily encapsulated in the visual images in a silent home movie. The author has seen them over and over again. They make her reflect on the people in the movie. They are mainly Puerto Rican immigrants, some newly arrived, and some comfortable in their new city dwellings (89). Again like in the essay of “One More Lesson”, the author refers to the memories of food and drink evoked by the movie of a party. Even though the movie cannot capture the smell and the taste, the author remembers the smell and taste of the traditional food that she associates with Puerto Rican life, not only on the island but also taken along to the immigrated spaces (94). The visual images of people dancing in the movie also evoke the memory of the sound of the sentimental music of Daniel Santos and Felipe Rodríguez. The music is not heard yet it is part of the author’s memory of her childhood days. It is a music, which was played over and over again in parties, and at home, maintaining a connection to, and duplication of the life on island (94).  

The visual memory of the silent dancing seems “sad and comical” (95). It is comical to the author since it lacks the sound to the rhythm to the dance movements. The sadness stems from the realization that the dance is a ritualistic performance, an act of communal expression of joy and togetherness. It is part of the immigrants attempt to keep alive their culture far away from home. The author remembers the faces of the people from the home movie and they reoccur in her dreams, forcing her to remember each one and their stories. She compares herself to Odysseus, the classical warrior, who visits Hades, the land of the dead and is forced to hear the dead before he is permitted to ask questions.

I, too, have to hear the dead and the forgotten speak in my dream. Those who are still part of my life remain silent, going around and around in their dance. The others keep pressing their faces forward to say things about the past. (98) In her dream she sees the dying face of her uncle, and in that face recognizable features of her whole family, her father’s and her own. Ortiz Cofer sees the imperative of retelling the tales of her family and friends to keep them alive, even though they are physically dead. Women and immigrants are the most easily forgotten people because of their social circumstances and
therefore remembering them is giving them a life of continuity.

Ortiz Cofer through her essays reclaims the world of her female and immigrant community. Her personal memories of these figures and their personalities resisting the norm of their gender, ethnic background, and social situation, open up a world to inquire and question the roles assigned to them, and find a legitimate identity within their difference. She appropriates the spaces assigned to them through her own personal narrative. Ortiz Cofer’s own identity, which she establishes in this autobiography, resides within the community she remembers. Judith Ortiz Cofer’s self is defined by her connection to the collective. This identity is based on her childhood experiences and memories, yet they are perceived through her own adult vision, and influenced by all those who form part of her world, her family, her friends, people of whose stories she has heard and tells.

Ortiz Cofer’s essays explore the author’s own social circumstances and those of the people of her community, to reach a better understanding of their identity. They reiterate the commemorative behavior of the immigrants to keep alive the customs of the land they originate from. As Pierre Nora observes, “[. . .] without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away (12).”

The narrative attempts to break away from the essentialist notions of the immigrant Puerto Rican, racialized and marginalized. As Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman theorize the concept “tropicalize” as, “[. . .] to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values,”(8) Ortiz Cofer redefines the Puerto Rican community as a product of a mixed culture. Ortiz Cofer and her life’s story are not simply agents of keeping the communal memory alive, through personal accounts; but also are voices, which determine a reality of the Puerto Ricans, in their own terms. Juan Flores theorizing the “Latino Imaginary,” sees it essential and primary that the Latinos themselves must tell their stories to dismantle the stereotypes created from the outside (185).

Judith Ortiz Cofer concludes her narrative with connecting with her mother, and her daughter. They form a chain in the generational scheme of life and memories. The author argues with the mother about the truth of their memories (162-65). They finally make peace with the idea that the memories will differ, as they are remembered differently depending upon what or how one wants to remember. Yet it is important to remember to continue to be connected to
those who have molded our identity. The author ends the final narrative with a poem “Lessons of the Past,” dedicated to her own daughter. The poem is the memory of the author as a child, remembering the days of her waiting for the absent parent, her father (166-67). Each period of wait would be a journey to the island and then back to the city of Paterson. She passes on her own memories, to her own child, hoping that they might be remembered and told all over again to another generation. In this autobiographical remembrance lies the hope to remain connected to the community, from which one originates and do understand who we are.
NOTES

1 Few examples of the child protagonist as the principal character in US Latino literature are Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me Última, Esmeralda Santiago’s When I was a Puerto Rican, and Sandra Cisneros’ The House on the Mango Street. Although the child character may not be the principal protagonist, but when juxtaposed with an adult, he/she represents the difference in perception of the adult and the child immigrant, or the first and the second generation, for example in Cristina García’s Dreaming in Cuban. Juvenile-literature specifically targets young readers, and therefore also uses the child as the main character. Writers like Julia Alvarez or Judith Ortiz Cofer have been writing for this audience as well.

2 In an interview to Rafael Ocasio, commenting on An Island Like You Judith Ortiz Cofer says that, she was convinced by Melanie Kroup, a young adult’s book editor, for the need of literature for young people, living in a world of mixed culture. From this idea surfaced the narrative work of a series of short stories with adolescent characters dealing with their changes and development (90).

3 Moments of Being is the book of autobiographical essays, written by Virginia Woolf. This unfinished memoir was never published while the English novelist lived, nor by her husband Leonard Woolf after her demise. “Sketch of Past” is the essay in which she writes of her childhood memories, and theorizes the process of writing memories.

4 The term testimonial seems more appropriate as it connects the women to their cultures, which depend heavily upon the oral tradition, especially among women. These women also position themselves as from the third world women, even though they live in the first.


6 The tale of María Sabida is part of Puerto Rican folklore. The character of María Sabida is similar to Scheherazade of the Arabian Nights. Scheherazade like María is married to a tyrant who terrorizes the town. The figure of Scheherazade reoccurs in Ortiz Cofer’s short story “Not for Sale,” published in her book Latin Deli.
Espirínto or Spiritism, like Voodoo and Santeria are common forms of traditional belief systems of the spirit world still present in the Caribbean along with Catholicism. Spiritism is an ancient practice, which was codified by the French Allan Kardec in mid nineteenth Century. It believes in the existence of God and spirits, even though the Church condemns the practice.

In the narrative of Ortiz Cofer the grandmother’s dislike for the husband’s practice of espiritismo seems to arise from the social and racial associations of the profession. People of African descent, who may or may not be of a lower social class, usually practice it. The Church’s unacceptance is also another reason that may affect the grandmother’s approval.

Felicia Fahey in an essay on Puerto Rican national culture, looks at Rafael Luís Sánchez’ La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos (The Importance of Being Called Daniel Santos), and argues that the modern Puerto Rican intellectual world has come to reject the jíbaro, or the rustic simpleton as the national icon, because of its lack to encompass the reality of the country’s ‘essence.’ Daniel Santos, the bolero singer, who immigrated to the United States, is one of the most popularly known Puerto Rican in the Latin American world. Therefore Sánchez and Fahey see him as a more appropriate cultural/national icon, even though he lived outside the island of Puerto Rico.
CHAPTER 4

CONTESTING IDENTITY: ACHY OBEJAS’ MEMORY MAMBO AND DAYS OF AWE.

Journalist, poet, short story writer, and novelist Achy Obejas left Cuba at the age of six following her family to exile to the United States. Obejas returned to Cuba for the first time after thirty-three years, in 1995 on a personal visit (Obejas, “In ‘Awe’”). She is an open lesbian and considers it as much as part of her identity as she is a Cuban American with Sephardic roots. The focus of her works is the split caused by the Revolution of 1959 in the Cuban nation and the subsequent waves of the Cubans to the United States. Memory Mambo (1996) and Days of Awe (2001) are two novels by Obejas, which look at Cuban Americans’ recognition and reconciliation with the truth of their changing identity as a people in exile. This community is separate from and privileged than those Cubans who have continued to live on the island of Cuba.

Juani and Alejandra the protagonists of the novels Memory Mambo and Days of Awe, respectively, are in the terms of Gustavo Perez Firmat, one-and-a-half generation Cubans. They were born in Cuba and were brought to the United States, without their conscious consent. Their predicament like Cubans born in the United States is one of identification with an ethnicity, whose origins remain obscured by the separation, and overpowered by the revolution of Fidel Castro, and his continuing dictatorial rule of the island. Both the protagonists of Memory Mambo and Days of Awe, feel the need to question what they have been led to believe about their past and origins by their parents and other members of the exilic community. The ethnic memory of being a Cuban, and also a Jew in the case of the novel Days of Awe, is riddled with skepticism. As the protagonists search for the truth, they also question the notion and the responsibility of belonging to a community to which they are tied through their cultural origins.

The essentialist attitude towards our identity provides us with a sense of stability and continuity. As Stuart Hall says, “Identities are a kind of guarantee that the world isn’t falling apart quite as rapidly as it sometimes seems to be. It’s a kind of fixed point of thought and being, a ground of action, a still point in the turning world” (10). For the Cuban community, in exile
and on the island the stable ground shifted quickly soon after the political upheaval of the Revolution, which ruptured the secure identity in which the Cubans had grown to be comfortable and safe.

Ethnic memory is the memory of the cultural beliefs and practices of a group, which tie the members together and separate them from other groups. Ethnic identity is based upon such a memory, which compels continuity in order to survive the onslaughts of change and oblivion. Shifts in geo-political situations and generations threaten transformation. The first generation of Cuban exiles bring with them memories of a lived experience, an experience that they had to cease to live because of expatriation. Nostalgia for the lost space allows for the creation of an idealized siteuncorrupt and permanent in time. In the novels of Obejas the Cuban ethnic identity has thus become part of narratives created out of nostalgic memories. The perpetuation of such an identity is questioned because there exists a gap between the stories told and the truth of the matter, or sometimes simply the lack of any information.

Obejas’ novels deal with the ethnic memory of being a Cuban in a multifaceted way. It explores the shifts in identity between the two generations of exiles, and also the two communities divided by sea. It further looks at the two sides of the Revolution--its promises and outcomes. The texts are tied to each other with the idea of a search, yet they differ in many aspects. The two novels might also be seen as a progression in which Days of Awe tries to complete the exploration that Memory Mambo begins to unravel. Both the novels are based in Chicago, were a substantial population of Cuban Americans have settled over the years, yet this experience remains different from Miami, which is the center of Cuban culture and politics in the United States. Juani belongs to a working class family, who run a laundromat. She socializes within her family and other Latino members of the community. On the other hand Alejandra from a middle class family, enjoys the privilege of a college education and is a professional interpreter. Her father is a professor at an university. She has maintained a circle of friends and associates outside her extended Cuban family.

Juani came to the United States at the age of six, in 1978, whereas Alejandra comes as an infant of three years in 1963. Juani has some experience of life in Cuba but her memories are vague and jumbled, and Alejandra has none. The narrative action of Memory Mambo encompasses a year, whereas Days of Awe transpires over a decade, but both look into their families’ past, trying to trace it back to its true origins. They cannot trust their own memories...
because they were too young when they went to exile with their parents to the United States. Moreover Juani has come to the conclusion that her memories are not hers. They are a complicated mesh of collective narrations and versions, with little truth-value attached to them. Juani says:

   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 about so many times, or so convincingly, that I believe it for myself--became the lens through which it was captured, retold and shaped.  

