

The Problematic of Identity-Memory in the Cuban-American Fiction of Cristina García and Achy Obejas¹

Mónica Fernández Jiménez²

Abstract. In their fiction oeuvre, Cuban-American authors Cristina García and Achy Obejas demonstrate concerns related to the fragmented memory of Cuban-American second-generation migrants. The particular political status of this exile community together with the difficulty to access familial memories back in the homeland cause in the protagonists a series of conflicts affecting their sense of identity. However, as the narratives progress, these conflicts prove to be a result of the prevalence of nationalism and linearity in traditional notions of identification. Through an alternative relation with history, memory, and identity the protagonists of these works contest undisputed postulates on the study of memory such as Maurice Halbwachs'. They also reflect postcolonial theories which have challenged the influence of Western epistemology in approaching these issues and consider the changing paradigm of identification in an increasingly globalised and mobile world.

Keywords: memory; multicultural literature; immigrant literature; identity; postmemory

La problemática de la identidad-memoria en la ficción cubano-americana de Cristina García y Achy Obejas

Resumen. En su obra ficticia, las autoras cubano-americanas Cristina García y Achy Obejas muestran preocupaciones sobre la memoria fragmentada de la comunidad migrante cubano-americana de segunda generación. La particular situación política que rodea a esta comunidad en exilio, así como la dificultad para tener acceso a recuerdos familiares en la tierra de origen, causan en las protagonistas de las obras una serie de conflictos que afectan su sentido de identidad. Sin embargo, a medida que las narraciones progresan, se puede observar que estos conflictos son el resultado de la prevalencia del nacionalismo y la linealidad en el enfoque tradicional hacia la identificación. Relacionándose de manera alternativa con la historia, la memoria y la identidad las protagonistas son capaces de cuestionar postulados indiscutibles en los estudios de memoria como son los de Maurice Halbwachs. También reflejan teorías poscoloniales que han cuestionado la influencia de la epistemología occidental en el enfoque hacia estos asuntos y tienen en cuenta el cambio de paradigma en la identificación dentro de un mundo cada vez más globalizado y móvil.

Palabras Clave: memoria; literatura multicultural; literatura de inmigración; identidad; posmemoria

Contents. 1. Introduction. 2. Challenges to National Identity: Establishing a Diasporic Memory. 3. Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*: Postmemory and the Return to the Island. 4. The Home as Collective Frame in Achy Obejas' Fiction. 5. Conclusion.

How to cite this article: Fernández Jiménez, M. (2021) The Problematic Of Identity-Memory In The Cuban-American Fiction Of Cristina García And Achy Obejas, in *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 29, 93-102.

1. Introduction

The field of memory studies has long been developing since the advent of the 20th century with the works of Maurice Halbwachs and has taken a more interdisciplinary approach since the 1980s (Erl 2008: 1). Although much criticism and development has been done, Halbwachs' definition of collective memory remains central. His notion that "Our memories remain collective, however, and are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events" (1980: 23) takes into account familial ties and national affiliation in the creation of an identity. This belief, as Astrid Erl explains, goes back to John Locke, who "maintained that there is no such thing as an essential identity, but that identities have to be constructed and reconstructed by acts of

¹ The Spanish Ministerio de Universidades (FPU19/01193), Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación through research project PID2019-108754GB-I00, and Universidad de Valladolid through research project PIP-063/217951 have funded the research carried out for this presentation

² Universidad de Valladolid
ORCID: [0000-0002-8988-6930](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8988-6930)
Email: monica.fernandez@uva.es

memory” (2008: 6). In the same line, Halbwachs contends that the estrangement from certain groups makes us doubt our own memories and identities (1980: 24), as brilliantly illustrated by the paranoia suffered by Juani, the protagonist of Cuban-American Achy Obejas’ novel *Memory Mambo* (1996). Because the estrangement that Halbwachs mentions is an intrinsic aspect of diaspora, the theme of memory often pervades immigrant fiction, in particular Cuban-American fiction because of aspects such as the politically turbulent nature of the Cuban exile and the consequent partiality and obscurity in the transmission of information and in the analysis of Cuban-American political relations, among others.

Within Cuban-American exiled communities, strong ties between its members are created perhaps in order to recreate the lost Cuban world, as Amrita Das also believes, especially in relation to how their memories are negotiated: “[i]n the absence of a familiar space, re-enactment of practices and its memory is threatened. Therefore, it becomes imperative to recreate the lost space in order to locate the origin of the memory” (Das 2012:142). The children of these exiles, who then remain in a frozen version of the past, are the protagonists of the three works I have chosen for this analysis: the novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) by Cristina García, the novel *Memory Mambo* by Achy Obejas, and her short story “We Came all the Way from Cuba so that you can Dress Like This?” (1994). The three works challenge the conception of a monolithic national memory and its influence upon the creation of an identity. They present characters who, because of this estrangement, even doubt their own personal memories. However, they finally conclude that the alienation they felt found its reason in the traditional perception of national affiliation, which they, in the end, reject. Through the lenses of the theories of Maurice Halbwachs, this article will tackle what Eliana Rivero calls “Cubangst” (2009: 112), the Cuban-American anxiety surrounding identity, and its eventual transcendence by the protagonists of these works. I will start with an introduction exposing the ways in which diasporic memory challenges Halbwachs’ theories developed in *The Collective Memory* (1925). Finally, I will analyse the works of each author separately, as their approaches differ somehow.

