THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY: COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN THE WORKS OF CRISTINA GARCÍA AND ANA MENÉNDEZ

by

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(Under the Direction of John Lowe)

ABSTRACT

Cristina Garcia and Ana Menendez are Cuban American writers with remarkably similar backgrounds. Their fiction, too, shares key characteristics, especially a sense of nuance and a criticism of fantasies of mastery, a turn to the past and an attention to collective memory, and strong suggestions that the past is unknowable. But in their works dealing with icons of the Cuban Revolution, the two authors diverge strongly. When writing about a Castro figure, Garcia employs *choteo*, the Cuban humor which is certainly hilarious but unfortunately oversimplified. Menendez, on the other hand, writes rich, complex accounts of both Castro and Che figures, adding nuance to the Cuban narrative and hopefully creating possibilities for more complex understandings of Cuba and Cuban-American relations.

INDEX WORDS: Collective memory, Fantasy of mastery, Cuban American authors, Cristina Garcia, Ana Menendez, *King of Cuba*, *Loving Che*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Near the end of Cristina García's *The Agüero Sisters* (1997), Reina tells her sister, Constancia, that their father had lied to them and that their mother had shot herself in the throat. This truth shatters the lies upon which Constancia had built up her understanding of the world and herself. Angry and afraid, Constancia attacks Reina, forces her overboard, and watches her float away: "She fights the urge to push Reina's head underwater again. To shatter her sister's skull with the oar and call it home" (276).

The word home here does not signify a geography but a mental construct, a series of beliefs about the past out of which Constancia has built an identity. At this moment in the novel, she must decide not just what action she wants to commit, but what interpretation of the past she wants to believe. People construct this sort of ideological home by privileging some interpretations, some memories, over others; all such constructions are powerful, but perhaps nowhere more so than the straits between Florida and Cuba. The Cuban Revolution kicked off a migration of over a million Cubans over a period of fifty years, many of whom ended up in Miami (Boswell and Curtis 38). There, the émigrés[1] built Little Havana and waited for the Revolution to fail. As a result of the Revolution, emigration, and a deep ideological divide, Cubans on both sides of that 90-mile stretch of water developed their own interpretations of the Revolution, their own ideological homes. Each of these homes serves as a sort of carnival mirror, reflecting back to the group what the group wants to see, both about those within the group's

[1] Scholars differ on what to call the Cubans who emigrated after the Revolution. Most of them left willingly, making them emigrants; however, once they left they could not return, making them exiles. Either term fails to convey the whole situation. I have chosen to follow Torres's use of émigré.

boundaries and about those without. In this sense, Cubans on both sides mirror each other, as they each insist on viewing their opponents not as they are, but through the carnival mirror of their own simplified perceptions. The competing ideologies have led to what Rojas calls a state of "memory-war" as each side refuses reconsider its way of perceiving the other (237).

Eventually, the children of those Cubans who experienced the trauma of emigration and exile began to question the historical interpretations or the ideological homes in which they were raised. Indeed, the ideological frameworks on both sides of the straits were lacking, and Cristina García's writing delivered some of the first blows, smashing the mirrors of supposed histories. García's early work, especially her 1997 *The Agüero Sisters*, conveys a sense of complexity that refuses to accept idealized or demonized stereotypes, while poking fun at certainty. Her 2013 novel, *King of Cuba*, returns to Cuban topics to satirize patriarchal systems and Cuban machismo. The book brings much-needed mockery to bear on patriarchal and dictatorial mindsets, but her approach lacks the ideological complexity of her earlier work. One might say that if *The Agüero Sisters* smashes the mirrors, *King of Cuba* reinstalls them. Ana Menéndez, on the other hand, began her career after García and others had already created a complex space within Cuban-American discourse; she has followed in García's steps, but has more consistently resisted idealizing or demonizing, ultimately reworking the broken shards of the mirrors to encourage a more nuanced, more complex understanding of Cuba for readers in the United States.

This essay will first establish a critical and historical framework for how the opposing sides constructed their ideologies and how younger generations of Cuban Americans have begun to seek out a more complex understanding of the past. It will then examine how two authors of remarkably similar backgrounds have written fiction that includes quests for historical truth,

criticism of oversimplifications and official narratives, and journeys back to Cuba, all of which help to open up space for a complex understanding of the island. Both have also invented characters based on icons of the Cuban Revolution in a hope to further complicate the conversation about Cuba and the United States, though in this case their fiction operates in very different ways. García's "El Comandante," representing Fidel Castro, has a tendency to mirror the propaganda of the Miami Émigrés and the United States. Menéndez's Che, however, manages to break away from the imposed preconceptions of both Miami and the Revolution, leaving the reader with new possibilities for thinking about Che – and with him, Cuba.

A Theoretical Background

The Revolution has defined the Cuban nation for the past half century. Artists and academics have shifted from studying the first to the second and third generations of émigrés, but have maintained a focus on the ongoing consequences of the Revolution and the resulting diaspora. Cuban American scholars invariably perceive the Revolution as a time of national trauma, one which involved "psychic rupture and fragmentation" (O'Reilly Herrera, "The Politics" 177). For some Cubans, the trauma of revolution developed into the additional trauma of diaspora; in the three years after the Revolution, a quarter of a million Cubans left the island, many for the United States. Groups which undergo such diasporic trauma must either disappear into the surrounding societies or define themselves in such a way that preserves their collective identity. The Cuban émigrés in Miami initially believed that they would soon return to Cuba and had no desire to assimilate. Though they were absent from the island itself, "reinforcing cubanidad became something of an obsession for the exiles" (María Cristina García, "The Cuban

Population" 84). The resultant émigré identity was one "deeply influenced by a language rooted in the longing for returns" (Mirabal 367), an identity irrevocably linked to their diasporic situation.

Such a strong sense of collective identity was necessary if the émigrés were to survive as a distinct entity, but this in turn required a collective memory. In the process of collective remembrance, similar to the one involved in nation building, "collective symbols form a constellation of reference points that endow upon disparate fragments a sense of congruity" (Torres 37-8). Various events are given symbolic values which, taken together, provide a sense of a unified whole, a seamless narrative which interprets the past in a particular way.

To survive as a group, the Cuban émigrés in Miami needed to frame the past in a way that justified themselves and condemned their opponents. Like other groups, they collectively shaped "how the country of origin and the exile is to be remembered" (Lohmeier and Pentzold 776). By selective forgetting and remembering, they curated memories to create an interpretation of history that "evolved as a form of self-affirmation for the collective identity as a means of cultural and psychic survival" (O'Reilly Herrera, Introduction of *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced* 3). The result was a homogenous, simplified discourse (O'Reilly Herrera, "The Politics" 181), one which overlooked the negative and exaggerated the positive. Though their discourse about Cuba was true in part, the parts were so carefully selected as to make it what Torres refers to as "a mythical image of homeland" (185). By means of this mythical collective image, the community retained its boundaries and its positive self-identity.

Pierre Nora suggests that this is a common process. In his view, memory develops a sense of congruity by accepting only those facts which suit it (8) and remaining blind to all considerations but those of the group (Nora 9). In other words, it selectively remembers and

intentionally forgets, thereby reconstructing "a past without lacunae or faults" (9). Nora writes that "Through the past we venerated above all ourselves" (16). In other words, a group uses a select series of cultural referents to enshrine a positive self-identity in public memory, one in which that group functions as the "good guys." Kreyling builds upon the work of Nora to suggest that "collective memory is 'present oriented,' summoned by social groups and communities who find themselves in troubled waters and in need of reassurance that the present is indeed continuous with a past in which their origins were unambiguously established fact … The way-we-were is the way-we-are" (8). It is implied that those origins are not only established but positive and laudatory.

Lisa Hinrichsen, writing about Southern literature in the United States, offers the useful term "fantasy of mastery" to describe this kind of manufactured memory which idealizes collective history. When a group undergoes a trauma such as the Cuban Revolution, it carefully defines the trauma in terms that allow the group to maintain its sense of self-righteousness. In this manner the group attempts to "perform the impossible task of 'knowing' trauma, locating it and managing it in order to draw it to resolution or swerve from it" (6). Since actually communicating the full experience of the trauma is impossible, the group turns to a simplified version of the event, a fantasy which allows the group to avoid any sense of guilt and affirm its positive self-perception. Once the group has a positive self-perception, it creates imaginary boundaries to identify the righteous and the wicked. Within the boundaries, the community builds for itself a collective identity as the protagonist of history, the maintainer of all that is just and good. Those inside the boundaries become "good guys" and the outsiders "bad guys." The self-identification as the "good guys" enables the group to "justif[y] privilege and sustain cultural norms" (Hinrichsen 5).

Group adherence to this myth creates cohesiveness and a degree of power. Holding the "dreams, desires, fantasies, and fictions … affects and identifications" of a group manifests belonging within that group (Hinrichsen 5), and with belonging comes safety. The more adherents, the more power in the group. But just like crowdfunding only works if all members contribute, this crowdsourced identity only works if a majority of the members abide by that identity. "Shared, collective, cultural memory marks groups *as groups*, confers upon the individual members the identity of the collective and distinguishes them among throngs threatening dissolution" (Kreyling 20). Failure to conform to the collective memory or the group identity – that is, to no longer give the signs of membership – is to threaten the fantasy of mastery. In such a case the group expels the offending individual. For the Cubans, this has taken place in what Rojas calls the "memory-war" (237), a harsh dispute over the correct interpretation of the Revolution's significance, played out in the "competing nostalgic nationalisms" (Mirabal 368) or what Rojas calls the "mirrored nationalism" (240) of Havana and Miami.

Two Mirrors

The relationship between Havana and Miami includes mirrors and mirrored fantasies of mastery on several levels. This idea of mirrors has been a common theme in scholarly literature on Cuban-American relations. De la Campa suggests that "both sides mirror each other in spite of their avowed differences" (7). Torres literally titled her investigation of the Cuban exile in Miami *In the Land of Mirrors*. She writes: "I was struck by the similarities between the intolerance I found in the exile community and on the island" (20). Beyond the obvious mirroring caused by a common culture, the two literally mirror each other in their obsession with

the Revolution, their overly positive self-perception, their intolerance, and their accusations. Both Cuba and the Cuban émigrés have formed their own fantasies of mastery. Both sides claim to represent the real Cuba and to uphold a morally superior cause. In reality, both rely on top-down hierarchies and maintain cohesion by various forms of repression that expel those who do not hold to the fantasy.