   (Memory Mambo 9)

Alejandra has no choice but to accept the stories told to her by her parents, and accept them as part of her memories. She as a young twelve year old had wanted so much to hang onto her mother’s Cuban documents as a patrimony--physical evidence of being part of a Cuban memory--but the mother soon after obtaining her U.S. citizenship had burnt her original birth certificate, her University of Havana I.D., and her passport. The mother wanted Alejandra to have her own memories of her life in the United States (Days of Awe 302). Alejandra as an adult understands that her parents have tried to forget many memories, of which she can only presume, not because of the discontinuity but because they have chosen to break away from a painful past. Commenting on forgetting she says,

   There is a word in Spanish, olvido, which is usually interpreted as oblivion or forgetfulness. But this one term on which my father and I agree: Olvido is not just a void; much like memory itself, it is a place, with dimensions and weight. Rather than holding all we want to remember, it’s repository for what we want to forget.  

   (Days of Awe 103)

Juani and Alejandra, both negotiate an identity based on borrowed memories. In the case of Juani she is troubled by the various versions of the same event. She is unable to decide who and what to believe about her past--as a Cuban and as a member of her family. Alejandra on the other hand feels a lack of memories. As an adult she has learnt about Cuba and her Sephardic roots through books, but she feels a lapse on the part her family’s past. Both the protagonists seek participation in their ethnic identity, but Juani seeks it through exclusion and Alejandra through inclusion to the memories of the family.
The Cuban Revolution of 1959 is a defining moment in the construction of Cuban identity because of its continuing affects on the lives of the Cubans of both sides. The unending flow of asylum-seekers is a constant reminder of this event that marks the lives of these people. The threat to the Cuban American identity is as much an imposed phenomenon from outside groups as much as from within. The United States by providing political asylum to the Cuban exiles, contribute to the identity that the Cuban Americans are creating for themselves in the U.S. The identity of the exilic community has an essential political aspect of being anti-Castro. The allegiance to United States’ open opposition and continuing embargos on Cuba are unwritten premises attached to the asylum. The Cubans in exile have done little to resist these essential political elements in their own identity formation. There is no doubt that for the most of the Cuban exiles, the displacement was caused by the Revolution led by Castro, and the following years of a dictatorial rule. The protagonists of Obejas’ novels are second generation Cubans, who have little or no recollections of the Revolution or of Castro’s politics as a lived experience. Juani and Alejandra in the absence of their direct experience of the revolution can stand back and observe the reaction of the Cubans towards the dictator. Juani believes that, “They [Cuban exiles] see in his [Castro’s] outrageousness some measure of their own capacity, of their own ability to survive--him on his island, and they--us, because my family’s part of it too--here, in the U.S.” (Memory Mambo 130). Alejandra feels that, “For most Cubans, there is only one answer: Fidel is the devil. This is both in hatred and love, in derision and admiration” (Days of Awe 127).

Juani and Alejandra, both question the anti-Castro sentiment, as they do not see it to be relevant to their present realities. They want to belong to the Cuban ethnic identity, but are troubled by the association to an identity based on hate for Castro, the fiction that surround the Revolution and the subsequent exile of their families, and the denial and erasure of the past and the origin.

Juani and Alejandra at the beginning of their search for the truth believe that: “... being Cuban is an accident of timing and geography” (Days of Awe 67). Their choice to make a conscious effort to be part of the Cuban identity, arising from different reasons, leads them to question it. Juani does not care what she is labeled as--a Cuban American or Cuban or cubana--as she is unaware of what these labels actually imply. Juani’s lover Gina and her communist
Puerto Rican independentista friends question Juani’s identity as a Cuban. Teasingly they call her a gusana (Memory Mambo 127). It is a pejorative term literally meaning, “worm,” used for Cubans who left Cuba, and with the implication that they deserted the revolution of 1959. The label of a gusana troubles Juani, as she was unable to participate in the decision to leave the island. On being questioned what her choice would have been if she could decide for herself, Juani has no answers (Memory Mambo 133). She is further unable to come up with a reply to if her parents were right or wrong in their decision to leave. Juani for the first time realizes that the political implications of being a Cuban American are so closely tied to the Revolution and Fidel Castro. They form an essential part of her imposed identity, which she all this while had accepted without giving it a thought.

Juani is also disturbed by her own ignorance about Cuba, to which she claims allegiance through her acceptance of being a Cuban. Gina and her friends, even though are Puerto Ricans, have more knowledge of Cuba although it is a romanticized version of Castro and his revolutionary Cuba. Castro’s communist politics and anti-U.S. policies, supports the cause of the Puerto Rican independence movement. The independentistas have a direction in their lives, having consciously chosen their identity. They believe in a free and an independent Puerto Rican nation, with no U.S. control. Juani does not support their politics but she can appreciate their effort to take a stand about their country’s state of affairs even though they live outside Puerto Rico. She feels her origins have been erased leaving a gaping wound in the continuity of being a Cuban:

And I realized that I’d left Cuba too young to remember anything but snatches of color and scattered words, like the cut-out letters in a ransom note. And what little I could put together had since been forged and painted over by the fervor, malice and nostalgia of others. What did I really know? And who did I believe? Who could I believe?” (Memory Mambo 133)

Juani’s self-introspection of her Cuban identity introduces the element of agency in the construction of identity. In the absence of reliable sources, Juani has grown to doubt her identity to the point that she has stopped caring for it. She sees lies and prejudice surrounding her identity
as a Cuban yet she has been unable to stand up against it. She fears exclusion and isolation in the
face of her protest: “I didn’t have an escape, and I didn’t want to be rejected” (Memory Mambo 124). Her own sister Nena, her cousins Pauli and Patricia all have confronted their imposed identities, and found their “escape,” and as an consequence have faced isolation in some form or the other. Some of the issues that Juani and the cousins have had with the family are tied to the cultural practices and beliefs as a Cuban.

Juani’s parents (and uncles and aunts) represent a section of Cuban exiles, who are the embodiment of the stereotypes of Cubans in the United States. They are classists, racists, homophobic, and sexists—the men are male chauvinists, and the women subservient to the patriarchal structure.\(^2\)

Juani’s father Alberto José Casas y Molina, is a symbolic representation of an exile, who carries the trauma of separation from his homeland with him to the point that he has stopped making a distinction between truth and fiction. Juani’s father claims that their family, Casas y Molina, is descendent of the sixteenth century priest Bartolomé de la Casas.\(^3\) He also states that before the Revolution he was a wealthy and prosperous businessman, socializing with the important people of Havana. After the Revolution he helped many escape. Alberto claims that he knew the right people with boats and yachts, and even helped Batista, the dictator of Cuba, whom Castro ousted. Among all his assertions of his past, the one of the cinta magnética is the most integral part of his story. Alberto as Juani says, “... believes he invented duct tape” (Memory Mambo 24). The tragedy is that he also maintains that the CIA stole his formula. According to Alberto, the CIA is a cover for a company like Pepsi, and they own half of the products in the U.S. market (Memory Mambo 30). In his story the CIA came to Alberto and asked him to make the duct tape. Alberto and his men toiled hard to come up with a formula. It gets further intriguing with the idea that the CIA was actually interested in Alberto because of his contacts with people with yachts. Thus they could smuggle people out of Cuba to safety after Castro’s communist policies were set in motion. But when it came for the Casas y Molina’s family, the CIA abandoned him, and left him to fend for himself and his family. He had to find his own way out of the island. Upon landing in Miami, Alberto found that the duct tape was already in the market, and that CIA had betrayed him once again.
Juani, like many others, knows that the stories that the father tells of his past are an invention. Facts and other people’s versions of the same occurrence prove a discrepancy in the father’s assertions. Bartolomé de las Casas story shows that the family is classist and seeks to establish themselves as part of a family associated with power and prestige. Casas was a catholic priest who had taken the oath of celibacy. If he did have children, it would just prove that the family was of bastard origin. Juani finds in the history of Cuba a Casas, who was rather boring: “. . . who paved the streets of Havana, but my family has never expressed much interest in being related to him” (Memory Mambo 34). The mother has supported the father’s story, as it is for her an advantage and a social climb. She is from a society, which favored the higher classes of Spanish origin. The mother herself is a mulatta in denial of her past.

The inconsistency in the tale of Batista’s departure from Cuba is in the fact that the dictator is known to have left the island on an airplane, and not in a boat with the ingenious help of Alberto, who himself probably was a young child on the fateful New Year’s Eve in 1959 (Memory Mambo 27).

The story of the cinta magnética varies as the listener changes. Jimmy, the husband of Caridad, a cousin of Juani; is anti-Castro. The father therefore says that he was a, “. . . prosperous businessman recruited by the CIA after the Cuban revolution . . .” and to Gina, a communist and a staunch supporter of Castro the father tells that he was, “. . . unemployed and, when the CIA came calling, didn’t have any other options” (Memory Mambo 27).

The humor in the depiction of the father and his tales is obvious, but the irony is that he himself is the target of the humor. The humor arises from the incredulity of the tales, yet the conviction with which they are told. The narration accommodates the listener and each time they are told, it is a new story for entertainment. Alberto is a pathetic figure who has been unable to accept his loss, and has created a world of fiction. The fiction is perfect—he is rich, prosperous, and well known. The present reality does not provide him with any of the comfort of his tales. Through his tales he is also able to generate sympathy from the listener, and that implies a kind of acceptance in a world where he is an outsider. The CIA as a symbol of the United States is as much of a villain as is Castro. They both contribute to his state of exile. Castro made him abandon his home, wealth, and prosperity. On the other hand the CIA/United States never gave him the success that was promised.
Xiomara, Juani’s mother, a woman of partial African descent, refuses to acknowledge her lineage. She shows open disgust to the people of color. She wanted to lighten her family’s skin color, and therefore thought herself to be extremely lucky to have found a man who claimed to be a descendent of Bartolomé de la Casas. Unfortunately she has children who have inherited her genes. Nena, Juani’s sister has the, “. . . propensity for darkness after any exposure to the sun . . .” and Pucho, her brother has “. . . kinky hair and full lips . . .” (Memory Mambo 34). To add insult to injury her sister married Raúl, a man of African descent, yet their children turned out, “. . . pale and Anglo-like, with blue veins visible just under rice-paper skin” (Memory Mambo 35).

Xiomara was instrumental in the family’s departure from Cuba. Her hatred for Castro is a racial prejudice. With the triumph of the Cuban revolution, Xiomara was perturbed with the idea that the blacks would take over the control of the country. It is a historical fear in the Caribbean that came true with the Haitian (then Saint Domingue) slaves revolting against the French colonial rulers in 1791, and finally gaining their independence in 1804. Africans brought as slaves to work in the plantations in the Caribbean exceeded in numbers their European white colonial masters. The fear of reversal of power had been imminent, simply by the virtue of the numbers and the disgruntled, racially and socially oppressed people of African descent. Cuban history, even after its independence from Spain, is witness of the fear that a racial revolution similar to that of Haiti could occur, even though Slavery had been abolished in 1886. The massacre of 1912 of thousands of Afro-Cubans, by the Cuban army remains in history as a sign of Cuban society’s denial to give Afro-Cubans their “. . . full equality [. . .]proportional representation in public service, and social reform” (Helg 3).

Juani sees her mother’s persistence to deny her past in her intentions to have her own children marry people of European white races: “. . . her immediate goal became to get us out of Cuba, out of Latin America, out of any country where we might couple with anybody even a shade darker than us . . .” (Memory Mambo 35). The family’s ethnic and racial prejudice is not limited to the blacks. Jokes and racial slurs about Puerto Ricans and Jews are common in Juani’s family. Gina decides to stop visiting Juani’s family because she is the target of the Puerto Rican jokes, enjoyed by all including Juani, who sees it as harmless and just as a “cultural thing” among Cubans (Memory Mambo 122). Tío Pepe would get angry with her daughter Nena for,
“her strict business practices,” and, “... he’d accuse her of being a Jew and trying to rip off his profits” (Memory Mambo 123).

