

## **Negotiating a New Identity for U.S. Latino Literature in Achy Obejas' *Ruins***

**By Amrita Das**

The Cuban American author Achy Obejas' latest novel *Ruins* (2009) is another text in an emerging trend among U.S. Latino authors raised in the United States, looking at their ancestral countries, and engaging with their contemporary socio-political issues. The Dominican American Julia Alvarez's *Saving the World* (2006), and the Peruvian Americans Daniel Alárcon and Marie Arana's *Lost City Radio* and *Cellophane* (2007) respectively, are some of the other texts that are part of this phenomenon. These novels shift from the dominant U.S. Latino narrative centered in the Latino population living in the United States, and bring into light the plight of Latin American issues rarely glimpsed in U.S. texts. Obejas' earlier narratives show her propensity to read the Cuban American experience differently than the dominant Cuban American exile narrative. She does not present a nostalgic representation of Cuba, a common exile motif. This may be attributed to her "one-and-half generation" status, to use Gustavo Pérez Firmat's term, which allows her to distance herself from the Cuban experience of the Revolution and its displacement as a faraway memory with no input as far as the decision to leave the country. Obejas' narratives, the short story collection *We Came All the Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?* (1994), and her two novels *Memory Mambo* (1996), and *Days of Awe* (2001) all present an irreverence for the Cuban nostalgia of the past of the island before the Cuban revolution as the exiles try and make a new life for themselves in the United States. Her earlier narratives seek a different kind of connection to native Cuba, one that is bound to the present of the island, with a responsibility towards the people who are still living in Cuba. The eponymous story in the collection of 1994 challenges the parents' decision to leave Cuba as a personal and

not a political decision as is commonly presented in the Cuban exile narrative.<sup>1</sup> In the novel *Memory Mambo*, the protagonist Juani rejects her parents' passed on cultural identity, and the novel even goes on to suggest the incorporation of the present Cuba as part of the Cuban American identity instead of it being a simple label.<sup>2</sup>

One can trace Obejas' development and progression to a more island centered narrative in her next novel, *Days of Awe*. The discourse of the novel is partly centered in the island, with a perspective of the people who live in Cuba—some disillusioned by the Revolution and some who still believe in it.<sup>3</sup> Part of the narrative time of the novel *Days of Awe* coincides with *Ruins*, which speaks completely from inside Cuba at a very pivotal moment in recent Cuban history called the *período especial*, the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Due to the fact of the USSR being the biggest subsidiary provider and importer of Cuban goods until then, there was a tremendous shortage of everything in Cuba during the *período especial* and the country plunged into a massive state of economic depression. The novel *Ruins* is specifically set in 1994, the year when a false rumor of a boat leaving for Miami led to a tumultuous atmosphere known as the *Habanazo* of August 5th, 1994. Fidel Castro quelled the dissidents by allowing Cubans to leave from the coastal town of Cojímar. This is also famously known as the *Crisis de los balseiros* incident, the name originating from the rafts used by more than 30,000 Cuban refugees crossing the waters to the United States. This is also the incident that marked United States change in its foreign policy towards Cuban refugees, making it tougher for Cubans to gain access to the United States. Homero Campa and Orlando Pérez's book *Cuba: los años duros*, published in 1997, is a vivid and detailed documentation of their own experience and of other regular Cubans who lived through these years of the crisis.

*Ruins* uses the *Crisis de los balseros* as a backdrop for a narrative that highlights instead Cuba's poverty, heightened by the collapse of the Soviet block and human adaptation of the situation. The country is presented as a living reality in need of urgent attention and not just the past of the millions of Cuban exiles who have come, and continue to come, to the United States. Over the years Obejas' narrative has intentionally moved towards a Cuban centered discourse, which lays out the urgency and need to understand present-day Cuba. This urgency suggests a need to redefine Cuban Americans and U.S.-Cuban policies. Cuban Americans, especially those born in the United States, or having traveled from Cuba at an early age are removed from the direct experience of the journey of exile. This temporal detachment, along with the physical distance, characterizes them. The distance, yet the adherence to the ethnic identity, allows for a reevaluation of what it is to be a Cuban American. In the introduction to his self-translation *En el año que viene estamos en Cuba*, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, from the same generation as Obejas, defines his generation as the "one-and-halfers," and its presumed biculturalism as a "contradicción" (xii). Firmat, who arrived in the United States as a young boy with his own lived experience of Cuba, unlike his father, sees himself as part of two cultures. His father on the other hand never stopped being a Cuban and never really became American. Firmat's son, on the other hand, born and growing up in America, is not really Cuban, except by heritage. Firmat finds himself in the middle. As having arrived at an early age he adapted to American ways, but never gave up his *cubanía*. He writes: "*Si para mi padre Cuba es un peso pasado, y si para mis hijos es una ficción feliz, para mí Cuba es una posibilidad. Al estar arraigado tanto en Cuba como en Estados Unidos, pertenezco a un grupo de exiliados que podría genuinamente escoger si regresar o no*" (xiii) (If for my father Cuba is a weighing past, and if for my children a pleasant

