

**Diasporic Subjects and Hybrid Identities in *We Came All the Way from Cuba*
So You Could Dress Like This? By Achy Obejas**

By Guadalupe Pérez-Anzaldo

Far from an essentialist definition of “nation,” postmodern and postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Benedict Anderson, Fatima Mujcinovic, among others, have demonstrated that this concept is a modern cultural construction or, more specifically using Anderson’s term, an “imagined community.” Each one of the subjects who inhabit the nation (re)creates, (re)writes and (re)interprets it according to their own perspectives and cultural values demonstrating that the concept of nation is also an individual projection. Under this perspective, nation is an array of discourses and emblems pointing towards an apparent uniformity which is performatively interpreted for its members and, in turn, modifying the pedagogical version of the nation (Homi Bhabha). Therefore, national identity is hybrid, multiple, fluid, ambiguous and always open to change.

However, it is not until the individual is displaced voluntarily or by force from his/her homeland, that he/she becomes self aware of his/her own sense of belonging. As Yi-Pu Tuan states, “Uprooting in this sense involves bringing this change to consciousness in a particularly painful manner. This process of uprooting is a literal disarticulation, a term that evokes the physical processes of both speech and touch” (qtd. in Kaminsky, 11). In this sense, it is important to distinguish between place and space; the former is full of affective connotations while the latter is defined by Yi-Pu Tuan as a “place without meaning, or to reverse the terms, place is space that has been given meaning by the human mind through a process of narrativizing” (qtd. in Kaminsky, 40). As a consequence, that change of consciousness intensifies depending on the reasons for a rupture or separation from the homelands.

Displaced subjects, immigrants, refugees, exiles and all diasporic groups are caught between two or more cultural referents. They face the dilemma of trying to keep their original cultural heritage alive while at the same time becoming assimilated into the dominant culture.

As Fatima Mujcinovic points out, they also:

Find themselves placed in different signifying systems, and in this state of a multiple being their selfhood is always informed by the alterity of the other. In this course, their subjectivity is often formed in the space of “in-betweenness,” an interstitial location where distinct cultures converge and collide, forming both collaborative and conflictual processes. These processes may provoke either a sense of fluid subject-positioning or of agitated disorientation as they invalidate the singularity and stability of the cultural domain and complicate, as Lacan puts it, one’s “assent to identity.” (9)

By living on the margins, in the periphery, these subjects become Others, problematizing and exposing the fallacy of cultural homogeneity presented by institutionalized discourse. It must be emphasized, however, that theorization on the diasporic situation of these interstitial subjectivities should be contextualized; that is to say, the historical and cultural specificity needs to be considered. Diaspora, as Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannuer state, cannot “transcend differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality... nor can diaspora stand alone as an epistemological or historical category of analysis, separate and distinct from these interrelated categories” (5). All diasporic subjects live different experiences according to their own ethnicity, gender, sexuality and social class; but their identities are more complex than that since each Self uses different strategies to explore and negotiate multiple codes depending on his/her situation or cultural context.

In this vein, Marta Caminero-Santangelo explores the complexity of hybrid, transnational, and fluid self-identification by focusing on the literary production of the “Latino community” within the United States. She suggests the reformulation of the theorizations and terms used by the dominant critical voices (Nara Araújo, Eliana Rivero, Juan Armando Epple, among many others) to refer to the literary works that deal with multiple and cross-cultural subjectivities in order to avoid essentialist definitions such as “Latino/a literature of exile” and “U.S. Latino/a ethnic literature.” According to these critics, the former definition reflects first-generation exiles living in the U.S. who tend to see their country of origin with nostalgia, while the latter refers to writers that focus on experiences of assimilation, biculturalism, and who either arrived as children to the U.S. or were born in this country. Caminero-Santangelo extends the definition further to demonstrate that this controversial classification is continuously overlapped in the literary productions of heterogeneous writers such as the U.S. Latino/a since all these writers, namely “exile” or “ethnic,” are deeply influenced by the U.S. cultural context. Ethnicity, she points out, “(like “nation” in Homi Bhabha’s postulation of “nation as narration”) is narrated” (3).