Juani is aware of the problems that she has with her family and the identity imposed from within the family and co-ethnics yet she is unable to stand up against it, neither for herself nor for her lover Gina. The only free choice that she has made against her family and community is openly embracing her sexuality. Her family has shown resistance through subtle and at times overt acts: “My lesbianism is not the cause of my alienation, but it is part of it” (Memory Mambo 79). Juani’s mother knows about her daughter’s sexual preference, and has had some “clumsy conversations” with her. The mother on one hand holds onto her Catholic faith, which condemns homosexuality, and sees it as “morally disfiguring,” yet on the other hand seems to like her daughter and her lovers. Instead of accepting the change and reality she prefers to maintain silence and distance with her daughter (Memory Mambo 79-80). The father is also aware of Juani’s sexuality but refuses to encroach upon any subject that might lead up to deciding his acceptance or rejection of his own daughter. He even prevents acquaintances from talking with Juani about marriage. He knows that she wouldn’t lie about her sexuality if asked, but he rather not be embarrassed by the truth: “It is vital to him that I [Juani] not be provoked into the truth” (Memory Mambo 80).

Juani’s siblings and her cousins have accepted her sexuality, but Jimmy is the representation of a pervert and the heterosexual male’s extreme aversion to homosexuality, especially lesbianism. He does not want his wife to socialize with Juani and her lesbian friends. He feels Caridad too, would become a lesbian through association. He restricts Juani to be alone with Caridad. Jimmy’s own insecurity as a sexually performing male is expressed through his pervert gestures and acts around Juani. He masturbates in front of Juani as an expression of his power and to threaten her. She does not resist Jimmy even though she is affected by it. She does not report him to the family or the authorities, and even his wife remains completely clueless of his acts. Juani feels that even if she were to tell Caridad, she would not believe her and defend her husband instead (Memory Mambo 199). Juani takes the sexual abuse in silence.

Obejas does not project just the Cubans as homophobic. She targets the Latino community and also the mainstream society of the United States. She even introduces Cuba’s take on homosexuality. Obejas strikes out at Latinos living in the lie that there are no Latino homosexuals. Gina involved in Puerto Rican independista politics sees the question of sexuality
as a “white” thing (Memory Mambo 78). Gina feels her fight for a free Puerto Rico has no place for her private sexual identity. It is seen as a distraction from the issue of “puertorriqueñismo.” The truth of the matter is that she is closeted because the independistas do not support homosexuality, and she does not want to be rejected by the group members of the community, with which she identifies through her political convictions. Bernie, Juani’s sister’s boyfriend explains the independista’s stand on the issue of sexuality:

. . . they think homosexuality’s a product of a capitalist society. As soon as the revolution comes, men will stop being narcissistic, which will put an end to male sexuality. And they’ll stop being sexist, which will dampen lesbian ardor, since, obviously, women only turn to women ’cause men are dogs, right? (Memory Mambo 171)

Emilia Fernández a Dominican woman is the first Dominican on the School Board in Chicago. She has climbed the social ladder, but remains closeted about her sexual identity. She as a lesbian and a Dominican woman in the United States understands the prejudice against people of minority. She feels that she could loose all she has worked hard for, especially in a society where race and gender are still obstacles to achieving success. Her sexuality would probably ostracize her completely. Juani can sympathize with her to an extend, because Emilia does not shy away from issues related to homosexuality, even though has refused to address her own private life.

Titi, a cousin in Cuba has tried to escape from the island in every occasion and every way possible, yet has failed. Juani knows her through photographs and the stories told by relatives. Her desperation to escape is seen by the relatives as the “archetypical would-be exile’s” heroism. Everyone says that, “She wants to be free,” but what Juani knows and nobody wants to accept is that Titi is gay and would like the freedom to practice her sexuality freely.

. . . Titi’s addiction to the notion of escape, her desire to come to the U.S., has nothing whatsoever to do with any of that patriotic crap, but with a whole other, perhaps even crazier idea--that once here, she might be free to be queer. (Memory Mambo 76)

Titi’s situation comments on the position of the homosexuals not only in Cuba, but also the vision homosexuals have of the United States. Juani knows that there exists a homosexual society in Cuba even though “the official silence prevails.” Fidel Castro’s concentration style
UMAP (Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción) camps were established in 1965 for enemies of the state. They were filled with homosexuals, along with other delinquents as they were seen as unfit for the revolutionary society.\textsuperscript{5} Juani can understand Titi’s desperation, but she is not sure if Titi would really be free to openly practice her sexuality once in the United States without being alienated and discriminated.

Juani continues to be bothered by the family’s sexist attitude. (It must be made clear that Juani never mentions that Cuban sexist attitude is the cause of her lesbianism, which is a common fallacy among heterosexuals about lesbians.) Tío Pepe is an alcoholic and has extramarital affairs all the time. His wife suffers the humiliation in silence. Caridad, the daughter also does not say anything, but she like her mother feels the responsibility to take care of the father when he staggers and stumbles in drunk. Pauli, the other daughter takes a stand against her father’s behavior. She puts a stop to his public flaunting of his mistresses. She is unable to stop her father’s womanizing tendencies, but she has decided that her father can do without her sympathy or help: “In American terms, Pauli refused to enable her father. In Cuban terms, she was ingrate” (Memory Mambo 63).

Caridad and Jimmy both represent the second generation who have not resisted the structures and identity imposed upon them, and continue the cultural habits from which Juani and some of her cousins want to exclude themselves. Caridad accepts Jimmy, even though he beats her and gets his way all the time. She feels that she has control over him through her sexual charms and that’s how a relationship between a man and a woman should be (Memory Mambo 17). Patricia feels that Caridad’s reasons to marry Jimmy is not just because she is thirty, an age unacceptable to be single in her community, but also because Jimmy has something Cuban about him, which attracts her like a “primordial memory,” and thus allows her to be close to Cuba (Memory Mambo 60). Ironically Tío Pepe feels that his own son-in-law is a “comemierda,” or a good-for-nothing fellow; even though he is not very different from Tío Pepe as far as sexist attitudes towards women are concerned. Tío Pepe is unable to stand the idea that Jimmy beats his daughter, but he has never said anything or helped Caridad. He simply dies of a broken heart to see his daughter suffer.

Juani fears rejection, if she were to resist the identity forced upon her from outside and inside her community. She has seen her cousins resist the Cuban way of being, and as a
consequence has seen them being isolated. Nena, her own sister had to leave home and then the
city to find her identity. Her parents and her community’s ways of being troubled Nena. She
leaves home at an early age, something that is rare in most traditional Cuban families. She took
Juani with her, as an excuse. She claimed that the house was small and they needed space, and
moreover the sisters would be there to take care of each other. Nena moves to Miami as soon as
she gets a chance. In Miami she falls in love with Bernie, who embodies practically everything
that her parents have resisted all their lives. He is the son of a Jewish man and a black Puerto
Rican lesbian woman. Bernie is at home with his cultural and racial heritage. Juani on a visit
notices that her sister’s home now shared with Bernie, reflects the African culture but has
nothing to do with being a Cuban. Nena has rejected her family’s imposed identity to the extend
that she has no way of going back to them. She doubts that her family, especially her mother,
will accept her if she was to tell them of Bernie. To find her own self she has accepted the
rejection of her parents. It has been a painful decision, because Bernie makes her happy, and she
is unable to share this joy with anyone, not even her own sister Juani, till she comes face to face
with her.

Pauli’s resistance to her family’s imposition of her identity, especially as a woman, has
been confronted with an out lash of promiscuous behavior. She is aware that her father, Tío Pepe
is hurt by her sexual endeavors, and sees it to be the only way to counteract her father’s own
licentious affairs. The father does not change his ways but soon dies of broken heart because of
the two daughters--Caridad suffering at the hands of Jimmy, and Pauli refusing to conform to the
role of a moral woman. Pauli’s resistance distances her from her family, and she leaves for
Mexico. She returns only for her father’s funeral with a child, yet is unmarried and refuses to talk
of the father of the child, who happens to be a Chicago Indian taxi driver.

Patricia is probably the most successful cousin in negotiating an identity on her own
terms. While she is still able to be part of her Cuban community; she is not openly welcomed by
the extended family for her choices. She has no qualms to accept that her family is classist, racist
and even sexist. She openly objects to the narratives that her uncle Alberto tells of knowing
important people in Havana with boats and yachts: “Patricia says this is all invention, that we
weren’t as high class as my father wants us to believe, and that more likely than not, he was
stealing the boats--if, in fact, any of the story is true at all” (Memory Mambo 27).
Patricia openly dares to say that her uncle lies about the story of the duct tape, even though the rest of the family has decided to keep quiet about it, some out of respect for the aging exile, and some out of an inability to refute the matter: “. . . it’s just a fantasy created in exile, a group hallucination based on [. . .] constant re-telling of the story” (Memory Mambo 25). Patricia’s husband is Jewish and she has made it clear that she would not tolerate any racial slurs targeted against her husband’s ethnicity, and the family has respected her wishes. She knows that she can’t change people but, “. . . you can let them know you think that kind of thing is out of line” (Memory Mambo 123). She picked her battles and fought back the prejudices of her family, but when it came to her sexuality she was unable to step beyond the boundaries set by her ethnic community. She feared complete ostracization from her family and community. Patricia is also aware that the American culture too, is hesitant in accepting homosexuals as part of mainstream society. Patricia’s attraction for Titi is a secret and Juani learns of it only by chance from her sister Nena.

Patricia’s ability to withstand the onslaught of the imposition of a Cuban woman’s role arises out of the fact that she enjoys the privilege not only of an education and economic independence, outside the family business, but also the fact that she has come to a conclusion about her identity through a process of revaluation of being a Cuban in the United States. She has had the opportunity to participate in the post-revolutionary programs of Cuba, which have led her to experience the system. Patricia joined hordes of Cuban youth in the sugar cane fields of Cuba, but over the years became disillusioned about Cuba and Castro’s decisions. She has her own experience of Cuba to understand what modern day Cuba is. She knows that the Cuba of the nostalgic memories of her first generation exilic relatives does not exist nor has the Revolution been able to give what it promised. Patricia has reconciled with her self as a Cuban American. As a resident of the United States, she understands the position of privilege enjoyed by herself compared to the Cubans on the island and therefore does not feel the need to idolize Cuba, as many of her exilic community members do.

Titi symbolizes the love and attraction for Cuba, which is romanticized, but an impossible and failed dream. The isolation of Patricia is evident. Her extended family does not consider her as much as part of their lives as they would have done if she had not resisted them. The extended family maintains a distance in expressing their opinions to her because of the fear that she might rebuke them for something improper. To them she has crossed over to the other
side and is considered more American than Cuban. She has accepted the reality of being part of an exilic community, but has also been able to make her space by resisting what has been expected of her by her own ethnic community, even though that has meant separation from co-ethnics and adaptation to the American identity. Her experience in the post-revolutionary Cuba and America has allowed her to make choices about her present reality and present identity, even though it has meant breaking away from the notion of a continuous and stable identity that the exilic community has tried to maintain.

