

Queering the Hyphen: Mental Borderlands in Achy Obejas' *Memory Mambo*

Martina Urioste-Buschmann

Abstract:

This article explores the narrative negotiations of Cuban-American cultural belonging and sexual orientation in Achy Obeja's novel *Memory Mambo* (1996). Referring to the concept of 'hyphenation' introduced by Gustavo Pérez Firmat and to Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes's concept of a 'sexile', as well as to Homi K. Bhabha's idea of cultural difference, it shows how the narrator's discourse creates an understanding of the intersection between race, sexuality and nation embedded in the oppressive logic of colonial thinking. Analysing examples of the narrator's enunciations, the article concludes that the accounts of first person narrator and protagonist Juani Casas map hybrid 'borderlands' (Gloria Anzaldúa) from a Cuban-American perspective in order to challenge the colonial scaling of sexual orientation within a diasporic Caribbean context.

The Caribbean is considered a region where homophobia is particularly prevalent and legitimized by law.¹ Newspaper articles and human rights reports with titles such as "Homophobia In The Caribbean: Anti-Sodomy Laws And Persecution, Being Gay Is No Fun In The Islands" or "Hated to Death: Homophobia, Violence and Jamaica's HIV/AIDS Epidemic" offer an indication of the level of interest taken in 'Caribbean Homophobia' by Western media.² While the oppression of non-heteronormative peoples is often linked to historical patterns of patriarchy within colonial Caribbean societies³ and, as such, "taken for granted"⁴, the representation of and political discussion about queer experience has become an increasingly common theme within Caribbean contemporary literature.⁵ The growing number of essay collections and literary anthologies dealing with subjects such as cross-dressing and lesbian-gay lifestyles testifies to the extent of the ongoing debate about sexual differences in the Caribbean region.⁶

Some of the best-known examples of contemporary Caribbean queer writing include the autobiographical novel *Antes que anochezca* by Cuban author Reinaldo Arenas, the essays and poetry of Audre Lorde, as well as the short stories and novels of Shani Mootoo.⁷ It is particularly noteworthy that the biographies of all three authors derive from diasporic contexts.⁸ The literary scholar Evelyn O'Callaghan connects the strong presence of diasporic authors whose works feature themes of sexual difference to a yearning to bring the "silenced stories" of queer subjectivities within the Caribbean to light.⁹ She also situates "the metropolitan centre" as a "more positive location for the 'freeing up' of alternative sexual subject positions."¹⁰ This seems to be true for the authors mentioned above as well as for Achy Obejas, whose novel *Memory Mambo* (1996) will be discussed in the following pages. Lorde describes herself as a "Black lesbian feminist poet warrior mother" and in her writings frequently reflects on intersecting oppressions, anticipating crucial ideas on the entanglements between class, race, sexuality and gender that were later put forward by other lesbian writers of colour (e.g. Patricia Hill Collins, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga).¹¹

Therefore, the analysis of diasporic Caribbean narratives offers an unprecedented insight into criticism by the queer community on heteronormative and colonial domains of power.¹² By focusing on hybrid spaces in which differing cultural systems overlap, the authors of these narratives use a fictitious context to reflect upon queerness from different angles, incorporating both subaltern and dominant discourses. Essentially, these narratives provide an experimental space for the decolonial exploration of various theories that have emerged out of the field of gender studies. What is really occurring in these stories is the decolonisation of academic knowledge concerning gender and sexuality, as realised within geo-political and racial borderlands.¹³

In her ground-breaking work *Borderlands. La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (1987), the Chicana and Third World feminist critic Gloria Anzaldúa focuses on the borderland paradigm when dissecting the binary discourses of heteronormativity, sexism, racism, and neo-colonial thinking. According to Anzaldúa, the borderland concept does not only reference a physical state but also a psychological, sexual, and spiritual one. She describes the way in which subjects who inhabit borderlands

are able to negotiate the contradictions and tensions of that plural state, being as they are forced to transcend the fixed frontiers separating races, genders, sexualities, cultures, and languages. In contrast to the intersectionalist approach of black feminists such as Audre Lorde or Patricia Hill Collins, Anzaldúa's border feminism does not focus on multiple physical locations of individuals or groups within a specific social category. Rather, her concept emphasises the transgression, negotiation and displacement of political, cultural and sexual borderlines. As Walter Mignolo points out, Anzaldúa's intellectual image of the borderlands emerges from subaltern experiences within colonial modernity. Referring to the Chicana author's "conciencia de la mestiza", Mignolo appropriates the borderland paradigm to introduce his concept of a decolonial "*critical border thinking*" that fractures the epistemic hegemony of Western knowledge.¹⁴ In this sense, Anzaldúa can be described as a decolonial critic *avant la lettre*.

Referencing the borderland concept when analysing diasporic Caribbean narratives and their queer subjects offers the reader deeper insights. Not only does Anzaldúa's borderland concept describe the process of identity formation within the context of migration more precisely; it also draws attention to the deconstruction of the exclusionary mechanisms as an inherent part of binary thinking, including that which underpins colonial patterns and heteronormative discourses.

Against this backdrop, my essay explores queer identity creation in the Caribbean diaspora within the USA's big cities. My main areas of concern are: a) the critique of 'white' American discourses of gender and sexuality and b) the inspection of Caribbean homophobia as well as the reclamation of dissident perspectives on Cuban and Puerto Rican politics. These concerns take into account "the cross-fertilization of decolonial thinking and queer theory"¹⁵ and therefore aim to critique heteronormativity grounded in the modern understanding of sexual dimorphism.¹⁶ Following this critique, my essay approaches the intersection of race and gender, sexuality and nation embedded in social mechanisms of oppression. By applying concepts of postcolonial and decolonial theory, I will examine the wavering field of tension that exists between Caribbean identity and belonging, citizenship and lesbianism as depicted in Achy Obejas' novel *Memory Mambo* (1996). Referring to the concept of 'hyphenation' introduced by Cuban-American writer and scholar

Gustavo Pérez Firmat in *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (1994) and to Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes's concept of a 'sexile', as well as to Homi K. Bhabha's idea of cultural difference, I will conclude that these narrative perspectives create a hybridised 'border' state in the sense of Gloria Anzaldúa.¹⁷