Not only do the two sides mirror each other, but fantasies of mastery themselves serve as a sort of trick mirror on which a group can superimpose its sanitized and idealized perception of itself. The mirror covers warts and blemishes and makes the group appear more fill-in-the-blank-with-whatever-positive-attribute than it really is. When the entire group cooperates to project this mythical image, the group can persuade itself that the image is true. In that sense, the fantasy of mastery serves as a carnival mirror, an image purporting to reflect reality while actually distorting it.

There is another sense in which a fantasy of mastery can be a mirror, at least insofar as it includes a reflected image. The fantasy of mastery refers not only to those within the group, but to those outside. If those inside the group are "the good guys" then those outside the group are either indifferent or "the bad guys." When the communal identity looks outwards, in order to retain the imaginary boundaries separating the group from the rest of the world, they must exaggerate differences and erase similarities. The fantasy of mastery not only gives back a false reflection of the group but impedes the group's ability to see the outside world. Indeed, instead of actually seeing the outside world, the communal sense of identity only sees its own preconceived notions of the world reflected back to it by the fantasy of mastery.

Such is the case for both the Havana and the Miami Cubans. Cuba's projected self-identity relies on the idea that the émigrés were *gusanos*, the Revolution had the full support of

the population, and that it substantially improved the quality of life of ordinary Cubans, especially in terms of education, health care, and access to the arts. By themselves the improvements, at least, do not make up a fantasy; these areas did actually improve for most Cubans.[2] But though the revolution did bring a heightened sense of national sovereignty, and visitors to Cuba in the 1970s often gave favorable reviews of the country's progress (Lopez 41, 44), the émigré population was not homogenous, and the Revolution did not have the full support of the Cuban population. Scholars frequently point out that, was the Cuban situation as idealistic as is claimed, they would not have had over a million citizens leave the country since 1959. In 1980, over 120,000 Cubans fled in the Mariel boatlift, many of them from traditionally poor and working-class backgrounds – the very people the Cuban government claimed to be helping (María Cristina García, *Havana USA* 69). An additional mass exodus occurred in the early 1990s, when tens of thousands of rafters (*balseros*) fled the island (Gott 299). And not only have many people left willingly, but Cuba has removed from society, by exile or imprisonment, many who did not uphold the collective identity. Admittedly, external pressure on a society – which Cuba certainly experienced – does lead to internal pressure. Nonetheless, freed political prisoners have frequently testified of harassment, mistreatment, and torture. Accusations of arbitrary arrest and detention increased in the 1990s (Torres 138), and in the last thirty years, human rights organizations have routinely rebuked Cuba for unjustly arresting and detaining individuals. As an extreme example, one man was detained for almost two months just for spray painting *Se Fue* ("He's gone") after Fidel Castro died ("Cuba: Grafiti Artist"). Cuba remains a place where one must be careful of what one says, and where disloyalty to the fantasy of mastery can lead to trouble.

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[2] See *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy* by Louis Perez, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* by Aviva Chomsky, and *Cuba: A Revolution in Motion* by Isaac Saney

On the other hand, Cubans in Miami projected an equally distorted fantasy of mastery. Scholars frequently point out that the Cuban-American community in Miami was not homogenous, and that it included conservatives, moderates, and anti-Castro leftists. Nonetheless, Cuban American scholars virtually all agree that public discourse in "Little Havana" was dominated by anti-Castro and anti-Communist rhetoric. The communal sense of identity was so fiercely defended as to be "a virtual public religion" (Lowe 316). For this collective identity, the imagined boundaries were fairly clear; members were expected to eschew any positive facet of Castro's regime. The community projected a fantasy of mastery onto the island, one in which the Revolution changed Cuba from a wealthy, relatively egalitarian, tranquil near-paradise into a repressive communist hell, while the democratic elements of society fled to Miami.

These assertions turn out to be distortions. Instead of a more or less just society, historian Luis Perez suggests that "Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century dwelt in the American imaginary principally as the site of moral license" (*Between Reform and Revolution* [*BRR*] 239). U.S.-sponsored dictators kept down unrest in the shantytowns and the rural villages while tourists could find any sort of vice they wanted (*Ties of Singular Intimacy* [*TSI*] 222). By 1959, U.S. corporations controlled the vast majority of land, utilities, banking assets, and many industries (Sorey 9, *TSI* 219-220). Meanwhile, rural areas experienced high unemployment and low access to education and health care (De la Campa 64), as well as racism that had been reinstituted by the United States in the early 1900s (59).

The idea that the émigrés defended democracy remains questionable also. Some conducted terror attacks against Cuba, mostly in the 1960s (María Cristina García, *Havana USA* 122, 126), but continuing all the way until the 1990s. From 1973 to 1976, émigrés carried out over a hundred bombings just in Miami (María Cristina García, *Havana USA* 141). Cuban-

Americans who suggested that the United States should normalize relations with – or even negotiate with – Cuba were declared Communists (María Cristina García, *Havana USA* 47) – something which García experienced as well (García, "And there is only" 104). Even the U.S. Treasury Department harassed an art dealer working with Cuban art (Torres 140). For a long time, expressing a divergent opinion in Miami was no more acceptable than in Havana, and sometimes it was almost as dangerous.

A third group plays an important role here. The U.S. government's fantasy of mastery overlapped strongly with that of the most vocal segment of the Cuban émigrés in Miami. Washington's own fantasy of mastery insisted that Communism was the great evil of the world, and that it must be eradicated at all costs. While the Revolution enjoyed a level of support in the U.S. before the fall of Batista, the government quickly began to depict him as an almost demonic force and Che as a villain (Helmic 115). Such a narrative has led the U.S. government over the past five decades to cut off much of Cuba's economic access to the world (Perez, *TSI* 250, Gott 197), to sponsor terrorist attacks in Cuba (Perez, *TSI* 252), and to attempt to starve out the Cubans in the 1990s (Perez, *BRR* 326). It chooses to forget the benefits the Revolution brought some Cuban citizens and its own role in the suffering of the Cuban people.

As this fantasy of mastery overlapped with that of many émigrés, the two fantasies have tended to merge. The United States considered Cuban émigrés as exiles fleeing from Communism, and quickly offered support. Cubans "enjoyed terms of entry [to the United States] routinely denied to other immigrants" (Lopez 38). After entry, Cubans had access to job training programs which were unavailable to actual United States citizens living in Florida (María Cristina García 29, 41, 90). Torres suggests that United States aid – which amounted to nearly a billion dollars (Lopez 38) – was so extensive that it "in effect created the Cuban exiles" (59).

The coalition of these two fantasies of mastery has constructed a powerful barrier to residents of the United States who desire a complex, nuanced understanding of Cuba.[3]

Thus, each group projects its own (oversimplified) conception of the other onto the mirror, and projects an image of itself on the mirror that is equally oversimplified in an attempt to preserve the group's solidarity in the present. And any questioning of that interpretation leads to negative consequences. In such a setting, separated by carnival mirrors, mutual understanding and any kind of productive relationship are impossible, as neither side can see the other. As Torres writes, "Reconciliation will require a long, hard look at ourselves – at the image we project upon the mirror – and a coming to terms with our enemies/selves" (21). For Cuban American authors, then, a key task is to examine the images in the mirror – or, alternatively, to break the mirrors down.

Two Authors

If, within the Miami émigré community, maintaining cubanidad was "an obsession" and "a public religion," then it is no surprise for cubanidad to be passed on to second (and now third) generation Cubans in the United States. Cristina García explains: "I spent my entire childhood downwind from the torch carried by the exiles, and it affected me deeply. It just became part of what I inhale and what I exhale" (García, "Multi-hyphenated identities" 6). The all-permeating atmosphere of loss and nostalgia could not but latch on to the descendants of the exiles, giving them the same sense of loss. The popular saying "you can't miss what you never had" turns out, within the Cuban diaspora, to be false. Some sense of an unobtainable place remains alive in the

[3] My desire to bring attention to the complexity of Cuba's history overlaps in some ways with Amy Kaminsky's work, which brings to light issues in Latin America for which the United States is at least partially culpable. See her introduction to *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora*.

consciousness of later-generation Cuban-Americans who have never even seen Cuba. O'Reilly Herrera, in her introduction to *ReMembering Cuba*, confirms a secondary sense of exile when she writes that "an equally large group of my contributors characterize themselves as being in a state of exile despite the fact that they have little or no first-hand experience of Cuba" (xxii). The sense of a lost homeland has been passed down through keepsakes and photos, continually rehearsed memories, an atmosphere of nostalgia in personal conversation and in media outlets (Lohmeier and Penzold 784, Mirabal 367). Second generation Cubans, therefore, are left with a sense of loss not their own, an inherited collection of memories (Rivero 109) or what O'Reilly Herrera calls "a second-hand sense of displacement" ("Inheriting Exile" 187) or a "second-hand experience of exile" ("Cuban Artists" 7).

In the last ten years, scholars like O'Reilly Herrera, Iraida Lopez and Isabel Alvarez have begun to describe this phenomenon by drawing comparisons between the experiences of second generation Cuban Americans and the concept of "post-memory." The term was coined by Marianne Hirsh, who studied the how memories of trauma were passed down from Holocaust survivors to their children.[4] In such situations, the descendant can inherit and imbibe a deep-seated sense of trauma and loss, even though they themselves did not experience the trauma. In the same way, though not exiles themselves, second and third generation Cuban Americans still experience a sensation of displacement.

It is no surprise, given that sense of loss, that many Cuban-Americans growing up in the diaspora have felt a need to investigate the past for themselves, or as Forza explains, to "retrace their roots" (126). The "vicarious memories" (O'Reilly Herrera, Introduction, *ReMembering Cuba* xxii) they have inherited leave second generations precariously balanced upon the Cuban-American hyphen. Unlike the earlier 1.5 generation, which Firmat Perez suggests can remain

[4] See "Family Pictures: "Maus", Mourning, and Post-Memory."

upon the hyphen quite comfortably, the second generation tends to think of itself as in search of "a cultural home" (O'Reilly Herrera, Introduction, "Cuban Artists" 7), to the point where some would say that "the journey is home" (8).[5] This is in fact what Cristina García says of herself: "You are never at home *at* home. But for me, "home" is not what I am after. What I am after is a sequential and refracted and complicated understanding as I move through the world" (García, "Multi-hyphenated identities" 6).