Juani understands the isolation her sister and cousins have confronted in the face of their resistance of the cultural way of being a Cuban. In a desperate attempt to find coherence to her life, beyond the lies and fictionalized memories of her families she decides to find the truth of her father’s tale of the cinta magnética. The cinta magnética, or the duct tape of her father’s tale becomes the metaphor for Juani’s despondent challenge to find the true memory of the past history. Although she thinks that she can remember snatches of memories of her father and his friends working in the backyard of their house in Cuba with black cloth and chemicals boiling in pots, she is unable to verify her childhood memory. Her sister Nena remembers it clearly but has a different memory, but her brother Pucho remembers nothing, as he was just a baby. Patricia’s explanation of the memory that it is a “group hallucination,” seems a possibility, as she herself believes that memories tend to merge with other people’s memories, forming a community with memories and not simply an individual with personal memories.

Juani knows that the tale that her father tells of the cinta magnética along with other stories of their past are fictionalized. Even though she finds it troubling she does not question her parents about the veracity. On a visit to her sister in Miami she is introduced to the use of the Internet. Juani decides to find the truth about the origin of the duct tape. The attempt to find the accuracy of the origin is an ambiguous desire. On one hand she wishes to prove her father wrong and be free of the invention that haunts the family, but on the other hand she also wants to believe in her father’s account. She also realizes that the Internet is not the best source for the truth, as she finds misinformation about her own Tío Raúl, a famous painter from New York. The information that she retrieves about the duct tape formula has a similar ring to some of the elements that her father tells. To confirm her findings she calls home to talk to her parents. The mother refuses to give the telephone to the father, and pleads with her daughter not to revive the
past and torture him (Memory Mambo 178). Juani refuses to understand her mother’s protective attitude towards her father, who has decided to live in a world of imagination.

Juani’s own experience of recounting the story surrounding the fight between Gina and her, makes her face the troubling notion of inventing fiction about events of our lives, especially the ones we want to forget or obscure. Juani wishes to see the world in black or white, the complete truth. Yet her experience shows her that human life is constituted of what we want to believe as true.

Juani has seen her Tíos Raúl and Zenaida’s marriage break because of the lie that was told to ease pain, and seek happiness. Raúl, married to Zenaida, the sister of Juani’s mother immigrate to New York before the Revolution, to find fame as a painter. Raúl decides to return to Cuba, alone, to join Castro’s revolution. He formed part of the failed attack of the Moncada barrack. It was an attempt by the revolutionaries to overthrow the Batista regime in Cuba. Raúl escapes being taken prisoner and leaves Cuba to join Castro and his comrades in Mexico, preparing again to attack Cuba. Abuela Olga wires Raúl to return to tend his dying wife. Upon returning to New York, he learns that he has been lied to, but is unable to go back to join Castro, because he feels ashamed, about his wife’s and mother-in-law’s lie, and fears the pain of his wife’s isolation. He alienates himself from the family as he no longer is able to trust his wife, who valued her happiness over what could have been her husband’s contribution to the liberation of Cuba from it’s misery. Eventually the marriage breaks up (Memory Mambo 102-115).

Juani believes that truth is the basis of trust between people, which Raúl lost and she too has lost in her parents. Yet when it comes to her own life she is unable to handle the truth. Gina makes Juani realize that she is unaware of who she is as a Cuban. This truth hurts Juani so much that she ends up having a ferocious physical fight with her girlfriend, which lands them both in the hospital with serious injuries (Memory Mambo 134-5). On the one hand, she is unable to handle the truth about herself as a Cuban, but she expects her parents to do so; on the other hand when it comes to telling the truth about the injuries, she does not tell the truth. Jimmy her brother-in-law, a janitor at the hospital is able to reach her before any other member of the family. He realizes that if the family and the public were to know the truth of Juani’s fight with her lesbian partner, it would create a scandal. Instead of anybody knowing the truth, he invents a story of a political attack on Gina by an anti-independista. Gina accepts the story and withdraws
from her initial desire to file a police report against Juani. She sees it to be in her best interest, especially to her political life.

Juani does not resist the story that is told by Jimmy to the world. All her relatives ask for her version, and she initially either avoids it or just let everyone believe Jimmy’s tale. Over time, she falls into the trap of lies. She finds it easier to obscure her pain of the fight with Gina, through denying it, and by not accepting it. She like her father finds the listener’s sympathy every time the story of “the political attack” is recounted, although she knows she is deceiving the people who have decided to trust in her. The lie separates her from those she wants to belong to. In this moment of isolation she seeks an escape, and wants to go to Cuba. She searches for an identity based in a belonging to Cuba. Cuba as an idolized site of untouched memory holds a romantic value in the lives of the people like Juani, who have been infused by tales and narratives of a glorious Cuba. The country has ceased to be a geographic place in the minds of the people separated from it. It has become as Pierre Nora’s defines it as a site of memory, which indicates that we need to locate our pasts as we come to terms with the passing away of our history: “There are lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory” (7).

Juani’s narrative ends as she starts to come to terms with the fact that escaping to the Cuba that she imagines will not provide an answer to her search for belonging. Patricia’s advice to face the present and reconcile with the reality she lives in seems more practical, even though difficult. Juani’s attempt to reconcile her self to being a Cuban, separate from her co-ethnics, especially her parents involves understanding the need of fiction and invention on one hand, and on the other to have the courage to face the truth of the present. Obejas suggests that the self is the only agent that can provide a true objective answer to our identity. Traveling to Cuba is not necessarily the only solution to being a Cuban, as it entails the risk of disenchantment. On the other hand the experience of the present day Cuba could allow Juani and her likes to make a decision about their selves as a separate and privileged Cuban, than those still residing in a police state and broken economic system. Alejandra unlike Juani has the opportunity to come face to face with the Cuba she has wanted to belong to, only to learn how different it is, and how different she is from those Cubans still on the island.

Alejandra as a child in the U.S. wanted to be in Cuba so everyone would look like her parents and her. She would not be the different one among all the other children at school: “As a
child, I held Havana out to myself like a secret hiding place, a trump card, the Zion where I’d be welcomed after all my endless, unplanned travels in the diaspora” (Days of Awe 55). She had learnt the roads of Havana by studying an old map. Over the years as she acculturated to her new environment she had no need of the map any more. Alejandra’s situation differs to Juani’s. She does not have to face the stereotypical problems of the Cuban community. Not only has she achieved a level of economic and professional success for herself, but also found a reasonable sense of ease in her identity as a Cuban American, which is not questioned. As a bisexual, she does not seem to face any resistance from her parents, although it is never discussed what they think of her sexual choices.

Alejandra does not seek exclusion like Juani. Like Juani, she accepts her Cubanidad but she does not know what exactly it is that makes her a Cuban. She feels left out of a part of her family’s past and Cuban history. Alejandra is aware of her parent’s decision to leave Cuba in the wake of the Playa Girón’s (Bay of Pigs) attack, in 1961 planned by the Cuban exiles with the help of the United States:

What was actually propelling people off the island was a sense that things were beginning to look more and more like another one of those bloody skirmishes the United States periodically undertook in Latin America. (Days of Awe 7)

Alejandra understands why her parents made the difficult decision to leave Cuba, and she has no misgivings about it. They did not see the revolution as “hideous,” but understood that such a change in the political system would only bring about unrest and instability. They wished for a stable and peaceful life for themselves and their daughter. Alejandra’s concerns are that of searching for a past that is lost or hidden from her, unlike Juani’s past which is passed onto her but has the problems of veracity.

Alejandra although accepts her ethnic heritage as Cuban, locates the origin of her past in Spain of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, among the Sephardic Jews. The Reyes Católicos or the Catholic Rulers Ferdinand and Isabel, fighting the Moors sought to reunite the Iberian Peninsula under the common faith of Catholicism. Jews were coerced to convert to Christianity during their reign.7 They were called the conversos or New Christians. In the year of 1490 the Reyes Católicos declared the establishment of the Inquisition with the help of the Catholic Church, which enjoyed tremendous power in the political system, to keep the society clean of
crypto-Judaic practices. In 1492 the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula was complete with the fall of the last Moorish kingdom of Granada, and the followers of Islam and Judaism were given the final choice to become Christians or exile themselves from the peninsula. The Jews who did convert continued their lives in fear as the Inquisition could accuse them of heresy if they were found to be still practicing their age-old customs and traditions. The Inquisition was not restricted to the European kingdom, but also to the colonies in the Americas, were many Jews had fled. Many of these Jews, had converted but still practiced their customs as a matter of habit. Over the years many of these Jews assimilated to their new geographic and cultural surroundings till they found their unique niche in Latin America. Alejandra’s mother is the true example of the mestizaje or ethnic mixing that Cuba had to offer.

Alejandra’s mother Nena, like Juani’s mother was more eager to leave Cuba than the father. Her tale is that of survival. The mother in absence of a stable home grew up with different relatives. Living in her grandmother’s house, she was exposed to the African traditions of the household maids, and learnt ways to combat the evil in the world with the help of the gods and saints of Santería. One of the evils was her own step-grandfather, a womanizer with an eye for the maids and even his step-granddaughter. Later she lived with her aunt who lived with a Chinese man, without ever marrying him, because of the social dislike of interracial marriages. Nena has interesting stories of these relatives to tell, but she has none of her earlier ancestors. Alejandra’s interest lies beyond the present reality. She wishes to know of her mother’s Haitian grandmother, and the British pirate and the U.S. Civil War veteran great-grandfathers. Unfortunately Nena does not know anything of her past family except that her family originally came from Seville, Spain, in 1620. They were New Christians, who had converted much earlier than the Inquisition, and they had assimilated to Christianity and lost their Judaic practices over the years. Nena’s apathy for her past arises from a need to see herself in a stable present, and forget the painful past. It is also reflected in her actions of destroying her Cuban documents on receiving her U.S. citizenship. Alejandra on the other hand does not share her mother’s indifference about the past: “. . . I’m this blank space, unconnected to history, bloodless” (Days of Awe 182).

Alejandra’s feeling of detachment from her past arises from the fact that she locates her origin in a culture, which lived only in secret. The crypto-Jews of Spain, who immigrated to
Latin America where the Inquisition still had a stronghold, do not have a recorded history as other openly practicing Jews.\(^9\) Alejandra’s father Enrique is the symbol of the secret tradition, which remained existent, yet hidden among many immigrants to Latin America, including Cuba. Alejandra like Juani has a conflictive relationship with her father. Juani’s father narrates his past as a fiction, and Alejandra’s father refuses to speak of it. Enrique tries to obliterate his Cuban past, although he wants his daughter to be part of Cuba. He sees himself as of Spanish lineage and not Cuban:

\[\ldots\text{my father reached back for his spiritual inheritance to Spain, as if Cuba almost didn’t exist, because Spain was a scar tissue, whereas Cuba was a gaping historical wound.}\(\text{(18)}\)

Juani and Alejandra in their search for the truth, encounter far too much than they had expected. Coping with the truth is harder than fictionalizing or obliterating it. Alejandra is connected to her past through her contact with present day Cuba and her father’s friend Moisés Menach. She learns not only of the hardships that her father went through in order to maintain his connection with his Jewish faith, but also how the present day Cubans survive. She is also faced with the distance between the Cubans on both sides of the strait. It is a distance not only created and maintained by the Cuban Americans but also perceived by the Cubans on the island about their exiled cousins.

Enrique’s inability to speak or practice his clandestine faith openly, even though he resides in the U.S., were Judaism is practiced freely; surfaces from a history of persecution and pain of denial. The history of the Sephardic-crypto-Jews is different from the Jews of the Holocaust. They were both looked with suspicion by other groups, the former for denying their faith and the latter for accepting their faith publicly. Enrique, as a Jew lives a life of shame, which has disabled him to speak of it freely to his daughter. He religiously reads his Friday prayers in the basement of his house, but has not forced his wife or daughter to follow his faith.