Cuban-American Hyphenation, Sexile, and Borderlands

In his book *Life on the Hyphen*, Pérez Firmat points out that Cuban-American artists born abroad and raised in the United States from 1959 onwards have been confronted with a process of biculturation. As second-generation exiles, they have often been shaped by parental memories of the homeland, while incorporating elements of Anglo-American culture into their lifestyle.¹⁸ The hyphen therefore represents their bicultural placement; it is best understood as a seesaw upon which each culture is balanced in an oscillating manner:

Spiritually and psychologically, you are neither *aquí* nor *allá*, you are neither Cuban nor Anglo. You're "cubanglo," a word that has the advantage of imprecision, since one can't tell where the "Cuban" ends and the "Anglo" begins. Having two cultures, you belong wholly to neither one.¹⁹

The precarious balancing act that these "one-and-a-halfers"²⁰ perform is accompanied by a sense of rootlessness, since their cultural origins are confined to a sphere of the imagination that is dominated by the vivid memories of others:

This is what second-stage exiles feel: that the ground has been taken out from under them, that they no longer know their place, that they have in fact lost their place. Rather than nostalgic, they now feel estranged and disconnected. The provisional comforts of substitution have vanished. Now every time you drive by La Esquina de Tejas, in your mind's eye you see a sign that says instead, "This Isn't Havana." If the theme of the first moment was "we are there," the theme of the second moment is "we are nowhere."²¹

The literary scholar Isabel Alvarez-Borland extends Pérez Firmat's definition by introducing another subgroup of second-generation exiles focusing on authors: she

***EnterText*, Special Issue on "Crossing Thresholds: Gender and Decoloniality in Caribbean Knowledge," 12 (2018): 99-122.**

mentions 'Cuban-American ethnic writers' as an additional category. According to her distinction, one-and-a-half generation writers have left Cuba "during their early adolescence and thus had Cuban childhoods and U.S. adulthoods."²² This group has published literary works both in English and Spanish. In contrast, Cuban-American ethnic writers belong to a younger generation of authors "who came from Cuba as infants or who were born in the United States to parents of the first exile generation."²³ This group of writers is more closely related to English as a writing language and addresses an American as well as a Cuban audience in its works. Following this definition, it becomes clear that Achy Obejas belongs to the second group of authors, since she was born in Cuba in 1956 but migrated with her parents to the U.S. at age six and has published her texts in English.

At first glance, the discourse surrounding hyphenation seems to stand in stark contrast to the idea of a 'sexile'. This term, introduced by Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes in "*De sexilio(s) homosexual(es) Latina(s): cultura puertorriqueña y lo nuyorican queer*" [On Latin Homosexual Sexile: Puerto-Rican Culture and the Nuyorican Queer]²⁴ (2004), redefines a sexually connoted form of exile as a form of migration:

Esta migración a veces tiene como simple objetivo el alejarse de la familia y de la comunidad, ir a un lugar donde el individuo no tiene historia. En otros casos, se trata de ir a un lugar que tiene fama o reputación de ser más tolerante para con los homosexuales, o donde hay comunidades establecidas, protecciones legales [...].²⁵

[This migration has the simple objective of moving away from the family and community, towards a place where the individual doesn't have a history. In other instances, it involves moving to a place which is famous for or has the reputation of being more tolerant towards homosexuals; where established communities or legal protection [...] exist.]²⁶

Taking into account that queer people were prosecuted and imprisoned within UMAP camps in the early stages of the Cuban revolution, the option of being freed from one's cultural roots appears to be more a matter of survival than a biographical account of cultural disenfranchisement in this historical context.²⁷ However, the

***EnterText*, Special Issue on "Crossing Thresholds: Gender and Decoloniality in Caribbean Knowledge," 12 (2018): 99-122.**

overlapping themes of cultural loss and physical integrity occurring within the queer exile's progress constitute a starting point for the counternarrative that is developed in *Memory Mambo*.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa develops an intellectual framework upon which to explore a hybrid consciousness of gender by remapping cultural discourses from Mexico, the United States, and Latin America. This 'mestiza' consciousness emerges out of the convergence of cultures – a convergence that creates psychological conflict that forces women to renegotiate their identities and allegiances in the context of incompatible value systems. Within these spiritual borderlands, the dialectic framework of Western thought, which constructs "oppositions between being white and colored, female and male, heterosexual and queer," can be transcended;²⁸ instead, it introduces a tolerance for ambiguity via a new consciousness which embraces difference and contradiction.²⁹ Anzaldúa's decolonial feminist agenda demands that a political change must take place in the minds of both the oppressors and the oppressed.³⁰ Queer identity plays a prominent role within this process:

Being the supreme crossers of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet. We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other —the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials. It is to transfer ideas and information from one culture to another. [...]

The *mestizo* and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls.³¹

Anzaldúa's essayistic reflections on the hybrid queer living find a narrative expression in Juani Casas, the lesbian protagonist and first-person narrator of the novel *Memory Mambo*, since her character represents a mapping of intimate Cuban-American queerness. Juani's narrative discourse is characterised by "living on borders and in margins," as well as transferring this alien experience to something

familiar, in which a sense of home can be cultivated beyond the dualistic matrix of white or black, straight or gay.³²

The author Achy Obejas and her novel *Memory Mambo*

Throughout her journalistic career in Chicago, Obejas has been politically active, involved in the human rights movement, and working for the LGTB newspaper *Windy City Times*.³³ Obejas identifies herself as a lesbian and frequently writes about the Cuban migratory experience in the U.S. For example, her 1994 short story collection, *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?* and her novel *Days of Awe* (2001) both explore the histories of diasporic communities and the fragmented memories of Cuban exiles and refugees living in the U.S. Although Obejas frequently writes about her characters' struggles with sexuality and family acceptance, she stresses that she has always accepted her sexual identity as part of herself:

In terms of my own sexuality, I don't know what it was, but I just never blinked. I was always amazed when other people did; I was always sort of flabbergasted when people would suffer angst about it. I understood that it was taboo and all of that, but I chalked it up as a kind of a generational problem.³⁴