2. Challenges To National Identity: Establishing A Diasporic Memory

... the individual memory, in order to corroborate and make precise and even to cover the gaps in its remembrances, relies upon, relocates itself within, momentarily merges with, the collective memory [...] These events occupy a place in the memory of the nation, but I myself did not witness them. In recalling them, I must rely entirely upon the memory of others (Halbwachs 1980: 50-1).

The epigraph above explains Maurice Halbwachs’ two interrelated concepts of collective and historical memory. According to the French sociologist, an individual’s memory comes determined both by the shared experiences of the different social groups to which he or she belongs and by facts related to the history of a certain nation “because their tradition endures, very much alive” (1980: 51) and is in turn retained into the individual’s consciousness (1980: 51-2; 57-8; 77). The individual, thus, can be said to develop a certain national identity which is tied to the memories shared by others in his or her country: “I belong to a group with a part of my personality, so that everything that has occurred within it as long as I belonged—even everything that interested and transformed it before I entered is in some sense familiar to me” (1980: 52).

What happens, then, when this common ground has crossed cultures and national histories? The texts that will be analysed in the next sections show accounts of individuals who – because of their Cuban-American diasporic existences – defy traditional notions of identity, and, therefore, memory, especially as related to nationality or country of origin. These works are particularly relatable to Halbwachs’ theories because the discontinuity in the characters’ national identities sees itself reflected in the struggles that they have with their memories, whose authenticity they doubt. However, as the novels and short story progress, a different way by which to relate oneself to history and memory other than monolithic nationalist ones is proposed. Diasporic communities’ semi-autobiographical accounts have changed the direction of memory and identity studies as they problematise the very idea that identification can only be conceived in relation to nationality and national history. Halbwachs’ idea of historical memory indeed becomes problematic since it deems what Benedict Anderson saw as an “imagined [...] community” (2006: 6) an empirical reality, without questioning to what extent this is a mediated narrative with political purposes. Whereas these narratives – or parts of them – may prove unproblematic for some individuals, others, such as second-generation immigrants, expose that some of them do not coincide with their perception of reality. For example, in the novels and short story the perception of Cuban history is different for each of the characters.

Halbwachs claims that historical memory informs collective memory (1980: 51-2; 77), while also maintaining that the former is just a set of events chosen by certain people so that they do not disappear with the death of the societies that kept them alive in their collective memories (1980:+ 78-9). He adds that those events are the ones taught at school, read, and passed on (1980: 78). Halbwachs’ definition of historical

memory indeed acknowledges the arbitrariness with which the facts included are chosen, but he does not continue the discussion on the effects of such arbitrariness, remaining too neutral about the fact that, as Walter Benjamin claims, articulating the past “historically” serves the purpose of the ruling classes (2003: 391). On the contrary, in another passage, Halbwachs claims that history is not only a recollection of facts and dates but what makes certain periods of time different from other previous or later ones (1980: 57). By this, he means that it is possible to situate oneself within a certain historical period because what goes on at the moment determines the individual’s behaviour, due to the fact that “historical” events have a psychological effect on people (1980: 56), which quite contradicts the idea of arbitrariness.

As will be seen, Halbwachs’ claim regarding the empirical recognizability of historical periods becomes problematised by these three Cuban-American texts. Halbwachs seems to transmit the notion that history is transparent and that particular events within official history (written and taught at school) are relevant for everyone in order to reconstruct their memories and construct their identities. While he acknowledges that the historical articulation of the past is artificial since it comes only “some time after [the event’s] occurrence” (1980: 54), he also endorses the existence of a sort of “lived history” (1980: 57) which “dissolve[s] into a series of images traversing the individual remembrance” (1980: 59). This definition does not take into account cases such as those presented in these novels and this short story: diasporic family networks with disrupted collective memories and a polarised social background. It also assumes that historical information is transparent and accurate, without considering manipulation and partiality. Nevertheless, there is something significant in the way in which Halbwachs explains how the arbitrary narratives that compose national history are relevant for the collective and the individual memory: “[t]here are events of national import that simultaneously alter the lives of all citizens” (1980: 77). The main struggle in these texts is that the protagonists cannot see how these events, which their parents narrate to them, *alter* their lives, even if they have determined the country where they are all living. To this Halbwachs would respond that one has to retain at least a minimal trace of the remembrances in question in the mind (1980: 25), which they cannot do because they migrated when they were very young. Does this therefore explain the profound mistrust they have for their families’ narratives? This mistrust narrated at a domestic level in the texts eventually represents a bigger picture which suggests a distrust for national histories in general.

