

Transgressive Subjects in Crisis: Reimagining "queer (un)belonging" and Relationality in Obejas' *We came all the way from Cuba so you could dress like this?*

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“[T]he most powerful and valuable intervention that queer diaspora scholarship makes into both queer studies and diaspora studies: that it gives us a mode of reading, a methodology that allows us to ‘see’ both subjectivity and the workings of power differently” – Gopinath

The momentary, yet powerful account of familial violence represented in the closing story of Obejas’ book *We came all the way from Cuba so you could dress like this?*, offers an insight into the complicated forms of social and spatial relationships that are produced throughout the collection of short stories. Navigating each disparate vignette, Obejas’ personal and fictional portrayals of migration, sexual orientation/exploration, and political activism informs the myriad accounts of movement that drive the stories’ narrative, implicitly placing at the forefront the affective experience of the post-1959 Cuban-American diaspora. Thus, as the work’s title indicates, the communal exodus and, consequently, displacement of space in “*We came all the way from Cuba...*” demands a closer cross-examination of what Jose Muñoz calls “practices of disidentification” that arise within this particular trajectory of subject formation. For queer and diasporic subjects do much more than simply expose exclusionary ideologies of belonging. They also reconstruct or reimagine their experiences of oppression as forms of minoritarian empowerment and fulfillment.

In what follows, I utilize queer (un)belonging, a theoretical model proposed by scholar, Johanna Garvey, and furthered by Gayatri Gopinath, to argue that Achy Obejas’ work is not only resisting normative ideologies of belonging, but is also challenging heteronormative readings that have informed diasporic and queer writing. I claim that queer (un)belonging functions as a methodology that maintains spaces of relationality for queer diasporic communities. Unlike traditional notions of diaspora that often rely on a hierarchy of origins and a universalizing relationship to a national homeland, queer (un)belonging subverts conventional and restrictive understandings of identity formation. When read in conversation with Gloria Anzaldúa’s consciousness of difference—mestiza consciousness—it functions as a way of knowing that subverts national and sexual boundaries policing identity. Reading queer (un)belonging through an Anzaldúan lens accommodates an inclusive understanding of the multiple voices and bodies that exist across different spaces, both rendering different subjects visible and exposing non-linear ways of knowing. Thus, I will also consider how the work of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands: La Frontera* gestures towards an understanding of queer (un)belonging that offers alternative ways of constructing identity. In particular, by focusing on a short review of *Borderlands* as a text that maps a consciousness of difference (mestiza consciousness), I claim that her invocation of multiple voices often oppressed by hegemonic discourses of belonging contributes to a necessary sense of disorientation that leads to empowerment. Through concepts like mestiza consciousness, nepantla, and the Coyolxauhqui Imperative, Anzaldúa offers an iteration of queer (un)belonging as a way of negotiating the Other’s relationship to systems of power. Lastly, I turn to Achy Obejas’ book, *We came all the way from Cuba so you could dress like this?*, to discuss how the text reinvents relationships within and around homosexuality, aesthetics, and urban spaces in an attempt to refuse a fixed, monolithic representation of identity. I argue that *We came all the way from Cuba...*¹

renders visible both a multiplicity of independent states and “spaces” as it also maintains spaces of relationality that work against the effacement of non-normative bodies and subjectivities.

Theorizing Queer (un)Belonging

Conventional theories of diaspora have generally characterized displaced populations by their physical movement across geopolitical spaces, focusing primarily on their “dispersion in space;...orientation to a homeland... boundary-maintenance” (5).² And while terms like “boundary-maintenance” may suggest a relationship to irreconcilable spaces and temporalities, maintaining such a binary framework of “one and/or the other” threatens to undermine the complex identity formations at work in diasporic cultural production. Thus, although diasporic subjects are often (mis)placed and marginalized within a hierarchy of origins, it is necessary to consider how such subjects challenge normative and limiting notions of belonging and being. For example, according to queer diaspora studies scholar, Gayatri Gopinath, in queer diasporic cultural production, artists “work against the violent effacements that produce the fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies” (5). By focusing on “Queer diasporas” and their creative work, instead of the patriarchal logic that underlies “orientation to a homeland,” Gopinath suggests that diasporic populations are defined by a control over forms of authenticity and *representation*, ostensibly claiming that sites of continuous production, such as narratives and fictions, refuse to naturalize or efface a multiplicity of identities. Indeed, to work against “violent effacements” is to embrace and make visible what is rendered inauthentic across space and time: the non-reproductive body.