Contemporary U.S. Latina writers, in particular, have created complex female characters whose quest for identity are constantly oscillating in the spaces of multiculturalism and have generated new rebellious, contestatory, and emancipated subjectivities. This is the case of the Cuban-American poet, novelist and journalist Achy Obejas, who presents in her texts, new possibilities of self-definition by portraying interstitial subjects that traverse a multiplicity of cultural boundaries. Her own experience is a clear example of the postmodern conditioning of identity: having been born in Havana, Cuba in 1956, she left the island when she was only six years old. Unlike the vast majority of Cuban exiles living in the United States who prefer to

reside in Miami, Obejas grew up in Michigan City and Indiana, and since 1979 lives in Chicago. This fact has been very significant in the formation of her selfhood because, as she states: “I think if we’d stayed in Miami things would have been different... But my brother and I grew up in the Midwest, in a little town where there were no other Cubans at the time. So it became an even fiercer endeavor for my family to hold on to the memories of Cuba. We were in a constant recall mode. Memories became a way of defining who we really were” (Harper, 2).

While for her parents Cuba became an obsession, a place forbidden to return to, for her, Cuba remained only as an imagined, mythical place in her life and in her writings until she returned to the island at the age of thirty-nine. She realized that as much as she wanted to belong, to be attached to that country, she was different from the rest of the Cubans because she had been raised in and lived in the United States. This divergence of her own ethnicity is even more complex since in the country of her residency she also has a marginal status: “I was born in Havana and that single event pretty much defined the rest of my life. In the U.S, I’m Cuban, Cuban-American, Latina by virtue of being Cuban, a Cuban journalist, a Cuban writer, somebody’s Cuban lover, a Cuban dyke, a Cuban girl on a bus, a Cuban exploring Sephardic roots, always and endlessly Cuban. I’m more Cuban here than I am in Cuba, by sheer contrast and repetition” (Shapiro, 4).

Her identity, however, is not only based on multicultural and cross-national terms since, as she points out, she is a woman, lesbian, Sephardic Jew, Latina, and Cuban-American. Thus, as “the most cross-indexed writer” (Craft, 370), she negotiates her fluid, hybrid and plurilayered identity and contests, under conditions of marginalization, the essentialist identitarian definitions promoted by the hegemonic discourse.

In this essay, in particular, I focus on the complex short story which combines some autobiographic elements with fiction and gives the title to the entire collection *We Came All the Way from Cuba so You Could Dress Like This?* (1994) by Achy Obejas. This nonlinear retrospective story of an exiled Cuban family is presented in the first person: through the perspective of an adult narrator, a ten-year-old protagonist begins narrating how she and her parents were rescued by an American ship after they were found floating in their boat. The year was 1963 and since they were considered political exiles, they were protected under U.S. immigration laws current at the time. As historian Roger Daniels states, Cuban refugees who were mostly professionals (and thus belonging to the middle class) not only received direct financial support by the American government, but they were also favored by special INS laws: “In 1966, for example, Congress passed the Cuban refugee Adjustment Act [...] In it, by statute, Cubans admitted or paroled into the U.S. after January 1, 1959, and physically present in the U.S. for one year could be given permanent resident status at the discretion of the attorney general” (201).

This short story recounts the challenges and difficulties her family had to endure while trying to adapt to the dominant American cultural parameters, while alternating with the remembrance the adult protagonist has of their first day in the office of Immigration and Naturalization Services. Even with the host country offering them financial security, they faced a constant struggle to surpass a marginalized social condition within it due to their ethnic origin, as is depicted in this passage:

There are things that can't be told.

Things like when we couldn't find an apartment, everyone's saying it was because landlords in Miami didn't rent to families with kids, but knowing, always, that it was more than that.