Considering this domestic level, an individual needs an affective community in order to develop his or her own memories, according to Halbwachs; that is, he or she needs the collective memory of the affective group in order to confirm one’s own or the remembrance will eventually disappear (1980: 29-30). If we follow this idea, the young second-generation immigrant is an extremely alienated subject in this sense due to the severance of ties with familial and national groups and the discordance of the two contexts in which he or she is caught *inbetween* (Rumbaut 1994: 749). Cuban sociologist Ruben Rumbaut explains that this generation of young migrants has the double task of transiting to adulthood and becoming acculturated, the latter being a task which, due to their age, they undertake at a different pace from that of their parents (1991: 61), who sometimes do not even succeed in it. Furthermore, the case of Cuban-American communities is extremely interesting for this discussion because it shows that national historical memories have some limitations due to the isolation the blockade entailed, the psychological effects of exile, the existence of a polarised population, and the impossibility to go back for many members of the community. Are these members then deprived of the human experience of remembering or is the problem just one of having given too much importance to national histories and communities?

Halbwachs’ postulate, although at some points coming close to Walter Benjamin’s critique of official history – or historicism – when he differentiates between “formal history” and “historical memory” (1980: 78), at other times suggests that the reason why some facts become recorded while others do not is because they are indeed more relevant in how they influence the group and the individual. Particularly, he endorses the view that only certain notable figures are agents of history: “I remember Reims because I lived there a whole year. But I also remember that Joan of Arc consecrated Charles VII there” (1980: 52). It is at the very beginning of one of the texts, *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina García, that the problematic nature of this way to articulate history is introduced:

[My father] told me stories about Cuba after Columbus came. He said that the Spaniards wiped out more Indians with smallpox than with muskets.

“Why don’t we read about this in history books?” [...] If it were up to me, I’d record other things. Like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or life stories of prostitutes in Bombay. Why don’t I know anything about them? Who chooses what we should know or what’s important? I know I have to decide these things for myself. Most of what I’ve learned that’s important I’ve learned on my own or from my grandmother (García 1992: 28).

Not only does this fragment criticise à la Benjamin the way to articulate the past according to political purposes, it also extends the critique to the domestic settings already mentioned: in the novel the protagonist’s family engages in the same practices of historicism while she tries to propose alternative ones. Thus, in these

narratives there is a suggestion that the domestic and the historical frames are interrelated, as both are the result of a certain narrative epistemology which has the same particular understanding of identity and history.

Narratives like the ones analysed in the sections to come establish alternative mechanisms by which to reconsider an official history which has, in Derek Walcott's words, become a myth (1998: 37). In his writings, Benjamin famously proposed what he calls "historicism" as a major enemy, a way to use determine facts politically, as the characters' parents do: "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was'. It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (2003: 391). According to him, one of the bastions of historicism is "empathy with the victor" (2003: 406), whereas "the historical construction [should be] dedicated to the memory of the anonymous" (2003: 406). To fill in the gaps of domestic memory with this official history is indeed problematic. The short story by Achy Obejas, "We Came All the Way from Cuba so that you could Dress like this?" shows an immigrant family who leaves Cuba being positive that the "American Dream" will become true for their daughter. Later on, such daughter, who is the narrator, explains as "things that can't be told" (1994: 123) how after migrating the family suffered racist attacks, her father tried to commit suicide, and they had to survive on welfare and a series of precarious jobs (1994: 123-124). This led her to conclude that the persistence of the "American Dream" in the Cuban imaginary has more to do with American politics than with their social reality, for "this is 1963, and no Cuban claiming political asylum actually gets turned away. We're evidence that the revolution has failed the middle class and that communism is bad" (1994: 113).

In conclusion, the narratives by these two Cuban-American writers show how domestic memories and their particular historiographies – in this case a diasporic existence which transcends national frames – are often articulated in the same way as historicism. Just as history is partial and over-generalising, Halbwachs' idea on the way historical memory affects collective and individual memory is proved problematic in the texts. These texts sometimes reflect Halbwachs' ideas but they also propose a different understanding of memory and identity. In other words, they unveil that the workings of memory as defined by Halbwachs can be transcended through a reconsideration of the nation as the main frame for memory and identity. In these texts other frames such as Miami's hybrid environment or the feminised home are proposed through second-generation practices of postmemory.

3. Cristina García's *Dreaming In Cuban*: Postmemory And The Return To The Island

Dreaming in Cuban by Cristina García shows the political confrontation between a Castrist mother, Celia, who stayed in Cuba, and her exceedingly capitalist eldest daughter, Lourdes, who migrated to the United States. This antagonism between mother and daughter leads them to take radical and essentialist views on the history of their country, which Lourdes' daughter Pilar, mistrusting her mother's version of it, imagines through her art. Gustavo Pérez Firmat's book *Life on the Hyphen* describes the experience of being a Cuban living in the United States since very young as "having two cultures". In his words, "you belong wholly to neither one. You are both, you are neither: cuba-no/america-no" (1994: 7). Political exiles live with the fear of erasure since they are the last generation who retained original "lived memories" (Das 2012: 143-144) and thus resort to essentialist attitudes in the texts. It is their second-generation offspring who develop post-essentialist postcolonial epistemologies which contest nativist or essentialist conceptions of the nation. In "The Third Space" Homi Bhabha challenges the conception of identity as essential by offering a more poststructuralist understanding of identification:

The concept of a people is not 'given' as an essential, class-determined, unitary, homogeneous part of society *prior to politics*; 'the people' are there as a process of political articulation and political negotiation across a whole range of contradictory social sites. 'The people' always exist as a multiple form of identification, waiting to be created and constructed (1990: 220; emphasis in the original).