Obejas' first-hand observations about the struggles of other gays and lesbians against a background of social taboos find expression in Juani Casas, the lesbian protagonist and narrator of *Memory Mambo*. In 1978, six-year-old Juani escapes Cuba by boat to the U.S. with her family. Although the protagonist's biographical aspects correspond to Alvarez Borland's category of the Cuban-American ethnic, Juani's life experiences are characterised by the typical balancing act of the "one-and-a-halfers" who negotiate their feeling of belonging to different social groups. In the novel these groups are represented by family, friends and lovers. The twenty-four-year-old "pretty light-skinned"³⁵ Cuban-American works in a Chicago laundrette that belongs to her extended family. Not knowing what to do with her life, Juani spends a lot of time with her numerous siblings and cousins. Her own memories of Cuba are blurred, consisting of faded photographs and her parents' endlessly repeated anecdotes. As a result, Juani often doubts her memory, thinking that her

brain plays tricks on her as she has heard these stories from her parents so many times:

Why do I remember foggy meetings around the kitchen table, cigars burning in the ashtrays, their tips glistening, while my father's face appeared and disappeared behind the smoke? My mother tells me there were meetings just like those I remember, but that Nena, Pucho and I were in bed [...].

If these aren't my memories then whose are they?³⁶

Additionally, some of the stories that she has heard seem to be pure fabrications invented by her father Alberto – a light-skinned, openly anti-Castro Cuban who presents himself as a direct descendent of Bartholomé de las Casas and thus differentiates himself from the “mixed breed” of Juani's mother.³⁷ Juani often and with ease exposes his storytelling as lies; for example, when Alberto claims that he helped the Cuban dictator Batista to escape from Cuba in 1959, ignoring the fact that he himself would have been just a child at that time. As a “one-and-a-half” in exile, listening to the stories of her father yet unable to connect them with her own memories, Juani notices that her *allá* is constantly dissolving. She experiences what Pérez Firmat terms a cultural “destitution.”³⁸ The protagonist clearly identifies herself as a lesbian and speaks frankly about her former lovers, recounting her memories of sexual indulgence in poetic terms: “The very first time I pulled my fingers out from inside a woman, I watched the tendrils of cum catch the light. They seemed as strong as a spider's silk, as impossible as morning.”³⁹ Although her family is aware of her lesbianism, Juani's sexual orientation is banished to the sphere of unspoken truths by her parents:

My mother knows about me; we've talked about it. These are unsteady, clumsy conversations. Her basic reaction is Catholic: she is mystified but defers, both to her vague knowledge of the church's condemnation, and to the fact of my existence. [...]

My father knows too but we don't talk about it. This doesn't mean there are any pretenses between us. To the contrary: My father is as aware as anyone could ever be. He avoids not just the topic of my sexuality, but any

subject that could inadvertently lead us there. My father's worst fear, I think, is that I'll say something to him about it. Because he can think of nothing worse than having to look me in the eye and make a decision about whether to accept or reject me [...].⁴⁰

It is not until she meets the *mulatta* girl Gina, a Puerto Rican *independentista*, that Juani feels challenged to question the ideals of her culturally enacted identity. Gina actively supports the Puerto Rican independence movement, sympathising with the violent acts carried out by the paramilitary organization of the *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional* (FALN) between 1974 and 1983.⁴¹ She works as a political campaign manager for the community activist Rudy Canto, who seeks election as an alderman in Chicago. Juani meets Gina at a political district gathering where counter-gang measures are being discussed. At their very first encounter, even before the two women have exchanged words, Juani feels an intense attraction to Gina. However, their first date happens in private, at Gina's flat, after both have been stuffing envelopes for a mail-out to promote Rudy Canto as an aldermanic candidate. In Gina's flat, Juani also realises that her new girlfriend's leftist attitude strongly contrasts with Juani's own migratory history. Pictures of Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara adorn the walls of Gina's bedroom and tributes to Puerto Rican independence and Latin American liberation movements are scattered throughout the flat. In this scene it becomes clear that Gina's identity formation is strongly linked to the idea of the anti-colonial liberation struggle and the Cuban revolution.

Juani's self-conception is characterised by an ambivalence towards the Cuban socialist project, since the political developments under Castro's rule are the reason why she and her family escaped to the U.S. Her relationship to Cuban history is conflicted and influenced not only by her own one-and-a-half biography but also by her lesbianism.

After the women start seeing each other regularly, Gina critically examines Juani's lifestyle. As a result, the Cuban-American begins to radically change her habits in order to please her girlfriend. Juani retrospectively recalls her personal transformation with wit and irony:

During my time with Gina, I ate less red meat (I refused to give it up entirely, in spite of her health and political warnings, because it also meant I would eat less Cuban food, which I love and refuse to give up for anything or anyone, including her), no California grapes or lettuce (because of the boycotts) [...] I ate a lot more soy (which I actually like), brown rice (which I think ruins every Cuban rice dish in *Cocina Al Minuto*) [...].⁴²

The above passage shows the difficult balancing act of a life on the hyphen: in order to maintain a continuing love relationship with Gina and to avoid frictions, Juani is willing to subordinate her cultural eating habits to the political ideal of fair trade. However, her cultural seesaw oscillates upon a simple consumer choice between the elements of homeland and the expectations of the leftist LOHA environment Gina belongs to.⁴³ At the beginning of the relationship, it seems that Juani's efforts to adapt to Gina's political agenda have had a balancing impact: in return for Juani's change in consumer habits, Gina forces herself to patiently listen to stories told by Juani's father at family meetings, which generally adopt a harsh tone towards the Castro regime.