**Days of Awe** a rather complex novel about Alejandra’s search of her father’s secretive past, and her own identity as a Cuban Jew; is a complicated metaphor for the state of exile. Crypto-Jews of Cuba and other Latin American countries, who exiled from Spain in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, were not able to practice their faith freely even in their new adoptive lands because of the laws of Inquisition also practiced in the Spanish colonies of Latin
America. Enrique burdened with the history of exile of his people exiled once again to the United States. His inability to practice his faith freely seems to be not simply a matter of historical habit, but also what Obejas seems to be suggesting as a metaphor for the Cuban Americans paralyzed state of concern towards the present day Cuba. The novel is not simply accusing the Cuban Americans’ incapability to change the course of Cuba, but also is accepting of the tremendous courage required to face the truth of this symptomatic situation of exile. The imaginative world of Alberto, Juani’s father and the secret life of Enrique, Alejandra’s father are two possible ways to deny Cuba’s present reality, and in doing so it is a denial of Cuba altogether.

Alejandra’s first visit to Cuba and the following correspondence between Moisés and her, unravel the reasons of the cautious and secretive life of her father. Moisés, or Moses in English as the name suggests is a symbolic figure with parallels drawn with the Jewish messiah of the Old Testament. He is the patriarch of his family. He supported the Revolution and still continues to do so. As the narrative progresses over the ten years of contact between Moisés and Alejandra, from 1987 to 1997, the patriarch still hopeful that the Revolution will come starts to lose hope with the worsening condition of Cuba. His Promised Land does not come, yet he refuses to accept that the Revolution has failed.

Moisés’ household is the symbolic archetypical urban Havana household. Alejandra in her U.S. reality has never seen such living conditions, especially the human relations. The apartment is old and in need of repairs. It is a large household. Moisés’ father-in-law, Rodolfo is senile and spends his days in front of a television in a chair. He is the generation, which was made obsolete by the revolution:

[... ] Rodolfo an ancient mummy-like mass who sat before the TV all day, whether there was anything on the tube or not. Later I found out that he claims to have not slept since 1961, when the Americans bombed the air bases before invading Playa Girón. (Days of Awe 77)

Ester, Moisés’ wife, is the archetypical mother--welcoming and nurturing of all. Alejandra is touched by her hospitality. Her divorced son Ernesto, who continues to live with them, represents the new generation of the revolution’s youth. He was sucked in by the propaganda and the revolutionary programs, but now has lost hope. He tries to escape Cuba in
1994, in the wake of the exodus of exiles from the port of Cojímar, but never reaches the U.S. shores nor is his body ever found.10

Moisés’ daughter Angela and his son-in-law Orlando, and their three children also live in the same house. Orlando and Angela’s marriage has ended yet they carry on living together as a matter of convenience. In the next decade that Alejandra comes to know the family, Angela through an escort service finds a Spaniard willing to marry her and take her out of the country to Spain. Orlando helps her to do so, while he continues to live with his in-laws.

Orlando is an economist who worked for the government but over the years becomes cynical with the country’s state of affairs. He refuses to leave Cuba, as he feels that there is no other home for him other than Cuba and that too his father-in-law’s home. Orlando having given up his job now works as a chauffeur for foreign visitors. His job includes taking women as escorts for the guests. Orlando has helped his own wife Angela, his daughter Paulina, and his son’s girlfriend to participate in the surreptitious growing sex tourism of Cuba, practiced under the covert names of tour guides or escorts.

Over the course of ten years Alejandra learns of the shocking reality of Cuba’s present. The long lines for rationed food, the power outages, the police state and female prostitution are a few of the realities that leave her with a sense of helplessness.

Alejandra also learns of her father’s family’s past. At the beginning of the twentieth century her great-grand father then known by his Christian name Antonio, lived a life of secrecy like all his family members had done since they moved from Spain to the rural eastern part of Cuba, the Oriente. He finally accepted his Jewish faith, after encountering a Lebanese Jewish trader, who was a Sephardim, and proudly practiced his heritage. Antonio took on his Jewish name Ytzak and moved to Havana where he would be able to practice his faith. Ytzak had fought in Cuba’s War of Independence from Spain in 1898, and felt proud to be a Cuban and now finally a Jew too. His wife refused to move with him and endanger her daughter and herself by revealing themselves as Jews. In the rural ignorance of the Oriente the Crypto-Jews had been able to live in harmony with their neighbors. The rural people had not questioned their secret ways if any and were not bothered with the Church, which had little direct influence in that area.

Luis and Sima, Enrique’s parents continued their families’ tradition of fear and secretive practices. Enrique grew up watching his parent’s unwillingness to practice their Jewish customs
in open, always fearing that they would be persecuted. Ytzak, having found a new courage in his new life, kidnap his grandson on his birth to circumcise him, and introduce him to his rightful faith. This act angers and hurts Luis and Sima. As an act of revenge and also as the last resort to keep the family tradition of secrecy taken on since 1492, Luis throws the family Bible into the river, which contained the names of all the ancestors. This act obliterated history, which had lain hidden all these centuries. Alejandra sees it as a loss of her past and origin, Luis sees it as the only way of survival of the tradition that he had been given the responsibility to carry on and maintain.

Enrique who was finally taken under the care of his grandfather came to Havana in the 1930s. The Depression years had created a growing xenophobia, making it difficult for Jews—immigrants and those who already resided in Cuba, as no distinction was made in their status of residency. With the growing influence of Fascism and Hitler’s power in Europe, Cuba also saw the growth of fascist factions, who supported and promoted the anti-Semitic sentiment. The Cuban Falangist Party was formed in 1936 and the Cuban Nazi Party was formed in 1938. In spite of this fact Cuba was one of the few countries, which accepted Jewish refugees fleeing the holocaust. The two incidents that marked the life of Enrique as a Cuban Jew are also the deciding factors of his decision to deny Cuba as a Jew. With the wake of huge numbers of Jewish refugees, Cuba had to finally refuse the asylum seekers of the SS Louis, which came to the shores of Cuba in 1939. The ship was sent back to Europe and it is believed that the Jews were taken captive and died in the indiscriminate eradication of the Jewish people. On that ship was a girl, with whom Enrique falls in love. He had been part of a group aiding the new immigrants and supplying food to the people on the ship.

Enrique was further disillusioned with Cuba and Cubans for having forced him to bow down to the power of Hitler in return for his life. A young man still coping with the thrashing that he and his grandfather had received by Cuban Nazis, Enrique is cornered again by a Nazi mob in the streets of Havana. Already enraged by the hatred for Jews he is unable to face the mob. For the fear of his life he refuses to being a Jew and joins his voice with the mob with the salute to Hitler: “. . . ‘Heil Hitler!’ he shrieked, then ran and ran through the streets of Old Havana [...] his throat burning, hating himself [. . .]” (Days of Awe 353).

Alejandra is told of her father’s secret pain only after her return to Cuba after ten years with her dead father’s ashes. It was his last wish to have his ashes scattered over the bay in the
Malecón of Havana. Alejandra for the first time realizes that Enrique has lived his whole life of self-hatred for his weakness and his betrayal as a Jew. At this point she also understands the pain her father felt when the mother advised Alejandra to deny being a Cuban if faced by any trouble on her first trip to Cuba. The father’s inability to pass on the tradition of being a Jew to Alejandra arises from his own painful experiences as a Jew, and the historical fear that she too might be persecuted for her faith sometime in the future. Alejandra’s return to Cuba with her father’s ashes, coincide with the period observed as “Days of Awe” in the Jewish calendar. It is a period of repentance and seeking reconciliation, before the coming of the New Year. Enrique seeks reconciliation with Cuba by returning home, after having denied it for the pain he had suffered as a Jew. Alejandra too reconciles with her father’s decision of having denied her the past. It is also reconciliation with her self as a Cuban. In the decade that she comes to know Cuba’s present she also realizes that her position of privilege as an U.S. citizen separates her from the Cubans on the island.

The question of living by your personal convictions, which can jeopardize the safety of your family, or deny the convictions to save one's life, is a haunting dilemma that surrounds the narratives of Obejas. Ytzak refused to live in an interior exile as a crypto-Jew once he found the courage to accept his Jewishness publicly, but had to abandon his family and child. In his zeal to continue the tradition, he introduced his grandson to a world of hatred and danger, and leaving the daughter and son-in-law angry and hurt.

Moisés stands by his personal convictions about the Cuban revolution. Alejandra sees Moisés as Job, unruffled by all the misery. Orlando, his son-in-law sees him as Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his own son for his belief. He feels that Moisés has sacrificed everyone around him just because he believed in the Revolution and his being a Jew. Orlando feels that the young one’s around him are inspired by the romanticism of the man’s fanaticism and only later learn the price of such dedication. Moisés insisted that his children Angela and Ernesto be open about their Jewish faith, but because of the staunch Marxism, all religious believers were not given jobs. Moisés believed that it would pass, and it did pass, but by then Angela was in Spain with another man and Ernesto dead in his attempt to leave Cuba in the exodus of Cojímar. Enrique and Alberto, who were luckier than Ernesto also, chose to save their lives, and exiled themselves. Now in exile they and their families are safe but deep inside they carry the cross of their choices with the burden of denial of Cuba in their act of abandonment.
In each man’s action is the dilemma of responsibility towards the community or the nation and the family. The idea that only the Cubans on the island who support the revolution have the responsibility to change their society is questioned in the two narratives. Alejandra arguing objectively, with Moisés of the failures of the revolution brings up the case of Huber Matos, a revolutionary who separated his ways from Castro, and ended in jail:

. . . Fidel released him to exile in Miami, where it was thought he’d spark a counterrevolutionary movement. But instead, Matos virtually disappeared into the comfort of his family, preferring to spend his time catching up with his children and grandchildren and becoming a rich old man. (Days of Awe 80)

It is Ernesto, who makes Alejandra realize that she too is a Cuban with the same responsibilities that she expects from people like Huber Matos or her own father. The fact that she was not part of a conscious decision to leave Cuba does not really absolve her of her responsibility, even though it may appear so. Ernesto ironically says:

“You are absolved, my friend, you may live guilt-free among the bourgeoisie, the enemy, because you had no say in your predicament,” he said. “You can come back and we will help you cry about your lost, lost Cuba because none of this is your fault. It may be ours, perhaps, or the kidnappers--except that would be your parents and it’s complicated then--but not yours, not ever. ¡Te llevaron! Now remember that. It’s a story you will need. And it will be even more convincing if you believe it.” (Days of Awe 237-8)

There is no easy solution to Cuba’s difficult present. The novel looks at the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the subsequent fall of USSR as a possible approaching end of Castro and communism in Cuba as well. Moisés points out that such a change in Cuba would be like the one that Germany is to face, where poor East Germans will receive food, but the West Germans will get new opportunities to exploit the East Germans for their capitalist gains: “A stream of West Germans and their allies looking at the forbidden zone, at the Spartan cool of the east and imagining hamburger places, multilevel department stores, and car dealerships” (Days of Awe 175). Cuba would become another Puerto Rico with U.S. intervention. End of communism and the initiation of capitalism could possibly bring huge problems.

