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Qué gusto me da sentir tu voz: Restarting the dialog that diaspora interrupted

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Peace, according to journalist Christopher Hedges (2003), is about the recovery of a narrative, a common narrative.¹ This paper is an iteration of that theme. It is a narrative recounting a month-long visit to La Güinera, a neighborhood on the southern outskirts of Havana, Cuba. It is the neighborhood where several of my Cuban relatives live, and where I stayed when I went to Cuba for the first time, in August of 2001.

For the past 44 years, it has served the political interests of privileged groups in both Cuba and the United States to discursively divide the nation into two antagonistic sides: those in favor of the government that came to power in 1959, and those against it. But regardless of whether one answers to these tightly bound subject positions, the pain of absence bleeds profusely, arbitrarily, rhizomatically, into the lived experiences of those who left the island, and those who have stayed. This narrative is a tracing of one such course of history in the Cuban community.



An angry pig shrieks.

Like a rooster's *quiquiriquí*, the pig's squeals have stirred me from sleep. I cover my head with the white cotton bedsheet, trying to muffle the saddening sounds escaping into the bedroom from the sty out back behind the house.

The pig protests again. There's too much life in her long, stocky body for her to surrender without a fight. But it's useless. Her flesh is ours now.

“¿*Ya mataron el puerco?* Have they killed the pig yet?” I ask my aunts and cousins seated around the kitchen table.

“*Sí, parece que sí.*”

Behind the house, my uncle Cardo and my cousin Wiqui prepare the pig: they gently scrape the hide clean, and then slice open the pig’s underside. Together they remove the intestines and liver so my aunts and cousins can cook them for lunch. Wiqui cuts through the spine, and the carcass spreads open like a book.

He lays the pig on a table in the back porch, and my cousins Mireya and Maruja bring out handfuls of garlic that Tía Chaya has peeled and pressed. We pick limes from a tree and cut them into halves that we squeeze over the meat. Wiqui cuts little pockets into the flesh, and we fill them with garlic and salt. Satisfied that we’ve seasoned the pig well, we leave it to marinate on the table for a couple of hours.

Wiqui sits to rest on a bench, and I offer Maruja help with the laundry. One by one, she pulls the soapy garments out of the tiny washing machine that she’s placed in the back porch, and hands them to me to rinse in the outdoor sink. It’s a sunny September afternoon, and as I lift a cotton dress out of the cool water, I realize that I am happy.

It’s evening when we sit down to the table. Tía Fina is embarrassed to spread the food-stained tablecloth across the makeshift table set up behind the house. “*No importa.* It doesn’t matter,” I tell her, and arrange the tablecloth so the holes and stains don’t show. My cousins set out the *arroz congrí*, the *mariquitas de plátano*, and shredded lettuce to eat with the pork. Gathered around the table are *Tío Cardo*, *Tía Fina* y *Tía Chaya*. My cousins *Tomasa*, *Grise*, *Mireya*, *Maruja*, *Wiqui*, y *Fredy*. Fredy’s girlfriend Margarita and

their newborn son Kevin. Grise's mother-in-law Maria. Osvaldito's girlfriend Isabel. Wiqui's girlfriend Jaquelin and her daughter. Tomasa's friend Jorge. I sit down at the head of the table, and as we raise our bottles of beer to toast, I realize that this feast is for me. I get the urge to stand up and offer my thanks to them for this great sacrifice and gift, but the words to express what I feel don't come.

As daylight fades, the volume rises in La Güinera, *el reparto donde vivo con mis tíos, en las afueras de la Habana*. Bodies and sounds emerge from under corrugated tin roofs, onto partly paved, lamp-lit streets. Chattering figures linger together among the cement-block houses, stirring up the dense night air with their movements and speech. In the growing darkness, the collective rhythm speeds up.

On the front porch one story above street-level, my family and I watch the scene as we rock ourselves on large, wooden rocking chairs, and I wonder what my parents and my sister are doing several hundred miles away, under the same moon-lit sky.