fiction, for me Cuba is a possibility. Tied to Cuba as much as to United States, I belong to a group of exiles who could genuinely choose between going back or not [my translation]).

Living in a hybrid space, the “one-and-half” generation defines itself by taking from both cultures. In the case of Cuban Americans of following generations, there is little or nothing to draw from their own experience of the “other” culture, and they must depend upon their ancestors’ memories which leads to the problem of an imposed identity from within the ethnic community. Yet imposed identities are also formed by outside forces. Being a Cuban American comes with an assumed and imposed identity from the outside, of being anti-Castro, anti-communist, pro-embargos, etc. Many of these characteristics are stereotypical and are part of the U.S. imaginary. Roman de la Campa in his book *Cuba On My Mind: Journeys To a Severed Nation*, based on his own experiences as a Cuban exile, writes “Americans knew little about conditions in Cuba before the revolution—a gap that was compounded by what they learned from refugees arriving in the early 1960s. We often underestimated—and in some cases deliberately denied—conditions of underdevelopment in many parts of the country [...]” (63).

The novel *Ruins* is representative of the generation which refuses to rely on imposed identities and wishes to construct an identity based on an objective understanding of being a Cuban American. It is a novel that seeks to redefine Cuban Americanism by understanding Cuba as a possibility; and not just nostalgia. Obejas’ *Ruins* presents a narrative, which is as much a U.S. novel as it is Cuban. Its hybridity lays in its obvious Cuban centered theme and its target U.S. audience. The narrative constantly reminds the reader of the U.S. presence in Cuba, from its anti-U.S. national rhetoric to the dreamy allusions to Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. The principal character is named after the words “US Navy,” which his mother saw printed on the side of a U.S. naval ship. The main character Usnavy’s only dream is anchored in a majestic

Tiffany lamp, culturally iconic of America's early twentieth century luxury, and today's collector's item. The presence of the United States in Cuba is obvious and this novel tries to make present-day Cuba, and not the stereotypical Cuba, a topic of new dialogue in the United States.

There is nothing hopeful about the novel *Ruins*. It reeks of painful disillusionment from the beginning, starting with the title itself. It is bleak and open ended. Usnavy, the principal character, is a 54-year-old aging revolutionary who refuses to leave Cuba despite the fact that his life is miserable, poor, and unfulfilled. He in many ways is reminiscent of Achy Obejas' character Moisés, from her earlier novel *Days of Awe*, who too has not allowed his family to make their own decision about the Revolution simply because he believes in it. Usnavy, like Moisés, has the opportunity to leave in the wake of the opening of the Cojímar coast but he prefers to stay.

The novel *Ruins* does not romanticize the days before Castro or the situation in the present. Usnavy was raised by a poor single mother who survived by prostituting herself to rich Americans in Guantánamo and Caimanera. He was happy to join the Revolution in hopes of being treated as an equal in his own country instead of being a servant to the rich American tourists and soldiers. Usnavy believes in the ideals of the Revolution and sees his life as a possibility because of it. His fervor for the Revolution may have simmered down, but he still respects its ideals and the leader who laid them down:

The Comandante's picture wasn't up in his house to keep away the president of his local Committee in Defense of the Revolution, but because Usnavy really admired him. Usnavy still volunteered for block-watch duties. He still went down to the Plaza de la Revolución to catch the Comandante's marathon speeches and

worked himself into a frenzy of joy, jumping up and down, shouting and waving his little paper flag. (27)

Usnavy simply believes in the basic precepts of communism, of sharing wealth with all, especially the underprivileged. He gives up the right to own a television set, which he won as a reward for his hard revolutionary work. He gave it instead to an autistic child in his neighborhood (27). As a worker at the *bodega*, responsible for distributing the rationed items, he tries to save some for the old or the most needy before all of it runs out (14).