Obejas seems to suggest that if there is a solution it lies in claiming responsibility by all Cubans on and off the island for the present state of Cuba. Obejas targets the second generation...
Cubans who have lived a life of privilege, free from the decision of living in or fleeing Cuba. Obejas is critical of the Cuban Americans’ inability to react to the present reality of Cuba, which is a far cry from what the nostalgic tales that they tell. Caridad of Memory Mambo insists that her husband must help his cousin Vicky in Cuba. Caridad believes that it is the family’s responsibility, especially because of their position of advantage, but Jimmy does not see it necessary to claim responsibility.

Deborah, the grand daughter of Moisés, and a budding artist collaborates with an American born Cuban artist Pilar Puente, in an outrageous artistic endeavor. The project involved wrapping their naked bodies in Cuban flags and unfurling themselves to the ground from important buildings, the Freedom tower in Miami and the Cathedral in Havana to expose their bodies and walk through the streets till arrested. It is a statement of the joint responsibility of all Cubans on and off the island to revaluate the Cuban reality:

The idea was to force another look at ourselves, to reconsider that all of our accomplishments--whether it is the revolution or the success of the Cubans in Miami or whatever--are all meaningless, all illusionary, unless we go back to our true origins, to our unmasked, vulnerable selves, the ones we see in the mirror when we’re alone. (Days of Awe 323)

Obejas’ use of the fictional character Pilar Puente is an inter-textual reference to Christina García’s Dreaming in Cuban (1992). In doing so Obejas creates a collaborative community within texts, which are trying to revaluate the connection to being a Cuban. The ethnic memory of being a Cuban in Obejas’ narratives does not lie in the past Cuba. Cuba is not an idolized state of being, rather a geographical location, which because of exile stretches beyond the Caribbean island into the spaces inhabited by each Cuban in the U.S. or elsewhere, who claim adherence to Cuba by professing their ethnic identity. As Steven Knapp calling out for revisionist interpretations of official memories says,

. . . the locus of authority is always in the present, we use, for promoting and reinforcing ethical and political dispositions, only those elements of the past that correspond to our sense of what presently compels us. (131)

Obejas’ narratives attempt to understand the present needs of a Cuban American. In constructing an ethnic identity there lies a constant negotiation with our past and our present.
Juani and Alejandra must negotiate with their family and their community’s past. It is a responsibility to challenge and reevaluate ourselves as members of an ethnic community. The continuum of the community lies in a constant reassessment of our current existence, rather than fixing it in a history that remains unquestioned and untouched.

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no nos acabamos de ir del país
tú y yo, siempre con el mapa abierto
examinando las fronteras, costas abiertas
añorando playas perdidas
las olas tibias de amores anteriores
y la perfección de otros pasados
volvemos siempre al mismo punto
señalando flechas en diferentes direcciones
con todo propósito (el alivo, la razón
por la distancia y cercanía)
estamos siempre al punto de partir
pretentiendo frío, indiferencia
practicando pequeños argumentos
con el futuro
y falta de memoria con nuestro pasado
pero la prueba está en el mapa
gastando como una sábana que ha visto
muchas noches

--- Achy Obejas. “El Bote.”12
NOTES

1 Independentistas are the Puerto Ricans who support the politics of a free Puerto Rican nation, and not an Associated Free State or a State of the United States.

2 Some of these issues are an echo and an elaboration of the short story “We Came All The Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?” published in the collection of the same name. Obejas in this story looks at the generational shift of the Cuban exile family, where the daughter challenges the parents’ societal structures.

3 Casas spoke against the inhuman treatment of the indigenous population by the Spanish colonizers. Some believe this intervention however humane, started the slavery of Africans, starting a new chain of inhuman exploitation, in Latin America.

4 Eugene D. Genovese in his book, From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave revolts in the Making of the Modern World, looks at how the slave revolts changed in their goals after the Haitian success to establish a modern state. The slaves till then aimed to free themselves from their European masters and restore “as much of a traditional African way of life as could be remembered and copied,” in their maroon societies (82).

5 UMAPs were closed in 1967 after national and international protests. The homophobic sentiment continued to be promoted through doctors and educators. Emilio Bejel in his book Gay Cuban Nation explaining the rationale behind the Cuban homophobia writes, . . . homosexuals are a threat to the nation because they corrupt children and young men and thus impede the formation of the ‘new man’; homosexuality constitutes an inversion of the ‘natural’ gender roles and therefore breaks the basic laws of nature; and finally homosexuality is the result of the distortions of capitalism, from which it may be concluded that socialism could now eradicate this social problem just as it could eradicate prostitution, drug addiction, and other ills and vices. (102)

6 The Moncada barrack was attacked on the 26th July 1953. Situated in the East part of the country it was a symbol of tyranny and oppression since the Spanish rule. The War of Independence of 1898 had not changed its status and it continued to be a prison known for its torturing practices. Most of the young revolutionaries with Castro in the Moncada were killed, once captured and tortured.
7 John Friedman in his revisionist article on anti-Semitism against the New Converts “Jewish Conversion, The Spanish Pure Blood Laws and Reformation: A Revisionist View of Racial and Religious Antisemitism,” writes that anti-Semitic sentiment existed since long before the Inquisition was established. Jews were accused of being the cause of the plagues of the fourteenth Century. Many Jews who converted found it to their convenience in their social, economic and political life. Many found easier access to the Church, the administrative system and were prosperous businessmen. Many Catholics saw this flourishing condition of the New Converts with envy. The New Converts could not always be differentiated as Christians or Jews, and many were accused of being Crypto-Jews or *marrones*, literally meaning pigs. The Inquisition was established to clean up the society of Crypto-Judaic practices.

8 The Cuban population is an ethnic mix of 1% Chinese, 51% mulattos, 11% blacks and 37% whites.

9 The five-hundred-year anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ arrival to the Americas in 1992 also sparked a new interest in the Sephardic diaspora, which took place in 1492--in the same year as Columbus’ first journey.

10 The Cojímar incident, like the Mariel exodus of 1980, is one of the largest escape of exiles from Cuba. Castro opened the ports to ease the growing unrest in Cuba. This incident changed the U.S. policy towards the Cuban exiles, to counter the great number of Cubans emigrating. They were no longer political refugees, rather illegal immigrants. Any Cuban caught at sea would be sent to the U.S. Navel Base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for an indefinite period of time.

11 In Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* Pilar a second generation Cuban paints a punk Lady Liberty on the wall of her mother’s new bakery on the occasion of the United States’ bicentennial celebration. Such rebellious acts are seen as acts of responsibility towards our revaluation of our community.

12 Translated by the poet as:

“The Boat”

we don’t seem to leave the country
you and I, always with an open map
searching the borders and open coasts
yearning for lost shores
the warm waters of former loves
and the perfection of yesterday
we always come back to the same point
aiming arrows at different directions
deliberately (the relief, the reason
for the distance and the proximity)
we’re always at the point of departure
pretending coolness, indifference
practicing trivial arguments
with the future and a lack of memory
but the proof is in the map
worn like a bedsheat
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS: CONTINUITY AND COMMUNITY.

Narrative is the age-old medium of cultural continuity. Stories and tales narrated from generation to generation are the repository of the cultural values that a community adheres and holds dear to it. Narrations in any genre--a poem, a fable, a drama, a novel or a film--all have the same role to communicate to the listener, viewer, or the reader. This communication is a reiteration of the system of cultural codes by which we have agreed to live our lives in a community. Cultural codes are social roles and rules that are assigned to people of a society. They are created and governed by people in positions of power. The codes are not static and alter with needs of the time. The transformation might be abrupt or simply a gradual alteration, but the rules always change.

Narratives are not simply passive records of the changes, rather they are many a times the harbingers of transformation, and also the medium to create normality in the novelty of life. It is a tool used by the powerful to maintain their position of dominance or by the powerless to obtain a position of equal influence or overthrow the oppressive authority.

Postcolonial writings of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean of the twentieth century too, through their narratives have reinstated their culture’s sovereign way of life. These postcolonial writings differ from the Romantic narrative of Latin America, also produced in their post-independence era, in respect to the degree of cultural transference that took place in the contact between the populations of the Colonial masters and the colony. In parts of Latin America where very few indigenous populations survived, it was a struggle for mainly the Creole population to create a separate identity from their Spanish ancestors. These Creole nations constructed to benefit the ruling classes, continued with the old colonial paradigms where the surviving indigenous and the free black populations remained subservient. In other postcolonial nations like that of Africa and Asia, where the majority of the native cultures survived, the struggle for these populations was to claim back their land and their way of being; but there is never a going back to the original state of being. All that remains is just a semblance of continuity, with all the
changes that the contact brought to them. Aimé Césaire an activist and intellectual from Martinique in his Une Tempête (1968) or A Tempest looks at the Caliban myth, made famous by the Shakespearean play The Tempest (1611). Martinique was colonized by France in 1635 and was never liberated. The country was able to bring about change and today it’s political status is that of an overseas Department of France. It remains dependent on France but the people of Martinique can vote for the French President and have representation in the French parliament. In Césaire’s text Caliban is a black slave who seeks his freedom from his colonial master Prospero. It is the representation of the process of decolonization of Caliban who becomes conscious of his oppressed self, and the condition of the colonized. He says to Prospero:

And you lied to me so much,
about the world and about myself,
that you ended up by imposing on me
an image of myself:
underdeveloped, in your words incompetent
that’s how you made me see myself!
And I hate that image . . . and it’s false!
But now I know you, you old cancer,
And I also know myself! (64)

The Spanish Caribbean, namely Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, in spite of being part of Latin America, remained part of the Spanish colonial empire until much later in the nineteenth century. These Caribbean colonies once free from Spain became part of the United States’ imperial ambition. The control of the economic and political aspects of these islands triggered emigration in large numbers to the United States. Migration from these countries was facilitated by the geographical proximity and hopes of the realization of the ‘American Dream,’ of economic prosperity. Many immigrants and their children born in the United States have assimilated to the American way of life. Yet they remain outsiders, and continue to be identified and labeled by the country of their ancestral origin or simply as Hispanics. This is in contrast to the European immigrants and their descendants. Even though European immigrants have in many cases maintained their ethnic heritage yet being racially white and in the absence of a history of U.S. domination of European nations, have allowed them to assimilate and be accepted by the mainstream society. The political relations of the United
States towards Latin America, and the race relations within the United States are major reasons for this unacceptance of Latinos.

The marginalization of the Latinos in the United States cannot simply be attributed to a binary division between the United States and the Latin American immigrants. There also exists a division within the different groups of the Latino immigrants themselves. Latino groups are split among themselves on the issues of color, class, and gender. Puerto Ricans’ dislike of the Dominicans arises from a racial xenophobia. Dominicans have been immigrating to the island of Puerto Rico and replacing the natives from low wage jobs. Puerto Ricans prefer to view themselves closer to the Europeans and the Tainos, the extinct indigenous group of the island, than to their African ancestors. The presence of black Dominicans in the Puerto Rican society creates a deviation from the elitist nationalistic discourse. The immigrant Puerto Ricans carries this racist attitude towards the Dominicans to the mainland of the United States. Ironically in spite of the Puerto Ricans belief of their racial makeup, they remain outside the mainstream culture. Similarly, the well-established Cuban community also prefers to be separated from the other Latino groups of the United States, because of their economic prosperity. Cuban Americans tend to consider themselves white and thus different from the other racially different Latino groups.

