

## **Stealing the Nation. Three Cuban Women Writers in the U.S.: Lourdes Casal, Dolores Prida, and Achy Obejas.**

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Nation and language are so tightly intertwined that at times it is almost impossible to determine where one begins and the other ends. Just like language, nation may also be deemed a locus of power. Thus, there is a moment when emerging writers, in this case ethnic writers, could be called to steal the nation, this here nation, without even having to put memory and nostalgia totally aside. By "stealing the nation" I am making reference to Alicia Suskin Ostriker's book entitled *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Obviously, Ostriker's endeavor was never to condemn the women poets, nor to accuse them of thievery, so the mischievous title must imply that when it comes to language, stealing is no longer a criminal act. It also suggests that perhaps there is no other way, the emerging poet must take the language, and run with it.

Thus, when it comes to language, there is license to steal: "Power [...] has always inscribed itself in language. [...] And language is one of the most complex forms of subjugation, being at the same time the locus of power and unconscious servility" (Trinh T. Minh-ha 52). In the same way, stealing is a form of subjugation for it presumes, if not necessarily more power, at least a momentary triumph over the other, whose grasp was not quick or strong enough. Under normal circumstances a thief usurps what is not rightfully his or hers. This means that somewhere out there, there is a rightful owner who will always remain the owner, no matter what, at least from a moral perspective. Such is not the case, indeed, when women steal the language. First of all, from whom do they steal it? One could say that they steal it from men. Then there's the scene of the crime, a place, a country, a nation to which the language belongs or belonged. Then again, Ostriker did not write this book to prove that men or the nation will always remain the rightful owners, or that the language the women stole will never rightfully be theirs. If the women stole the language it was because they had no other choice. Up until the moment they stole it, either the men or the nation just wouldn't share, or, as Anne Bradstreet so rightfully puts it, "They'll say it's stolen, or else it was by chance" (Bradstreet 16). So why not just go ahead and steal it anyway?

In any case, what comes across here is not the crime, but the hubris and the audacity. As Ostriker puts it, "A major theme in feminist theory on both sides of the Atlantic has been the demand that women writers be, in Catherine Hermann's phrase, *voleuses de langue*, thieves of language, female Prometheuses" (Ostriker 211). In her endeavor to define and redefine what it means to be a woman poet, Ostriker then goes on to stress the adversarial quality of women's poetry before reminding us that all poetry is marginal (Ostriker 239). The same goes for all writing. It is adversarial by nature, it has to be. By writing, however, the ethnic writers are asking to be heard, and this implies that they are reaching out for the nation, to steal it, if need be.

In this study, three Cuban-American women writers, Lourdes Casal, Dolores Prida, and Achy Obejas, go about stealing the nation, this here nation, call it *los Estados*

*Unidos, EE.UU, Norteamérica*, or the USA., as well as constantly re-taking Cuba. Their being writers presupposes that they already stole a language, be it *el inglés*, or English, or Spanish. These three writers do not have the same relationship with the official language of the United States. It is probable that it always remained *el inglés* for Casal, that Prida loves to play with it as *el inglés*, but that it is English for Obejas. In fact, this relationship with the English language will have a direct effect upon the way these three writers choose to steal the nation, and at times even give it back. Indeed, their stealing the nation is a requisite. For one, it was the theft of the nation that empowered them to be, or become, writers. The theft therefore becomes imperative and primal. But it is not just a one-time act and it does not only imply one nation. A thief will not just steal once.

When language and nation are put side to side, languages suddenly appear more concrete. To steal a language is to take it away from someone else, it is to run with the words and this, in turn, means putting one's own words into the language. But what does it mean to steal a nation? And what exactly is it that they are stealing? The etymon is a good place to begin. The word "nation" contains in it the Latin root *nat*. From there, natal, native. Trinh T. Minh-ha would immediately want to know which native we mean when say the word:

Terming us the 'natives' focuses on our innate qualities and our belonging to a particular place by birth; terming them the 'natives,' on *their* being born inferior and 'non-Europeans.' As homonyms, these two 'natives' sometimes claim to merge and other times hear nothing of each other (52).