Usnavy is not unaware of the deteriorating state of affairs around him. There is scarcity of everything. There is not enough food or other essential items like soap in the *bodega* to go around for all. Meat and chocolates are luxury items that have long disappeared. There is a scarcity of fuel, limiting public transportation to a few crowded and unreliable buses as well as lay-offs of taxi-drivers, including his wife. There are power cuts and outages and the city lacks clean water. The buildings in Havana, especially in the old colonial district, have become decrepit due to lack of care and upkeep. The old mansions, now divided into one-room apartments, are old and rundown, with the walls crumbling and on their last legs.

As a young man Usnavy, full of fervor for the Revolution, hurled rotten tomatoes with rage at people lined up outside the U.S. Interest Section office looking for asylum in the United States. Over the years, the rage turned into pain to see his neighbors leave, and finally it was just sadness:

As everyone around him yelled obscenities at the frightened elderly couple who'd scored visas to the U.S (and whom Usnavy knew from the CDR itself, both former officers, competent and enthusiastic), he shuffled through the throngs,

embraced them both wordlessly, and went home. After that, he never allowed himself to be volunteered for that particular kind of activity. (141)

The latest disappointment added to the long list was the legalization of the U.S. Dollar, and Usnavy saw it as “something of an irony” (28). He believes in the national rhetoric of the perceived threat of the United States—a country known for sending military troops in the name of its own interests. In the time period of this novel, Haiti saw the arrival of American troops, sent under the Operation Uphold Democracy to keep the elected President Aristide in power. In her earlier novel *Days of Awe*, Obejas discusses the perceived threat of the United States after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. After the fall of the USSR many, including in the United States, perceived it to be the end of communism, including in Cuba. Moisés, a character from *Days of Awe*, a staunch communist believing in the national rhetoric, feared that a sudden end of communism and the initiation of capitalism in Cuba could possibly bring huge problems. Moisés articulates his fears as he watches the fall of the Berlin Wall on television and the unification of the two Germanys. He fears that poor East Germans would receive food, but the West Germans would get new opportunities to exploit the East Germans for their capitalist gains: “A stream of West Germans and their allies looking at the forbidden zone, at the Spartan cool of the east and imagining hamburger places, multilevel department stores, and car dealerships” (*Days of Awe* 175). Moisés fears that Cuba would become another Puerto Rico with U.S. intervention.

Caught between the two worlds of national rhetoric and the actual state of affairs, Usnavy, like his friends, is left to rationalize his state of being. He believes that he is “*sala’o*,” the Cuban way of saying “*salado*” or “salted,” which roughly translates to being “unlucky.”<sup>4</sup> Being *salado* is not just a reference to someone being unlucky, but also being unable to produce anything, however much they try. In the case of Usnavy, he too feels that he is being punished.

Unfortunately he does not understand for what, as he has always been faithful to the ideals of the Revolution: he continues to work for the local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, he works in the *bodega* providing the rations to people. He refuses to participate in any illegal ways of making money or accepting favors. He appears to be like the biblical Job, whose faith in God remains unquestioned in spite of all the adversity thrown at him. Usnavy also lives in austere conditions with a stay-at-home wife, who lost her job to younger men, and a rebelling teenage daughter. He is unable to provide them with basic necessities, yet refuses to accept it as a failure of the state to provide what was promised some thirty odd years ago. Usnavy's Job-like faith in the possibility of Cuba allows him to face adversity despite the fact that everyone around him has given up faith in the possibility of an egalitarian society that the Revolution had promised to achieve.

The poverty and scarcity of the moment as represented in the narrative *Ruins* leave readers wondering why Cubans have not been able to organize themselves and revolt against the government. Usnavy and his friends from the old days in the *Rebelde Seis*—the rebel army's largest battalion, which was later turned into the first revolutionary Police Force—complain about the state of affairs playing dominoes. Everyone except Usnavy joins in the complaining. They too are surprised that, “After thirty-five years, haven't we produced anybody who can step up?” (27). Alma Guillermoprieto, the Cuban American journalist who spent time in Cuba after it released many political prisoners at the behest of Pope John Paul II who visited the island in 1998, found that counter-Revolution activists are heavily punished especially if they speak with the international press, the only way to be heard in an environment of a censored national media. She reports that Elisardo Sánchez, founder of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliations, was sent to two and half years in prison for speaking with the



*Washington Post*; José Angel Carrasco, founder of the movement AMOR, was imprisoned for seven years for an interview with *Le Monde* (115). It is therefore not uncommon for a non-Cuban living outside Cuba to perceive that Cubans are apathetic to their miserable situation. The government makes sure that political dissidence is quickly squashed.