This younger generation emphasizes the journey in part because their "home" of vicarious memories too often seems oversimplified, or strangely cut off from the time period before the Cuban Revolution. Ylce Irizarry, in her *Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction: The New Memory of Latinidad*, writes that "the books within this study suggest that literary projects have forsaken the construction of a larger public memory in favor of exploring personal collaborative memory because extended collective memory is inaccessible, insufficient, or false" (195). Or as Iraida Lopez writes of three Cuban American novels, including works by García and Menéndez, "the narrators find the available accounts about the past untrustworthy and set out to take them apart" (163). The larger public memory of the Miami émigrés too often proves to be insufficient. As a fantasy of mastery, it has too obviously been curated into a highly idealized narrative. If the collective memory is too clearly idealized, too obviously a fantasy, then the writers and artists of later generations go looking for interpretations of their own, and write out of this desire to gain a more complex understanding of the past. Alvarez Borland goes so far as to suggest a "Cuban-American yearning to create an alternate history" (Alvarez Borland, "Figures of Identity" 41).

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[5] Gustavo Firmat Perez's *Life on the Hyphen* popularized the concept of the "1.5" generation, or those who had childhoods in both Cuba and the United States, thus feeling at home in both worlds. He believes that such Cubans are not less Cuban, but simply more American. While García was born in Cuba, she has no childhood memories of the island, for which reason I have, for the purposes of this paper, considered her a second-generation Cuban-American. Of course, all such distinctions are limited and imprecise (see the introduction to *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora* by O'Reilly Herrera).

This does not mean a totally invented history, but one separate from the hegemonic discourses – the fantasies of mastery – which have been passed down on both sides of the straits.

This searching for an alternate interpretation emerges in the writings of both García and Menéndez. They have quite a bit in common: both were raised by émigrés outside the émigré capital of Miami, became journalists, moved to Miami, and found their reception jarring. In interviews and articles, each author resists both fantasies of mastery. Finally, and most importantly, both of them write fiction haunted with a desire to understand the past, to uncover a history that will give a clear sense of self in the present. In each author's work we see a shift away from the standard fantasy of mastery and an attempt to carve out a new space.

García was born in 1958 in Cuba, but was brought by her parents to New York in 1961, where she grew up away from the center of the Cuban émigrés. Nonetheless, her parents were émigrés themselves and spoke Spanish at home and so, as she says, "I was marked by my parents' dislocation after they left Cuba, so I think on some cellular level I carry the nostalgia of so many other Cuban exiles" (García, "Multi-hyphenated identities" 6). When she went back to Cuba for the first time in her mid-twenties, she found a much more complicated situation than she had expected (García, "And There is Only" 104). Later, in 1987, she took a job in Miami and was shocked by the closed-minded community (García, "And There is Only" 104).[6] After visiting Cuba and living in Miami, García began to "mistrust authorial omniscience – the official version of things, what purports to be all-knowing" (García, "An Interview" 187). García's sense of cubanidad exists outside either mirror held up on either side of the Miami/Havana divide. Indeed, she says "I kind of devote my life, in a way, to kind of reflecting the complexities of the [Cuban American] situation" (García, "Cristina García at the NYS").

[6] According to Lohmeier and Pentzold, this is a common experience (785).

Menéndez was also born to Cuban émigrés, was raised outside of Miami, and spoke Spanish at home. Like García, she became a journalist and spent two stints working in Miami, one in the 1990s and another in the 2000s. Also like García, her first work of fiction – *In Cuba I was a German Shepherd* – was written after her first return to Cuba in 1997 and deals with the Cuban American emigrant experience. She visited Cuba a second time in 2002 before publishing her second book and first novel, *Loving Che*. In 2001, Menéndez wrote an editorial for a New York paper positing a position similar to García's; she said that her friends thought her on the conservative fringe, while her family saw her as part of the liberal fringe. Neither group seemed able to understand the complexity she saw in Cuban American relations ("Cuban Anger"). After returning to Miami in the 2000s, this time for the *Miami Herald*, she wrote articles critical of both Castro and the Cuban émigré community, causing flurries of negative editorial responses and radio attacks in the fall of 2006 and spring of 2007. Like García, she has an ambivalent relationship with the Miami émigré community, and she, too, is a complicating force in the relationship between Cuba and the U.S.

Beyond the biographical similarities, each author investigates the past through fiction in order to establish some sense of identity in the present. García's *The Agüero Sisters* investigates how memory works to create legacy and history, and in doing so it rejects either fantasy of mastery. The characters search through the wilderness of history where truth can be difficult if not impossible to ascertain. Nonetheless, they are drawn to the past to find the source of their identities apart from the lies that are impressed on them by others. Menéndez's novel *Loving Che* also rejects the fantasies of mastery, questions how much can actually be discovered about the past, and yet still focuses on a search to fill a felt void. Besides the backwards gaze into the past, this novel shares attributes with García's most recent novel, *King of Cuba*, in that it turns to look

at the fantasy imposed upon one of the icons of the Revolution. In this respect, however, the authors diverge. García's use of humor and the surreal served, in *The Agüero Sisters*, to fragment the artificial perceptions about the Cuban-American experience and to provide complexity. In *King of Cuba*, García's outlandish and admittedly funny parody flattens, simplifies, and lends itself to caricature. While her treatment of the émigrés and Castro serves to highlight the similarities between the two, it also fails to humanize them – and especially Castro. Though the portrait of Che in *Loving Che* is also overly simplified, it creates space to humanize him, and perhaps with him, post-Revolution Cuba.

CHAPTER 2

THE AGÜERO SISTERS AND THE WILDERNESS OF HISTORY

Since the end of the Cold War, García has emerged as one of the most important Cuban American authors whose fiction disrupts the émigré fantasy of mastery. Both of García's first two novels deal with "the centrality of the exile experience to Cuban-American life" (Payant 172). However, the second novel seems less concerned with sorting out which side of the controversy is correct, and more concerned with sifting through the historical rubble to create space for those who are neither-nor, who simply wish to understand their past and to build an identity of their own from the memories they possess. *The Agüero Sisters* (*AG*) attempts to understand the past (Socolovsky 144) and as such is "deeply preoccupied with the construction and reception of public memory" (Irizarry, "Doubly Troubling Narratives" 199). If, as García says, "legacies are really distorted memories" (García, "The Nature of Inheritance"), then the novel investigates how those legacies are formed. With that in mind, the reader can come to *The Agüero Sisters* expecting a highly complex examination of memory and its roles in individual and communal identity, and ultimately a fictional space that is not only neither-nor in terms of American or Cuban culture, but is also neither-nor in terms of politics and competing fantasies of mastery.

The novel revolves around a singular violent act committed by Ignacio, a scientist who specializes in the birds of Cuba. The character of Ignacio has particular importance beyond this act; through him, the reader gains access to aspects of Cuban history frequently overshadowed

by the Revolution and its aftermath. His diary/autobiography, embedded throughout the text, teems with descriptions of Cuba's now-lost fauna. Ignacio's voice also takes the reader further back into history by recounting the life of his father, who was the reader in a cigar factory – a once-vital industry of Cuba and of great importance to Cuban national identity.[7] Through this character, García gives her readers access to a Cuban heritage deeper than the typical disputes over the Revolution. However, though Ignacio records his family history, he also ruptures it by killing his wife and later committing suicide. As a result of Blanca's murder, her two daughters, Constancia and Reina, and their eventual children are left without a full history, much like second-generation Cuban Americans. Set adrift by these acts of violence, the characters try to find an identity from what scraps of the past they have.

No doubt this look to the past is partly because in *The Agüero Sisters*, the past cannot be ignored. Family features - scars, hands, faces - turn up in every generation. Reina inherits her grandmother's hands and passes on their skill, if not their size, to her daughter, Dulce. The scar on Blanca's heel is passed by Constancia to her daughter, Isabel, and from Isabel to Raku, her son. Dulce carries her father's face and, perhaps most strangely, Constancia wakes up one morning to find that her mother's face has supplanted her own.

All of these fragments from the past - hands, scars, faces - make it impossible for the characters to ignore the past; they cannot even look in the mirror without seeing the signs. The characters are all clearly products of history and yet García refuses to grant her characters the simple, straightforward history that one would find in a fantasy of mastery. The past remains almost completely inaccessible, handed down in disorienting shards, explained in contradictory ways or not explained at all. If only they could get a larger grasp of what Reina calls "the dark,

[7] According to Fernando Ortiz, in his *Cuban Counterpoint*, the tobacco industry was inherently more nationalistic than the sugar industry, for which Cuba is primarily known today.

exploding whole," if they could only gather a few more fragments, they could find out why they are the way they are. As a result, all the characters experience a sense of loss or absence and a corresponding desire to gather up fragments, to travel back to some explanatory origin. As the characters delve back into the past, they find that none of the stories they have heard are sufficient, and that they must rework many of their assumptions. In this way García takes a sledgehammer to both sets of mirrors, critiquing each of the fantasies of mastery overshadowing the Cuban-American experience: on the one side, the failed promises of the Revolution, and on the other, the failed imaginary world of the Cuban émigrés.

In the U.S., the problems with Cuba are well-known, especially the poverty of the 1990s (the "Special Period") induced by the fall of the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. embargo. García uses what Rivero calls "that peculiarly Cuban humorous vein of *choteo* (110) and the circumstances of the Special Period to mock the Revolution's claims. She pulls out some of the more comic examples of poverty and mismanagement for her readers, including brain surgeons who have to bake cakes on the weekends for the extra money (*AG* 48), busses that run more in the middle of the night than during rush hour (97), the shampoo that glues your hair together (55). Other examples, however, are more sad than comic. Dulce says that, to make ends meet, "almost everyone I know my age, male or female, turns a trick once in a while" (51). Near the end of the novel, Reina stands on the beach and thinks about *balseros* dying out on the ocean as they seek to flee to the U.S. (*AG* 202). Though Constancia returns to Cuba to recover her father's diary, she will almost certainly return to Miami. By the end of the novel none of the characters are willing to live in Cuba.

García also cracks jokes at the expense of the Miami fantasy of mastery through both Reina and Constancia. Early in the novel, Constancia moves from New York City to Miami with

her husband. She finds she does not quite fit in with the Miami Cubans: faces fall "starkly silent" when she "mentioned she'd voted Democratic (just once, for Jimmy Carter)" (45). Much later on, Reina moves to join her sister in Miami, where she too faces pressure from the emigre "civic religion," which expects that all Cubans will accept certain dreams, desires, and fictions. Reina complains: "It isn't enough for her simply to be in Miami, or even to remain silent. The pride-engorged *cubanos* want her to crucify El Comandante" (197). In another comic moment in which Reina accidentally calls a cashier *compañera*, "all hell broke loose on the checkout line, and a dozen people nearly came to blows!" (197). And according to Dulce, who arrives in Miami near the end of the novel, the city has a strange capacity to "foster … empty delusions" (288).