According to Ernest Renan, "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle" (19). This soul or moral conscience is constituted of two things, one that lies in the past and has to do with memory and legacy, and another that suggests a present as well as a future, or a desire to live together. In light of this, each one of these three Cuban women writers can be situated in different moments of what Eliana Rivero describes as a "transition," "[...] from émigré, exile, or immigrant/refugee categories to that of ethnic minority members" (191). Rivero then explains that, "[...] this transition entails coming into a personal awareness of biculturalism, and takes for granted the reality of permanence in a society other than the one existing in the country of birth" (Ibid). According to Rivero, Casal was the first of the Cuban women writers to assume this double identity and to live alternately in two very different cultures and political systems.

Casal's search for an articulation of her identity, however, differs from Prida's and Obejas'. Perhaps this has very much to do with the date of Casal's birth, for she was born in 1938, which means that she was 21 at the time of the 1959 Revolution, and 24 when she left Cuba for the United States. As Casal herself realized, it was too late to fully leave Cuba behind, too late to fully embrace her new country, but also too late to go back without taking the New Yorker she had become along:

[...]  
y sin embargo, Nueva York es mi casa.  
Soy ferozmente leal a esta adquirida patria chica.  
[...]  
Pero Nueva York no fue la ciudad de mi infancia,

no fue aquí que adquirí las primeras certidumbres,  
 no está aquí el rincón de mi primera caída,  
 [...]

Por eso siempre permaneceré al margen,  
 una extraña entre estas piedras,  
 aun bajo el sol amable de este día de verano  
 como ya para siempre permaneceré extranjera  
 aun cuando regrese a la ciudad de mi infancia.

Cargo esta marginalidad inmune a todos los retornos,  
 Demasiado habanera para ser neoyorkina,  
 Demasiado neoyorkina para ser,  
 -aun volver a ser-  
 cualquier otra cosa. (Casal *Palabras* 60-61)

This poem, entitled “For Ana Veldford,” begins with the word *nunca*, never: Never summer in Provincetown. And yet... (my translation). The reader is caught in the middle of a thought, and suddenly there is a New York City bus, a glass pane, a gaze, a memory, another memory, a thought of snow in Vermont, then the stanza, nevertheless New York is home. This home is familiar, it has sensory power, this home comes in through the nose, the perfumes, marijuana, beer, urine... She is writing the city, and thus making it hers. She calls it a small fatherland.<sup>1</sup> Reading this poem in light of Renan’s definition of a nation, the spiritual principle that presupposes a past does not appear to be in New York City, where the poet will always remain in the margins. Havana is the city of her childhood, of her past. However, the present, in this case New York, has somehow altered the past. One could easily jump to the conclusion that Cuba was the nation of the past and the United States that of the present and of the future had there not been the “just as” and the “even when” in this poem. Casal’s state of being an exile has made Renan’s definition of nation problematic. It suggests that as the present unfolds, so the past changes.

Under normal circumstances the nation is a gathering of people with a common past, willing to live together in the present, but here, there are no normal circumstances, there is a wrinkle in time that alters the past, the present and the future, for the present has now affected the past (just as the past affects the present) and has made Casal too much of a New Yorker to ever really belong to the city of her childhood again. What Casal is expressing here is that she can very well change countries and citizenship, but that from now on, or from the day she left Cuba in 1962, she became incapable of truly becoming a "national," or of ever again being a "native": “[...] her poetic persona functions in two different environments but fits completely in neither” (Rivero 192). Casal’s nostalgic poetic persona in the bus is oddly reminiscent of young Frank Lloyd Wright’s experience in a Chicago cable car the moment he becomes intensely aware of the myriad of signs around him, signs that are everywhere, pulling him, pushing him, playing with him, perhaps even reading him. William Boelhower considers this particular experience of Wright’s to be one of initiation (23). As the signs liquefy and the words momentarily lose their meaning and their origin young Wright enters what Boelhower considers to be a new cultural order. In other words, by becoming fully one of the crowd and surrendering

his personal sovereignty, Wright joins a multicultural “we.” What Wright loses by surrendering this nostalgic self,