Usnavy's undying support of the Revolution, which may be termed as blind faith by some or simply stubbornness to refuse to accept the facts by others, seems to have engulfed his life with inertia. As life changes around him for the worse, he refuses to give in to the flow of time. He has taken on a non-confrontational stance, which is evident in his silent moments with his friends. He does not argue with them, while they continue to complain. He is even incapable of upholding what is his own. He finds excuses to not go and speak with his upstairs neighbors who have weakened his home's ceiling by doing illegal construction (20). He does not even support his own wife by giving her solace on having lost her 20-year old job as a taxi-driver to younger male drivers. Instead of seeing discrimination based on age and gender, he finds excuses for the lay-offs—he rationalizes by saying to his wife, "They have family" (16).

In the novel *Ruins*, the only thing that has kept Usnavy trudging along are his relationships with, of course, his wife and young teenage daughter, but also, his books, and the stained glass dome lamp in his room. Like everything in the novel, all these relationships are strained. Human relationships are corroded by his family's needs for food and other essential goods versus his rigid belief in the system. Lidia, Usnavy's wife, keeps her frustrations to herself as Usnavy does not care to hear anything against the government. Pushed by hunger to the extreme, she starts to collaborate with her neighbor Rosita in a private enterprise in the *bolsa negra*, or the Cuban black market, selling sandwiches filled with "meat substitute," which is nothing but blankets cut into strips and marinated in a spicy sauce. The relationship with his

daughter Nena, an adolescent rebelling against the authority of parents, is further strained when she loses her identity card. The bureaucratic process to get another card is filled with long waiting periods in crowded offices, only to be told that essential papers are missing or in another office. The only piece of paper that proves Nena's existence, a photocopy of her birth certificate, is practically destroyed by the dampness and the aging of the paper. This incident is also a metaphorical representation of Usnavy's generation's inability to provide an identity to their children. They have nothing to pass on to the next generation as a legacy—something they may believe in. Usnavy's strongest legacy is his belief in the system, and it is broken. His strongest bonds with his wife and daughter have deteriorated. His treasured books are rotting away from the dampness, and the only other material possession he still holds dear is hanging precariously from the ceiling of his room—the stained glass dome lamp:

Made of multicolored stained glass and shaped like an oversized dome, the lamp was wild. Almost two meters across, the cupola dropped down with a mild green vine-and-leaf motif flowered into the luscious yellow and red blossoms, then became a crimson jungle with huge feline eyes. (In truth, they were peacock feathers, but Usnavy had never seen or dreamt of peacocks, so he imagined them as lions or, at least cats.) The armature consisted of branches at the top, black and fat to resemble the density of tree bark. They narrowed as they neared the edge, until they were pencil thin and delicate. The borders were shaped with unevenness of leaves and eyelids, petals and orb, in a riotous yet precise design. (17)

The lamp is crucial to the narrative at many levels. It helps understand Usnavy, the man, and Cuba, the possibility. Once the possible value of the lamp is revealed it becomes the path out of misery. The lamp's original home was the Brooklyn House in Caimanera, and was brought to

Havana by Usnavy's mother, and remained with him as the only possession of his mother, and of his past. Usnavy finds solace in the nostalgic past of his childhood days. It also allows him to dream of faraway lands, and it is not a coincidence that he sees lions in the lamp, very much like Santiago dreamed of lions on the shore of Africa in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*—one of the often-read books by Usnavy. The lamp precariously anchored in the deteriorating ceiling is the only escape from his reality of stark scarcity and strained relationships. The lamp will break, if not from age, as already marked by the fracture line cracks, then from crashing down to the floor as the ceiling loosens under the illegal construction on the floor above. The lamp's condition is reflective of Cuba's own state of affairs. The majestic patrimony without proper care has developed cracks. Heavy torrential rains and thunderstorms, a constant reality of the tropical island, has only made Usnavy's old building weaker, and the regular shakings due to the climactic stress, added fracture lines in the glass panels. Ben Corbett in his book *This is Cuba* writes, "During rainfalls, I've sat with Cubans in buildings that should have been condemned long before. The air is always thick with this subconscious fear of impending danger" (112). The buildings in old Havana, representative of a once vibrant urban center of the colonial past, both Spanish and U.S., were left to deteriorate after the Revolution to detach from a single-city-centered past, which Castro saw as Cuba's cause of a hierarchical and unequal society. It was the "Las Vegas" of its time attracting not only foreign tourists but also islanders (Eckstein 152). Castro's attention in the initial years of the revolution was to develop the rural countryside. He did not completely neglect the capital and focused on building low-cost housings. Susan Eckstein in her book *Back From the Future* writes,