Her observation suggests that perhaps the mirror of Little Havana is no mirror at all, that the exiles are deluding themselves when they insist that they are the true Cuba. Reina compares the Cuban emigre men to well-trained dogs (197) and can't spend more than a night or two with any of them (198). Constancia's second husband, Herberto, lacks any real agency, for even in death he is "maddeningly inert" (292). Miami grants no beauty to the aging process as Cuba does, as grandmothers in the States are not respected and sought out for advice, like in Cuba (26). There are no plazas, no places to congregate (174) and the degraded position of community matches the degraded perceptions of beauty of which Reina complains when she goes to a department store (*AG* 161). The erosion of family value plays out again when Constancia literally sells her mother's face as the trademark of her "Cuerpo de Cuba" line of anti-aging creams. The translation, of course, is "Body of Cuba," and Constancia acts here as capitalist pimp, selling the Cuba of the imagination to her fellow exiles and eventually Americans at large, gaining profits far beyond what she needs. This is also an ironic, if less shocking, reflection of the *jinteria* in Cuba which Dulce experiences. While Constancia sells the body of Cuba and the

face of her mother, Dulce must sell her own body out of necessity, constrained by an embargo put in place by the same profiteering country in which her aunt sells the "Cuerpo de Cuba."[8] Constancia thinks that she still possesses the true Cuba - that she is its *constant* - but she has already lost Cuba. She can no more claim it than she can actually become more attractive by the use of her creams.

While García effectively smashes the mirrors, or the old perceptions of past, her characters still feel compelled to look to their past in order to make sense of their present and move into the future. However, if it is true that the mirrors of the fantasies of mastery are broken into shards, it may be that the character searching out the past will never be able to find more than fragments. Indeed, *The Agüero Sisters* could be considered an exercise in fragmentation. In the midst of conflicting testimonies, Constancia's thought that "the past is a wilderness" (297) is correct; to travel through the past is to travel through a territory of ever-shifting fragments, bits and pieces of memory and contradictory interpretations that may or may not cohere. In the text, Reina specifically questions whether it is ever possible to get a whole image of another person: "We hold only partial knowledge of each other, [Reina] thinks. We're lucky to get even a shred of the dark, exploding whole" (201). So much goes on beneath the surface, there is so much unknown even in one's own family, that knowledge shows up only in fragments.

For that reason, it is fitting that the narrative structure of *The Agüero Sisters* is also highly fragmented, and a bit of a wilderness itself. In the first place, the book speaks from five perspectives, some of which offer additional storylines. The reader only gets fragments of each life, often separated by time and space. García heightens this sense of fragmentation by littering the text with aphorisms and snatches of poetry - a line here, a wise saying there, a quotation

[8] The brand name also echoes the way in which the body of Cuba was sold after the Spanish-American war, until the vast majority of its land and economy were owned by foreigners, particularly Americans (see Perez, *TSI*).

showing up under some character description. She quotes surrealist poets and philosophers, and then throws in her own isolated sentences, subject to multiple interpretations. “Maybe the ground is the true river," Reina thinks as she travels upstream with her sister (270). “Did it all count or did they merely love each other?” Constancia worries, thinking of her daughter (211). In this way the novel itself becomes a series of fragments to piece together, replicating for the reader the experience of an exile who grows up between competing fantasies of mastery and must rake through old family stories, half-told anecdotes, family resemblances and bits of inheritances to forge a sense of identity.

Even beyond narrative structure, this refracted, fragmented, complex view of the world comes through the novel in surreal descriptions which make García’s work overlap with magical realism. Throughout the text, shards of plot, character, and description are distended marvelously, sometimes ludicrously or monstrously. The characters, either individually or in groups, are somehow larger than life, almost the same way the fish in every stereotypical fisherman’s tale become larger each time the story is told. Electricity around Reina often flickers or goes out when she comes into Constancia’s apartment (255), and Dulce gives some of her clients electrical shocks (256). When Ignacio first sees Reina’s father, he is “tall as a lamppost” (*AG* 235). Every time Reina goes to the yacht club, heads do not only turn - “pandemonium breaks out” (171). Constancia as a girl lands in a mango-vender’s cart, and cats parade around after her for weeks, drawn to her “sweet, fleshy scent” (83). Here we also have a distending of language, where a scent becomes not only sweet, but “fleshy,” thereby stretching ordinary definitions and leaving the world slightly out of its normal dimensions. Reina’s hands are of “luxurious disproportion” (196) - though how exactly those two descriptors go together isn’t clear. But Reina is often described in oddly swollen terms; she comes up from a Miami

swimming pool as a "glorious titanic beast" (159), while later Constancia stares at her "mesmerizing slabs of soft, beveled flesh" (171) and thinks that she and Isabel look like "hot giant rubies" (218). The whole world has a sense of distortion, of a strange dream, of the surreal.

Despite the fragmentation and the difficulty of knowing anything for certain, García's characters are irresistibly drawn to the past. For this reason, the youngest generation returns not to the place of their birth but to their parents, who hold the last remnants of a tattered family history – much like later-generation Cuban Americans often return to their relatives in Cuba. Isabel returns with nothing but a mesh bag of sculpture, all "odd shards of clay and other materials combined to suggest something recycled, something tampered with or incomplete" (212). For Isabel's art, nothing is quite complete or whole. Even a hard and durable material like ceramic is not fixed - or rather, it is only fixed in uncertainty, in shapes which could mean anything or nothing, and which do not fit into the old forms.

Silvestre, for his part, has been cut off from his parents ever since he was sent to Colorado as a child in the Pedro Pan program, designed to keep Cuban children out of Castro's clutches. While in Colorado, he became ill and as a result of the illness became deaf. His new inability to hear his parents (or anyone) symbolizes a generational disconnect between Silvestre and his mother – a common problem for the Pedro Pan children.[9] Eventually, Silvestre returns to his father to uncover his past, and literally uncovers and kills his father. Just beforehand, however, we find that Silvestre has brought nothing back but a few scraps of surrealist verse which form a parallel to Isabel's similar scraps of clay - he too, is unfinished.

Among the children of Reina and Constancia, Dulce receives the most attention from García and therefore articulates her urge to find an origin more strongly than her cousins. In

[9] When Roman De la Campa reunited with his own parents after his time in the Pedro Pan program, he writes that "It felt as if we didn't know each other anymore" (47).

some ways, she seems to vocalize the concerns of second and third generation Cuban Americans. While wandering the streets in Spain, she says "I wish I could go back through all the blood and muscle to the origin … we walk in [our ancient ancestors'] footsteps and everyone else's since" (205). Being part of such a long lineage ought to give her some source of wisdom by which she can make decisions, but the line has been broken with the death of Blanca. She wishes there were some ritual which passed on all the history of the tribe, some opportunity to hear her history and sort through it for herself, to "dismiss all the false histories pressed upon us, accumulate our true history like a river in rainy season" (144). By a proper understanding of her origin, she thinks she can understand her present and move into her future. Unfortunately, it seems that Dulce – in an parallel to later-generation Cuban American authors – will need to construct any such understanding on her own.

In Constancia, the desire for return is initially manifested in the longing for the wisdom of an older generation. As she fights wrinkles, she frets that without a grandmother or mother to talk to, "how, then, could she possibly know how to grow old herself?" (26). Some stronger link to the past would serve as a means to determine her own identity, to piece her own life together. Since she cannot go to a mother or an older woman in the community for advice, eventually she must go back to Cuba, back to "where the curse was first born" and "where the grave was first dug" (*AG* 260). She and Reina therefore put out to sea to find Constancia a *coyote* who can smuggle her ashore. Only out in the waters between Cuba and Miami, in what De la Campa would say is the only place that a Cuban-American is really at home (175), does Constancia learn the truth about her mother's death: Ignacio shot Blanca in the throat. Only there does she learn she would rather have the truth and her sister than the lies of her father. Later, in Cuba, Constancia digs up Ignacio's final papers and reads the story for herself – making her return to

the island not so much about a return to a specific place as a sort of return to her own story. Faced with a new complex understanding, she will need to rearrange her own internal space and construct an altered identity.

The Agüero Sisters, then, rejects the idea that fantasies of mastery contain the answers to the past. The truth of the past is incredibly complex and difficult, if not impossible, to discern. Nonetheless, the novel also depicts how impossible it is to ignore the past, how one may need to return, and how one must use whatever fragments one has to form an identity with which to move into the future.

CHAPTER 3

LOVING CHE AND THE UNKNOWABLE PAST

Like so many Cuban American authors, Menéndez also writes to understand the past. Her first book, *In Cuba I was a German Shepherd*, deals with some of the stresses and tensions of exile while giving sympathetic and nuanced depictions of the Cuban community in Miami and its wrestling with memory. Her second book and first novel, *Loving Che* (2003), deals more with the actual production of those memories, specifically regarding the Revolutionary icon, Che.

The narrator of *Loving Che* is a Cuban America writer who was born in Cuba but grew up with her grandfather in Florida. Her grandfather told her almost nothing of her past. His silence, though nonviolent, ruptures the narrator's access to the past just as certainly as Blanca's murder and Ignacio's suicide prevented their descendants from understanding their own history. The narrator eventually returns to Cuba to search for her mother. After finding nothing and returning to Florida, she receives a mysterious box full of fragmented letters and photographs. The photographs are included in the novel, and are actual historical photographs of Che. The letters and photos form the middle third of the book, and give the impression that the narrator is the child of Che Guevara. This leads the narrator on another unfulfilling attempt to discover her personal history, carried out in the last third of the text.

Much like *The Agüero Sisters*, this novel revolves around an inherited past, fantasies of mastery, historical fragments, and returns. Critics tend to focus especially on the novel's relation to history, as it imagines new contexts for genuine photos, and therefore elevates the personal

over the political (Simões 2). In doing so it questions "official renditions" of the past (Alvarez Borland "The Memories of Others" 12) and suggests that historical and fictional writing might not be too different, that recorded history may simply reflect the desires of the historians (Alvarez Borland, "Figures of Identity" 32). This question is particularly pivotal, as re-creating Che as a potential lover and father "question[s] some of the most basic political assumptions of and about [the Miami Cuban-American] community" (Dalleo and Saez 15). That fantasy of mastery considers Che to be a thug, a monster, a man to be disparaged or ignored. The novel, however, suggests alternate possibilities. Indeed, the questioning of official history – a theme also common in the works and interviews of García – serves to "subvert the grand narrative of both Cuban and Cuban-American exile culture" (Lopez 101). The Che in the text fits neither the macho warrior of the Revolution nor the great villain of the Miami émigrés. Ultimately, *Loving Che* serves as an example of the later-generation Cuban-American tendency to "reconstruct a history for themselves" (Rohrleitner 137). As in *The Agüero Sisters,* the reader can come to *Loving Che* expecting a felt need for a nuanced personal history, a search for the past, and a bewildering jungle of fragments from which the narrator must construct an identity. The formation of that identity will require a return to Cuba and a rejection of both fantasies of mastery.