Fighting internal and external stereotypes and prejudices through cultural productions like art, theatre, and print literature is an essential component in creating a strong communal identity. The Latino groups suffer from a dual colonial condition, one historically inherited through the hegemonic Spanish colonial structures, and the other is the present reality of U.S. imperialistic attitudes towards the Latin American nations. The role of the artist as the agent of culture and change in society is imperative. Culture in any society enjoys a certain level of respect because of its quality to entertain while educate. It has the social acceptance of the people as the repository and the medium of expression of the codes of conduct. Even though cultural productions are seen as separate from the economic and political realms of a society, it is impossible for the authors or the artists to be separate from their political or economic reality. Thus each cultural piece is a representation of a certain politics that the artist adheres. (Politics is to be understood as the belief in a set of social codes that need to be applied in a governance of a society).
The narrative text exists in a collaborative endeavor of the author and the reader. Edward Said speaking of the genre of novel in his book *Culture and Imperialism* writes, “A novel exists first as a novelist’s effort and second as an object read by an audience”(73). This study of Caribbean Latina writers also attempts to emphasize the role of the author and the reader in the completion of the act of creation of a cultural artifact. The narratives studied in this investigation are similar in many aspects yet maintain their separate distinctiveness through the representation of different ideologies and politics, especially those related to ethnic identity formation.

This study argues that the texts examined, use memory as a tool to remain connected to a past, un-archived, forgotten, and distant. Historical, autobiographical, and ethnic memories are three such memories that keep us linked to many aspects of our community, and define the national, personal and cultural identity of a person. All the three writers represented in this study were chosen because of the commonality of their Caribbean origin, which shares a historical and geographical space. Similar histories reflect similar issues of conflicts. Yet present socio-political realities facilitate different approaches to the present identities of each Caribbean Latino community targeted in each of the writers’ narratives. This reality is based upon mainly two factors, namely the U.S.- Caribbean political relations, and the means available to the Latinos to remain part of the countries of their origins or ancestors. The continuation in concern is not simply of the cultural nature, but also political.

Puerto Rico’s political reality as that of a Commonwealth or as termed as “Estado Libre Asocido,” is representative of an oxymoronic desire to belong and to be free at the same time. It is the perfect case of the colonial desire of control and the decolonized subjects’ desire to be sovereign. This symptomatic condition of Puerto Rico is duplicated in the life of their migrant population, which is politically free to be part of two systems, unlike the Dominicans and the Cubans. Ortiz Cofer through her narrative capitalizes on this freedom to create a personal space of cultural continuance, in spite of exclusionary tendencies on both sides that are typical to the situation of immigrants.

Alvarez too, stakes a claim in Dominican history for an exclusively English readership, in the United States. The Dominican Republic, which is a free nation, and has no American control in its political system, is still claimed as part of the Dominican Americans’ heritage. Absence of travel restrictions permits a continuous flow of contact between communities, and allows alliance in cultural and social aspects, which is beneficial to both communities.
The present reality of Cuba is the biggest distance between the Cuban exiles and the island of Cuba, in spite of being geographically the closest. The split created by the exilic condition has also created the biggest distance in the continuing connection of the two communities across the strait. The antagonism between the political worlds of the two countries does not permit a free alliance in the continuation of the separated communities. Thus for the Cuban artist it is not only a problematic undertaking, but also a larger responsibility. Obejas’ narratives consequently have an imperative tone to understand this distance and make amends to bridge the gaps. The Cuban Americans in a position of privilege must take a political stand on Cuba’s present situation, and act upon it.

The desire among the writers for a reciprocal concern for the communities separated by national boundaries raises the question of the place of U.S. Latino literature not only in the United States but also in Latin America, or specifically in the Caribbean. In the United States, where these narratives are labeled as U.S. Latino literature and not simply American literature positions it as separate from the mainstream. Yet it may be seen as to their benefit that a separate categorization allows for a distinct space in places of circulation like the bookstores or the libraries. It allows the readers to identify these texts, which could have been otherwise lost in a larger pool of publications under the generalized category of American literature. The U.S. Latino label also distinguishes it from literature written by Americans about Latin Americans and Latinos. It allows for a shift in perspective, especially one from below and within, rather than the privileged vision from the top and outside.

The reality of American immigrant life is one of multiculturalism. The exclusionary practices may have kept Latino groups in the margins, because of their class, race, and language; but have also helped to create a body of culture, which refuses to assimilate to the American culture and continues to hold on to its Caribbean cultures and origins. The issue of wanting to belong to a cultural space in spite of distance is an ongoing debate. Latino literature is not only representative of an American reality, but also narrated in a language unknown to the masses of Latin America, and in a language, which represents the neo-imperial power. But a language does not bind literature. Language is simply a medium for literature to speak of a community. Puerto Rican studies, for example initiated in the United States have been trying to bridge the gaps. The constant borrowing from the originating culture and the political reality tend to support the idea of inclusion. Juan Flores in his essay “National Culture and Migration: Perspectives from the
Puerto Rican Working Class,” points out that the Puerto Rican immigrants have mainly been
from the working class who have not identified with the elitist ideas of Puerto Rican national
identity, which promoted an essentialized notion of a Puerto Rican, similar to the Uruguayan
nationalist theorist José Enrique Rodo’s Ariel (an eponymous essay first published in 1900), who
is European in nature and has little to do with the African roots of the people. It simply
obliterates race and class issues. This led to a break in historical continuity in their experience of
the working class immigrant in United States and on the island of Puerto Rico. Speaking of the
cultural outburst of Puerto Rican immigrant artists of the 1960s in New York Flores writes:

The rebellious young Puerto Rican artists in New York had no way of recognizing
their continuity with the working class traditions of Puerto Rican culture, since it
is precisely this component of the national history which imperialist relations are
most urgently obliged to suppress. (135)

Flores also states that the re-connection to the island has been a slow process and only
the reevaluation of history by the Latinos themselves have led them to reinvent themselves as the
continuing community of the working class of the island. Ortiz-Cofer in her attempt to write of
her personal memories connects both sides of her life. She presently does not belong to the
working class, which comprises the majority of the immigrant Puerto Rican population. She
emerged from the working class community, and has had the experience of both sides, and
incorporates them in her writings. Her personal experiences transfer to the larger community of
immigrants, who continue to struggle with the two sides of themselves.

Alvarez, who has chosen to write not just of the immigrant experience but also of
Dominican history enacted within the boundaries of the nation itself, comes closer to form part
of the large corpus of Dominican literature. Nations like the Dominican Republic and Cuba, that
have well defined boundaries, separate from the United States, have a natural resistance to allow
literature produced in another space to become part of their literature. Nations are “imagined
communities,” and until recent times the national rhetoric has refused to look beyond its political
borders. It is a changing reality and communities tied by ethnicity or common history, have been
able to survive their traditions in spite of traveling beyond the national borders. This fact in itself
is grounds for considering Latino literature as part of Latin American literature. Writings like
that of Alvarez, Ortiz Cofer, and Obejas will continue to stake their claims to be part of a dual

108
reality, as long as they continue to desire to write of both the communities and keep their memories alive.

The U.S. Latino texts written for an English speaking American audience, and specifically for a Latino readership, allows for a space to not only voice the concerns of the Latino communities, but also to create a bond between the readers and the world of the text. The memories of the narrators and the characters of the texts in this study connect with the similar memories of the readers. The struggles of the Latino reader as a marginalized member of the American society in terms of their class, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality; are made alive through a medium of wide public reach.

The narratives of the three writers, Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Achy Obejas differ in their choice of genre, but they all emphasize the woman protagonist in her social role. The protagonists are part of a patriarchal society and negotiate their space and identity within the power structures of male domination and female subservience. The narratives allow the reader to reconsider the continuing dominance of patriarchy. For a Latino woman reader the texts work as a tool to see the history of oppression within their own culture, and educate to negotiate an identity free of patriarchal domination.

Ortiz Cofer’s autobiographical narrative and the poems that constitute her autobiography have very few male characters. In spite of the fact that she is not harsh in the portrayal of men, it is clear that the male members of the family were either absent or had very little contribution in the bringing up of children, especially in those aspects of her life, which the author considers worth recalling and recognizing as important to her present identity, as a writer, a daughter and as a mother of Puerto Rican heritage living in the United States. The weak-male representation may be seen as symbolic of the colonial condition of the culture. The traditional head of the family, the patriarch no longer maintains the power of domination, as the colonial power rules supreme. It is also important to note that the dislocation also attributes the absence of strong male characters. Many male immigrants leave home in search of better economic opportunities. Once in the new immigrant space, the man does not enjoy the same patriarchal privilege as back home due to his social and economic status. The women are thus are left to fend for themselves and their children. Ortiz Cofer celebrates the ties of womanhood of her culture—the traditional private and domestic space and role of the woman. She does not deny the modern workingwoman’s role, but simply highlights the traditional role, which is usually considered of
Ortiz Cofer herself a representation of the modern woman acknowledges the role of the traditional women in her life, a role which continues to dominate the lives of women of her community, both on the island and in the United States.

Julia Alvarez and Achy Obejas are much more critical in their representation of men in their narratives. Julia Alvarez draws attention to heroines of the Dominican Republic’s national history. The Mirabal sisters’ fight was against the self-imposed patriarch of the land, the dictator Rafael Trujillo. Alvarez’ narrative of the Mariposa national myth highlight’s the feminine perspective in the struggle against Trujillo. In the novel Trujillo’s sexual advance towards Minerva is the pivotal point in her fight. The defense of female dignity becomes the motivating force against the surmounting grudges against the dictator. For Patria it is her maternal instincts that are threatened by the sight of the indiscriminate killings of innocent youth by Trujillo’s army.

The character Salomé of Alvarez’ narrative negotiates her role as a woman within the specific boundaries provided to her by her male guardians, her father and later her husband. She has the benefit of education and her art of poetry to support her struggle to make her voice heard. She seeks equal role and rights for the woman as for the man. Alvarez intends to highlight the role of women in social change, in spite of their restricted social acceptance in the political realm of life.

Obejas’s protagonists Juani and Alejandra, both are in conflict with their fathers about the truth of their past. The fathers as the symbolic representation of patriarchy are resisted. Both protagonists negotiate and reconcile with the fathers about the truth of the invented and the forgotten past. Similar to Alvarez’ narratives Obejas’ Memory Mambo openly comments against sexual promiscuity of men in their communities. Juani’s cousins are the representation of the choices women can make in order to combat the imposed identities and the patriarchal dominance, in her community. Days of Awe looks at the patriarchal decision of the protagonist’s father Enrique, her grandfather Ytzak, and her father’s childhood friend Moisés. Their decision to maintain or deny their ethnic and religious identity, that of a Jew, is challenged and revaluated by Alejandra.

The narratives on one hand remain tied to each other in many aspects, but each author looks at the components of identity formation in different ways. One of the issues that make them different is that of sexuality. Sexuality, in particular of women and homosexuals, in
American and Latino society is marginalized because of the dominant conservative ideas that dictate the cultures. The fact remains that women and homosexuals are aware of their sexuality and therefore avoidance of the issue when in question, simply strengthens the continuing social attitudes of taboo. The questioning of the governing attitudes in cultural productions allows for a dialogue and awareness of the matter.