Despite their mutual efforts to reach a compromise, however, the relationship is exposed to increasing frictions due to Gina's refusal to come out of the closet. For Gina, a frank, public admission of her lesbianism would socially separate her from her fellow political combatants; moreover, she considers the general discussion of sexual identity to be the product of an affluent, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant society. In Gina's eyes, coming out of the closet is not compatible with the aim of political emancipation from colonial dependence, since liberal debates on sexual identity are part of the oppressor's logic. Gina's argumentation corresponds to the colonial strategy of homosexualising the image of subjugated countries. According to the Nuyorican poet and literary critic Alfredo Villanueva Collado, this strategy played a crucial role during the Spanish-American war when Spain lost its colonial power over Puerto Rico and the USA annexed the island into its own national territory.⁴⁴ In his essay "René Marqués, Ángel Lozada, and The Constitution of The (Queer) Puerto Rican National Subject" (2007), the Nuyorican writer shows the links between Spanish colonialism, North American imperialism, and the construction of the Puerto Rican national body as a male homosexual subject by analysing contemporary

Puerto Rican literature. He refers to texts of authors such as René Marqués or Luis Rafael Sánchez to provide evidence for “an internalized homophobia and absorption into postmodern neocolonialist discourse, particularly in the critical writings.”⁴⁵ In this sense, Gina’s idea of staying in the closet in order to support the anti-colonial liberation struggle reproduces the neocolonial duality in which national autonomy is perceived as ‘straight’ and colonial dependence as ‘queer’.

The antagonistic political positions of the two lovers repeatedly give rise to strong and emotionally draining debates. Juani reflects on these retrospectively as painful memories:

“Look, I’m not interested in being a *lesbian*, in separating politically from my people,” she’d say to me, her face hard and dark. “What are we talking about? Issues of *sexual identity*? While Puerto Rico is a colony? While Puerto Rican apologists are trying to ram statehood down our throats with legislative tricks and sleights of hand? You think I’m going to sit around and discuss *sexual identity*? Nah, Juani, you can do that—you can have that navel-gazing discussion.”

And though she never quite said it, I felt the sting: I knew part of the reason why I was pinned with this topic as personally important was not because it was valid, but because I’m Cuban, and in Gina’s eyes, automatically more privileged [...].

“That’s so white, this whole business of *sexual identity*,” she’d say, while practically undoing my pants. “But you Cubans, you think you’re white...”⁴⁶

Here, Gina’s words allude clearly to the stereotypical idea of the white Cuban exile formerly belonging to a colonially derived land-owning class, who had to escape the revolutionary transitions occurring in Cuba after their property was expropriated. In fact, a large percentage of Cuban-Americans occupy an intermediary socioeconomic position between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic populations, right up until today.⁴⁷ This is also strongly related to the fact that, since the time of Castro’s government, exiled Cubans have received the status of political refugees in the U.S., thus granting

them privileged treatment under U.S. immigration laws that other non-political Latin-American immigrants were subjected to. Up until the 1990s, statistical evidence shows that 83% of Cuban-Americans were classified as white and an overwhelming proportion had achieved a noticeably higher level of socioeconomic success than other groups of Hispanic-origin immigrants.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, this image must be considered carefully: Ever since the beginning of the Special Period in the 1990s, the migration flow to the U.S. also has affected other social and ethnic groups in Cuba that are not exclusively white and do not belong to the pre-revolutionary upper class. The Cuban author and film scholar Eliseo Altunaga points out, for example, that after Mariel, “there’s an exodus of blacks” to the U.S.⁴⁹ The Cuban-American myth of ‘racialised’ success therefore cannot be generalised. The literary scholar Margarethe Herzog argues that Cuban immigrants in the U.S. are confronted with problems such as unemployment and the search for housing when securing their livelihood, just as much as other migrant groups.⁵⁰

However, Puerto Rican migrants are among the lowest-paid, lowest-educated and most impoverished minorities in the U.S. Members of the Puerto Rican-American community who have been granted U.S. citizenship because of the island’s status as an unincorporated U.S. territory are aware of their disadvantaged situation and tend to see Cuban success within American society critically.⁵¹ In this sense, Gina’s stereotyping of the Cuban-American population represents the collective subaltern perspective of a marginalised migrant group from the Hispanic Caribbean region in the U.S.

In any case, Gina’s criticism of the supposedly ‘white’ imperial discourse on sexual identity reveals itself as a product of colonial thinking, because her argument ignores Hispanic contributions to the LGBT movements in the U.S., for example, their involvement in the Stonewall riots in 1969.⁵² La Fountain-Stokes critically notes this hegemonic blind spot:

Desafortunadamente [...] los individuos y las aportaciones culturales que no son de origen blanco, anglosajón, protestante, de clase alta o media, masculina y heterosexual no son valoradas de igual manera que las otras, ni

en los EE.UU. ni en el imaginario extranjero sobre ese país. Por más privilegiada(s) que parezca(n) a nivel mundial, la(s) cultura(s) homosexual(e)s estadounidense(s) — como la(s) de otras comunidades “subalternas” — ha(n) sido marginada(s) o excluida(s) del discurso oficial;⁵³

[Unfortunately [...] individuals and cultural contributions not deriving from a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, upper- or middle-class, male or heterosexual origin, are not given equal assessment either in the U.S., or in the popular perception of the U.S. in foreign imaginations. Although homosexual U.S. culture(s) may seem to be privileged on a global level, they have been marginalised and excluded from official discourse alongside other “subaltern” communities.]⁵⁴

Gina's anti-colonial observations paradoxically represent the same reactionary reflex that is characterised by a colonial concept of 'Othering'.⁵⁵ By perceiving the plurality of sexual identity as part of a white ideology, she adopts a heterosexist position which corresponds to a “*sexualized racism*”:⁵⁶ whilst queer identity making is possible within a white society, the breaking of sexual dimorphism is forbidden within the cultural context of being 'non-white'. Gina's point of view shows the entanglements of different systems of oppression. Here, the markers of class, race, gender, and sexuality interact intersectionally within a system of oppression to produce diverse constructions of the deviant.

The women's distinctly different ways of dealing with their lesbianism, which are rooted in irreconcilable political differences, cause the tensions between Gina and Juani to grow. This conflict reaches its climax when Gina invites Juani to a party at her house, where Gina's friends start to scoff at her for being a typical Cuban exile and accuse her of being a 'Gusana'.⁵⁷ When the party is over, Juani realises that Gina is not going to apologise for the jokes that were made at her expense or for her friends' teasing. Instead, Gina takes this taunting even further, describing Juani's parents' decision to leave Cuba as a despicable act and asking Juani what she would have done in their place.

“I wouldn't have left.” She [Gina] paused. “How about you—if you'd been old enough to decide for yourself—would you have left?”