On May 21, 1960, Elisa Rocubert Otero arrived at Aeropuerto Rancho Boyeros in Havana, Cuba with a four-month-old boy in her arms. At 1:30 that afternoon, she and the child boarded a flight to Miami, Florida, and left the land that had given them birth. For the 23-year-old woman, it was the first time leaving her country, but not the first time leaving home. On New Year's Day 1951, she had arrived in Havana from the tiny hamlet of Montezuelo, *en la cola del cocodrilo*, in the tail of the crocodile, the western end of the island, where the rough, rocky coast shreds apart Gulf waves. From Montezuelo there is only one way to go, and that is east, to Havana.

Elisa left Montezuelo “*porque lo hallé demasiado chico*, because I found it too small,” she says. Maybe she’d gotten the idea to leave from her grandparents, who’d emigrated from the Canary Islands in search of arable land and a more promising future. Or maybe it was from the many evenings she had spent as a girl, with her ear to the radio, listening to American broadcasts—not understanding the words, but finding meaning in them anyway.

On January 8, 1959, several thousand had marched into Havana from the east, *Oriente*, that end of the island where ocean-beaten sands readily curve under the weight of the newly arrived and carry them inland: Spanish *conquistadores*, enslaved Africans, *franceses* fleeing Haiti. These thousands now entering Havana had left their homes in because the old regime had offered them too little, and they knew there could be more.

In Havana, Elisa had worked as a nanny for several wealthy families. In that first week of 1959, she took to the streets with the rest of the city to welcome the new regime. Over the next year or two, well-to-do Cubans were faced with a decision: give up their power, or give up their country. Among those who chose the latter had been a young couple who, in the chaos of a new-born State defining itself, had had to leave behind not only their possessions, but also their newborn son. This was the child that Elisa now held in her arms.

For several months, Elisa had quietly cared for the baby, waiting for the day that the boy would be old enough to board the plane that would reunite him with his parents. Earlier, she had watched nightly on television the executions of those deemed *enemigos*, enemies of the new power. As the shots sounded across the island and the mounting clouds of gunsmoke seemed to her to blanket the country in a foul haze, Elisa decided her

future lay somewhere else. When the plane ticket and 30-day visa at last arrived, Elisa said farewell to her family, not knowing when she would see them again. A few weeks after arriving in the United States, she applied for *refugio cubano*, Cuban refugee status, and with that act, surrendered her freedom to return home.

Elisa Rocubert Otero left her country “*porque lo hallé demasiado chico*, because I found it too small,” she says to me, her daughter, 42 years later.



It’s a 40-minute flight from Miami to Havana. The proximity between Florida and Cuba shocks me, because I grew up in Florida, and my mother’s homeland was always far away when I was growing up. It didn’t exist except for the occasional nights when my brother and sister and I would lie in the dark on my parents’ bed, and listen to my mother’s stories about her life before she married our father. She’s one of 10 siblings, and I could never keep their names straight. They were too far away.

Years later, in the first week of 1996, I left the place where I’d grown up, and moved west. I left Florida “*porque lo hallé demasiado chico*, because I found it too small.” California is another story. Here, the waves crash against the coast *con ganas*, and the fertile land rises and falls.

It’s August 18, 2001, and I’m on my way to my mother’s homeland for the first time. The five-hour flight from Los Angeles to Havana goes by quickly. I sit next to Jorge, a Cuban man of 34 who lives now in Arizona and is returning to his country to visit his family. He left on a *lancha* eight years ago. It was a boat he’d bought himself by squirreling away dollars he’d earned working the hotels of Varadero, a coastal resort for

foreigners. As the plane descends into Havana, a man and woman stand up and sing old Cuban songs, to lively applause from their fellow passengers. Others dance in the aisle. As we're about to land, the man in the row behind us cries out, "*¡Plánchalo! ¡Plánchalo!*" as if instructing the pilot on the preferred way to land a plane on his beloved *Cubita linda*, his beloved Cuba the beautiful. The moment the wheel brushes the ground, the cabin breaks out into raucous cheers and applause.

It is in this moment of ecstatic chatter that the distance dividing me from my fellow passengers deafens me. I try to share in their delight, but my applause doesn't ring. It's too off-key to join the chorus. It's like my Spanish: *se entiende pero no tiene esa gracia, ese sabor* that *caribeños* live and share, but no outsider can imitate. It's like my Spanish: you can understand it, but it doesn't have that style, that flavor, that Caribbean people live and share, but no outsider can imitate. And besides, the delight of reuniting with a beloved land is a feeling I have never known.