In an effort to move away from a universalization of all diasporic experiences, Brubaker argues that one must reconceptualize diaspora as a term that “does not so much *describe* the world as seek to *remake* it” (12). Redefining diaspora “not as a bounded entity, but as an idiom, stance, and claim”³ that *remakes* the world emphasizes not only the ongoing tensions between dominant figures of representation, but also the struggle to (re)produce and (re)instate new spaces for the diasporic subject. Therefore, if focusing on queer diasporas introduces a re-imagined community that contests dominant, exclusionary “fictions of purity,” then it is necessary to develop, as Gopinath states, “a methodology that allows us to ‘see’ both subjectivity and the workings of power differently” (635). Such a methodology may then be articulated by the “queer (un)belonging” framework of Johanna Garvey: spaces that “undo belonging while not leading to the destructive behavior of not-belonging... can accommodate multiple identities and respond to normative attitudes that rely on racism and other forms of violent categorization” (758).⁴ Furthermore, within this framework of (un)belonging states of subjectivity, one must also remember “that these spaces... are also spaces of disorientation that fall outside the dialectics of belonging/not belonging that subtend conventional national and diasporic formations” (637).⁵ “Queer (un)belonging” renders not only a multiplicity of independent states and “spaces” in the “production of ‘home’ and ‘family,’” but maintains spaces of relationality that expose an affirmative state of (un)belonging.

Queer (un)belonging is a way of envisioning a queer diasporic community that does not place the queer subject outside of national boundaries, but rather challenges the imposition of such borders. In Meg Wesling’s article, “Why Queer Diaspora?,” the author expresses concern over the emergent terminology of the “sexile, a gay cosmopolitan subject, who, once exiled from national space, is therefore outside of the duties, identifications, and demands of nationalism, and is paradoxically liberated into free transnational mobility” (31). Since, according to Wesling, “this

binary would suggest that to the extent that queers necessarily disrupt national coherence, they are always already extra-national.”⁶ I would add that this binary view of a globalized queer subject also positions him/her outside of a space of belonging. The claim to “transnational mobility,” while implying a romanticized view of free, unrestricted movement across national and cultural boundaries, produces an image of the queer diasporic subject as errant and without purpose. Mobility, here, still participates in spatial understandings of belonging to a homeland, displacing the sexile further as a subject without access to a homeland or cultural history.

Borderlands and the Expression of Difference

This article uses Gloria Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness to consider how different marginalized bodies negotiate their lived experiences in liminal spaces. While her work centers on the US-Mexico border, it also functions as a point of departure to theorize marginality and (un)belonging beyond the geopolitical border. I read her work in conversation with diasporic theorists like Gayatri Gopinath in order to consider how critical thinkers challenge problematic relationships to normative belonging. For example, the terms “queer (un)belonging” and “mestiza consciousness” are interrelated concepts that reposition, elevate, and transform the voices of queer bodies in transition. If, as Garvey states, spaces of queer (un)belonging “are also spaces of disorientation...” then such spaces become sites where oppositional ways of thinking exist in flux. The subjects inhabiting spaces of queer (un)belonging challenge normative patterns of identity formation while simultaneously shifting into alternative possibilities of being. In other words, the subject at the site of disorientation is ultimately challenged to engage in differential knowledge production. And we might understand the site of disorientation, queer (un)belonging, as *nepantla* or the transitional space that leads to “the path of *conocimiento*,”⁷ which requires, according to Anzaldúa in her edited volume, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, “that you encounter your *shadow side* and... confront traits and habits *distorting* how you see reality and inhibiting the full use of your *facultades*” (my emphasis, 118). Queer feminists of color like Garvey, Gopinath, and Anzaldúa embrace the marginalized subject’s experience of disorientation because it engenders a deeper awareness of the ways in which a person can shift or reshape identity.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* is a text that articulates a radical understanding of the queer Chicana’s experiences growing up in the U.S./Mexico border region. As a hybrid text, Anzaldúa uses both poetry and prose to ruminate about fragmented subjectivities and unitary politics. On the one hand, her work challenges monolithic and Eurocentric understandings of history that have dispossessed minority subjects like the bicultural, bilingual, queer Chicana. While, on the other hand, the text is an exercise on the transformative power of writing and the way marginalized subjects can fashion new, non-Western paradigms for theorizing differences. For instance, in the chapter, “*La consciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness*,” Anzaldúa posits that when *la mestiza* encounters “conflicting information and points of view,” she is “subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders,” discovering that concepts or ideas cannot be contained within rigid borders. Instead, *la mestiza* must remain flexible, shifting

out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes (79).