Furthermore, Arjun Appadurai sees that in an increasingly globalised world where mobility and diaspora are commonplace (1996: 164) the frame of the nation-state should be transcended since the imagined notions of nationalism and patriotism (1996: 161) have been strategically endorsed in this context with the sole aim to exert "the control, classification, and surveillance of its subjects" (1996: 162). The imagination of the characters in fact is significant in Cuban-American exile fiction according to Gustavo Pérez Firmat, who draws on poet Pau-Llosa's claim that "the exile knows his place, and that place is the imagination" (qtd. in Pérez Firmat 1994: 10). The problem is, as Pérez Firmat contends, that "imagination is *not* a [real] place" (1994: 10; emphasis in the original). While Pilar's mother rejects talking about Cuba and idealises American society, another non-nostalgic usage of the imagination is implemented by Pilar, who shapes through her art the domestic history and the collective memory of this family so that it escapes the nationalist notions promoted by official history. She tries to find a third space where she can escape the ideas of fragmentation and incompleteness which deprive her from constructing new memories in the new country.

Pilar's mother and grandmother perceive historical events through different lenses, to the extent that they are seen as completely different. While Lourdes embraces the capitalist American lifestyle, Pilar embarks on a journey of discovering the culture of the land of her ancestors by buying a Beny Moré album and going to a *botánica*, both situated, according to Machado Sáez, inside the workings of the capitalist market but being characteristic of Cuban culture (2005: 134). Tracing Pilar's journey, the text engages with "the relationship between imagination, inhabitation and historical reconstruction," rather than historicity (Leonard 2014: 192). Such reconstruction is extremely difficult for Pilar, who realises that, because her mother's perception of Cuba is highly subjective and exaggerated, she needs to look for information outside the family nucleus and their narratives. At the beginning, for Pilar the solution lies in going to Cuba to feel at home in New York; she thinks that she needs to find her Cuban identity in order to create an American one (Machado Sáez 2005: 130). As Pérez Firmat argues regarding the generation one-and-a-half, like other ethnic diasporic identities, "Cubanness will be something we acquire" (1994: 16). In other words, due to the political conflict that disrupts familial memory transmissions, Cuban-American identity can be acquired as the immigrant grows older, in an inversed chronological order to acculturation. To borrow Hall's words, in the post-essentialist identity search, "we are constantly in the process of becoming 'selves'" (1987: 45). However, the missing element for displaced populations is not something which is stable and physically accessible but something metaphorical which is part of the cultural imaginary of the displaced (Hall 1989: 232).

As such, in this mobile globalised world theories on memory differing from Halbwachs' have emerged. For example, Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory. There are certain communities – if not to say all, to different extents – that have been disrupted and for which memory cannot be relied on. Hirsch's text grants essential importance to the second- and third-generation testimony and, therefore, narrative. Hirsch coined the term "postmemory" to define a "structure" with which second-generation individuals deal with inherited memories (2008: 105), even when this memory is lost, as it is the case with the characters of these three texts who virtually lack any information. According to Hirsch, diaspora causes the intergenerational transmission of memories to lose its direct connection with the past; however, this generation also "works to counteract this loss" (2008: 111). In the aesthetic recollection of inherited – maybe non-reliable – memories, the second-generation witness to stories of exile and diaspora like that of this Cuban family "strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression" (Hirsch 2008: 111; emphasis in the original). In what Hirsch calls "hybrid postmemoirs" (2008: 105) there is an important role taken up by the generation of postmemory: the task of recollecting personal and cultural memories but also shaping them, making them transcend "strictly personal recollections" (Zerubavel 2004: 2).

As "an idolized site of untouched memory," (Das 2012: 145) the unreal image of Cuba serves the purpose of grounding identity for first-generation exiles. Pilar seems to believe that the real-day post-revolutionary Cuba is this new necessary ground for her – as a young second-generation Cuban-American immigrant – to find an identity. And, in fact, it is a way for her to realise that her identity is not fragmented or unstable but that her exiled community has created, in Pierre Nora's words "lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory" (qtd. in Das 2012: 146). According to Das, characters like Pilar need to come to terms with the idea that their parents and grandparents are enacting what Nora calls the modern conception of memory, not a "history" but a simple "reconstruction of a past—never complete never sacred" (qtd. in Das 2012: 146). In the end, the characters' obsessive need to link past and present memories in a form that gives shape to one's identity responds to the traumatic nature of the characters' parents' exile.

The return to Cuba is a teaching experience for Pilar, who realises that nationalisms are a fiction and that there was nothing essential for creating an *inbetween* identity in the island. First, she encounters her own American identity as something more stable than she thought:

I think about how I'm probably the only ex-punk on the island, how no one else has their ears pierced in three places. It's hard to imagine existing without Lou Reed [...] I've started dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, liked something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. [...] But sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong – not *instead* of here, but *more* than in here (1992: 235- 236).