The truth is, I'd never thought about it before. [...]

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

And I realized, sitting there on Gina's couch, that, among all the dizzying feelings bloating my brain, I was jealous that she and her friends knew so much about my country, and I knew so little [...] I had spent all my time working in a laundromat folding other people's clothes [...].⁵⁸

Because of the previous events at the party and because of Gina's hostile attitude towards her family history, Juani feels that her cultural identity and autobiographical narrative is being painfully called into question. This leads to a violent knee-jerk reaction:

But what I did next, I'm not proud of.

I rocked a bit to the side, just going with her motion, but when I came back up, my fist had somehow rolled into a wrecking ball, the knuckles all pointy and aimed at her face. I don't know why or how but I smashed it into her [...] and I felt the bones of her face collapse under my hand.⁵⁹

The violent break-up causes a deep crisis in the protagonist's life, forcing Juani to renegotiate her sense of cultural belonging by focusing on her lesbian identity. This process finds its expression in Juani's statements about her queer identity which develops cross-links between her hyphenated position and the global struggle for gay rights. These extend the stereotypical idea of the Cuban exile to include the dimension of heterosexist exclusion. In the following, I will argue that these explored entanglements correspond to a narrative which articulates mental borderlands as it is described by Anzaldúa.

Juani's Enunciations of Mental Borderlands

Shifting the focus to Juani's reflections on her own lesbian identity – and, in particular, those which come after her fight with Gina – I will look at samples of literary devices which bring to light her border consciousness in terms of cross-cultural belonging and female sexuality. Relationships with images and text play a crucial role in illustrating the narrator's spiritual borderlands.

In the given example, Juani's reflections are articulated in the form of an ekphrasis as she describes photographs of her cousin Titi. Titi lives in Cuba but has desperately tried to escape the island on several occasions, without success:

I know about Titi only through stories [...]. I've seen photographs. I've seen her crazy hair, her crazy eyes. I've seen the way she leans into a doorframe, wearing only a loose print housedress, and the desperation etched into her brave and weary face. I know just from the pictures—Titi at the beach grinning and straddling a raft, Titi with her arms around her friends at work, Titi smoking like Bogart and staring intently at the sea from the gray and crumbling *malecón*—that Titi's a lesbian. There's no androgyny, no fashion statement, no political button or secret hand signal to give her away. There is nothing other than her particular madness.⁶⁰

Here, the issue of queerness and gender oppression is not expressed via narrative telling, but rather via showing. Images are employed to transmit a sense of what it means to be a lesbian in Cuba, to great effect. By analysing her cousin's appearance in the photographs, Juani draws a questionable link between sexual orientation and a psychological disease – a link which she immediately recognises. However, her thoughts are characterised by a historically connoted political consciousness of lesbian and gay resistance, which critically focuses on the marginalisation of gays and lesbians in Cuba:

I know everything just by gazing at her; I know it in my heart, which reads and decodes her every gesture and look. More importantly, I also know that the damage in Titi's soul—and it's there, clear as the blue skies in every one of these photographs—is connected to how she loves, or more precisely, how

she's not allowed to love. Her face, with its thin lines and bloody red lips, is a map of a sealed island, surrounded not by water but by an invisible, electrified barbed wire.

I also know how dangerous all this is to say—how suggesting a correlation between being queer and being nuts throws out more than thirty years of civil rights and all the goodwill built up by Martina Navratilova's Wimbledon records and Pedro Zamora's MTV love affair.⁶¹

The narrator uses Titi's facial features to describe an insular metaphor, that of an inner 'sexile'. The overlapping of facial and geographic topographies depicts Cuba as an iconographic space of gendered confinement, leading to psychological damage. This image is then contextualised through allusions to the narratives of public figures and their commitment to LGBT issues in the U.S. By referring to the Cuban-American Pedro Zamora, who raised international awareness of gay love and AIDS education throughout his acting as a cast member on the MTV reality series *The Real World*, Juani focuses the contributions made by Cubans outside their home country to break heteronormative gender patterns.⁶² Using this reference, the protagonist establishes a link between her hyphenated cultural origins and the option of political engagement for gay rights. Although Juani is wary of invoking dangerous prejudices by making a connection between queerness and psychological disorder and this conflicts with her own self-conception, she tolerates the contradiction for the purpose of connecting on a spiritual level with her cousin in Cuba:

Titi's problem is not, of course, that there aren't other queers in Cuba —there are, and always have been, plenty. It's not that there isn't a gay society within all the political sloganeering and the official silences about homosexuality, because there is. [...] It's not that Titi hasn't had lovers [...]— I know from the shadings, omissions and insinuations, that she's been loved and has loved, powerfully and jealously. But [...] what's evident only on my radar: My cousin Titi's need to be loved in daylight— [...].⁶³

Here, the desire to love freely and without societal constraints is expressed metaphorically, using daylight to associate it with the empty space in which the historical taboo on homosexuality in Cuba occurred, and brings it back to symbolic

visibility. The symbolism of daylight also alludes to Gina's oppression of her lesbianism: in the novel Gina appears as the closeted migrant figure of Hispanic Caribbean descent. She is unable to live her emotional and sexual desires outside of her apartment due to a dialectic thinking that hierarchises political aims by giving priority to the struggle for national independence over the global struggle for gay rights. It is precisely this graphic conceptualisation of her cousin's desire for individual freedom and her experience of social oppression that enables Juani to explore, vis-à-vis her visual memory, a part of her own *Cubaneo* and to reconnect with her experiences with closeted people in the U.S.:⁶⁴

Even though I'm here, in what is supposed to be the land of the free, I share this desire with my cousin Titi. Every lover I've ever had has been closeted, has always instantly looked over her shoulder when we've kissed on a street corner or train station platform. This was especially, and most painfully, true of Gina.⁶⁵

A spiritual kinship is evoked via Juani's perception of her cousin's photograph, a connection that consists of a transnationally shared experience of the two relatives. In very different contexts, both cousins have experienced alienation and inner exile – either through their marginalisation within society or through their relationships with lovers who have accepted repressive social norms. Juani's identity as a Cuban exile thus attains a dualistic quality, referring not only to the polarising hyphenation of Cuban-American life but also to a semantic concept which realises her inward sense of psychic and sexual exile. In this sense, *Memory Mambo* allows for rethinking the term of 'sexile' raised by La Fountain-Stokes. Throughout the novel, the topographic conditionality of the concept is semantically expanded to include the spiritual abyss of inner sexual exile:

What I mean is this: I am as marked by genetics and exile as everyone else, as comfortably a part of any family portrait as the others. But though nobody much notices, I'm also a stranger in my own family, whether my connection is by blood or experience. [...]