Much like *The Agüero Sisters,* a desire for a history permeates *Loving Che* (*LC*) as a felt need for some connection to one's origins. The narrator describes life as a series of separations beginning with birth; one must always leave that which is familiar, and so one must learn "to detach oneself" (3). However, even if one becomes accustomed to being detached, "even then we may turn one day and find the years hollowing a dark canyon beneath us" (3). In other words, something within us longs for connection with an origin, no matter how much we train ourselves

otherwise. The narrator comes back to this point obliquely in the letter to Dr. Carabello, describing "that feeling of vastness at your back" caused by the absence of a known history (173). Like Dulce, the narrator desires some account of the past to help her in the present. Without that concept of an origin, she feels a lack, an absence. The absence of history creates a feeling like vertigo, an unsteadiness which demands answers. Unlike members of the 1.5 generation who have their own memories of Cuba, narrator cannot live on the Cuban-American hyphen – at least until she has some real, personal knowledge of Cuba (Sims 110).

The narrator feels this from the time she is a girl, becoming "more and more preoccupied with the blank space where my mother should have been" (*LC* 4) in a near-echo of García's famous phrase, in the words of Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban*: "and there's only my imagination where our history should be" (138). Her mother comes to exist more as a figment of her imagination than as any reality – partially because she knows so little of the reality. The sense of a void grows and gnaws at her until she makes the absurd suggestion that her grandfather may have kidnapped her and that he isn't her grandfather at all (*LC* 6). Her desire for her past and her obsessive imaginings led her to create a fiction, a fantasy, which had no basis in reality. Just as the characters in *The Agüero Sisters* all desire to return to their past, and particularly to their parents, so this narrator too must return to Cuba to look for her mother. Like Constancia, she goes back to Cuba to find a person; like Constancia, what she finds is a story.

That story is no more a tidy history than the wilderness of fragments through which the characters in *The Agüero Sisters* wander. After she returns to Florida, the narrator receives a box from a woman claiming to be her mother. It is full of photos and fragments of text, "small shards of remembrances written on banners of wind" (49). The narrator must search through literal fragments of this story in an attempt to discover her past. As in *The Agüero Sisters,* in at least

one case a fragment comes in the form of a physical attribute. The author of the letters, Teresa, records how she saw the narrator walk up the street with "her dark hair … pulled back low and the ends curled around her neck in a style that was familiar to me…she reminded me of myself at the same age" (14-15). Teresa herself had once worn her hair in a similar style: "the girls had gathered my long hair into a swirl at the nape of my neck" (53). Most of the fragments, however, come in the mysterious box full of paper and photos – literal fragments of a story created from memories and reflections, some isolated, some linked.

García's fragments take the form of a somewhat bizarre wilderness which makes the characters question whether can give any objective account of the past or if they will simply need to invent their own history. Menéndez's fragments are less unsettling, and the questioning is more subtle, but they are just as effective at undermining clear-cut conceptions of the past. Indeed, it quickly becomes questionable whether one can really know the past. From the very first page, the narrator announces that she likes to look at old photos and make up stories about them, "playing a game with history" (*LC* 1). And though the letters from Teresa purport to be true, they nevertheless undermine their own narrative again and again. Teresa writes that as a child she began "to wonder if perhaps the outer world was no more real than our imagination and all its thrashings but a mirror of our own thoughts" (17). She does not mean there is no outer world, but that it is so heavily filtered by our own thoughts and perceptions that we never really see it. Instead, we project our own thoughts onto the mirror of our perceptions, and see only what we expect to see. This would be even more true regarding fantasies of mastery and the Cuban American experience. If Cuban-U.S. relations are determined by competing fantasies of mastery, each working as a mirror on multiple levels, then Teresa's statement is on some level true. Through fantasies of mastery we see only what we want to see – an interpretation radically

influenced by our predispositions and reflected back to us in a mirror. It's no wonder, then, that the Menéndez "find[s] the available accounts about the past untrustworthy and set[s] out to take them apart (Lopez 163).

Teresa goes on undermining her own narrative: "And I wonder if our recorded history isn't like this, if our idea of history isn't another way of saying an idea of ourselves" (17). This statement could come directly out of Pierre Nora – perhaps written history merely reflects the positive aspects of the group back to itself. Like the mirror analogy, however, this statement of Teresa's works on two levels. First, as mentioned, it questions recorded history, or, to use García's phrase, "the official version of things, what purports to be all-knowing" (García, "An Interview"). It works to "debunk the idea that historical and fictional writing are all that different" (Alvarez Borland "Figures of Identity" 32). Secondly, the statement questions itself, for Teresa is embarking on the project of recording her own history. It is effectively an admission that this history enclosed in a cardboard box is not reliable. Instead, this history is a construct of individual or collective self-perception, formed, as Nora said, in order to create a positive self-image, much like the Havana houses with "the street-side faces … smooth and neat" while "The alleys were the dim backsides of so much industry" (21). There's a core of doubt in the very center of her narrative; to what extent does Teresa present the reader with a "street-side face?" Near the end of the novel, the narrator has imbibed this ethic, commenting: "in the end, each of us exists in a small universe of our own making" (182). This is a universe created by one's own perceptions, shaped by one's own selected rememberings. As in *The Agüero Sisters*, one might never be able to grasp more than a few fragments of the "dark, exploding whole."

The rest of the fragments show Teresa's attempt to create a fantasy out of her desires. Just as a collective community selects histories to show itself in a positive light, so Teresa

invents memories to reflect her desires for the ideal. Che in some sense was the ultimate Cuban idealist, and out of Teresa's desire she invents memories of their rendezvous. What the narrator experienced by imagining an ideal mother, Teresa carried out via the written word. In both cases, Menéndez shows how fantasies of mastery come about.

After going through the box of fragments, the narrator, like Constancia, returns to Cuba to find her history. But her search only leads to further questions. She never finds her mother. Instead, she finds a woman who claims to have known her mother, and who offers a plausible but unsubstantiated story. The last section of the book teems with questions. Can the narrator really trust that packet of letters sent from a third country with no return address? Can the narrator rely on a woman who claims that her mother knew Teresa? How would she know if Che could have been a lover when the highly educated professor cannot see him that way? There are no easy answers to these questions, just as there are no easy answers in the past.

While many of the ideas of Menéndez resound with ideas that García used, *Loving Che* is by no means a rewrite of *The Agüero Sisters.* Menéndez certainly includes a search through a fragmented past, but she relies much less heavily than García on fragmentation of character and form. *The Agüero Sisters* contains at least 5 narrative strands; *Loving Che* has two, one framed by the other. *The Agüero Sisters* rings with distortions of language, character, and description, and rattles with bizarre quotations and aphoristic observations until the reading experience becomes a bit of a wilderness. In *The Agüero Sisters,* the whole world seems uncertain. The reader and the characters must wonder why there was an owl that stole a placenta, or a mysterious bite on a woman's heel, or a strange Nordic tourist who loves to feed women eggs. *Loving Che* relies on the plot itself for its mystery, rather than magical realism; the world itself seems stable, but the search for history is not.

Loving Che offers no answers, but, like *The Agüero Sisters*, it resists both fantasies of mastery. Here, too, the reader finds a strange tension in Miami. Early in the novel, the narrator plans to display photos of exiles, but she finds that when she starts to collect photos from those who fled Batista along with those who fled Castro, her "political motivations were put in question and the entire project fell apart (2). She then laments the émigré community's "endless pining for the past [which] seemed to me like a kind of madness" (2). After the narrator receives the mysterious box, she goes to a professor of history to ask if the story could be true. Dr. Caraballo (whose name sounds vaguely like Castro's nickname, El Caballo), finds that "there are some errors in the dates…Omissions." She goes on: "It was difficult for me to read about that man as a lover; it was difficult for me to see his photograph" (*LC* 174). Dr. Caraballo is unable to see Che as a lover, because her desire to see him as a villain precludes anything so tender. She has a hard time even looking at his photograph – and such a one-dimensional view is a sign of the fantasy of mastery, in which an image of a villain superimposed on the historical leader. After the narrator leaves the meeting, she thinks: "So often in Miami I have departed from a friendly conversation with a lingering chill, as if some malignancy ran beneath the surface…the sense that the person chatting so pleasantly with me was only waiting to be offended, to detect in some innocent or ignorant statement a secret adherence to repellent beliefs" (175). The criticism of the Miami émigrés is less humorous here than in García's novel, but it certainly exists.

At the same time, Menéndez doesn't try to idealize life on Cuba; the narrator's returns there depict the poverty, the desperation, the *jinteria* (so like the prostitution of the Batista era). Nonetheless, the narrator still depicts daily life far less bleakly than García's *King of Cuba*. One could say that Menéndez creates a Cuban chorus through the three family units the narrator visits on her second trip to Cuba, but this chorus resounds with ambiguity. The first member of the

chorus is a boy who persuades the narrator to buy things for him in the market. He then brings her to his house, and she finds herself invited over for the lunch which she herself has provided, all along considering it "a delightful little game" (189). While listening to the boy's mother talk at lunch, the narrator suspects that her account of life in Cuba is more an attempt to please her than a true expression of her thoughts. Indeed, the narrator concludes that "her true thoughts were private and unknowable" (188). This statement serves as an echo of Reina's skepticism and could serve as a summary for *Loving Che*'s portrayal of Cuba as a whole. The text undermines any claims of complete understanding.

Later, the narrator visits the apartment of a wealthier family which has wine and satellite TV – though even here, shabbiness lurks in the corners (202). This household includes a mysterious young black woman who appears to be not quite family and not quite servant. Menéndez writes in such a way that our interest cannot but be piqued; the reader wants to know who the woman is, why she is both maid and member of the house, why no one speaks to her – but the narrator never finds out, and never sees her again (199). While the narrator speaks on more open terms with this family, and their hardships are still evident, their history, like the thoughts of the mother, is ultimately inscrutable.