Second, she comes to understand her mother's trauma. When Lourdes and Pilar travel to Cuba there is a riot at the Peruvian embassy and Lourdes – in a mad frenzy of hate for Cuba – uses the situation to sneak her nephew Ivanito into a plane as a political refugee to take him to the United States: "Lourdes realizes she is close enough to kill him. She imagines seizing El Líder's pistol, pressing it to his temple, squeezing the trigger until he hears the decisive click" (1992: 236). Surprisingly, Pilar allows her to continue with her plan at the last moment:

I pull him towards me; hold him by the waist. I can feel my cousin's heart through his back. I can feel a rapid uncoiling inside us both.

"I couldn't find him," I lie to Abuela (1992: 241-242).

Pilar would not have allowed such an action had she not let go of her idealised imagine of the post-revolutionary Cuba shortly before this moment, when she realises that the United States will be beneficial for Ivanito. Although Pilar is turned against her mother at the beginning of the novel, she eventually recognises that Lourdes has her own story to tell – how she was raped in Cuba by two revolutionary soldiers who had gone to her house in order to expropriate her husband's lands her husband's lands (García 1992: 70-1) - and therefore (...) – and therefore had her motives to act the way she does: "[Mom] closes her eyes. I think it's less painful for her than looking out of the window" (1992: 216). At the end of the novel, Pilar manages to unite all points of view to create a personal familial historiography which in turn parallels the untold and complex political history of Cuba.

The resolution lies in embracing hybridity because Cuba will only be a viable home if it allows for transformations and fluidity. Because of the revolution but also because of the United States politics towards the island, which has impeded the flow of normal transnational discourse (Shemak 2006: 5), Cuba is presented in the novel as a place devoid of hope because it is frozen in time and it does not change anymore. Pilar is the modern subject in the novel who, being exposed to an increasingly globalised world (Machado Sáez 2005: 131) but also being aware of her family's Cuban roots, realises that official history is not an objective narrative but an ideological construct. Pilar struggles to find a way to unite all the points of view in the narration of the memories of her family and, at the same time, the historical materialism of Cuba, with which they are inextricably linked. Cristina García claimed that, after visiting Cuba and the anti-communist Cuban-American community in Miami, she became concerned about how to tell this troubling history without falling into essentialisms (Payant 2001: 163-4). This is a concern that Pilar also has, and its impossibility results in her reliance on art to express certain inexpressible ideas. With her paintings, Pilar blurs the line between Celia's and Lourdes' sides. Her painting of the Statue of Liberty marks a turning point in her life and in the narrative:

Liberty, thorny scars that look like barbed wire. I want to go all the way with this, to stop mucking around and do what I feel, so at the base of the statue I put my favourite punk rallying cry: I'M A MESS. And then carefully, very carefully, I paint a safety pin through Liberty's nose (1992: 141).

Pilar believes that her art can "obliterate clichés" (1992: 139). Although this is not the effect it has on the people who attend the exhibition where the painting is unveiled, it does have a transformative effect on mother and daughter. When someone is about to tear the picture with a pocket knife, Lourdes protects it, "a thrashing avalanche of patriotism and motherhood" (1992: 144). It is at this moment that Pilar realises that she loves her mother (ibid). Art, here, has the power to uncover a "history of emotion," as Walcott suggests (1998: 5), instead of a family history just based on political conflict.

Pilar's way to deal with the memories which Hirsch describes as inherited and therefore belated (2008: 105) adjusts to her notion that those can be transformed in meaningful ways so that her own "stories and experiences [are not] displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation" (2008: 106-7). This proves particularly necessary in a context where the memories and conceptions of history of the mother and the grandmother are so drastically different. Differing from Halbwachs' annotation that familial memories ground the individual to a group identity, it is by mistrusting and reshaping her family's memories that Pilar finds an identity of her own as a second-generation Cuban American. In this way García's narrative reflects that in the times of globalisation identities cannot be grounded in the memory and the history of the nation-state but should rather reflect the fluidity of a postnational understanding of the world.

4. The Home As Collective Frame In Achy Obejas' Fiction

Whereas *Dreaming in Cuban* shows the previously explained closure, the texts by Achy Obejas finalise with open endings despite the fact that the protagonists also express the need of going to Cuba to find their identities. Differently, whether this trip is undertaken or not is not shown in the narratives, letting the reader decide whether these characters will be able to feel at ease with their, in Pérez Firmat's words, one-and-a-half identities. In "We Came," after the original opposition of the protagonist's family – although probably decided exclusively by the father – to her going to Cuba and the later death of the father, the mother provides the protagonist with the necessary documents to renew her Cuban passport in order to go back to the island. However, instead of ending with her journey to Cuba, the narrative ends with a flashback of her arriving to the United States. This seems recurrent in Obejas, for *Memory Mambo*, some chapters after Juani, the protagonist, expresses her desire to go to Cuba, finishes with a series of chapters narrating a family conflict in the house of one character – Tía Celia – in Chicago, and therefore Juani's resolution becomes ignored. None of the endings shows the optimistic closure of *Dreaming in Cuban*, but a lingering sense that identity struggles will not cease.