Among the three authors only Obejas explores the sexual identity of the protagonists as part of establishing the character’s identity. Obejas looks at the lesbianism and the bisexuality of her protagonists Juani and Alexandra, respectively, as part of their struggle and search of themselves through their ties to the ethnic past. On the other hand, Julia Alvarez and Judith Ortiz Cofer, who touch upon the subject of sexuality never explore it in depth as part of their characterization. Obejas, Alvarez and Ortiz Cofer, all engage in a discussion of discrepancies in sexual rights among heterosexual men and women. Heterosexual women, in a patriarchal society suffer the male domination and find liberation only after the demise or in the absence of male authority. In the case of Ortiz Cofer, the grandmother although not an oppressed woman in the social realm, yet is tied by the role of a woman, especially in relation to her body. She seeks liberation from the sexual relationship with her husband, which is translated into childbirth and child rearing. The paternal grandmother finds liberation after the death of her husband. The mother is tied to her displaced space only till she is bound by her traditional role as a wife and a mother. She remains separated from her homeland even after her husband’s death, just to rear her children in the United States as wished by her husband. She returns to the island as soon as the children are independent. In the case of Alvarez, the Mirabal mother builds a new home after the death of her husband. Tía Celia of Memory Mambo is a happier woman after her husband’s death, freed from the indignity of her husband’s open affairs with other women.

Salvatore in Ortiz Cofer is the only homosexual character, who represents the margins of the barrio society of New Jersey. Yet the issue of homosexuality is not highlighted as a major problem in the Latino society, and moreover Salvatore is Italian and not Latino. The issue of homosexuality in Latino culture is important because like Latina women under patriarchy, homosexuals suffer because of the popular and traditional gender roles, which live by the myth that there are no homosexual Latinos.

Camila of In the Name of Salomé is a closeted lesbian and Alvarez does not develop this aspect of the character. She is portrayed as one who finds public duty far more important to her
private sexual identity. It is an idea that Obejas openly criticizes in Memory Mambo, where Gina a Puerto Rican political activist refuses to acknowledge her sexuality openly. Alvarez feels that the question of Camila’s sexuality is not relevant to the plot of her novel (Alvarez, “Interview”). It seems obvious that her shying away from Camila’s sexuality is also an issue of cultural respect. Within the Dominican cultural code of conduct, where homosexuality is still seen as a moral deviance, it would be scandalous to glorify the sexuality of a woman, that too the one that is considered morally wrong. Alvarez also portrays the Mirabal sisters as practically asexual, as if it is a requirement for their role as political activists. It is ironic that in her later novel In the Name of Salomé she points out to this problem of women national figures, in regards to the character of Salomé, the national poetess. The Mirabal sisters are mothers but not sexual partners. The fact that Minerva’s battle with Trujillo begins with the sexual advance made towards her, is emblematic that Minerva sees female sexuality as part of a woman’s dignity. It is not something one speaks of rather preserves it.

Obejas an outspoken lesbian activist considers her character’s sexuality as a relevant factor in the creation of their identity. Juani understands the resistance to her choice of sexuality, but also is determined to accept it as part of her reality, just like the fact that she is a Cuban American. Writing about lesbian characters, and the social resistance against them, allows for a dialogue. It not only permits to see them as any other functional member of society, but also to challenge social and religious codes of sexual conduct. Alejandra is bisexual but her sexuality is not so much a concern in her story, yet it functions as a metaphor of being in dual spaces at the same time like her bicultural reality.

The three Caribbean Latina writers of this study also differ in their approach to the conflictive issues within their respective communities, in relation to race/ethnicity and class problems. Judith Ortiz Cofer, like the issue of sexuality, and patriarchy, does not tackle the problems of race or class as a challenge in her Puerto Rican community. The author sympathizes with those who are target of the social prejudices, but she does not problematize it or seek solutions to the social problem. The reference to the poor black boy who is seen appropriate enough to entertain the class and the teachers with his singing and mimicking abilities, but not fit to host the PTA show, shows the racism of the Puerto Rican society as far as the abilities of a person are concerned based on their race and class. The boy is down graded as an object of entertainment, but not considered seriously for other jobs of responsibility. As a child the author
is told not to be worried about being different, as she is white. Ortiz Cofer also mentions the racial prejudice in the United States, where being of Latino origin is cause enough to create racial tensions in spite of being white. The Jewish landlords were apprehensive of letting out to Latino families outside the New Jersey barrio. Yet the father was able to convince his landlord with his impeccable English, his white skin and his U.S. Navy uniform. He brought his children as models to meet the landlords, but never his wife, who fit just right into the image of a Latina woman. At school the author faced racial prejudice from her teachers, especially because she could not speak English.

Ortiz Cofer’s public struggle as a Latina, is one that of fitting into the mainstream, and keeping her Puerto Rican heritage a personal aspect of her life. Her own public self does not project her as a Latina in spite of the fact that her writings draw so much from the Puerto Rican heritage. She seeks to highlight the Puerto Rican community of the island and the mainland, yet hides behind a personae of an assimilated immigrant. Her writings are the only way to reach a public sphere where she can openly speak of her personal self as a Puerto Rican through her characters, of both spaces.

Julia Alvarez explores racism of the Dominican society. Only in the novel In the Name of Salomé, she notes the hegemonic racial and classist prejudices of the Spanish colonial rule still present in the free nation state of the nineteenth century. Prejudice against people of African or Jewish descent is seen as remnants of the old colonial structures. Racial prejudice against Dominicans of visible dark skin in the United States of the early and mid twentieth century is also pointed out. Alvarez’ character Pedro Henríquez Ureña’s proposal to unite people with similar discontents is a political stand and comment against the social inequalities. Even though it is a historical reference to the last century, it still continues to be a relevant comment to draw inspiration.

Achy Obejas’ Memory Mambo not only describes the racial and classist biases of the Cubans, but also seeks exclusion from such group identification. In Days of Awe Obejas tries to understand the fears of the Sephardic Crypto-Jewish community of Cuba. The historical fear of persecution by the Spanish rule and the Inquisition, the Holocaust, and the revival of Neo-Nazi factions are reminders of the possible continuity of violent hatred against a group of people.

The narratives of all the three authors are also tied with the notion of continuance. The past is seen as the anchor for the present. Each author emphasizes the urgency to recall the past
of the characters to establish their identity in their present realities. These realities are reflective of the larger communities of the Latinos, who are also urged to create a strong present by remaining connected to their roots. Each author reflects on different aspects of the past that are brought into the present by the simple act of remembrance. Ortiz Cofer seeks the cultural component of story telling, a tradition that she inherits from her grandparents. She acknowledges her role as a narrator and poet as an inheritance from the grandmother, the storyteller and the grandfather, the poet. She also sees her culture—both of the island and the immigrant life—as sources for her tales. She as an immigrant must keep returning to her ancestral origins to sustain her art.

Alvarez looks into the national and political history of the Dominican Republic to create a continuance. It is in the heroines of the past that she seeks the moment of pride and courage. The gringa dominicana is the representation of the second generation of immigrant Dominicans who have no knowledge of their ancestral past, yet have the desire to attach their identity to their history. The importance of understanding our present in terms of our past is also reiterated in Obejas’ narratives. Obejas although considers the choices made in the past in a particular historical context as an important element to comprehend the consequences of the present, yet she insists in projecting towards a future of social change, based upon the lessons of the past.

The significance of the present is a relevant factor in these narratives, yet knowing where we originate from is the only fixed point in the lives of the dislocated. This dislocation arises from the geographical displacement and the mainstream society’s unacceptance. This intolerance to consider us different in a society, and label us as the “other” gives rise to a search of a determined space, which we may claim to be ours. This takes us to the point of origin, which is considered the earliest point in the past, a site where we may anchor ourselves, even though we might find our present in motion. Thus the notion of movement in the immigrants’ lives is a crucial factor in the narratives of the three authors. It is a metaphor of the migratory history of the communities that these narratives target. Judith Ortiz Cofer’s constant travels to the island of Puerto Rico and to the barrio of New Jersey have become a habit to the way of Puerto Rican life. Juan Bruce-Novoa reading Ortiz Cofer’s poems speaks of a “ritual of movement,” a take on Ortiz Cofer’ poem titled “The Habit of Movement” (Silent Dancing 138). Bruce-Novoa points out the continuing tug-of-war between the two cultures, makes the poet a constant traveler, especially in her writings. As she favors neither of the cultures, she must oscillate between the
Her autobiographical text structurally expresses this rhythm of movement in the serialization of the essays as they alternate between the two spaces.

Alvarez’ *gringa dominicana* must travel to Ojo de Agua to retrieve her history. She cannot retrieve the history in the comfort of her home in the United States, especially because she searches a history, which is hardly chronicled in books. It is the history of the marginalized voices of women. The movement, which forms part of Camila’s search, is structurally captured too well in the chapterization of *In the Name of Salomé*, with its constant movement of back and forth in time and the lives of the protagonists. Camila is the dislocated immigrant—the perpetual exile. She constantly moves as a result of her parent’s and her own political decisions to challenge authority. The physical motion can also be seen as a metaphor for the need of social change. The decisions that we make to be either subservient to an oppressive authority, or challenge it; follows with the consequence of continuing in the same geographic space or being dislocated.

Obejas looks critically and revaluates the effects of movement in the lives of the Cuban exiles. Dislocation from Cuba and the knowledge of the impossibility of return to the homeland in its present conditions is the exilic state of mind. Locked between the desire to return and the unfortunate fate to remain is seen as a static state of social unproductivity. The fact that Juani of *Memory Mambo* is indispensable at the laundromat after her accident, makes her realizes her static state of being, with no options to move on. Juani seeks Cuba to find the origin, but she does not share the free option like the Puerto Ricans or the Dominicans to travel whenever she desires to. Travel also does not guarantee a return to the past, especially in Cuba, whose present condition overwhelms and overshadows the past. Alejandra of *Days of Awe* unlike Juani does travel to Cuba, but only to be overwhelmed by the present state of Cuba. Yet this movement makes her conscious of the stagnant mental state of the exiles who seem to have forgotten Cuba in their inability to change Cuba’s present.

Movement is a symbol of continuity. It is also a symptomatic state of migratory communities. The journey is the link between the geographical spaces of here and there. Even in newer spaces these communities must bear the memory of the travel they or their ancestors made. The constant recalling of the past is the mental reenactment of the movement tied to the lives of the immigrants. The texts capture the continuity of the community through the memories of the characters, and delivering it to the community of the readers. Thus the continuation of the
memory comes to a full circle, with the author’s act of writing memory, and with the readers’
participation in the act of remembering along with the world of the texts.

The act of writing and the author’s creation are powerful implements. Writing from
within the minority communities on one hand permits a closer and personal look at the world of
the community, but on the other also has social responsibilities. Writing of past
experiences—historical, autobiographical or ethnic—allows looking back into the distant and
forgotten ties. The Latino communities even though differ and are distant from the communities
of their homelands, yet are able to find commonality and continuance through narratives, which
remember their origins. Alvarez, Ortiz Cofer, and Obejas as authors of their narratives are not
separate from their communities. In their writings they capture the collective past, emerging
from personal or communal experiences, not as an attempt to recover the lost and gone, but to
preserve the continuance of the community. Preservation of a community is an urgent need,
especially for groups like the Latinos in the United States, to be able to maintain their
independent identity and to fight the marginalization. The narratives that urge to remember a
community’s experiences, facilitate a growth of the “imagined community,” whose members are
tied to each other with shared origins, beliefs, traditions, memories, and narratives; yet are
unknown or distant from each other. Alvarez, Ortiz Cofer, and Obejas not only, through their
narratives, remember their communities’ experiences, but also bring forth issues necessary to be
revaluated in the continuous process of reinventing ourselves as members of an ethnic and a
social community. Be it as members of a class, a race, an ethnicity, or of a nation, the reader is
urged to reconsider the imposed identities and renegotiate in terms of the present reality.
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