Things like my doing very poorly on an IQ test because I didn't speak English, and getting tossed into a special education track where it took until high school before somebody realized I didn't belong there.

Things like a North American hairdresser's telling my mother she didn't do her kind of hair. (123)

Discrimination, marginalization, exclusion and alienation undergone by this Cuban family were some of the "things" that made their desire to return to their homeland even stronger; however, the social and political situation of the island was not ideal either. Before deciding to escape from their Communist country, the protagonist's parents were middle class professionals; her father worked as an accountant and her mother as a social worker. Even though they never wanted to talk about their negative experiences and their marginal socioeconomic situation in the United States, they started feeling lost in a hostile and alien environment, and the nostalgia for their native soil became a constant in their lives. Cuba, consequently, became an idealized "place" for them, to use Yi-Pu Tuan's term, a space full of meaning in their minds.

In the process of assimilation to the new culture in which she lives, the narrator experiences a tension between belonging to it and being an outsider, between being and not being. Unlike her parents, she does not remember the day at the office of Immigration and Naturalization "as something poignant and good" (114). Instead, she draws attention to the negative aspects of it, her parents' nervousness and terror, the strong odor of nicotine, the hot

and stuffy conditions at the processing center, the fat Hungarian female immigration officer, the noisy transient hotel where they stayed, etc., as a way to say that the United States is not the promised land it was said to be.

She particularly remembers two objects that have a significant impact on the reconstruction of her identity: the green sweater she was wearing when she and her family were rescued, which in her own words, “still smells of salt and Cuban dirt and my grandmother’s house” (114-5), and a blond plastic doll given to her by a Catholic volunteer working at the processing center. That smelly green sweater symbolizes, contrary to the traditional reference of the color green as a symbol of hope, her integrity and her attachment to her old selfhood and to her feminine genealogy. By refusing to trade her sweater, her precious possession full of affective value, in exchange for a “gray flannel gym jacket with a hood and an American flag logo,” (114) offered by the Catholic Charities volunteer, she asserted herself as a non submissive subjectivity.

With respect to the yellow-haired-plastic doll, it is associated with a shelter, an amulet that would go with her, as a companion, all her life. The yellow-haired doll is also associated with the protagonist’s future blond lovers, especially one named Martha. At the same time, it represents the protagonist’s *alter ego* since she is diagnosed with cancer when she is forty years old and the doll resembles, just like her, a chemo patient (115).

As a young woman, the protagonist adopts an ideological and political posture divergent from the anti-communist views of her parents, which is a major cause of tension among them. Her father is portrayed as an extremist to the point of being joyful with the violence perpetrated in the United States, such as the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. She rebels against her father who despite his declared hatred for Fidel Castro, represents, just

like him, an oppressive and dictatorial figure, exemplified in the passage when he is watching the Olympic games taking place in Mexico City in 1968: “when the Cuban flag waves at us during the medal ceremony, and the Cuban national anthem comes through the TV’s tinny speakers, my father will stand up in Miami and cover his heart with his palm just like Fidel, watching on his own TV in Havana” (120). Her father’s idolatry of these nationalistic emblems also demonstrated that, despite having physically abandoned the island once the Cuban revolutionary regime was in power, he had not been able to cross its symbolic national border.

The protagonist’s family relationship is a microcosm of the turbulent times and violence that affected public institutions in the United States during the sixties that were framed by the Cold War. Tensions emerged in her family because of the generational gap, but more important than that was the clash between two oppositional ideological forces: conservative (represented by her parents) and liberal (exemplified by her). She was influenced by a young generation of Americans who publicly questioned and challenged cultural and normative impositions. She was about eighteen years old when she defied her father’s authority by not only wearing a suede jacket and floor-sweeping bell-bottom jeans, but by responding to his question as follows:

We left Cuba so you could dress like this? My father will ask over my mother’s shoulder.