Like *Dreaming in Cuban*, Obejas' works show accounts of characters who see their confidence in collective memory impaired because of having received inaccurate fragmented familial memories which cannot be contested, proved, or critically examined. The protagonist of *Memory Mambo*, Juani Casas, a second-generation immigrant born in Havana but living in the United States since she was very young, is obsessed with memory and with knowing exactly what happened so that her family had to leave Cuba. She claims having been witness to her father's clandestine meetings where he organised the escape from the island, to which her mother responds that "there were meetings just like those [she] remember[s], but Nena, Pucho and [her] were in bed" (1996: 10). Juani then questions if the memory is true or if it is just a fiction that she had heard too many times, precisely confirming Halbwachs' idea that groups like the family "exert an influence on [the individual's] memory" (Llobera 1995: 37). However, the reassuring influence which Halbwachs defines never becomes true for Juani, who cannot even find the source of her – supposedly – collective memory:

If these aren't my memories, then whose are they? Certainly not my father's – he always casts himself as the stoic hero in his stories, unshakeable and inscrutable. [...] If these were my father's stories, they would be wholly congratulatory and totally void of meaningful detail.

My cousin Patricia says this is because his tales are almost always lies (1996: 11).

Therefore, Juani problematises the accuracy of collective memory by, like Patricia, accusing her family of lying to her. A similar situation takes place in the short story:

"You expect me to believe the Americans stole the formula and put it on the market between the time we left Cuba and the time we arrived here? What was that, Mami, a couple of days? Is that what you expect me to believe? You're lying, you're both lying!" (1996: 180)

"Look you didn't come for me, you came for you; you came because all your rich clients were leaving, and you were going to wind up a cashier in your father's hardware store if you didn't leave, okay?" (1994: 121).

By contesting the version of history which their parents have created according to their political ideas, Juani and the short story's protagonist problematise the fact that collective memory is influenced by an accurate "lived history," in Halbwachs' words. Rather, they suggest that such lived history is not the same for all the members of the community.

How to construct an identity based on ideological constructs is something that pervades immigration narratives, in turn reflecting the postmodern distrust for grand narratives, for is it not every sort of historical or national discourse a construct as well? That is what Juani, after the previously quoted confrontation with her family, finds out through the impreciseness and the lies that internet information contains:

I couldn't believe it. "That's not right," I said. "Tío Raúl isn't an exile. He was here long before the revolution. Heck, he went *back* after the revolution."

"See? It's what I was telling you," Bernie said. "You have to read between the lines" (1996: 184; emphasis in the original).

Second-generation immigrant identities, rather than being "broken," as Lucía Suárez suggests (2006: 3), end up reflecting a postmodern awareness on the ideological constructs that compose the human understanding of the world. In the short story, the protagonist confronts the cause-and-effect relationships that pervade her father's narrative just like Benjamin criticises that historicism tries to establish unreal causal relationships between events (2003: 397). While the protagonist's father in "We Came" establishes the unmovable notion that being exiles is an inextricable sign that the revolution was wrong or evil, his daughter – the unnamed protagonist and narrator of the story – shows an awareness on the workings of this sort of cause-and-effect fallacy.

Nevertheless, while Pilar is able to have access to the bigger picture through her trip to Cuba, Juani and the protagonist in "We Came" seem as confused at the ending as at the beginning. What both of Obejas' narratives' endings in fact share are two female first-generation characters finally adapting and feeling at home in the United States after the death of their husbands: Juani's Tía Celia and the protagonist's mother in "We Came." The two male characters who had oppressed their wives with their behaviours – Celia's husband cheating on her and repeatedly getting drunk and the father of the story imposing his immovable views on communism and history – embody the voice of oppression against the critical examination of identity, memory, and history. With this, Obejas throws light upon the inherent violence and sexism of the mainstream Cuban family nucleus and, like Cristina García, grants the domestic female scene a powerful force in the construction of personal (hi)stories (Payant 2001: 164). As Méndez-Rodenas explains, in the traditional cultural imaginary the male became the "emblematic subject of exile" (2009: 47), but Obejas subverts the balance. It is in the evolution of the domestic scene in Cuban-American exile communities that the characters – both first- and second-generation – find a space to work through identity and displacement, giving importance to fluidity and rejecting absolute static notions.

In these narratives the place of the exile is the feminised Cuban-American home, a place of oppression turned into a place to create, like Anzaldúa's borderlands. As Ana M^a Manzanás explains, whereas previous resistance narrative models included the hybrid as the "mixed race," a mixture of two "races," Gloria Anzaldúa's "new mestiza" concept "disarticulates the theory of the hybrid as a degradation of humanity and as infertile and rearticulates its meaning" (1999: 37). The notion of infertility could be well applied here to the characters' failure to conform to a national identity, as any subject who is *inbetween* two places does not succeed in being in any of the two. Unlike Pilar's visit to Cuba to acquire that part of her cultural identity which had been denied to her, *Memory Mambo* and "We Came" finish inside the house and not on the island. As Manzanás explains, the borderlands, in this case the house, contest "univocal identities": one is not simply *inbetween*, in this space one "produce[s] a new space, a new discourse, and a new culture" (Manzanás 1999: 36). It is not a place where two cultures merge but a place of multiplicity, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari saw it: multiplicity "changes its nature as it expands its connections" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8).