[...] is the intimate relation of the self to itself, as belonging to an ethos [...] It is this idiosyncratic self, with its specific genealogy, body, and memory, that becomes irrelevant to the city’s major signifying activities [...] Wright tries nostalgically to resuscitate this lost self. He tries by means of an extreme act of memory to return to what, for lack of a better term, we might call his ethnic self. (Boelhower 26)

It is precisely this ethnic self that Casal’s poetic voice refuses to surrender in that New York City bus. Casal’s definition of *hispanidad*, nevertheless, is very close to Renan’s definition of *nation*:

La hispanidad es un estilo de vida. Es un modo de pensamiento. Es una tradición y es un futuro. [...] La hispanidad de esa América que mencionamos cuando hablamos de América Hispana es la hispanidad nuestra que se entrelaza con nuestra americanidad [...] Hispanidad es cultura. Es idioma. Es tradición. Es pasado y es futuro. (*Itinerario* 15)

Homi Bhabha would see this definition of *Hispanidad*, as well as Casal’s relationship to the two cities, New York and Havana, as,

[...] a form of living the locality of culture. This locality is more around temporality than about historicity: a form of living that is more complex than community; more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications [...] than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism. (Bhabha 292)

Casal’s self awareness of hybridism can also be seen in her 1973 “Love Story, Según Cyrano Prufrock.” In the introduction, Casal speaks about the novel she would like to write,

[...] una novela realmente cachonda, aunque tú ni siquiera la podrías leer, con tu español subdesarrollado, insuficiente para lidiar con esta cotelera de castellanos que se me ha vuelto el habla después de demasiados años de exilio [...] (*Itinerario* 93)

The “you” being addressed in this long love letter is a woman named Beatriz who lives in New York City. Beatriz is the one with the underdeveloped Spanish, but so is the voice, the author whose language has become a hodgepodge after too many years of exile. Even the language suffers in exile, as a matter of fact, it is the first to go, the first to lose its native muscle. The memories go last, as we can see in this double discourse about Havana and New York where the reader “[...] finds allusions to a complex quilt of readings, noticing an American cultural presence in which, nevertheless, Cuban/Hispanic elements are basic to an understanding of the totality of the text” (Rivero 193). Havana

never leaves Casal, it remains so present in her heart and her intellect that she always struggled to understand why she left Cuba, so much so that her experiences in the United States deeply politicized her (Martínez 1-2). Consequently, Casal returned to post-revolutionary Cuba in 1973 and embraced Castro's revolution. After stealing this nation, she quietly gives it back, just to retake her original nation. As a result, "Casal's work is not included in anthologies of Cuban-American literature, which tend to define Cuban-American identity as a distinctly exile sensibility" (Martínez 2). Martínez then goes on to explain that these anthologies tend to limit themselves to Cuban-American authors who arrived in the United States as children, who write primarily in English from a "[...] decidedly uncomplicated anti-communist position with a peculiar arrested vision of history" (Ibid).

It is not certain to what extent other Cuban-American authors would enjoy being seen in that arrested light. It so happens that Prida's biography puts her in that ideal Cuban-American time frame. She left Cuba for the United States at a younger age than Casal, so a much greater part of her past is in New York City:

Prida belongs to a new generation of Latino women writing in North America a hybrid generation, born in the Caribbean, Mexico or Latin America and raised in the United States; socially progressive yet still closely identified with their cultural roots. (Weiss 9)

Nonetheless, Prida also had to deal with the pressure from the right-wing Cuban exiles. Weiss alludes to Prida having been subjected to death threats for belonging to a group of Cuban intellectuals who wished to establish a dialogue with Cuba in 1979 (when Casal was still alive):

Because this has been part of Dolores Prida's personal experience it cannot be dismissed, even though it does not figure into these plays and Prida herself has continued to work professionally with artists and directors who are not sympathetic to the Cuban revolution. (Weiss 12)

The plays Weiss is referring to are the five included in the collection *Beautiful Señoritas and Other Plays*.