It is important to note two things here: one is that the “swamping of her psychological borders” emphasizes what I call “a necessary sense of disorientation.” While *la mestiza* lives in a position of inferiority and marginalization, the experience of being “mixed breed,” of straddling multiple cultures and value systems creates a “psychic restlessness” (78). Second, insofar as mestiza consciousness challenges Western modes of thinking, its transformative power manifests in the possibility of inclusion rather than exclusion. *La mestiza* embraces contradictions and her psychic restlessness for the sake of operating in a pluralistic mode of thinking. This “pluralistic” mode of thinking demands acknowledging that other modes of being and believing exist, and that the constant turn or “psychic restlessness” of the mestiza is a way of bringing the marginal into visibility. Thus, when placed in conversation with Obejas’ book, our reading of the queer voices that mobilize through and around heteronormative boundaries is an act of pluralistic thinking.

Queer Bodies and Relationships in *We came all the way from Cuba...*

We came all the way from Cuba... functions as a text that explores both the mobility and fluidity of identities as well as the destabilization of normative attitudes vis-à-vis short stories that navigate urban spaces. In particular, the vignettes, “Tommy,” “Above All, A Family Man,” and “We Came All the Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?,” illustrate how a broader exploration of “queerness” serves as “a supplement to understandings of sexuality that posit homosexuality and heterosexuality as fixed, immutable, and—supposedly—equal and opposite identities,”⁸ carrying out what McRuer terms a “queer renaissance rooted in communities, histories, and struggles” (3). Both the homoeroticism of Obejas’ work alongside the queering of diaspora that questions notions of spatial and social belonging focalize a “queer renaissance,” or the disruption of a homo/heterosexual binary, that has traditionally been undermined by the invisibility of non-normative bodies and subjectivities.

Using the three short stories I have mentioned, this article questions various representations of masculinity for diasporic subjects in order to expose the limitations of dominant narratives that render queer subjects invisible. Moreover, because Obejas introduces closeted characters that challenge and destabilize prevalent notions of masculinity, it will also explore how these stories reinvent relationships within and around homosexuality, aesthetics, and urban spaces, revealing a narrative of resistance and self-determination. Since different social crises appear throughout the stories in various forms, the analysis will conclude with an examination of how sexual violence, both enacted and suppressed, functions as the primary form of crisis that exposes the tumultuous relationality between multiple identities in contact; for, as Dolores Ramírez notes, the struggle by women writers, like Obejas, is “de encontrar poder y subversión dentro de esa violencia mediante la presentación de subjetividades diaspóricas, en constante movimiento, que rehúsan ser fijadas en una identidad monolítica”(11).⁹

Such “diasporic subjectivities, in constant movement...,” or rather interstitial subjects, are at the center of the story entitled, “Above All, A Family Man.” Written in a first-person narrative, the protagonist and AIDS-diagnosed, Tommy Drake, is on a road trip from Chicago, IL to Santa Fe, NM with his lover, Rogelio. However, while Drake is openly gay, Rogelio is a hyper-masculine, closeted man who self-identifies as simply “*sexual*” because he is married to a woman and is a father of three. Tommy and Rogelio’s relationship is mediated by Rogelio’s homophobia and his displays of hyper-masculinity that push and pull the turbulent relationship, making Drake vulnerable to domestic abuse because Rogelio seems to perpetually adhere to homophobic understandings of gay sexuality. His hetero-masculine energy is so pervasive that even when he

engages in homosexual acts, Drake claims, “[H]e is sure, because there are certain things he will not do in bed with a man, and because of – quite literally – his favorite sexual positions, that he’s a man in the old fashioned sense of the word” (54). Oscillating between outings with Drake to gay bars and providing for his heterosexual family, Rogelio’s character suggests the difficulty in removing oneself from the discourse of heteronormative categorizations, from the displacement, or “not-belonging,” state inscribed by systems of exclusion. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing Rogelio, the transient subject prescribed by the desire for a normative citizenship (“living in the U.S. thanks to a rather dubious green card”), with Tommy Drake, a U.S.-born and self-identified gay man, Obejas presents two characters in flux that are made or unmade by the social spaces they inhabit, from inner city excursions to trips to and within urban (national) monuments. Each movement takes them towards the limits of their emotional capacities.