But in addressing tenant and small proprietor concerns the government left unresolved the problem of insufficient housing. The early housing projects

accommodated only a small fraction of urban folk, and the still-standing prerevolutionary building stock left much to be desired, in quality as well as quantity. Much of it was in state of disrepair, to the point that the number of Havana residents living in buildings on the verge of collapse rose. Meanwhile, demand for housing increased as the younger generation came of age and started their own families. (155-6)

In the novel *Ruins*, the illegal construction in Usnavy's upstairs' neighbor's apartment, apart from causing further strain on the lamp, is indicative of Cuban society's reaction to the economic disparities. The neighbor, no longer able to wait for the government to provide housing for all, at low cost, and build the system from bottom-up, as promised by the Revolution, has taken control of his life, and through the unorganized and illegal *bolsa negra* acquired enough wealth to fix what apparently needs repairs. The neighbor, if not unaware, is certainly apathetic to the shaky foundations of the building, just like his country, and to his downstairs' neighbor's condition, and property.

Usnavy learns that his lamp is probably the holy grail of Tiffany lamps—commissioned in 1918, but never installed. The supposed missing Tiffany lamp is said to be the creation of a bored Italian Jewish immigrant glassblower from Murano, who was brought to New York to revive Tiffany. He, with other Tiffany artists, was commissioned to work on the Presidential Palace in Havana. Due to a disagreement, the Italian glass blower deserted Tiffany and flooded the market with Tiffany lamps. Nobody could make out the difference if they were fake or real, because original Tiffany artisans made them. The descendants of these artists stayed on in Cuba, making it their home (71-74). The grandson of the master craftsman, Virgilio who tells Usnavy this history, now runs an illegal business of imitating Tiffany lamps looking at catalogues, under

the cover of fixing old lamps (174). This is also another example of the present state of Cuban society, where master artists and craftsmen are unable to flourish openly and reach their possibility. Cubans with no economic potential to buy new lamps must fix the old ones, and those who can buy new lamps, mainly the international tourist, must buy it in the black-market, which due to lack of legal status and control is not always authentic, like Virgilio's imitation Tiffanies.

The Tiffany lamp and the artists are a metaphor of an underlined discourse in this narrative, believed by many Cubans as the possibility of Cuba as a nation unable to prove its greatness to the world because of robbed opportunities. The nationalist rhetoric of Cuba being ripped off by the United States, oft-times exaggerated, and used as a political tool by Castro in real life, is present throughout the narrative and seen mainly as a tool for the characters to cope with the situation of their country, but it also has its basis in Cuba's history. Cuba's fight to become a free nation from Spain was high jacked by the United States by entering into war with Spain in 1898, and later interfering with the running of the country. Jose David Saldívar in a revisionist study of the "Spanish-American-Cuban-Philippine War" of 1898 in his article "Looking Awry at 1898: Roosevelt, Montejo, Paredes, and Mariscal" talks about Theodore Roosevelt's *The Rough Riders* (1900). He writes that the U.S. imaginary of places like Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Philippines were formed by texts like that of Roosevelt's that saw the U.S. imperialism of these "inferior" places justified. This is a repeated trope throughout the history of colonization, which the United States adopted in its own expansionist theories.

The novel *Ruins* explores further some of the other instances where Cubans feel they were cheated of an opportunity to prove themselves to the world. In an incident in the novel, Usnavy earns \$20 by driving a car for a tourist; tourism being the most important financial sector

now in Cuba for earning hard currency which not only provides Cuba its apparent stability, but also jobs to many Cubans working in various enterprises of the *bolsa negra* or as *jineteros* (Corbett 96-108). Usnavy agrees to taxi a Canadian tourist on the behest of his friend, Diosdado. This incident also speaks of Usnavy's belief that given a chance Cubans can do anything. Usnavy agrees to taxi the tourist not just for a friend but also to show that he is capable of doing so. Usnavy, in the rush of being able to prove his worth to his friend after all these years of having remained silent, starts ranting about how the Cubans have been denied their share of greatness—at times exaggerated—starting with the Americans stealing the Cuban independence from Spain, and then Alexander Graham Bell stealing the idea of the telephone from Antonio Meucci, and the artists Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso ripping off Francis Picabi and Wilfredo Lam, respectively (114-15). In the case of the Tiffany lamps, the name of the artist is unknown and is only a story that Virgilio tells yet it is the same discourse of having been cheated out. This idea of feeling betrayed by Americans is also presented in Obejas' *Memory Mambo* where the exiled father claims to have invented duct-tape on the behest of the CIA yet is denied the ownership of his ingenuity. Once in Miami, he sees duct-tape in the window of a store, and realizes that the CIA stole the formula from him and introduced it in the market as American (29). These claims, however fictional, simply speak of the common Cuban sentiment of feeling betrayed, of being *salado*, as represented in the man Usnavy himself, and in many cases by the United States.