My lesbianism is not the cause of my alienation, but it's part of it.⁶⁶

At this point in the novel, the narrator is able to express her personal position as a queered declaration of cultural difference.⁶⁷ She realises that her inner existence is located within a third space where the boundaries of diverse cultural systems intersect.⁶⁸ This recognition also has an impact on Juani's decision making because, for the first time in her life, she yearns to realise her wish to visit Cuba and get to know the relatives who stayed behind, thereby retracing the footsteps of her childhood. Independent of the fact that the question of whether Juani will set out on that journey remains open until the end of the novel, her wish reveals a narrator who increasingly explores her own cultural borderlands.

By bringing the repressive contexts of revolutionary Cuba together with the conservative Catholic values of the anti-Castro exile and crossing them with the homophobic discourse of the Puerto Rican anticolonial liberation struggle, as well as with ideals of the American civil rights movement, Juani's reflections create an experimental mind-set that withdraws from dualist trajectories of exclusion. This hybridised perspective of queerness and cultural difference offers a parallel to Anzaldúa's reflections in *Borderlands*:

Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I *made the choice to be queer* (for some it is genetically inherent). It's an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts. In and out of my head. It makes for *loquería*, the crazies. It is a path of knowledge — one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our *raza*. It is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality.⁶⁹

The photographic representation is to be considered as a Cuban-American exemplification of this "path of knowledge". The ekphrasis of the photograph illustrates a queer feminist 'border thinking' by bringing together the dimensions of sexual orientation, inner as well as physical exile and relating them with the process of hyphenation. It intertwines the Cuban-American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban biographies of three lesbian women whose life experience with regard to the Hispanic Caribbean world could not be more polarised. Through them, the struggle for postcolonial concepts of national identity enacts the crucial question of

intersectionality and homophobia in the Caribbean and within minority contexts of the U.S. Sexual identities which extend beyond a heteronormative, Caribbean model as well as discriminatory racial markers from within the U.S. are narratively renegotiated in a queer *mestiza* way that reveals the colonial traps of nationalist projects.

In *Memory Mambo*, Obejas conveys a decolonial critique of heteronormativity from the perspective of a Cuban-American life narrative. The way in which the conflicts of Cuban exiles are reframed by Obejas through the lens of sexual orientation keenly conveys the sense of solitude and vulnerability that is experienced by cultural border crossers. The Cuban sexile is a space where the tensions between intersecting oppressions exacerbate one another and are brought out into the open and confronted. Similarly, the interaction between the categories class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and nation is brought into clearer focus under the magnifying glass of the lesbian relationship between Juani and Gina. In her reflections on her broken relationship, Juani deploys a borderland discourse drawing on diverse cultural and aesthetic references in order to renegotiate and relate different ideas of political resistance and sexual identity making, such as U.S.-American television, Cuban food culture, Catholicism or photography. Thus, she connects the personal experiences of the sexile to larger tensions, e.g. the global fight for gay rights, the escape from Cuba as a form of silent protest against government-endorsed homophobia, and the anticolonial liberation struggle of Puerto Rican immigrants in the U.S. Moreover, Juani's speech acts deconstruct Gina's ideal of the independent, modern nation as a heterosexist conception. They evoke the neo-colonial subtext of the strategy used by imperial factions to sexualise subjugated populations as a 'gay' national body.

By reflecting the closeted situations of Gina and Titi, Juani's discourse exposes the presence of homophobia within Caribbean political contexts where the ideal to overcome colonial structures is predominant, e.g. the Puerto Rican liberation struggle or the Cuban Revolution. In both cases the colonial image of subjugated people "understood to be aberrations" of heteronormative masculinity persists obstinately.⁷⁰ Hence, the protagonist's hyphenated perspectives play a key role in articulating a decolonial exploration of queerness, by disclosing contradictory continuity of colonial gender patterns within contemporary Caribbean debates on

national sovereignty. As such, the novel succeeds in providing a laboratory for “decolonizing gender”.⁷¹

Endnotes

¹ See Maria Cristina Fumagalli, Bénédicte Ledent and Roberto del Valle Alcalá, eds., “Introduction,” in *The Cross-dressed Caribbean. Writing, Politics, Sexualities* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 1 as well as Zoe Mintz, “Homophobia In The Caribbean: Anti-Sodomy Laws And Persecution, Being Gay Is No Fun In The Islands,” *International Business Times*, August 9, 2013, <http://www.ibtimes.com/homophobia-caribbean-anti-sodomy-laws-persecution-being-gay-no-fun-islands-1377485> (accessed September 7, 2016)

² Human Rights Watch, “Hated to Death: Homophobia, Violence and Jamaica’s HIV/AIDS Epidemic”, *Human Rights Watch* 16, no. 6 (2004): 1–79.

³ See Evelyn O’Callaghan, “Naipaul’s Legacy: Made in the West Indies’— for Export” in *Created in the West Indies. Caribbean Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, edited by Jennifer Rahim and Barbara Lalla (Kingston [et.al.]: Ian Randle Publ., 2011), 30 and Joseph Gaskins Jr., “‘Buggery’ and the Commonwealth Caribbean: a comparative examination of the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago,” in *Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The Commonwealth: Struggles for Decriminalisation and Change*, edited by Corinne Lennox and Matthew Waites (London: School of Advanced Study, University London, 2013), 429.

⁴ Joseph Gaskins Jr., “‘Buggery’ and the Commonwealth Caribbean”, 16.