The next day, I phone my cousin Berto from a pension in El Vedado, a well-kept Havana neighborhood where all the foreigners go. Berto quickly makes arrangements with a neighbor who has a car, and takes me to his home in Los Pinos, where I meet his sister Llilla, and for the first time I set eyes on someone who looks like my mother. Later, they take me to my uncle Cardo's home in Arroyo Naranjo. As I ascend the stairs leading up to the front porch, an elderly woman stands there expectantly. And though I've neither met her nor seen a picture of her before, somehow, I know who she is.

"*Tú eres mi Tía Chaya*, You're my Aunt Chaya," I half ask, half declare. She smiles, laughs, and we embrace. Tío Cardo, his wife Fina, and a stream of *primos*, of cousins,

step forward one-by-one to welcome me. Sitting in the living room now, we smile at each other warmly, and I search for things to say that will bridge our 30 plus years of separation. I reach out and take Tía Chaya's hand and hold it in mine, just as I do with my mother when I visit her in Florida. Within moments I feel at home here; *somos familia*, we're family.

It's too late for me to meet my uncle Billa. He died nearly a year ago, but I *feel* him here in the room I share with Chaya, his wife. At night, she and I lie in the dark and talk about things that happened that day, or that happened years before, sometimes even before I was born. And we laugh. A lot. I don't even remember now what we'd laugh about. In the dark of her room, I can't see her, but I can hear her voice, and when she's giggling I know her whole body is shaking. During the day we laugh a lot, too, and when Tía Chaya laughs, she covers her mouth with her hand, and her whole body jiggles. That just spurs me to laugh even more at whatever it was that set us off in the first place. The rest of the family looks on and smiles without ever really knowing what we're laughing about, but that doesn't matter to them. A few days after my arrival in the household, several of my cousins pull me aside and confide to me that it had been nearly a year since they'd seen Chaya so full of life. Since Billa's death, she'd withdrawn into the silent solitude of their room. My arrival has somehow given her a way to see beyond these four walls.



*Gorrioncillo, pecho amarillo
Con tus alitas casi sangrando.
Tu, pajarita, andas buscando.
Cuando te cansas, te paras y cantas.*

*Y hasta parece que está llorando.
Luego se aleja y se va cantando.
Sólo Dios sabe que va llorando.
Ay, gorrioncillo.*

*Gorrioncillo, pecho amarillo,
No más de verte, ya estoy llorando.
Porque Dios sabe al estar mirando
Que ando sangrando al igual que tú.*

My uncle Vere taught me this song. This was the song he and his sisters sang as they drove from Montezuelo to the airport in Havana, to leave off my mother when she came here to visit 22 years ago. It was the only song short enough that they could still remember enough of it to sing it together to pass the time on the long overnight drive. That was the last time he saw her. This is his first time seeing me.

There's something else I learn from Tío Vere on this first meeting. After moving to Havana in 1951, my mother spent her very first paycheck on a new bicycle that she bought for him. It cost 45 pesos, he remembers. "*Yo era su niño consentido*, I was her spoiled child," he tells me. My mother had tried to bring her little brother with her to the United States, but my grandmother didn't let him go.

Vere and I are the same in that we wish we could have my mother closer. He worries a lot about her, and asks me why I live so far away from my parents. As I struggle to answer, he entreats me to make arrangements to live with them again. "If it's your house they live in, you can set up your own rules—you don't have to follow theirs," he advises me, trying to guess why it is that I would willingly choose to live *al otro lado del país*, *sin mi familia*, why I would choose to live on the other side of the country, without my

family. I know of no way to explain to him that to leave behind your home is not a choice.



If meaning is socially constructed, then it follows that meaning comes from belonging to a group. The search for origin is a search for community, a search for a group of people with whom you can converse, with whom there are mutual intelligibilities.