Just like Casal's poetic persona, Prida's characters consider New York home. However, the relationship to the place of birth is quite different. There is by far more ambivalence in Prida's sense of identity. On the one hand, there is the constant sense of never truly belonging. On the other, there is hardly a past. Or, the past is here, in *Los Estados Unidos*. The original nation is there, ever present, but not as present as in Casal's writings. First of all, not all of Prida's characters were necessarily born outside of this nation. In this sense, the memories of the old country are borrowed. This does not mean that these memories are weak, or unreal, they are nonetheless borrowed. Achy Obejas puts it very well when she writes:

[...] and I often wonder how distinct my memories are. Sometimes I'm convinced they're someone else's recollections I've absorbed. I'm not talking about hooking into past lives [...] It's just that sometimes

other lives lived right alongside mine interrupt, barge in on my senses,  
and I no longer know if I really lived through an experience or just  
heard about it so many times[...] ( *Memory* 9)

At this point in the transition, the memories are beginning to be handed down. As a result, the crossover or the transculturation seems more alive, more vivid. In a way, there are all the more memories. Since there is still a native land, somewhere back in space and time, so there is a need to maintain a memory of a place and a time that was never truly experience, a collective memory of sorts. It could very well be that it is this new type of memory that steals the nation. Once again, I am not suggesting that Casal lacks ambivalence, but the three authors are in slightly different historical moments. In some circumstances a handful of years can make a difference.

According to Weiss the ambiguity is a dominant theme of Prida's plays. So much so that Prida often sacrifices a crossover or a de-marginalization for the sake of this ambiguity. The fact that the play "Coser y Cantar" must "NEVER be performed in just one language" (Prida 49) limits Prida's ability to be heard by a more general public. In other words, those who wish to read or to watch a performance of "Coser y Cantar" must either be bilingual or become so beforehand. This does not only mean that it limits her audience in the U.S., but in Spanish-speaking countries as well, for the play is one long monologue in English and in Spanish. In Prida's own words, "The two women are one and are playing a verbal, emotional game of ping pong" (Ibid).

The ELLA persona has to speak Spanish, whereas the SHE persona has to speak English. It clearly demonstrates how the duality is an essential component of the Latino psyche. We do not function without the two cultures, the two languages, the two psyches. Perhaps this is a new phenomenon. It used to be that in their desire to become 100% Americans, immigrants would shed their past and language totally. For some reason, this total crossover has become an impossibility. In the final confrontation between ELLA and SHE, even the two languages cease to respect the ELLA-SHE border:

SHE: But if it weren't for me you would not be the one you are now. No serías la que eres. I gave yourself back to you. If I had not opened some doors and some windows for you, you would still be sitting in the dark, with your recuerdos, the idealized beaches of your childhood, and your rice and beans and the rest of your goddam obsolete memories! (For the first time they face each other, furiously.)

ELLA: Pero soy la más fuerte!

SHE: I am as strong as you are!

[...]

SHE: You wanted to be me once!

[...]

ELLA: ¡Alguien tiene que ganar!

SHE: No one shall win! (Prida 66-67)

The crossing-over of the language points to the fact that the two characters are neither "this" nor "that." Toward the end, SHE has no problems interlacing her English with Spanish, even in one sentence, particularly when she alludes to "your recuerdos." It is interesting that "memories" are first thrown at ELLA in Spanish. SHE uses the Spanish

word for memories to sneer at ELLA for clinging on to that idealized nation, the beaches, the sun, the rice and beans. By retorting with “Pero” ELLA admits that these memories are perhaps as obsolete as SHE suggests, but ELLA insists that she is the strongest, ELLA insists in Spanish. SHE affirms that she is as strong as ELLA. What’s more, there was a time when ELLA wanted to be SHE.