And for the first and only time in my life, I’ll say, Look, you didn’t come for me, you came for you; you came because all your rich clients were leaving, and you were going to wind up a cashier in your father’s hardware store if you didn’t leave, okay?

My father, who works in a bank now, will gasp –¿Qué qué?- and step back a bit. And my mother will say, Please, don’t talk to your father like that.

And I'll say, It's a free country, I can do anything I want, remember? [...]
And then my father will reach over my mother's thin shoulders, grab me
by the red bandanna around my neck, and throw me to the floor, where
he'll kick me over and over until all I remember is my mother's voice
pleading, Please stop, please, please, please stop. (121)

The protagonist consciously denied, at that precise moment, any responsibility for her father's decision to leave Cuba. She considered that she was merely used as an excuse, remembering when she was ten years old and her father had said to the immigration officer: "We came for her, so she could have a future," (114) to cover up her father's own ambition to maintain or even improve his socioeconomic status once living in the United States. By pointing out her father's position at a bank, she exposes her father's failure.

On the other hand, the above quote reveals the subordinate position of her mother who is unable to protect her from being brutally hit. It is also important to point out that the cruel reaction of her father to her words is a grim parallel of Castro's totalitarian government, which used force to repress all dissident voices on the island. In point of fact, violence is even worse when it is a woman who is repressed in a hierarchical system of male dominance. The protagonist's anger, however, will help her continue to fight for self recognition against both domestic and national authoritarian forces. By refusing to be discriminated against, controlled, and traumatized she challenges the dominant patriarchal societies where she has been formed and educated.

The question asked by the protagonist, "Is life destiny or determination?" is a reflection of her own metaphysical thoughts, and it helps her realize how important her own decisions have been in defining who she really wants to be. She constantly wonders how her selfhood would

have been affected if she and her parents had stayed in Cuba during the revolutionary regime: “And what if we’d stayed, and there had been no revolution? [...] My parents will never say, as if somehow they know that their lives were meant to exist only in opposition [...] I try to imagine who I would have been if Fidel had never come into Havana sitting triumphantly on top of that tank, but I can’t. I can only think of variations of who I am, not who I might have been” (125). Questioning this notion of migration helps her recognize the influence of the cultural and social context in the development of her own identity.

Once in the United States, her father wanted her to become a lawyer, which in turn would have given her the opportunity to become a prestigious judge, while her mother wished for her to become a wife, a mother and a successful career woman. Years later, instead of following her parents’ expectations, she becomes a political activist marching to protest against the Vietnam War and to support gay liberation. As was mentioned above, contrary to her parents’ conservative political assertions, she postulates a more liberal political position. In regard to the tensions that arose between the two oppositional postures in the political arena of the different generations of Cubans living in the United States, she represents the views of younger Cubans: those who do not necessarily accept their parents’ strong commitment against Communism, religious and sexual freedom, and the ending of the U.S. economic blockade that affects the Caribbean country.

As a lesbian, she is constantly struggling for self-determination against patriarchal normative gender roles. The most important goal for this rebellious daughter is to recognize, explore, and re-articulate her sexual identity. Among all the lesbian sexual encounters the protagonist experiences, she evokes a lover named Martha who was “perceived by the whole lesbian community as a gold digger, but who will love me in spite of my poverty” (115).

However, this relationship was not meant to last because after being thrown out by her rich lover, Martha decided it was “too dangerous” to live together without the financial support of a primary relationship. The significance of this incident is that it contradicts what is stated in Gloria Anzaldúa’s theoretical text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* on the topic of sexuality as a means to break culture and social borders:

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... It is to transfer ideas and information from one culture to another. Colored homosexuals have more knowledge of other cultures.