The emancipation of these women provides a ground for an alternative historiography both in the homeland and in the diaspora, and not only for them but also for their second-generation children and nieces. The domestic settings in which these women are become safe spaces to perform an identity which disturbs patriarchal hegemonic narratives. It is a domestic space to which the women were formerly forced and relegated as an only option, but once the oppression and obligation are over, it becomes a powerful space for subversion. In the short story, after the father's funeral all the men continue speaking outside the house while the women talk about food on the inside:

My mother and other several relatives will go back to *her* house [...] the women will talk about how to make picadillo with low-fat ground turkey instead of the traditional beef and ham, and the men will sit outside in the yard drinking beer or small cups of Cuban coffee, and talk about my father's love of Cuba, and how unfortunate it is that he died just as Eastern Europe is breaking free, and Fidel is surely about to fall (1994: 128; emphasis mine).

In the scene, the women's inventiveness contrasts with the men's static notions and conversations about a frozen past. At the end of the story we have a final image of the now blind mother using a Braille computer and connecting to the internet, an image of connection and expansion towards the Other, reminding of Édouard Glissant's idea of relational thought, a thought that disturbs linear narratives of filiation and instead discovers that identity is "no longer within the root but also in Relation" (2010: 18). This woman leaves the house one last time to give the protagonist a box containing some essential papers for renewing her passport so that she can go to Cuba and also explore this relation. It is illustrative that she goes out while the protagonist is about to enter a taxi instead of sending it or giving it to her while in the house. She goes *in and out* of this domestic space where she used to be confined, only to the inside.

In *Memory Mambo*, after Juani's Tío Pepe dies, Tía Celia – the widow – organises meals with plenty of fruit (to which Tío Pepe was allergic) where this big family gathers. As Juani recalls throughout the novel, the family had continuously been inventing narratives and lies which kept their toxic relationships unchallenged. It is thanks to these reunions that tensions finally give way and the family has to confront its skeletons in the cupboard. In Maite Zubiaurre's words, this is a reconstructed gynocentric nation (1999: 3) to fix impaired narratives and construct a truly feminist historiography. It is in this house where the final scene shows everyone in the family the true nature of Jimmy, the abusive husband of Juani's cousin, Caridad. Jimmy had been blackmailing Juani, threatening to reveal her own personal contradictions and secrets if she failed him, that is, if she exposed his violence towards Caridad, among other misbehaviours. The reunions in Tía Celia's house cause, through contact, the explosion of these situations. And even though Juani is silent due to the shock of observing Jimmy abusing her baby niece, Juani also reveals the truth by not defending him, since she is not alone anymore but in a house where everyone can see what Jimmy was doing. The ending being this and not a longed for trip to Cuba brings attention to the role of the feminine space as an alternative narrative frame contrasting with those that, both in the homeland and the hostland, had been predominantly patriarchal. According to E.C. Relph theorisations, it is the problem of placelessness, which this generation often suffers, that impedes development (1976: 65-66), as seen by Juani's paralysis and inability to take decisions. To develop an identity and an alternative historiography, one must be at home in their place, and this is attempted with the endings of Achy Obejas' works.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on the problematic of memory and identity for second-generation Cuban-American populations, Cristina García's and Achy Obejas' narratives contest traditional notions of identity as tied to historical memory and national affiliation. The relationship established by Maurice Halbwachs between history and collective memory is problematic for exiles and their bicultural children. Walter Benjamin's critique of historicism

contests Halbwachs' view by insisting on the fact that the past is not just official historiography but a much more complicated concept dedicated to the anonymous, a different view of memory that in Lucía Suárez's words "gives people agency [...] gives history freedom from the dictates of history writers" (2006: 5). In García's work, Cuba and the United States are acknowledged as cultural referents which are not static, and she stresses the Cuban exile tendency to cultural essentialism. Although an essentialist view of *inbetweenness* (embodying a combination of two cultures) is not conveyed in *Dreaming in Cuban*, visiting the island of her ancestors proves useful for the protagonist to ground her identity as a hybrid individual. However, the continuous modification and transformation of identity, as Stuart Hall sees it, "a coming-to-terms-with our 'routes'" (1996: 4), can be dangerously simplified into being exclusively identified as an *inbetween* immigrant who must assume a representative dual identity. Obejas' writing attempts to contest this assumption. Her endings point out that there is no need for the characters to go to Cuba so as to create a Cuban-American identity because such identity is not a combination of two cultures but a place for justice and feminist historiography, in opposition to Pérez Firmat's "hybrid nowhere[s]" (1994: 12): not a third space but a revolution. The paranoia, lack of memory, and lack of opinion and identification of *Memory Mambo*'s Juani establish that she does not need to find and transform any culture or identity but only to escape from essentialist premises like those of her Puerto Rican *independentista* lover, who continuously reminds her of her Cuban background, of which she does not have any memories.