⁵ Defining my usage of the term “queerness” is quite challenging, since the term derives from the theoretical introduction of the notion “queer”, which arose out of the political resistance to the practice of definition and as a critique of fixed identity concepts. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 172-73. The Nuyorican gay writer and scholar Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes considers this difficulty when he explains his own usage of the term “queer” to refer to a series of non-heteronormative sexual practices and identities which include but are not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, cross-dressing, transsexual or transgender life forms. See Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, “De sexilio(s) y diáspora(s) homosexual(es) latina(s): cultura puertorriqueña y lo nuyorican queer,” *Debate feminista* 15, no. 29 (2004): 138.

⁶ See Maria Cristina Fumagalli, Bénédicte Ledent, and Roberto del Valle Alcalá, eds., *The Cross-dressed Caribbean. Writing, Politics, Sexualities* and Thomas Glave, *Our Caribbean. A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁷ See for example Reinaldo Arenas, *Antes que anochezca*. 2nd ed. (Barcelona: Tusquets Ed., 1998), Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 114-23, Audre Lorde’s poem “Martha” in her anthology *Cables to rage* (London: Paul Breman, 1970), 10-16, as well as Mootoo’s novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

⁸ Arenas was exiled in 1980 to the United States as part of the Mariel Boatlift. Lorde was born in New York to a family of West Indian immigrants and Mootoo, who is of Trinidadian origin and was born in Ireland, grew up in Trinidad, and moved to Canada at age 24. Cf. John D. Perivolaris, “Arenas, Reinaldo, 1943-1990. Cuban novelist, poet, and autobiographer,” in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing. Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, edited by Margaretta Jolly (Chicago: Fritzroy Dearborn Publ., 2001), 53 as well as Lisa D. McGill, *Constructing Black Selves. Caribbean American Narratives and The Second Generation* (New York [et.al.]: New York Univ. Pr., 2005), 121 and Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell, *The Queer Caribbean Speaks. Interviews with Writers, Artists, and Activists* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 135. My use of the term ‘diaspora’ here is meant to denote communities that are located outside of their homelands and maintain multiple attachments beyond exclusively national bonds which include practices of accommodation as well as practices of resistance to the host country. Additionally, diasporic communities conceive themselves as “part of an ongoing transnational network that includes the homeland, not as something simply left behind, but as a place of attachment” and entanglement. See James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, No. 3 (1994): 307, 308-11.

⁹ Evelyn O'Callaghan, "Naipaul's Legacy", 29.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹¹ For example, Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex", 114- 23. See also Joan Wylie Hall, ed., *Conversations with Audre Lorde* (Jackson: Uni. Pr. of Mississippi, 2004), vii. The black feminist Patricia Hill-Collins refers to intersectionality as "particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation." She emphasises that "oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice." See Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18. Moraga and Anzaldúa identify intersectionality as a dividing moment between white middle-class women and (Third World) women of colour, which has a demoralizing effect in feminist movements. Cf. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., "Introduction," in *This Bridge Called My Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2nd edition (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), xxiii-xxiv. Moraga refers explicitly to Lorde's reflections on difference in the preface of *This Bridge Called My Back*. Cf. Cherrie Moraga, "Preface," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, xvi.

¹² I especially refer to novels here, since the essay focuses on an example of this genre. As pointed out above, the topic of queerness has also been touched upon in other literary genres such as short stories, poetry, and autobiographical writing. Other examples worth mentioning here are the lesbian-of-colour anthology *Piece of My Heart* (Toronto: Sister Vision, 1991) edited by Jamaican-Canadian author Silvera Makeda or the poetry collection *Pier Queen* self-published by the Nuyorican poet Emanuel Xavier in 1997 and reprinted 2012 (Bar Harbor, ME: Queer Mojo/Rebel Satori Press, 2012).

¹³ According to the literary and cultural critic Walter D. Mignolo, the borderland concept introduced by Chicana author Anzaldúa is primarily a way to "de-link" modern narratives from Eurocentric paradigms. Cf. Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, The Logic of Coloniality and The Grammar of De-Coloniality," in *Globalization and The Decolonial Option*, edited by Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (New York: Routledge, 2010), 339, 341.

¹⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands. La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999) 99. Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking", 339, 342-46.

¹⁵ Walter Mignolo, "Decolonizing Western Epistemology / Building Decolonial Epistemologies", in *Decolonizing Epistemologies. Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, edited by Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 42.

¹⁶ The Argentinian philosopher and feminist María Lugones remarks that the dichotomous understanding of gender is intertwined with a colonial logic of scaling gender in order to deny the colonised subject the mark of the human. See María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010), 743-44.

¹⁷ Anzaldúa's tracing of border consciousness has been taken up by decolonial thinkers such as Lugones and Mignolo in order to develop a criticism of modernity which embraces the knowledge of the colonised. See María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," 753 and Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking", 342-46.

¹⁸ I use the term 'exile' here to refer to the political context of Castro's Cuban Revolution, which forced more than 700,000 dissidents to migrate to the United States after 1959. See Isabel Alvarez Borland, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 5. To avoid blurring the notions of 'diaspora' and 'exile', I refer to Clifford and Ulfried Reichardt who describe exile in terms of individual predicaments. See James Clifford, "Diasporas", 308 and Ulfried Reichardt, "Diaspora Studies and the Culture of the African Diaspora: The Poetry of Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite and Linton Kwesi Johnson" in *Diaspora and Multiculturalism. Common Traditions and New Developments*, edited by Monika Fludernik (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2003), 293. Pérez-Format introduces a corresponding differentiation between 'immigrant' and 'exile'. Whereas the migrant conceives himself as a settler who is able to lose his or her cultural otherness within the host society, the exile "looks upon himself as a transient" and prefers to maintain his or her cultural otherness within the host society, since "the exile is not willing to acknowledge any distance or discontinuity" with regard to his or her homeland. See Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Transcending Exile: Cuban-American Literature Today* (Miami, FL: Latin American and Caribbean Center, Florida International University Press, 1987), 2. However, Cuban-Americans can also be identified as diasporic people, especially if they belong to younger generations not born in Cuba and

not able to relate personally to the experience of political persecution or expulsion. Furthermore, the political aspect of 'exile' is not always compatible with Cuban migrant biographies of the 1980s and 1990s that basically resulted from the precarious economic situation in the country.

¹⁹ Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen. The Cuban-American Way* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 5.

²¹ Ibid., 10.

²² Isabel Alvarez Borland, *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*, 7.