If Drake’s interpretation of Rogelio’s subjectivity places him outside the paradigm of queer (un)belonging, in a state of hetero-patriarchal belonging, then Drake’s narrative frames an alternative discourse and space of queer (un)belonging. Consequently, and in conversation with Sánchez-Eppler and Patton’s notion that “[A]n identity is not merely a succession of strategic moves but a highly *mobile cluster of claims to self* that appear and transmogrify in and out of place,” it is telling that Drake claims different desires in three diverse cities and places during the summer of 1978: Chicago, St. Louis, and Santa Fe (my emphasis, 4). By stating that an identity is “a highly mobile cluster of claims to self that appear and transmogrify in and out of place” (4), Sanchez-Eppler and Patton illustrate the ways place is subjective, changing, and functioning in relationship to identity. To claim self is to turn space into a form of belonging and a place of being. Drake states,

The fact is, I don’t really want to deal with the Arch, and I don’t really want to go to Santa Fe, which rings in my ears with an unexpected finality. About the only place I want to be is on the front porch of Stan’s old house, just a couple of blocks off Broadway... I fell in love a million times that season, and each time there would be a triumphant moment when my new lover and I would walk hand in hand down Broadway 62-63.

Although Drake exhibits a dangerous nostalgia that seemingly moves between the binaries of “here” and “there,” “now” and “then,” it is important to note that Drake’s voice identifies Santa Fe with a “finality” of self (he is going to Santa Fe in order to spend the last days of his life with a former lover), reminding readers that he has embarked both on an aesthetic journey (he is also attending a gallery) and on a desire to claim relational spaces: “only place I want to be is on the front porch of Stan’s old house.” Furthermore, relating the memory of his romances with “Broadway” and Chicago stresses the relational ties between his identity as “lover” and the city, as well as the narrator’s engagement with its space, “Broadway.” Unlike Rogelio’s state of not-belonging, Drake’s impending separation from space, bodies, and life helps him (re)envision an emotiospatial relationship to Chicago; the space between life and death is the site whereby Drake challenges normative attitudes of belonging and resists *forgetting* or erasure with a narrative of loss. Indeed, in his restlessness and discontent, Drake begins to engage in what Anzaldúa claims is a “tolerance of ambiguity” since he is able to both acknowledge what he does not desire or want and the love he is being denied.

According to Mary Pat Brady’s book, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies*, spatial narratives resemble “loiterature,” or gay literature insofar as the genre ‘relies on techniques of

digression, interruption, deferral and episodicity... to make observations of everyday life that are unsystematic, even disordered” (113). She further claims that “acknowledging the emotion-laden aspects of spatiality undermines the positivist tendency to treat the material as objective, largely unchanging, and outside the vitality of living, sociality, and relationships” (115). To be sure, Obejas’ stories are loiterary accounts that digress and interrupt, pausing in explicit moments of violence or resting in beds with victims of AIDS. They also move with emotional aggressiveness and disorientating experiences. For instance, when Drake and Rogelio consider stopping in St. Louis, the narrative has abruptly transitioned from a gay bar fight to a road trip scene. Drake states, “Rogelio and I wound up speeding down Interstate 55 together for the same reason, I suppose, that desperate people do desperate things. As awful as it can be, there’s a strange sense we’re all we’ve got” (58). As the narrative moves past the bar fight into a passage on car speeding it simultaneously downplays the severity of a violent encounter and emphasizes the nature of their swift, hasty emotions that account for doing “desperate things.” Readers are driven to and past the spaces that reveal fraught relationships and encounters. Driving down transitional spaces like the Interstate may appear to be gestures of intimacy, “we’re all we’ve got,” but essentially are moments that refuse to mask the tensions in Drake and Rogelio’s relationship.

Similarly, the narrative introduces an alternative transitional site whereby Drake undoes different forms of heteronormative belonging: the observation deck of the St. Louis Arch. Expecting to see a view of the city from the elevator that transports Drake and Rogelio to the observation deck, Drake notes that instead of a view, they’re “traversing the very bowels of the St. Louis Arch- ancient stairwells, a landing filled with janitorial supplies, a caged room with lockers for maintenance workers” (66). In an effort to view, and thus partake in the spatial configurations of St. Louis, Drake encounters not only the tools of the underrepresented service economy, but also forgotten and unnecessary forms of passage, “ancient stairwells.” This symbolic journey through the confines of the Arch displaces the geopolitical structure of St. Louis insofar as it is not accessible or viewable, while simultaneously redirecting attention towards the impossibility of forming relationships between overlapping paths, like the stairwells and elevator, and shared spaces that function as transitional points of contact. Because here, in “the very bowels” of the Arch, Drake and Rogelio depart from the open spaces of urban cities, and instead move across a homoerotic space of negation: the Arch’s bowels, where Rogelio will ultimately abandon Drake.