In a third encounter, a young woman finds the narrator and claims to be the daughter of the narrator's former maid. Here, again, Menéndez illustrates the difficulty of the Cuban situation. While deciding whether or not to trust the young woman, the narrator thinks about how "every trip to Havana is a dance between wanting to believe in the good of people and protecting oneself from the desperation that poisons every interaction" (204) – a fairly clear indictment of the Cuban situation. Nonetheless, the narrator chooses to join the woman, and meets her mother's (purported) former maid. This woman appears to live with her daughter in a single

room that has little more than a hotplate, but they have food, new Nike shoes, and money saved (211). Life, though difficult, is going on.

On the whole, Menéndez has provided a view of Cuba that is both varied and limited. She admits that there have been improvements in society: during her second trip, the narrator notices that the people on the street are better dressed than when she visited years ago (184). At the same time, "Everywhere, the socialist experiment seemed dead and buried, awaiting only the death and burial of its maximum leader" (184). The Revolution, in this view, caused hardship and desperation and its citizens look forward to the advent of capitalism. Cuba's long-held fantasy of mastery, too, seems in decline. But instead of painting the island according to preconceived ideas, Menéndez allows very different observations and interactions to allow a rounded picture of life on the island; though the citizens are poor, they are not so destitute as the Miami fantasy of mastery would suggest. Moreover, the narrator makes no claim to know the thoughts of the citizens. The narrative thereby resists an easy assimilation into either fantasy of mastery.

In questioning the fantasies of mastery and one's ability to know history, the novel does not advocate nihilism, but a more nuanced view of history, and an awareness of how memory functions. Often memory is not a reproduction of the past but rather of desires. This is true of the narrator, Teresa, Dr. Caraballo, and ultimately, both general fantasies of mastery on either side of the straits. If, as the novel suggests and as Menéndez states, memory cannot be trusted (Menéndez, "Crossing the Crest" 178), then we must be willing to listen to others and to admit uncertainty. Such humility "seems to open up space for counternarratives" (Lopez 186). In this way, Menéndez has furthered the work begun by García. In a world where all of the old stories are in doubt, one could reconsider old interpretations of the past and reimagine relationships between the U.S. and Cuba.

CHAPTER 4

KING OF CUBA AND SIMPLICITY

Cristina García did not give a Cuban revolutionary icon her full attention until her sixth novel, *King of Cuba* (2013). This is not to say that she has completely neglected either Castro or Che. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Celia seems to regard Castro as some sort of long-distance lover, constantly primping when she hears him on the radio (4) or when she prepares to do her patriotic duty of watching the coastline (112). Celia's daughter Felicia also fantasizes about Castro making love to her while at a reeducation camp in the mountains (110-111). Butler notes that these scenes seem to link patriotism with a sexualized version of the leader (98), and the ridiculous nature of Celia and Felicia's fantasies mock the supposed sexual equality of the revolution. In García's second novel, *The Agüero Sisters*, Dulce's father is a Che-like figure named José Luís Fuerte: one of the original revolutionaries, he is enshrined in an official museum. García also gives him a slogan regarding the church – "Make them grow palm nuts!" – which perhaps mocks the Castro government's use of Che quotations as slogans (144). Beyond these two briefly mentioned figures – one of them not even explicitly linked to the historical persona – García leaves the icons out until *King of Cuba*.

The novel pairs an obvious Fidel Castro figure (usually called "El Comandante" and never "Castro") with Goyo Herrera, an invented Cuban exile with investments in New York and a condo in Miami. Besides the fact that they hate each other, the two characters have vast similarities, almost to the point of being mirror images. By juxtaposing El Comandante and

Goyo, García critiques both Miami and Havana and resists a fantasy of mastery, but this time it is primarily the fantasy of patriarchy. Both old men are incredibly macho, incredibly arrogant, and hilariously enfeebled. Because of the obvious depiction of Castro, most critics have read it as a dictator novel which emphasizes issues of machismo and heteropatriarchy (Hanna and Vargas 76). Wilson focuses specifically on how García's witty rendition of Castro "demystifies 'El Comandante's' world-wide stature" by attacking his "conflation of machismo and military prowess" (127). Vargas, too, investigates *King of Cuba* as a dictator novel which serves to critique patriarchy and "hypermasculinist hero narratives" in both Havana and Miami (150).

García accomplishes her rebuttal of machismo through what she calls "equal opportunity skewering" (García, "The Rumpus Interview with Cristina García"). She wittily attacks patriarchal discourse wherever she finds it. This makes the book an example of *choteo*, a form of mockery which Cubans consider to be their own particular sense of humor. Rodolfo Cortina refers to *choteo* as a type of parody, or the practice of "making fun of everything and everybody" (50). Cuban scholars have investigated it as a peculiarly Cuban trait since Jorge Mañach's *Indagación del Choteo* (1940), and O'Reilly Herrera notes that many Cubans consider this an essential attribute of the Cuban character ("The Politics of Mis-ReMembering" 189).[10]

In an interview after the publication of *King of Cuba*, García said: "I also wanted to give a more nuanced voice to the sixty-year shouting match between Cuba and its exiles" (García, "Multi-hyphenated Identities"). To prepare for the novel, she read "everything" about Castro, and tried "to start imagining him beyond the speeches, beyond the vitriol, the exile side, beyond the temporary adulation on the Cuban side … get in [his] bloodstream" (García, "the Rumpus Interview with Cristina García"). But while García skillfully mocks patriarchal discourse and

[10] Menéndez mentions it also: after her first visit to Cuba, she remembers noticing "the fatalistic humor I thought was unique to exile" ("Coming Home").

cleverly compares Castro to the exile community, the *choteo* form has an unavoidable tendency to oversimplify. In García's rendering of Castro, his persona becomes oversimplified, distorted into very much the sort of one-dimensional image that the Miami émigrés and the U.S. government have imposed on him for half a century.

This is not to say that García fails to see problems with the émigré side. In fact, the novel constantly engages in clever attribute-crossing to suggest that the Miami émigrés are not as different from Revolutionary Cubans as they would like to think. In that sense García has continued her project of complicating the discourse around the Cuban-American experience. For instance, the world knows Cuba for its *jinteria*, or the way some Cubans literally sell themselves to wealthy foreigners out of desperation. In an ironic twist, women in Goyo's émigré community prostitute themselves for pleasant but unnecessary financial gain. Goyo usually finds himself too distracted by his girlfriend's beauty to question her motives, but he nonetheless suspects that she simply wants him to help pay for her son's tuition or her mother's medical bills (*KC* 83). And when Goyo goes to the local bakery and the cashier writes her phone number on his receipt, he reflects on how his age and wealth make him a fine catch in his community (83). In other words, the cashier and plenty of others will try to seduce him to get something from him, in a disturbing reflection of *jinteria*.

The centerpiece of the novel, however, is the comparison between Goyo and El Comandante. These two octogenarians are not perfect mirror images – there are important discrepancies – but they are close. El Comandante was born to a wealthy landowner who ruled his land like a fief (107), and Goyo had a wealthy father he claims was "King of Cuba" (103). At university, they had been mistaken for each other: "tall and handsome then, and … known to drop Latin aphorisms into casual conversations" (129). They even loved the same woman, who

later committed suicide. Now, in old age, they are physically deteriorating, complaining about special diets, resisting all help, keeping secret stashes of chocolates and cigars. They both experience what might be hallucinations induced by old age, as when the devil shows up to visit El Jefe, or when Goyo goes on an ill-fated swamp expedition despite the fact that he can barely walk.

Both men are obsessed over their legacies. El Comandante constantly channel surfs, looking for news of his revolution, and is infuriated to find that he is no longer center stage. Goyo fears that his life has been lived for nothing, and convinces himself that if he can only kill El Comandante, the émigrés will hail him as a hero. Both, too, are faced with problems they cannot solve, especially regarding their children. El Comandante calls his "a sorry brood," feeling their occupations – a "god-awful" poet, a student of snails, and a refurbisher of cars – are worthless. Goyo's progeny, on the other hand, consist of a psychologically unstable drug addict and a photographer who specializes in naked old people. Their projects, too, are decaying; El Comandante fears that his people would sell him out for a bar of soap (89), while Goyo's house in New York is on the verge of collapse.

One of the most important ways the two men are the same comes out in their machismo, which expresses itself first of all in rampant lust. Disoriented by the internet, both octogenarians find themselves distracted online by penile enhancement ads. This is particularly relevant to the macho self-image, in which sexual prowess equates to power and greatness. So, hardly a chapter goes by without one or both of the octogenarians hitting on a woman, recalling women with whom they've had sex, or actually having sex. Goyo recounts and rendezvous with multiple lovers. El Comandante still travels with his wife, but almost every sighting of a woman reminds him of some previous sexual encounter. While nominally faithful to their wives, they rarely treat

women as anything but objects designed for the pleasure of men. Even food and dolphins are eroticized. At the Devil's Diner, where Goyo eats with his son, Goyito, the foods are sexually appealing: "sundaes erotically glistening with pecans; slabs of ham like a chorus line of delectable thighs" (142). And when El Comandante watches a dolphin show and finds out that one of them is pregnant, he finds satisfaction thinking that "the bitch only had eyes for him" (119). This over-the-top sexuality is so extreme that it serves as a form of *choteo* all by itself.

Both *viejos* demonstrates a desire to not only have power over to women, but to be the sun around which others revolve. El Comandante, for example, tells some of his political prisoners that they will never be able to create a world without him at the center (137). As if to prove himself right, in a particularly ridiculous scene El Comandante delights in making some dozen people get out of bed in the middle of the night and put on a dolphin show (118). Goyo doesn't have the opportunity to exercise control over as many people, but he does so where he can. As Vargas notes, he also misses the days that he was the sun around which he daughter revolved (20). One gets the impression that the only thing keeping Goyo from El Comandante's excesses is the fact that he isn't in charge of a country.

Another way the novel manages to mock their hypermasculine egos is by their inability to control the world around them. In Goyo's case, the mockery comes through his daughter, Alina. Goyo finds her incredibly strange, not least because she takes pictures of naked old people. But Goyo is even more disturbed by her refusal to fit into the female stereotypical role. Alina exercises, eats wolfishly, and expresses strong opinions of her own – qualities that ultimately lead Goyo to view her as a threat (Vargas 169). Nonetheless, he is forced to rely on her. At one point he is so desperate to get to the bathroom that Alina "tucked him under a burly arm and

sprinted to the master bathroom" in a moment both hilarious and humiliating (23). For all his attempts to be macho and tough, in the novel he's dependent on his daughter.