²³ Ibid., 8.

²⁴ My translation.

²⁵ Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, "De sexilio(s)", 144.

²⁶ My translation.

²⁷ The abbreviation UMAP stands for "Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción", which can be translated as Military Units to Aid Production. These forced labour camps were formed in 1965 and aimed at rehabilitating people with supposed 'anti-social' behaviour. Such persons included homosexuals as well as young delinquents and religious believers. See Emilio Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 100. The political repression and persecution of homosexuals started to diminish by the mid-1970s, when the Cuban Communist Party no longer perceived homosexuality "to be in fundamental contradiction with the revolutionary process" and resolutions that aimed at the discrimination of homosexuals had been abolished. See Emilio Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation*, 106.

²⁸ Anahí Viladrich, "Deconstructing the Immigrant Self: The Day I Discovered I Am a Latina," in *Bridging. How Gloria Anzaldúa's Life And Work Transformed Our Own*, edited by Analouise Keating and Gloria González-López (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 36.

²⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 101.

³⁰ Ibid., 102.

³¹ Ibid., 106-107.

³² Ibid., 19.

³³ See Tracy Baim, "Achy Obejas Talks About Cuba, Books and Sexuality," *Windy City Times*, 2 January 2008, <http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=17092> (accessed September 7, 2016)

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Achy Obejas, *Memory Mambo* (Pittsburgh, PA: Cleis Press, 1996), 34.

³⁶ Ibid., 10-11.

³⁷ Ibid., 32.

³⁸ Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen*, 10.

³⁹ Achy Obejas, *Memory Mambo*, 80.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 79-80.

⁴¹ Between 1974 and 1983, the FALN claimed responsibility for several bombings of military and government buildings as well as financial institutions in Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC. The clandestine organisation sought to draw attention to Puerto Rico's struggle for independence and used terrorist acts to protest against U.S. military presence on the island. See Gina M. Pérez, "Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN)," in *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, at: <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/489.html> (accessed September 7, 2016) and Isidro Lucas, "Puerto Rican Politics in Chicago," in *Puerto Rican Politics in Urban America*, edited by James Jennings and Monte Rivera (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 107.

⁴² Ibid., 117.

⁴³ I use the abbreviation LOHA to refer to lifestyles focused on sustainable and ecological living, normally spelled out as 'Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability' (LOHA).

⁴⁴ Alfredo Villanueva Collado, "René Marqués, Ángel Lozada, and The Constitution of The (Queer) Puerto Rican National Subject," *Centro Journal* XIX, no. 001 (2007): 182-83.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 181.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 77-78.

⁴⁷ See Thomas D. Boswell, "Cuban Americans" in *Ethnicity in Contemporary America: A Geographical Appraisal*, edited by Jesse O. McKee (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 164.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 163-64.

⁴⁹ Eliseo Altunaga, "The Dead come at Midnight: Scripting the White Aesthetic/Black Ethic", in *Afro-Cuban Voices. On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*, edited by Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 94-95.

⁵⁰ Margarethe Herzog, *Lebensentwürfe zwischen zwei Welten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2003), 90.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, "De sexilio(s)", 141.

⁵³ Ibid., 139.

⁵⁴ My translation.

⁵⁵ According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, within the process of 'Othering' the colonised subject is constantly subjected to epistemic violence by the coloniser, through which he or she is marginalized as 'Other'. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward A History of the Vanishing Present*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 130, 214-15.

⁵⁶ Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 130.

⁵⁷ 'Gusano', meaning "worm" in English, is a pejorative Spanish term referring to a person of Cuban descent who conspires against the revolutionary government from their adopted home base in the U.S. See also the definition given in *Pons Diccionario General del español de América y España*, s.v. "gusano, -na", edited by Rosina Balboa Bas (Barcelona: Larousse Ed., 2006), 955.

⁵⁸ Achy Obejas, *Memory Mambo*, 132-33.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 75.

⁶¹ Ibid., 75.

⁶² See Tara Marie Kachgal, *Gay Male and Lesbian Youth in The American (TV) Family: Understanding Their Representation on U.S. Television in The Early 2000s* (dissertation thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008), 32-33 and Jesse G. Monteagudo, "Latinos and Latinas," in *Youth, Education, and Sexualities. An International Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, K-Z, edited by James T. Sears (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 501.

⁶³ Achy Obejas, *Memory Mambo*, 75-76.

⁶⁴ I refer to the distinction Gustavo Pérez Firmat made between three Spanish terms, all of which refer to the English word 'Cubanness' but contain differences within the use of Cuban Spanish. While *cubanidad* emphasises the formal relationship between Cuban nationality and citizenship, the term *cubaneo* does not refer to a civil status but rather to a state of mind, which "finds expression in [...] habits of thought and speech and behaviour [...]." The third term *cubanismo* is related to common representations of 'cubanness' that have become commodified, such as cigars and rum. See Gustavo Pérez Firmat, "A Willingness of the Heart: Cubanidad, Cubaneo, Cubanía," *Cuban Studies Association Occasional Papers* 2, no. 7 (1997): 3-6, <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/csa/8/>. I use the term *cubaneo* here to allude to the spiritual state of identifying as a Cuban lesbian on and beyond the island.

⁶⁵ Achy Obejas, *Memory Mambo*, 76.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁷ Following Homi K. Bhabha's definition, I use this term to refer to the designatory aspects of identity formation, which consists of a continual process of differentiation that emerges out of the blending of different cultural systems. In this sense, the formation of a cultural identity consists of an ongoing negotiation process, which produces shifting displacements and relocations with regards to the conflicting demarcations of the self in relation to the other. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

⁶⁸ Bhabha uses the notion of a "third space" to refer to interstitial spaces of artistic intervention where enunciations of cultural difference are generated as a performative strategy of self-presence in order

to question homogenising narratives of hegemonic history. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 4.

⁶⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 41.

⁷⁰ María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism", 743.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 746. Lugones refers to "a critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression" to describe the practice of decolonizing gender. Decolonizing gender thus means to site the "theorizer in the midst of people in a historical, peopled, subjective/intersubjective understanding of the oppressing — resisting relation at the intersection of complex systems of oppression". María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," 746-47.