Although Rogelio and Drake traverse a spatial and emotional gateway of sorts, the Arch becomes a spatial marker for the impossibility of entering or crossing into queer visibility. For instance, if, as Gorman-Murray claims, “the queer identity quest can be seen as a way of *embodying* sexuality-related displacement...’downsizing’ the explanatory scale of queer migration from the regional and national to the *body*,” then it is important to account for an embodied understanding of Rogelio and Drake’s own sense of queerness precisely because of the social and physical forms of violence both men experience between and outside of each other (229). Socializing (and engaging in sex) with a man that self-identifies as merely “sexual,” Drake is limited in his ability to make Rogelio understand the pathological and social violence that surrounds AIDS:

I told him that I was symptomatic, that my swollen glands and fatigue were typical. “Who gave it to you?” he asked me, his face blank from shock...
 “It could be anybody. And it doesn’t matter anyway.”
 “It doesn’t matter?” he asked, amazed. His face contorted with anger. “I want to know who it is so I can kill the son of a bitch.”

“Look, Rogelio, my honor isn’t what’s at stake here... “It’s you- and your family. You’ve probably been exposed.”

“But Tommy,” he said, his eyes narrowing into slits. “I’m not going to get this sickness. You, yes – you’re a homosexual” (56).

By reading Rogelio’s insistence on identifying the culprit, and potentially terminable transmitter of “it,” AIDS, we witness an understanding of the disease not only as pathologically bound to a particular group of people, but also as lacking a proper discursive presence in heterosexual (and homophobic) discourses; AIDS-inflicted men who identify as gay, like Drake, must always remain degraded and excluded, removed from any relational possibilities. Additionally, because Rogelio chooses to respond to Drake’s threatened social integrity, he is unable to acknowledge the bodily violence produced by AIDS and his own homophobic assault. The failure to witness and accept the condition affecting Drake’s bodily deterioration further emphasizes the epistemological constraints imposed by embodied and ill-conceived forms of knowledge. In other words, Rogelio may display an intuitive reaction to Drake’s condition when “his face went blank with shock,” but his language reveals an implicit belief that Drake contracted AIDS and is responsible for it because he identifies as “homosexual.”

The quality of Drake’s victimization illustrates my argument that violence exposes what I call “the crisis of (un)belonging.” If we acknowledge that Drake is the victim of a commonplace ideological abuse towards gay identity and experiences, then it is necessary to examine how everyday movement and encounters reflect patterns of violence. Drake informs us that he lives “thirty minutes north of his [Rogelio’s] family,” presumably residing in a section of the city called “New Town” (55). And, while the term “New Town” may exemplify an alternative space immersed in an open gay culture, the inscription of “New” alludes to a discursive refusal to acknowledge that gay identity and culture have always been historically present, although underrepresented. Thus, through this vacillation between acknowledging and disavowing, spatial referents like “gay street fair” and “gay clubs,” which do not possess formality as proper nouns, illustrate Drake’s alienation from Rogelio and the dominant culture, as well as his continuing experience with violence vis-a-vis homophobia and AIDS. As the subject who navigates through spaces of (un)belonging, Drake reveals the pervasive and continuous control that homophobia creates through space.

Drake’s eventual breakthrough and moment of resistance occurs when he violently confronts and reacts to Rogelio’s claim that he’s “immune” to AIDS but Drake isn’t because he identifies as “a homosexual.” We, unlike Rogelio, become faithful witnesses to the homophobic violence that separates Rogelio from establishing a positive and empathetic relationship with Drake. Feeling distant from Rogelio, Drake claims “I wanted to go running down the street, not to believe we’d ever shared an intimate moment... suddenly I had my fingers wrapped like rope around his neck” (56-57). This shocking moment of violence that leaves Rogelio shaking and sobbing illustrates Drake’s refusal to be fixed and relocated into a state of invisibility and rendered non-existent by a destructive homophobic discourse that naturalizes death by AIDS as the gay man’s burden. It is this painful moment in which Drake begins a path to *concocimiento*, removing himself from romanticized memories of shared intimacies and acknowledging his partner’s oppressive heteronormative beliefs. The violent contact is also Drake’s attempt to find self-worth and justice in his feelings of vulnerability, and to asphyxiate the voice of violent hetero masculinity. It is ultimately an expression of disorientation and fear, and, although violent, also signifies his transition into the in-between space of *nepantla*.