Usnavy stumbles upon the value of his lamp only by chance. He finds a small table lamp in the rumble of an old collapsed building. Recognizing the resemblance of the glass panels on this lamp to his own, he sees an artistic value, and opportunity to make money by selling it for a few dollars. In hope of repairing it, he meets Virgilio, who tells him that it is too expensive to

repair the lamp, thus making him realize the lamp is of high value. Consequently, based on the similarities of the table lamp found in the ruins of a building and the majestic lamp hanging in his own apartment, he deduces that his own lamp is of greater value than he had ever imagined. He is unable to part with his own lamp, even though a Canadian antique dealer offers him a generous amount, as he tries to hold onto a material memento of his childhood. But forced by circumstance, especially hunger, he sells a few of the red glass panels from his own lamp to Virgilio in return for a few dollars. He is amazed at the amount of money he receives. Once in possession of dollars, Usnavy is a changed man. He is astonished what a little money can buy. He is able to bribe an official and get a new identity card for his daughter, he is able to buy himself and his daughter used bicycles, a color TV, new shoes for the family and a used refrigerator. Once initiated into the black market of demand and supply, there is little that holds him back.

Usnavy, like many Cubans trying to adapt to the situation, finds a way to earn money, specifically U.S. dollars—money that is able to buy him food, basic amenities, and some comfort, even though it means the end of this ideological stand. He starts combing through the ruins of freshly collapsed buildings. He realizes that there are many more lamps like his all over Havana. The stained glass lamps and chandeliers that once dressed the buildings are now just a part of the ruins. The old dilapidated buildings in need of urgent repairs hide among them a treasure that is hidden from the world. Usnavy tries to cash in his newly found knowledge, aware that there are others, including the young man Yoandry, a *jinetero*, who tries to get Usnavy to sell his big lamp to a Canadian for a finder's fee, and the old lady who lives a few blocks away from his home, whose son in Miami had taken a similar lamp to America. In a world of survival, there is little trust as each competes with the other for the minimum such “commodities” like a

Tiffany lamp can offer. As for his own lamp, he only sells a few of the glasses, when he needs extra money, hoping to replace them in the future, unaware that once he starts selling the pieces of glasses he starts depleting his dream—a dream, which is not a future, but a past, an escape, nostalgia.

Usnavy's illegal enterprise is not without perils and the clichéd maxim “money does not always buy happiness” comes true. His new wealth is based on hoping for the collapse of Havana's old buildings, unable to hold-up through the tropical storms. The novel ends with one of Usnavy's trips searching through the wreck of a building in which he not only returns empty handed but also badly hurt: “It was roots and earth, black and fertile and wet. But his hand was wounded, the bone jagged, his fingers stabbed by shards of colored glass and bloated like petals on a flower” (199). He returns home to find his own building shaken by the torrential rains and the winds, his home inundated with water and filled with debris of broken walls, his new possessions broken, and his prized lamp “...hanging by a strand from the improbable hunk of ceiling, its remaining glass shattered, the black holes of missing panels like rotten teeth. Its shadow draped the room like the suspended, battered cadaver of a giant jungle cat” (200). Soon he learns that his daughter has left the island like many more on one of the rafts taking off from the coast of Cojímar. The novel leaves us with a broken man—hurt, tired, and disillusioned—with his wife and a few friends by his side, sympathizing with the situation and hoping to recover and move on with their lives as they have all these years.