There are no easy solutions, and no one shall win. SHE has the last word. A simple question; “Where’s the map?” Why this need for a map? Suddenly the two characters seem frightened and this fear unites them. The source of this fear are the loud sounds of sirens and shots coming from outside. ELLA and SHE finally agree that it’s time to get out of there. Out of where? Out of the neighborhood? Out of the country? Out of a state of mind? Away from the memories? Or away from this nation? Boelhower believes that urban poverty, random violence, and lack of solidarity have made it very difficult to believe in the promises of citizenship in our democratic country (Boelhower 19). But that doesn’t bridge the ELLA/SHE gap. Perhaps Prida should answer for herself:

[...] most of my plays have been about the experience of being a Hispanic in the United States, about people trying to reconcile two cultures and two languages and two visions of the world into a particular whole: plays that aim to be a reflection of a particular time and space, of a here and now. (Prida *Breaking Boundaries* 182)

Slowly, we are approaching land. The shores of the nation that is being stolen are in sight. This is a particular time and place, a here and a now. “This is the place and this is the time” (Ibid 187). When Rivero affirms that it is at the linguistic level that political consciousness is being expressed, she is defining Prida’s nation (Rivero 195). If Prida’s SHE and ELLA need a map, it is because there is a place and a time they are ready to leave behind. But if they are to leave a place behind, they also have to decide where it is that they are going. Prida states that she does not wish to be categorized just as a “Hispanic Playwright” or a “Woman Hispanic Playwright,” but rather as a person who happens to be a woman and a Hispanic. This particular person finds that writing about characters who are not Hispanic can be just as rewarding as writing about Hispanic ones, so long as they are authentic characters. What is important is to write about what one knows best, “and what I know best are the ups and downs of being a Hispanic woman playwright living in New York City. And I am not contradicting myself” (Prida *Breaking Boundaries* 183). This expression of identity is reminiscent of Hegel’s *Aufheben*. By conserving and at the same time surpassing, the subject moves on, and this, in turn, implies forgetfulness. If it is in the baggage, there is no need to constantly think about it.

But we do not yet know why SHE and ELLA need a map. The shots and the sirens suggest that there is turmoil outside, perhaps a reflection of the turmoil going on inside. In any case, there is violence. The sirens and the shots heard could very well be those often heard in New York City, especially since New York City is a constant presence in Prida’s works. Violence means conflict, battle, life or death situations. At a given moment SHE and ELLA begin yelling at each other and throwing objects at each other. Immediately afterward, there are sirens and shots. It could very well be that the world is mirroring them. They feel they do not belong since they are divided, since they are two.

They feel they need to choose. It's either choose or die, remembering or forgetting, or is it?

In Prida's "Botánica" Rubén finally asks what it means to be from here: Well, for me, to be from here is, well, mangoes and strawberries, alcapurrias and pretzels, Yemayá and the Yankees. What's the difference? What's the big deal? That's what we are, brunch and burundanga, quiche and rice and beans, Chase Manhattan and the numbers game. It all depends on how you pack your suitcase. But it's all part of your baggage. (Prida *Puro Teatro* 29)

Now the problem SHE and ELLA are facing is that they are desperately searching for the map before having dealt with their baggage. Prida chooses to leave the question wide open in "Coser and Cantar" and finds an answer in "Botánica." This does not mean, however, that the case is dismissed. Answers can be as fluid and as ambivalent and as ambiguous as nations. What is important is to finally welcome this duality, if not from the very start, at least after much soul searching and analysis. Homi Bhabha points out that there is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, as well as the language spoken in that nation, and the lives of those who live in that nation:

It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the origins of nation as a sign of the modernity of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality. (Bhabha 1)

This transitional social reality is clearly visible in these three Cuban-American writers. What's more, the more they become aware of it and the closer they come to assimilating it, the more powerful their writing. It is also interesting to note that when it comes to these three writers the two words constantly being applied to them are ambivalent and ambiguity. In trying to define the nation, the nation's coming into being, and the concept of narrating the nation, Homi Bhabha states that the most interesting accounts of the national idea: "[...] seem to concur on the ambivalent tension that defines the society of the nation" (2). It so happens that when it comes to narrating the nation there is no better place to find this ambivalent tension than in minor or, more specifically, ethnic literatures.