Jorge Luis Arcos (1995), in his essay, “Epistle to José Luis Ferrer (from Havana to Miami),” writes that, “Diaspora, like death, interrupts all conversation” (p. 180).² Interrupts. Immigration, exile, displacement do not end conversation, they interrupt it. What for 30 years seemed to me to be the cruel injustice of separation from my Cuban family, I now see as more a prolonged lapse in conversation. *Una carencia mútua, una falta recíproca* (Da Cunha-Giabbai ?).³ *Marchando separados*, but somehow *marchando al mismo paso*. Marching separately, but somehow marching to the same step. Our paths meet, there is a mutual recognition, and the conversation erupts. My anger turns into laughter. I comfort Tía Chaya in her grief; Tío Vere works to secure my mother’s happiness in her old age.

The distances that exist between my mother and her siblings were there before she ever left Montezuelo. And I was a Californian before I came to California. How it is that one can be alien to what one knows, and familiar with what one has never known, I don’t know. And how do you explain leaving what you know, to someone who has never done it, nor ever desired to?

For Michel Foucault (1977), “what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things” (p. 142).⁴ And

so it follows that, a search for origins or descent is not an “erecting of foundations,” but a recounting of reversals (Foucault 1977: 147).⁵ But no detour, no matter how profound, entirely excises what came before. The detour concurrently points to and digresses from the history that set the terms for its emergence.

The multilingual, multinational philosopher Rosi Braidotti (1994) has stated that “there is something of everyone in me, so I have belonged to no one” (p. 15).⁶ In this statement, there is both triumph and tragedy: The triumph of multiple ways of knowing and being; the tragedy of never fully belonging, of never achieving intimacy with any one shared reality and history. Can we not belong, and carry something of everyone in us at once? At what point of carrying something of everyone in you, do you become so estranged that you cannot belong to anyone?

We are rooted, but not fixed. The Martinican scholar Edouard Glissant (1989) calls our roots *submarine roots*, “that is floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches. We, thereby, . . . have the good fortune of living, this shared process of cultural mutation, this convergence that frees us from uniformity” (p. 67).⁷ This relates to his idea of Relation, “in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (Glissant 1997: 11).⁸ Diaspora, then, describes a root that wanders by the light of the memory of where it once was. It is a rupture that disrupts, reorganizes, and reroutes, without foregoing the desire for repetition of what it already knows.

We inherit the “invisible presence” of those who came before us, like a ghost limb that you feel despite the amputation (Marrero 1995).⁹ It is not a dead weight on the body, but the root of, in Glissant’s words, “a cross-cultural poetics: not linear and not prophetic,

but woven from enduring patience and irreducible accretions” (1989: 142)¹⁰ For me, this act of constructing family narratives is a way of ordering these irreducible accretions, of making sense of this “dazzling convergence of here and elsewhere” (Glissant 1989: 117)¹¹ that our displacements make us, and of laying a framework for imagining the potentialities that emerge in the present moment.



“*Que gusto me da sentir tu voz.*” What a pleasure it is to feel your voice. These are the words I hear every time I call my family in Cuba. This is the first thing Chaya says to me, and I can feel her body quaking as she says it. Every several weeks, I call to get caught up on the latest family *chismes*, and really, to just hear their voices. My mother does the same. In fact, she calls them much more often now than she has in years. My visit, for her, has been a return to Cuba. For me, it was the discovery of what I always knew existed, but had never experienced in this way in my country of birth. For the moment, I accept that a political border stands like a chain-link fence between us. I can be patient now because the dialog among us is in motion, and there’s no sign that the space between us will again fall silent.

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2. Jorge Luis Arcos, "Epistle to José Luis Ferrer (from Havana to Miami)," in *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*, ed. Ruth Behar (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), p 180.
3. Gloria da Cunha-Giabbai, *El exilio: realidad y ficción* (Montevideo: ARCA Editorial SRL), p 24.
4. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, translated from the French by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), p 142.
5. Foucault, p 147.
6. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), p 15.
7. Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, translated from the French by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p 67.
8. Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, translated from the French by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University Press of Michigan Press, 1997), p 11.
9. Teresa Marrero, "Miembros Fantasma/Ghost Limbs," in *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*, ed. Ruth Behar (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp 44-56.
10. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p 142.
11. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p 117.