(106)

This utopian assertion is reductionist and, therefore, problematic because homosexual identity cannot be universalized, as if racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, social divisions and exclusions were not possible inside this marginal group. As Susana Chavez-Silverman argues, all essentialist definitions must be avoided since they delegitimize other interstitial groups:

Many recent lesbian theorists caution against the tempting but facile move to script “the lesbian” as essentially anything. “Lesbian bodies,” writes Cathy Griggers, “are not essentially counterhegemonic sites of culture, as Wittig might like to theorize. The lesbian may not be a woman, as [Wittig] argues... yet she is not entirely exterior to straight culture... lesbians are inside and outside, minority and majority, at the same time” ... Australian critic Annamarie Jagose, in her potently provocative recent study *Lesbian*

Utopics, focuses on various textual attempts to theorize a perfect lesbian space as altogether elsewhere, hence utopian... and concludes, following Foucault, that positing the lesbian as utopic, outside the dominant conceptual framework, essentializes this category as transgressive or subversive while failing to recognize the category's implication within the networks of power. (12)

On the other hand, the protagonist is self aware of her culturally and politically uprooted and displaced condition, which is why, in her desire for an identity, she decides to travel to Cuba despite her father's opposition. While in the Cuban Interest section in Washington, D.C., she finds out that the Cuban government does not recognize her American citizenship. By being considered a Cuban, the official discourse is trying to (re)construct her national identity, excluding her own perception and experiences as a cross-national subjectivity. Her father, on the other hand, is also manipulating and controlling her own perspective by denying her the possibility to explore her roots in her birthplace while the Cuban revolutionary regime remains in power. Therefore, there were two patriarchal forces trying to conceptualize, colonize, alienate and categorized her body and self representation.

It is not until her father has died that she is able to recover parts of her old Self and reconcile and re-inscribe her past memories with what she has become, a politicized, displaced, and hybrid subject. At this precise moment, she is finally allowed to preserve her genuineness, which was suppressed while her father was alive. This self realization gives her the opportunity to take control of her life and define her own identity in more flexible and fluid terms. The last actions of her mother convey and complement her fragmented and dispersed set of memories linking together her past, present, and future experiences. The central connecting piece in this

process of self-constitution comes in the form of a gift: finding her old green sweater inside a box. This precious object helps her convey collective memories (those belonging to her family) into more personal ones:

When I get home to Uptown I'll forget all about my mother's box until one day many months later when my memory's fuzzy enough to let me be curious. I'll break it open to find grade school report cards, family pictures of the three of us in Cuba, a love letter to her from my father... Xeroxes of my birth certificate, copies of our requests for political asylum, and my faded blue-ink Cuban passport (expiration date: June 1965), all wrapped up in my old green sweater. (129)

It is also relevant to refer to the protagonist's mother, who validates and re-inscribes her own assertive personality, which had long been suppressed by the violent and powerful figure of her husband, once he had died. Despite all her family's expectations for her to continue representing her traditional role as a passive, obedient, and dependent woman, she resolved to become a successful investor. By leaving a bilingual message on her answering machine, she openly exposes her assimilation into the American society.

As an outstanding U.S. Latina writer, Achy Obejas has created a short story where identity defies exclusions and crosses multiple cultural boundaries. Her rebellious writing creates different venues, generating ideas and plural perspectives counterattacking the heteronormativity and other restrictions imposed by the essentialist and monolithic institutionalized discourses. In *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?* the fragmented memories and devastating experiences lived by an exiled Cuban family are presented through the inquisitive eyes of a singular protagonist that is constantly questioning and delegitimizing the normative

categories imposed by the patriarchal structure of power. This diasporic and hybrid Cuban subject raised in the United States during the second half of the Twentieth Century challenges the repressive domestic and social forces by decolonizing her body and taking control of her own life. She is able to defend her own independence and strong subjectivity by refusing to be a codified, invisibilized lesbian woman on the system of representation. At the same time, she is constantly renegotiating a variety of cultural parameters in accordance with the social context reinforcing, at the same time, her Self-definition as an ever changing subject matter.

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