Deleuze and Guattari point out that everything takes on a collective value when it comes to minor literatures. This means that because talent is not abundant: "[...] what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political" (Deleuze and Guattari 17). Indeed, there is no better way to "read" Casal, Prida, and Obejas. Their discourse is essentially political, a character such as Prida's Millie is speaking collectively when she says: "I won't live here. I have my own plans. I want something different. I want to leave all this behind" (Prida *Puro Teatro* 15). The great responsibility then becomes avoiding what Weiss calls the "[...] watering down of one's political expression, social consciousness, and group identity" (13).

This puts the reader in a very particular place, ambivalence. It has to do with speaking collectively, pounding on the doors of the nation and of the established literary



canon in order to be heard, struggling to come out from the margins, toward the center, because there is still some belief in a margin-center space, and yet, remaining minor and revolutionary,

[...] because collective or national consciousness is often inactive in external life and always in the process of breakdown, literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation. (Deleuze and Guattari 17)

It is with the conjunction “But” that Rivero makes the transition from Casal and Prida to Achy Obejas. “But the establishment of ethnic awareness/affirmation as a permanent literary presence for Cuban-American women comes in the mid-eighties with [...] Achy Obejas” (195). It is not by chance that Alejandra, the main character in the novel *Days of Awe*, was born on New Year’s Day 1959. Obejas did not pick this date out of a hat. On that day every radio in Havana was tuned to the news of the coup. The night before, President Batista had not shown up to his own New Year’s Eve party, and had boarded a plane instead. The following morning news of Batista’s flight in the middle of the night had spread, as well as that of Castro’s victory.

Already, this date of birth places Obejas somewhere else. Although her character was born in Cuba, she already belonged to another Cuba. What’s more, Alejandra’s family escapes Cuba by boat the night of the invasion of Bay of Pigs, another historical coincidence. By age two, Alejandra was in Miami, then in Chicago. This could mean that Obejas’ literary voice does not bring along as much Cuban baggage. This could mean that there is less conflict when it comes to nation, or that the idea of nation is less problematic. But it is not so. Obejas seems to have as much baggage as the others, even if her memories are borrowed at times. As to her perspective when it comes to nation, it is just as problematic. Obejas’ understanding of revolution makes her a child of the revolution: “Revolutions are, after all, for the moment. The minute they cease to be the outside challenge, the moment they become the power inside, they shift more than their balance. They demand another upheaval [...]” (Obejas *Days* 1). It is interesting to note that the word “revolution” could be easily replaced by some other words, such as minor literatures, and perhaps even “nations,” if we dare. The result of this audacious replacement would be thought provoking.

Throughout Obejas’ writings there is a constant search for ways to express an identity, or two identities, the Cuban and the American. In spite of having left Cuba at a very early age, Obejas’ main character Alejandra still remains profoundly Cuban. Much of this identity comes from her parents, particularly her father, who does not want her to forget. But these are not her own memories he does not want her to forget, it is a collective memory, or sense of identity. The father, however, lived through something similar. Where the daughter hesitates between the Cuban and the American identity, the father once hesitated between the Cuban and the Spanish identity, and finally chose the Cuban identity when it came to searching for or defining his daughter’s identity.

Yet my father --- who wanted so much for me to be Cuban --- was always cautious about identifying himself as Cuban,[...] He admitted, always, to a Cuban birth, but what he celebrated, perversely enough, was his Spanish heritage.[...]