According to AnaLouise Keating, similar to Anzaldúa's theory of the Borderlands, "nepantla indicates liminal space where transformation can occur, and like her theory of the Coatlicue state, nepantla indicates space/times of great *confusion, anxiety, and loss of control*... During nepantla, our worldviews and self-identities are shattered. Nepantla is painful, messy, confusing, and chaotic... But nepantla is also a time of self-reflection, choice, and potential growth—what Anzaldúa describes as opportunities to "see through" restrictive cultural and personal scripts" (my emphasis, 8-9). By focusing on nepantla as a state of confusion and chaos that affords opportunities "to 'see through' restrictive cultural and personal scripts," we can read Drake's attack as a painful moment of disidentification from the patriarchal scripts of hypermasculinity that have undermined his gay identity. And while the story does not culminate with a radical spiritual or psychic transformation of sorts, it nonetheless introduces a radical shift in Drake's personal narrative. He is now in a state of "crisis" that both acknowledges and rejects the rules of belonging centered on homophobia and enforced by normative standards of identity.

Toxic masculinity and homophobia are also at play in the vignette, "We Came All the Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?." Obejas reintroduces a hyper-masculine figure in conflict with his lesbian daughter and his own sense of belonging, proposing yet another alternative reading of queer diasporic experiences. While the story's shifting narrative is focalized from the perspective of a politically radical lesbian who is well aware of the patriarchal, heteronormative practices that attempt to undermine her unconventional identity, the narrative's fragmented structure interweaves experiences that seemingly occur in disparate social and spatial domains. By centering the narrative around a fraught father/daughter relationship, Sara Cooper claims that "[Q]ueer and extreme youth is not completely ostracized nor marginalized, cannot exist or be recounted outside of the family narrative" (76). This attention to the queerness of the protagonist's geographical and ideological voyages does not function independent of the father's flight from Cuba. For each character, the act of (un)belonging requires claiming a shared site of difference. For instance, his daughter claims, "[T]he immigration officer...asks my parents why they came, and my father... points to me—I'm sitting on a couch across the room, more than exhausted—and says, We came for her, so she could have a future" (114). From the onset, the father's narrative of national belonging is displaced from a conventional, patriarchal account of political exile and fashioned into a fiction centered on his lesbian daughter – a queer "family romance"¹⁰. This claim not only addresses the father's paternal responsibility, but also articulates his identity within a narrative of "becoming;" he anchors his exilic state of "not-belonging" into a form of (un)belonging.

Inasmuch as the father's request for political amnesty is centered upon a narrative of familial responsibility, the protagonist's act of re-envisioning an imaginary, post-migration family tale is also an act of queering the national and familial discourses at hand. Contrary to the couple in "Above All, A Family Man," the father-daughter dynamic delineates heteronormative and homosexual subjectivities in conversation with each other as elements of queer (un)belonging position them in a shared space and sociality. For instance, the father's fictionalized belief that he is the savior and protector of his daughter's destiny is ironically subverted by his "dreams" for her: "A lawyer, then a judge, in a system of law that is both serious and just. Not that he actually believes in democracy—in fact, he's openly suspicious of the popular will—but he longs for the power and prestige such a career would bring, and which he can't achieve on his own now that we're here, so he projects it all on me" (117). Whereas women have been traditionally limited to the domestic sphere, the father "does not envision [her] in domestic scenes" and consequently transfers the rights and privileges due to male figures to his daughter (117). Specifically, by

emphasizing that his dream for her entails a career as “a lawyer, then a judge...,” he further intertwines the components that uphold the nation with that of his uprooted family, implying that a form of belonging, “he can’t achieve on his own...so he projects it all on me,” resides within a queering of both national and familial narratives.