To conclude, these three literary works serve to unveil that analyses of the immigration experience that define it in terms of fragmented memory and broken identity draw on traditional notions of history and the nation as self-contained entities. Whereas these narratives show the identification problems suffered by second-generation immigrants, especially those from Cuba because of the country's particular political situation, they also denounce the essentialist nationalism which has contributed to the perception of this community as a group deemed unable to find their place in the world. As Caribbean thinker Édouard Glissant teaches, the problem with emigration only arises when one resorts to the rooted – that is, nationalist, – definition of identity (2010: 143) in opposition to one of "chaotic" networks of cultural contacts (2010: 144). As such, the workings of memory are also deconstructed in these works which show how they can be manipulated by the hegemonic – and politically motivated – epistemology that surrounds modern nationalisms.

References

- Ahearn Jr, Frederick L. and Jean L. Athey, eds. (1991). *Refugee children: Theory, Research and Services*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP.
- Alvarez Borland, Isabel and Lynette M.F. Bosch, eds. (2001). *Cuban-American Literature and Art: Negotiating Identities*. Albany: State U of New York P.
- Anderson, Benedict (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Appadurai, Arjun (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P.
- Benjamin, Walter (2003). *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds. Cambridge, Mass and London: Harvard UP.
- Bhabha, Homi K (1990). The Third Space. In Rutherford, Jonathan, ed., 207-221.
- Bhabha, Homi and Lisa Appignanesi, eds. (1987). *Identity: The Real Me*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts.
- Das, Amrita (2012). Contesting Identity in Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo*. *Letras Femeninas* 38 (2): 143-156.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Brian Massumi, trans. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- Erll, Astrid (2008). Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction. In Erll, Astrid and Ansgar Nünning, eds., 1-18.
- Erll, Astrid and Ansgar Nünning, eds. (2008). *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- García, Cristina (1992). *Dreaming in Cuban*. London: Flamingo.
- Glissant, Édouard (2010). *Poetics of Relation*. Betsy Wing, trans. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P.
- Halbwachs, Maurice (1980). *The Collective Memory*. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter, trans. New York: Harper and Row.
- Hall, Stuart (1989). Cultural Identity and Diaspora. *Framework: Journal of Cinema and Media* 36: 222–237.
- (1987). Minimal Selves. In Bhabha, Homi and Lisa Appignanesi, eds., 44-46. +
- (1996). Introduction: Who Needs Identity? In Hall, Stuart and Paul du Gay, eds., 1-17.
- Hall, Stuart and Paul du Gay, eds. (1996). *Questions of Cultural Identity* London: Sage Publications.
- Hirsch, Marianne (2008). The Generation of Postmemory. *Poetics Today* 29 (1): 103–128.
- Leonard, Suzanne (2014). Dreaming as Cultural Work in *Donald Duk* and *Dreaming in Cuban*. *MELUS* 29 (2): 181-203.
- Llobera, Joseph R. (1995). Halbwachs, Nora and "History" versus "Collective Memory": a Research Note. *Durkheimian Studies / Études Durkheimiennes* New Series (1): 35-44.

- Machado Sáez, Elena (2005). The Global Baggage of Nostalgia in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*. *MELUS* 30 (4): 129-145.
- Manzanas, Ana M^a (1999). Ethnicity, Mestizaje, and Writing. In Manzanas, Ana M^a and Jesús Benito, 27-39.
- Manzanas, Ana M^a and Jesús Benito, eds. (1999). *Narratives of Resistance: Literature and Ethnicity in the United States and the Caribbean*. Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha.
- Méndez Rodenas, Adriana (2009). Engendering the Nation: The Mother/Daughter Plot in Cuban American Fiction. In Alvarez Borland, Isabel and Lynette M. F, eds., 47-70.
- Obejas, Achy (1996). *Memory Mambo*. San Francisco: Cleiss Press.
- (1994). *We Came all the Way from Cuba so that you could Dress like This?* San Francisco: Cleiss Press.
- Payant, Katherine B (2001). From Alienation to Reconciliation in the Novels of Cristina García. *MELUS* 26 (3): 163-182.
- Pérez Firmat, Gustavo (1994). *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. Austin: U of Texas P.
- Relph, E. C. (1976). *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion Limited.
- Rivero, Eliana (2009). Writing in Cuban, Living as Other: Cuban American Women Writers Getting it Right. In Alvarez Borland, Isabel and Lynette M. F, eds., 109-125.
- Rumbaut, Rubén G. (1991). The Agony of Exile: A Study of the Migration and Adaptation of Indochinese Refugee Adults and Children. In Ahearn Jr, Frederick L. and Jean L. Athey, 53-91.
- (1994). The Crucible Within: Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem, and Segmented Assimilation Among Children of Immigrants. *The International Migration Review* 28 (4): 748-94.
- Rutherford, Jonathan, ed. (1990). *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Shemak, April A. (2006). A Wounded Discourse: The Poetics of Disease in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*. *Postcolonial Text* 2 (3): 1-23.
- Suárez, Lucía M. (2006). *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory*. Gainesville, Florida: UP of Florida.
- Walcott, Derek (1998). *What the Twilight Says*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Zeruvabel, Eviatar (2004). *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- Zubiaurre, Maite (1999). Hacia Una Nueva Geografía Feminista: Nación, Identidad y Construcción Imaginaria en *Dreaming in Cuban* (Cristina García) y en *Memory Mambo* (Achéy Obejas). *Chasqui* 28 (1): 3-15.