Usnavy's enterprise, like Rosita and Lidia's meat sandwich business, or Virgilio's duplicating business, is a capitalist venture in the *bolsa negra*, the rampant reality of Cuba. All the three enterprises are based on the monetary value associated with certain items, or “commodification” at the cost of human corruption—cheating and making profit by preying on



human desire, need, and societal decay. To survive, Cubans simply adopt capitalism, however illegal. Ben Corbett in his book *This is Cuba* writes about the black market in Cuba:

It is a web without proportion, and the entire population operates in it to different degrees, from the homeless man on the street, right up to the highest officials of the Communist government. When most people hear the words “black market,” they instantly think of guns, cocaine, caviar. But in Cuba, everything is the black market. It’s not a matter of choice for Cubans, it’s a matter of survival. If the Cuban government ever decided to crack down on every crime on the books, the entire population would serve prison time. (101)

At the thematic level, *Ruins* is a novel about human survival. Hunger, as described in this novel, is a motivating factor for even a humble and principled man like Usnavy to give in to unlawful methods of survival. But Achy Obejas’ novel allows discussion at multiple levels by opening up the debate to other issues about Cuba—its economy, its people, the exile community, and the American relationship with Cuba, to name a few. The novel leads to discussions of the Cuban economic model, but selling out to the capitalist enterprise is also criticized. Only recently Fidel Castro was quoted saying that the Cuban model has not worked for the country (Goldberg), and the country is moving towards changes providing legal licenses with lesser restrictions to run private enterprises in hopes to control and regulate the black-market.

Obejas’ narrative does not politicize the situation. She remains focused on the human condition of the Cuban people who endured the period of the *período especial*. There are a few references to Fidel Castro, but never by his name, simply the *comandante*. Obejas in her earlier narrative too does not take sides about the Revolution. She instead tries to carve a connection between the Cubans on the island and off. *Ruins* also attempts to bridge the gap by representing

the life of the Cubans living within Cuba, isolated from the world, forced to take part in the governmental controlled rhetoric or passively reject it. The reader outside this world is provided with a vision, however fictional, of a people who live the impact of the regime. In spite of the obvious non-reference to which side her narrative leans, it does suggest that it does not support the long held U.S. foreign policy of sanctions and trade embargos against Cuba. The narrative insinuates the much needed changes required in foreign policy, especially since there is no more threat from the Soviet block and the sanctions have not changed Cuba's regime. U.S. trade embargo laws towards Cuba need a review especially since the United States has growing trade relations with the present largest communist state, China. The anti-Castro Cuban American lobby has dominated U.S. policies, but with a growing population of U.S. born Cubans the position among the Cubans themselves shows variation (Grenier, et.al).

Obejas' narrative allows for a revisionist approach of present U.S. Cuban policies. The relationship between United States and Cuba, along with the rest of the Caribbean, has always been one of power manipulation. The Cuban Revolution of 1958 was a fight against this domination. Roman de la Campa, who accepts that Castro's revolution did not fulfill its democratic characteristics, blames the Miami-based politics as much as the United States and its open-arms immigration policies towards Cuban refugees for the situation of present-day Cuba. The Cold-War era immigration was a ploy to fight the growth of Soviet presence in the western hemisphere (28), yet in the absence of a Soviet Union, it is difficult to understand this special treatment of Cubans. De la Campa writes:

U.S. immigration law continues to encourage Cubans to risk their lives. It allows us to become refugees upon arrival, with quick passage to residency, followed by fast-track citizenship. Up until 1997, any Cuban at sea qualified; now it is only

those who reach land, or sand. The new policy only adds more risk to a practice that was already treacherous. Rafters must now avoid being spotted until they land, or hope to be picked up by agents or coyotes. (51)

After the end of the Cold War, the United States has done its best to destabilize the Cuban government, for example through the signing of the Cuban Democracy bill by George Bush in 1992 which penalized countries and companies trading with Cuba, including U.S. overseas subsidiaries (Eckstein 94). Cuba refuses to give up its socialist agenda, despite the fact that it has opened up many of its sectors to capitalist style economy, arising from the urgent need for hard currency. Castro himself agreed to have made concessions to capitalism, for survival and yet it was not the end of socialism (Campa and Perez 138). The *período especial* saw token changes in the functioning of the Communist Party and the constitution, with now the Cubans being able to vote in “secret direct elections for representatives of all levels of the Popular Power system” and not just the municipal level (Eckstein 115). Yet Castro continues to have a strong hold over his people, and the reforms have not stopped people from leaving the country. The U.S. embargos have been unable to break Castro. In Román de la Campa’s terms it is just a “quixotic” game for Castro to rally against the “dragon” of the United States (13-14), while the United States remains apprehensive to change the existing trade policies in fear of displeasing the influential Cuban American voting block. It is the Cuban people who suffer through this game, living in poverty, political fear, and less and less to pass on to the next generation as a civil society. It is time for Cuban Americans to re-think the dominant position against Fidel Castro, and see Cuba as part of their own “possibility” not simply a place “one-and-halfers” and the newer generations may deliberate to return to, after the fall of Castro, rather a “possibility” of being part of a space that connects their present to Cuba’s present and not just to its past.