The temporal structure of “We Came All the Way So You Could Dress Like This?” equally serves as a space for queer (un)belonging, projecting a future that develops alongside the present and that technically hasn’t happened yet for the protagonist. In this state of flux, the vignette portrays a multiple and simultaneous overlapping of experiences that are not yet bordered and mapped in reality. For example, the narrator’s embrace of what I call a drifting narrative—stories assembled in non-chronological order but shared in interspersed temporalities—supports the possibility for a different form of communal belonging:

As I lie here wondering about the spectacle outside the window and the new world that awaits us on this and every night for the rest of our lives, even I know we’ve already come a long way. What none of us can measure yet is how much of the voyage is already behind us (131).

This final statement is one of movement and foreshadowed relations. Unwilling to participate in the formal aesthetics of the “spectacle outside” or the “new world,” the narrator suggests that her desired participation resides within the conception and construction of the voyage “already behind us.” It is the voyage of a project, of a narrative that has navigated through spaces and relationships and resisted both the teleology of a migrant experience, like the father’s, and the categories that would prevent a representation of multiple identities-in-information.

While such moments function to create a framework that maintains relationality between father and daughter, the father’s status as an exile remains in tension with the spaces of non-belonging he inhabits and creates. According to Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s book, *On Latinidad*, the nostalgia of an idyllic homeland or point of origin, like Cuba, is a fiction mediated by the subject’s experience of discontinuity where the present is located in a different place from his/her past. She states, “[T]he present place, that is to say, shapes the imaginary past... For Cuban exiles in the United States, nostalgic imaginings of a Cuban past are inevitably informed by how the community wants to ‘imagine’ itself and represent itself to mainstream U.S. culture, its ‘elsewhere’ (95). Thus, in Obejas’ titular story, the father’s nostalgia for Cuba engenders a fictional imagining of Cubanness that is conciliatory with a normative U.S. national identity: middle class, heteronormative, and democratic. Yet, the fiction is antithetical to his daughter’s revolutionary and homosexual identities, eliciting a violent confrontation between both father and daughter. Indeed, this climactic moment illustrates the falsity of a fictionalized nostalgia and the father’s dangerous nature of not-belonging or displacement:

In 1971, I’ll come home for Thanksgiving from Indiana University where I have a scholarship to study optometry...

Alaba’o, I almost didn’t recognize you, my mother will say, pulling on the fringes of my suede jacket, promising to mend the holes in my floor-sweeping bell-bottom jeans...

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?...

And I'll say, It's a free country, I can do anything I want, remember? Christ, he only left because Fidel beat him in that stupid swimming race when they were little.

And then my father will reach over my mother's thin shoulders, grab me by the red bandana around my neck, and throw me to the floor, where he'll kick me over and over... (Obejas, 121).

By emphasizing his daughter's lack of proper clothing and, consequently, appropriate identification as a middle-class Cuban woman, the father removes his daughter from a "proper" Cuban and American "home." However, through the series of "ands" that maintain an unfolding sequence of events and through the daughter's resistance to these prescribed discourses of identity, she begins to center herself in her political convictions, to establish a discursive presence that is seemingly anti-Cuban and to take up space. Voicing the desire to remove herself from the fictional account of their migration and her desire to do "anything" she wants, the narrator engages with and rescripts the nostalgic national narrative(s) that inform her father's beliefs. It is therefore important that at this moment in her life and within this discursive manner, the narrator finds the best opportunity for undoing heteronormative belonging and embracing a queer (un)belonging where a consciousness of self is not dependent on static notions of identity.

While queer (un)belonging might challenge such fixed and marginalizing narratives of proper national identity, however, it doesn't do so without exposing moments of "disorientation." Just like Drake in "Above All, A Family Man," is "jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event,"¹¹ the narrator in the vignette, "We Came All the Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?," reimagines moments of violence as encounters that lead to a kind of *conocimiento*. For instance, that the father physically attacks his daughter may be interpreted as his inability to identify as anything less than masculine, authoritative, and powerful, yet a more nuanced reading of the aggression in conversation with his failed suicide (a violent attack on his own body) will reveal that in the lesbian narrator's re-telling of their lives, the father can be re-scripted within a queered space of (un)belonging. "There are things that can't be told...", the protagonist begins, "Like my father, finally realizing he wasn't going to go back to Cuba anytime soon, trying to hang himself with the light cord...but falling instead and breaking his arm" (123-124). The failed suicide illustrates the conscious realization that the father is no longer engaged with prescribed discourses of belonging and, more importantly, not part of a "proper" national identity. In order to transgress these violent discourses and aggressions, both the narrator and the father have to bring their statuses of (un)belonging and not-belonging into *conversation* with each other; that is, as the pun illustrates, they must *tell* things that can't be told and make present their relational subjectivities. In the act of narration, the daughter is deconstructing the ideology of an exclusionary culture and embracing a connectionist mode of thinking that transcends the binary of the other/subject, and acknowledges the painful process of arriving into a new consciousness. In other words, when she "tells," she engages with Anzaldúa's Coyolxauhqui Imperative, a step in the path of *conocimiento* that embodies the desire "to repair and heal, as well as rewrite the stories of loss and recovery, exile and homecoming, disinheritance and recuperation, stories that lead out of passivity and into agency, out of devalued into valued lives" (143). Such a