What has taken me a lifetime to understand is that my father reached back for his spiritual inheritance to Spain, as if Cuba almost didn't exist, because Spain was scar tissue, whereas Cuba was a gaping historical wound. (Obejas *Days* 17-18)

This could very well mean that the nations have shifted. A writer such as Obejas could be reaching to Cuba for spiritual inheritance, because Cuba has become scar tissue, whereas this Nation is the new, gaping historical wound. In other words, perhaps nostalgia and memories are more comfortable dwelling places than those that demand a constant definition and articulation: "As a child, I held Havana out to myself like a secret hiding place, a trump card, the Zion where I'd be welcomed after all my endless, unplanned travels in the diaspora" (Obejas *Days* 55).

In this search for an identity (or of ways to express the identity), that is in fact a search for language and for nation, memory plays a very important role. It is forever present in the writings of these three Cuban-Americans. Memory surprises Casal's poetic persona in a New York City bus, memory keeps Prida's SHE persona from becoming ELLA and vice versa, and one of Achy Obejas' novels is entitled *Memory Mambo*. In a conversation with Ilán Stavans, Obejas expressed how in her opinion memory was crucial among Cuban exiles and that this has to do with the fact that the relationship with the homeland is ruptured. Later on in that same conversation, when Obejas analyses the differences between immigrants and exiles, she says that the immigrant, "[...] on some level, undertakes the possibility of a new identity with some willingness and transports herself emotionally to a new home. But for the exile, return to the native land – and the true self – is both essential and eventual" (Obejas *Days* Readers Guide, n. p.). The exile is therefore less willing to accept the new home or identity, and holds on desperately to what was left behind: "Native skills – including language, ritual, the way of tuning one's senses – can't ever be taken for granted or lost" (Ibid).

All this seems to contradict what America was all about at a given moment in time. The United States is in fact a nation of immigrants and exiles, most of whom embraced the new country with alacrity. Many gave up their rituals and their language. This "embracing" allowed the immigrants and the exiles to live together with other immigrants and exiles coming from elsewhere. Precisely, the word "melting pot" comes from there. A melting pot is where all the flavors combine to form one flavor, whereas all the flavors maintain their individuality in a salad. Now, memory makes salads, and it could very well interfere with the making of a nation. When Renan defines nation as a soul, a spiritual principle, he states that two things constituted this soul or spiritual principle, and that one of them lies in the past since it is "[...] the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories" (Renan 19). The part having to do with memories, however, does not constitute the whole nation since Renan also affirms, without contradicting himself, that,

Forgetting [...] is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for the principle of nationality. [...] Unity is always effected by means of brutality [...] (Ibid 11)

Indeed, for the nation to be formed, the past, must be forgotten.

Now the question is: If there is to be a nation, or if a nation is to be narrated and/or stolen, should we privilege memory or forgetfulness? At first glance, there seems to be

little room for forgetfulness in these three women writers and the reader could easily conclude that after having attempted to narrate or steal the nation, they are condemned to remain nation-less because of that stubborn memory that just won't let go. Nonetheless, the United States, New York, Chicago, Miami, L.A., Jersey City, El Barrio, los many barrios, are precisely where this nostalgia happens, the same nostalgia that Casal is growing weary of when she writes:

Carajo quería escribir un relato alegre pero siempre me azota esta  
cabrona nostalgia, la mierda de estar, ser, en la depresión. Me aburro  
de mí; debía haber tenido el coraje de templarte anoche. (Casal  
*Itinerario 94*)

Just as Boelhower reminds us that the nation itself has an ethos and that Walt Whitman rarely expressed any nostalgia for what was forgotten or left behind (21), Casal is announcing something different in those lines from "Love Story Según Cyrano Prufrock." In fact, there could be no immediate need to choose between memory and forgetfulness for there to be nation or to narrate the nation, for one cannot be without the other, and the intense or hysterical will to remember could very well point to something having been forgotten and replaced by something else, a barrio, in itself a nation.

## Notas

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<sup>1</sup> I am translating patria as fatherland. Etymologically, patria contains the word father, pater, whereas nation carries words such as native and natal.

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