Novels like *Ruins* are opening a new direction for U.S. Latino literature which in the past decades has focused on Latino life in the United States and no doubt brought many serious questions such as immigration, exile, border crossing, assimilation, and racism to the forefront of socio-political discussions. However, a novel like *Ruins* makes a new connection to the country of origin, in this case to Cuba. It is not a nostalgic past, rather Cuba and its people as they struggle to cope with the present.

Obejas's *Ruins* negotiates a new identity for U.S. Latino literature through its themes, which otherwise live at the margins of the academic world both in United States and in Latin America based on language and content; and yet this novel is truly a U.S. Latino narrative. By presenting Cuba at one of its worst economic moments in its history, the narrative urges a new dialogue between the United States and Cuba, not simply at a political level, but at a more intellectual and human level, which possibly would open newer paths to understanding U.S. Cuban relations.

U.S. Latino literature because of its more commonly associated themes, location, and the chosen language of narrative, is often left out of canonical study of Hispanic Literature. With this shift, *Ruins* offers itself as a novel about Latin America. Obejas' narrative allows for a negotiation not just for American readers with the reality of Cuba and U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba, but also speaks to Latin American scholars who see the literature produced by the U.S. Latino author as outside their purview of scholarship. This permits for both U.S. Latino scholars and Latin Americanists to find a common space to co-habit and possibly include it in the curricula and research. Saldívar in his article "Looking Awry at 1898" writes that by bringing into discussion the *testimonio* of Esteban Montejo narrated to the anthropologist Miguel Barnet, published as the *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1980) in a discussion about the "Spanish-American-

Cuban-Philippine War” of 1898 in an American history course, the traditional perception changes as to how the war is perceived. Esteban Montejo was one of the many Afro Cuban *mambises insurrectos* who fought in the revolutionary army of Cuba in 1898 fighting for their independence from Spain. His narrative challenges Roosevelt and the U.S. imperialist notion of the incapability of the Cubans to lead themselves, one of the reasons being because many were black and incompetent (394). Obejas’ narrative attempts something similar through fiction and for U.S. Latino Studies. It allows Latin Americanists of both sides to approach Latin American issues, not just through a Latin American perspective—through literature written only by authors residing in Latin America, but also through literature written by Latino Americans.

*Ruins* is truly a U.S. Latino novel. Engaging with Latin American issues, it allows U.S. Latino texts to be introduced in the larger dialogue from which it has been excluded. The novel *Ruins* becomes a voice to connect contemporary Cuba with the U.S. audience. It is also a tool to engage Latin Americanists with U.S. Latino scholars on both sides. Even though the question of authority remains open to debate, it allows for the possibility of crossing over.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The narrator-protagonist growing up during the American cultural revolution of sorts, returns home one Thanksgiving sporting a typical anti-war 1970s rebel outfit with bell-bottom trousers and fringed torn suede jacket to the horror of the parents. The parents, both wishing to see their own personal desires projected on their child, are taken aback by what their daughter has embraced while away at college. The clothes are just symbolic of the political ideology of the 1960s and 70s in the Americas. The father retorts, “We left Cuba so you could dress like this?” To which the daughter says, the first and the last time: “...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? [...] Christ, he only left because Fidel beat him in that stupid swimming race when they were little" (121).

<sup>2</sup> In another article "Contesting Identity: Achy Obejas's *Memory Mambo*," I argue that Juani, the narrator-protagonist questions her family and extended Cuban American community's classist, sexist, homophobic, and racist cultural identity. Exposing the flaws of the Cuban American identity, imposed from within and outside leads the protagonist to explore her options to reject, accept, or negotiate the given identity. The narrative does not offer solutions, but proposes a conscious identity: one that is based on an objective understanding of life in present day Cuba versus in the United States.

<sup>3</sup> *Days of Awe* is Obejas' complex attempt at looking at various multiplicities of Cuban identity, starting with a bisexual protagonist's search of her bicultural identity as a Jewish Cuban American, in a split world of pro and anti-Revolution, in Cuba and in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> The term "*Salado*" originates from the Roman days when the land of an offender was sprinkled with salt so that it would not produce any crops. Thus being "salted" is to be impotent figuratively, someone who is unable to produce anything.

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