El Comandante also fails to hold on to his macho ego. As the anniversary of the revolution approaches, he looks forward to a high-quality reenactment of the Bay of Pigs invasion which will stroke his ever-inflated ego. But everything goes wrong. The director of the play is not macho but gay (147), and the play does not depict heroic soldiers, but frogs who are fighting off an army of crabs (177). Even worse, the play is a musical, and the audience responds to it with gleeful laughter (178). Instead of primping his pride, the musical "hijacks masculine expectations" (Vargas 158) and brings him to vow a revenge he will never take.

Also linked to this machismo is the dream of military prowess. Vargas explains that the idea of a virile and violent warrior is common in dictatorship novels, in which the dictator desires military glory. Both of these octogenarians yearn to be the star of "hypermasculinist hero narratives" (Vargas 150), reminiscent of the way Herberto in *The Agüero Sisters* becomes aroused when he thinks about invading Cuba (124). By placing that same eroticized desire in two octogenarians, García effectively "demythologiz[es] the masculinist celebratory narratives" created by macho dictators (Vargas 31). Goyo dreams of killing El Comandante to gain the praise of the émigré community. Ironically, at the end of the novel he has a chance to take a shot at El Comandante from close range, but he misses and dies of a heart attack. In the same way, El Comandante not only wants his Revolution to be on the front-page news all of the time, but desires to go out fighting. Instead, he too has a heart attack as Goyo attempts to kill him. Literally his last regret as he lays dying is that he did not take the bullet in order to die like a hero (*KC* 234). By killing them both off with heart attacks – a normal, unheroic event – García

effectively kills off the grandiose dreams of not only both characters, but of the competing conceptions of Cubanidad.

Despite the mockery, García's novel does grant some sympathy to Goyo. Though an inveterate philanderer, he shows some loyalty to his wife; he still visits her grave and brings her flowers (47). He also makes real attempts to understand his son. When a distressed Goyito shows up at Goyo's hospital bed wearing an "a malodorous, salmon-colored tuxedo from the seventies" with sneakers, Goyo comforts him (104). When Goyito writes him an obscure poem, Goyo has no idea what it means, but he doesn't mock his son the way El Comandante would.[11] When he finds out about his son's disastrous and unmacho relationship with a woman, he feels bewildered but sympathetic (186). The overall picture of Goyo is of a proud, ridiculous, unfaithful, but somehow still sympathetic old man.

That sympathy is one reason Goyo and El Comandante are not complete mirror images, as El Comandante lacks any redeeming qualities. At no point does the reader see him sympathize or express tenderness. He is a petulant child from beginning to end, one with a particular obsession with having the biggest, greatest *pinga*; all of his other actions can be interpreted accordingly. He must be the center of attention, because he is the manliest – and to prove it, he's tempted, repeatedly, to pull his pants down on television (94, 233). And at the very end of his life, he has the same vision with which his life opened – that of a dirigible-sized *pinga* floating across the sky (235).

Not only does García depict El Comandante without any positive traits, she also continually describes him as "the tyrant" or "the despot" during sections of the novel that focus on his stream of consciousness. There are no similar descriptors for Goyo, and "the frequent and

[11] Interestingly, the poem Goyito writes for Goyo is a revised version of a poem Cristina García wrote, apparently to her own father, in *The Lesser Tragedy of Death*.

subtle interruption of epithets into El Commandante's focalization betrays a narrator who disavows the historical importance of him as a revolutionary hero, and the epithets reproduce the discourse used by Goyo and the right-wing exile community" (Vargas 225). In other words, the oversimplification and the subtle use of epithets reinforce what the Cuban émigrés and the United States have been saying for decades, thus shoring up the remains of the fantasy of mastery.

Another key component of the novel is the sort of Cuban chorus which García has embedded in the text, the voices that García placed in notes to tell anecdotes or give definitions of words pertinent to that scene in the novel. According to one reviewer, this serves to "give ordinary people a voice, expressing their suffering, their perseverance, and, above all, their humor" (Greer). The notes certainly are witty, and often insightful. Take, for instance, the news bulletin from Radio Bemba (the social grapevine): "Fernando is looking to partner up with Mexico for a share of the drug trade. But you know what they say: cartels = organized crime; government = disorganized crime" (*KC* 89). Others are true; two notes describe how chambermaids will hide towels and demand a fee to "find" them, a scam which *King of Cuba* reviewer Ortuzar-Young confirms (378).

But of the forty-plus notes, all but nine of them depict the revolution negatively, and most of those nine are about neutral subjects (say, making love to a man who wore a particular pair of shoes). In reading these notes, one would think that Cubans were still living in the Special Period. While hardships certainly continue, the novel ignores what one reviewer calls Cuba's "more hopeful present reality" (Feinberg 183). Vargas takes this criticism a step further, noting that all of the artists and intellectuals in *King of Cuba*'s notes have negative attitudes towards Cuba. Vargas counters that in reality citizens of Cuba, and especially artists, are carrying on "a

rich dialogue" but the novel silences "their despair coupled with a resourceful hope" (Vargas 167). That chord of hope is lacking from the novel's Cuban chorus. As a result, while the chorus does provide a *more* rounded picture than one with nothing but the two octogenarians, it hardly creates the kind of complexity of García's earlier fiction. Of course, that may not be García's goal, and the chorus demonstrates a diamond-sharp wit and a delightful sense of dark humor which serve to further the comedy in the novel.

García's wit leads one reviewer to call *King of Cuba* "García at her best" (Ortuzar-Young 378), and the mockery certainly works to resist the discourse of patriarchy in both revolutionary Cuba and the émigré community. But at least one scholar seems to think that El Comandante is the real Castro, exclaiming "García's humor not only delights readers, but also reveals the human flesh and blood beneath the dictatorial mask, deflating the larger-than-life image of the oppressor" (129). Since we see little more of El Comandante than his arrogance and his concern for the size of his *pinga*, his portrait seems to be a little too simplistic to be "flesh and blood." On the other hand, a New York Times review suggests that "Ms. García's novel feels as much her revenge fantasy as [Goyo's]. She humiliates El Comandante but takes the buffoonery so far that he ends up a comic-book villain" ("King of Cuba" C6). García is writing a comic novel, of course, and the novel certainly fits in the Cuban vein of *choteo*. So while García may not have written a revenge fantasy, she has created a great example of *choteo*; unfortunately, *choteo* does not seem to serve as a strong form for creating well-rounded characters. As a result, as one reviewer writes, "she has made a man of her imaginings, probably not much like the real Castro and yet, like the protagonist of the novel written by his former aide, perhaps far more captivating and, in a way, more convincing" (Greer).

The novel's ability to be "far more captivating and, in a way, more convincing" serves both as a strength and a weakness. It is a strength, in that García tells an entertaining and comic tale, an excellent parody: but also a weakness, in that it convinces the reader to believe in an image that probably does not resemble "the real Castro" – or the real Goyo, for that matter. Unfortunately, that convincing image does strongly resemble the projection of Castro that the Cuban émigré community and U.S. society at large have consistently placed upon the mirror of their perceptions. Vargas notes that Fidel Castro in the U.S. imaginary has been "an evil spirit who tormented North American equanimity" (Vargas 28), and that "García's *King of Cuba* both satirizes and reinforces this view of Fidel Castro" (Vargas 28). Insofar as the novel does not take El Comandante seriously, it satirizes the standard perspective of the United States: one cannot really be afraid of a demon whose greatest attack is "a stream of flautus" (*KC* 4). The novel effectively mocks the idea of Castro as a demon or as a threat. However, the novel also frames his whole life as a love affair with his *pinga* and his ego. While this makes for great (if raunchy) *choteo*, it struggles to move the discourse "beyond the vitriol" and create space for complex understandings. In some senses it seems that instead of smashing a fantasy, *King of Cuba* has reestablished one.

CHAPTER 5
MENÉNDEZ AND COMPLEXITY

No discussion of *Loving Che* would be complete without an analysis of the photograph. Characters in Cuban American novels often use diaries, letters, and photographs as means of discovering the past. Menéndez's contribution is to embed genuine historical photos within the text and to create an alternate context for them (Alvarez Borland, "Figures of Identity" 31). Building on the observations of Roland Barthes, Menéndez uses the ability of a photograph to simultaneously work in multiple directions to create a novel which works much like a photograph: a radically ambivalent text which moves in several direction at once.

Barthes' *Camera Lucida* argues that the photograph is a remarkably ambivalent object. That which is photographed really did exist, and, in fact, "the photograph is literally the emanation of the referent" which will "touch [the viewer] like the delayed rays of a star" (81). In this sense, a photograph "is authentication itself" (87) – it can prove an object's existence. On the other hand, the photograph often cannot represent (89), as it fails to show the referent as he or she really is. As Barthes writes, "once I feel myself observed by the lens … I transform myself in advance into an image" (10). In other words, the photographed pose is always just that – a pose, an artificial arrangement of the referent's expression and body. Worse, the photograph turns out to be a kind of death. In the photo, the living subject becomes an object, a thing which can be passed from hand to hand. Once the referent is objectified in the photo, the viewers "do not possess me of myself, they turn me, ferociously, into an object, they put me at their mercy, at

their disposal" (Barthes 14). Therefore, in the photograph, the referent is dead, subject to the imposed desire of the viewer.

Thus the photograph has an ability both to authenticate, to prove existence, while simultaneously reducing that existence and making it subject to the viewer's interpretation. In *Loving Che*, Menéndez suggests that this process has occurred in the world's understanding of Che Guevara. When asked in an interview, "What are you trying to say about Che?" Menéndez critiques the world's image of Che much the way Barthes critiques the photograph. She responds: "He has become – he is already a fictional character, in a sense. He has become this image that we layer with our own meaning according to what we wish." (Menéndez, Interview with Robert Birnbaum). Perhaps her view could be summed up in her statement: "He's a complex man. And that has been lost in the photograph" (Menéndez, Interview with Robert Birnbaum).

Because of his close proximity to the Revolution, few people take Che as a complex man, but instead selectively remember and forget key characteristics or actions to create a simple image with which they can prop up their own interpretation of history. As Menéndez says in an interview, "we construct truths out of our desires" (Menéndez, "Mystery of Fiction"), and people's interpretations of Che are no exception (Helmic 125). They use Che as a sort of mirror "to project all their desires and feelings onto. And I think the same is probably true of Cuba" (Menéndez, Interview with Robert Birnbaum). On the Revolution side, Che became the model for the New Man which socialism would bring into being. On the émigré side, Che became the archetype of the "great villain" (Helmic 115). Che and Cuba have become screens on which others project their own ideas. That is, they have become the sites of imposed fantasies of mastery, which block out any true understanding.

Che's portrait in *Loving Che* is itself a sort of photograph, an oversimplified fantasy; Teresa herself admits that a photo both expands and flattens - expands, because it shows someone is important enough to have their picture taken, but flattens, because it kills the expression in the eyes (*LC* 83). The picture, then, is insufficient, is a mere fragment of what is necessary to know someone. Despite her own warnings, Teresa begins her obsession with Che by collecting pictures of him, which would imply that she never really had the means of creating a well-rounded conception of him. When she ends by painting portraits of Che (211), it would seem that that her impressions of him come more from herself than from reality. She says as much when she writes that "Loving Che was like the palest sea foam, like wind through the stars. Savior, murderer, brutal love of my own creation." (138). Here Teresa sets Che up as something effervescent and idealistic – "the wind through the stars." He was the incarnation of her idealism. But this was a lover of her own creation. This Che written here was made up not of actual events, but of her own perceptions, her own desires reflected back to her as in a mirror. She imagines him as her lover not necessarily because of a historical reality but because she has always loved idealistic men: Eduardo was an idealistic revolutionary (35), and her husband, Calixto, was a language idealist who would destroy everything for the purity of a sentence (37). And really, had the character been anyone other than Che, critics would read him as a cardboard cutout. As it is, Helmic still describes him as a "passive, two-dimensional caricature of romantic masculinity" (86). Teresa's account, then, could be said to be a kind of flattened image, one which is incomplete, which does not necessarily reflect reality.

Menéndez, then, has used the novel to trace out how a false image is formed, how people project their desires onto a mirror. Just as Teresa selected photos, removing them from their

context of the magazines and articles, so the novel removes Che from his historical context. But ironically, the novel itself functions as a sort of photograph – that is, it also cuts both ways. It oversimplifies Che into a Byronic lover for Teresa; at the same time, it authenticates his existence outside of the public situations by which the competing fantasies of mastery define him. That is, even while Menéndez describes the process by which people create a one-dimensional image in their own imagination, she still creates a multidimensional image. By using a narrator who could be Che's daughter and a woman who claims to have been Che's lover as her narrative voices, Menéndez grants an up-close, tender perspective of Che which could not have been possible from within the Cuban-American fantasy of mastery.

It's pertinent that though the pictures offer a flattened image of Che, Teresa still sends them, and Menéndez includes them in the text. Thanks to the variety of pictures of Che, one gets something like a rounded image - not a well-rounded image, but one that creates room for questioning and imagining. While there are the stereotypically Revolutionary poses - Che with his arm in a cast, Che speaking to a crowd - Menéndez also includes a picture of him shirtless on a bed, laughing with a camera, or peering around an office corner. The photos authenticate some experience besides that of a soldier, and other than that of a thug. These, doubtless, are the photos which Dr. Caraballo had difficulty seeing; they authenticated a personal, almost whimsical vision of Che, one which did not fit within her preconceptions. The representations also explain why so many critics insist that Menéndez's Che is a well-rounded character; compared to the absurdly flat image of the fantasies of mastery, these photos enact "the comandante's transformation from a one-dimensional pop-icon into a living, breathing being" (Ayala-Walsh 199). On some level, he has been given back his "human condition" (Lopez 189), a "human, compassionate and highly eroticized side" (Rowlandson 67). Though Teresa's

account is probably fictional, it has still accomplished something of importance by showing Che as human, full of the joys and sorrows and desires of humanity. Ultimately, the narrator rejects the story, but the emotional register has shifted. Che is no longer a great villain, but "a beautiful stranger who, in a different dream, might have been the father of my heart" (228).

Loving Che is not Menéndez's only take on a revolutionary icon; the first appears in her collection of stories, titled *In Cuba I was a German Shepherd*. The collection depicts Cuban émigré Miami, sometimes sympathizing, sometimes gently chiding, always wrestling with ideas of nostalgia, memory, and imagination. The collection, like the novel, resists assimilation into either fantasy of mastery and conspicuously lacks the "vitriol" of the émigré community. The story most pertinent to this paper is "Baseball Dreams," which is actually made up of two overlapping stories. In the first, written in the first person, a girl tells the story of her father playing baseball as a child. In the second, Menéndez shifts to the third person to describe the girl as she waits for her father to show up for a picnic at which he never arrives. Eventually, the reader is able to infer that the father is Fidel Castro.

The narrator of *Loving Che* suggests that she enjoys playing games with history, often looking at old photographs and imagining that they are relatives. In "Baseball Dreams," Menéndez does something similar, imagining her narrator as Fidel Castro's daughter who possesses a photograph of her father as a child. This is the most striking game that the story plays with history; that Menéndez, as the daughter of Cuban émigrés, would imagine Castro from the point of view of a daughter. Instead of viewing him at a distance, from which he can easily be depicted as monstrous, Menéndez decides to consider him from a much closer perspective, within the family - something she also does in "Miami Relatives" by making Castro the "old uncle." While this point of view neither defends the Revolution nor Castro – and there is no

indication that Menéndez would ever have a desire to defend either – by imagining Castro as a father and working from a daughter's perspective, the story's point of view immediately humanizes him and prevents him from being a stock character of someone's bitterness.

In the first half of the story, the narrator describes the photo itself – a three-year-old boy with a baseball bat – and then goes on to discuss her father's growing passion to become a baseball pitcher. Interestingly enough, if photos become the site of imposed desires, then this photo is no exception. At the end of Part 1, the narrator expresses her wish that her father had become a baseball player after all (133). Here, like second-generation Cuban Americans, she longs for an imagined past which she can never actually experience.

According to the narrator, the boy has all the normal boyhood dreams of greatness, and the stubborn determination to match. The story marvelously imagines the young Fidel as team captain, one who even then is tenacious enough to practice for hours, arrogant enough to take the pitcher's position for himself (129), and self-absorbed enough to become upset when someone else hits the first home run (131). Despite these obvious flaws, the boy plays with great skill, refusing to quit even after his team begins to lose badly (132). At the very end he demonstrates a flair for the (melo)dramatic; instead of taking the last at-bat, he walks away "toward the Sierras, the red savanna waving before him like the closing shot in the Westerns he loved" (132). Then the scene shifts into a hint of the future, the same Sierras, but with "the battlefields below, the little men… the Sierras catching fire again" (133). At this point, it is clear that the father is actually Castro, who will one day lead a band down from those same mountains.

Thus, like García, Menéndez traces core qualities of Castro's personality back to his childhood. But unlike García's depiction, this Castro reverberates with ambiguity. He is certainly arrogant, yet also clearly talented; disciplined and tenacious, yet melodramatic. Once could read

the walk to the mountains as a sort of idealistic Lone Ranger moment or as the melodramatic broodings of an immature boy. What one cannot do is read him as an oversimplification, as a dead photograph. The boy is human, and therefore open to multiple interpretations. It's hard to imagine a greater contrast to García's penis-preening little tyrant.

In the second half of the story Menéndez shifts to the third person, and tells the story of how the narrator of the first section received the photo in the first place. The girl who will own the photograph is at the beach, waiting with her mother for her father to come to a picnic. While they wait, they witness a sort of battle between two boys who are hard to read as anything other than representatives of Fidel and the United States. One boy is taller, paler, blonde: the other darker, shorter, strong. The two throw a ball back and forth with increasing aggression until the smaller boy hits the larger one in the head and knocks him unconscious. After a crowd determines the larger boy is still alive and carries him back to some houses, the smaller boy walks off alone down the beach, mirroring the (melo)drama of the boy in the first half of the story. Shortly thereafter, the mother gives up on her lover ever arriving and gives the photo to her daughter. Like so much of Menéndez's work, this story works on multiple levels. On the one hand, the father, Castro, never arrives, never keeps his promise – perhaps an echo of the failed promises of the Revolution. At the same time, the story portrays the smaller boy on the beach ambiguously. Is he over-serious, or competitive? Dangerous, or admirably strong? Either interpretation seems feasible, and that's what Menéndez wants. As she says, "the mystery of fiction – the open-ended, indirect poetry of it – is the best approximation of what it feels like to be alive" (Menéndez, "Mystery of Fiction"). Life itself is indirect, open-ended, uncertain, and Menéndez carries that belief into her handling of Castro in her short story.

Ultimately, Menéndez offers an approach to history that accepts neither the fantasy of Teresa nor the fantasy of the Cuban émigrés. In *Loving Che*, the narrator ends the story with a nuanced perspective, one which leads to open possibilities. She rejects Teresa's little game with history. Nonetheless, she sees in Che "a beautiful stranger who, in a different dream, might have been the father of my heart" (228). Che is certainly a stranger - Teresa's story hasn't told the real story. Yet on the other hand, though Che is a stranger, he is a beautiful one, one who could have been someone to love. The emotional register here really does move beyond the "vitriol" to explore tenderness and a sense of humanity, and within that humanity there is the sense that all the stories told might be wrong, and there might be some other, more true picture, even if we may never discover it.

Conclusion

García and Menéndez are two Cuban-American authors with remarkably similar backgrounds and surprisingly similar concerns in their writing. Each reflects the felt need of later-generation Cuban Americans to delve through the past to help form an identity in the present. The past, in their works, possesses at least two key characteristics. First, it has been ruptured by the trauma of the Revolution, leaving a void in the national psyche and making the past something of a wilderness in which one rarely, if ever, finds certainty. Second, whatever history the characters find is profoundly ambiguous. Life, as Menéndez says, is open-ended and indirect, and *The Agüero Sisters* and *Loving Che* reflect that complexity, effectively breaking the carnival mirrors installed by the fantasies of mastery on either side of the straits.

Overall, Menéndez more successfully caries this uncertainty into her accounts of the Revolutionary icons, Fidel and Che. García does fine work in *King of Cuba* to mock patriarchal attitudes. However, her depiction of Castro only differs from the Miami émigré fantasy of mastery in that it makes him too ridiculous to be at all dangerous. By describing him primarily in terms of his penis and depicting life on Cuba as unswervingly negative, she allows the reader to disregard Cuba as simply another failed state run by a comically foolish dictator. Such oversimplification enables the attitudes that keep the U.S. embargo operating today, to the detriment of the Cuban people (and, arguably, the American people).

Menéndez, on the other hand, manages to humanize Cuba, while still revealing some of its many problems. Even Castro and Che in her works receive a level of nuance and humanity usually lacking in works on Cuba. Such a capacity to embrace nuance and admit uncertainty creates space for a more human-centered understanding of Cuba and, perhaps, a less aggressive attitude from the United States.

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