moment works twofold: it reveals the inescapable tensions that inform subjugation and the simultaneous desire to enact new spaces of relationality.

According to Jose Muñoz, the “collision of perspective” between an essentialist view of identity versus a constructivist view “is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation... a representational contract is broken; the queer and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a jolt that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable, ways” (6).¹² In the vignette, “The Cradleland,” such an understanding of “deviantly gendered” identities offers a third and, for this paper, final account of gay/queer identities navigating spaces of (un)belonging. While Tomás may live with the destructive threat of AIDS, this story, like “We Came All the Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?,” presents an “I,” a lesbian narrator, who frames the narrative and transgresses the social, narrative, and gendered boundaries that undermine visions of relationality. “Cradleland” is a story that might not explicitly engage with transnational diasporic subjects, but nonetheless serves as a narrative of multiple “migrations” between and around queer spaces and gay identities. In particular, the story’s nonlinear temporality and interruptions in the form of the narrator’s sexual encounters delineate how the role of the writer enforces queer (un)belonging or what Muñoz claims is a “broken” representational contract.

Various male characters thus far have expressed a desire to belong in either a heteronormative order or to a national, patriarchal discourse of identity. However, these desires or orders of belonging are exposed and rejected by characters like drag queens and Tomás, the narrator’s gay friend who is suffering from AIDS. Here, various queer identities in contact serve as resistance to both heteronormativity and normative markers of gendered identity; for example, in describing her experience of a drag show, the narrator claims, “[W]hile the queens mouthed lyrics, big beefy guys stepped up and, with what I was sure were sticky fingers, curled dollar bills into make-believe cleavages, immaculately manicured hands, hip-high boots, hot pants waistbands—whatever. The ritual was understood and expected, and Tomás and I were amazed. We looked on, transfixed...” (35). By juxtaposing the presence of “big beefy guys” with performance of “queens,” the narrator facilitates an undoing of gender differences. In the “understood and expected” “ritual,” the narrator not only emphasizes that the performativity of gender is in flux and in constant (re)negotiation, but that it also creates a relationality between the performing artist and his/her audience, between his/her material body and its ability to transgress fixed notions that inform gender dynamics.

The text, furthermore, creates a sympathetic relationship between Tomás’ mother, presumably heterosexual, and her son, creating an “ideal unrooted relation” (763).¹³ According to Johanna Garvey, this “ideal unrooted relation is similar to Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, in which... ‘each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other’” (32). Thus, when Tomás falls drastically ill as a consequence of AIDS, his mother visits him and attends to his needs; the narrator recounts, “‘*Pues llevamos en el alma cicatrices/imposibles de borrar*’, Virginia sings to the socks... ‘What can I tell you?’ she says to me, then shrugs again” (40). Virginia’s song and response to the narrator’s question, “How is [Tomás]?”, highlights a different form of performativity that expresses a shared grieving and places opposing statuses in contact, both gay and straight, the dying and the melancholic. The hands submerged in the sink symbolize her immersion into a simultaneously shared and isolating experience of AIDS. Her body and words, unable to heal Tomás, serve to perform a ritual that is distinct from the drag show: it is a ritual that on a linguistic and emotional level invites the reader to understand the type of violence Tomás experiences.

Writing about these moments of (un)belonging in which the only seemingly antagonistic force that threatens to subvert gay/queer experiences is the AIDS virus, Obejas' narrator presents her own troubled narrative about sexual intimacy alongside Tomás' story. The narrator states, "[W]e're a relatively new relationship—just a couple of weeks—and we're still getting some of the details out of the way, like HIV status, the names of each other's brothers and sisters, and where we went to college. So Sylvia told me about the last time she'd had unsafe sex...Sylvia's story depressed me terribly, even though she'd been tested and was negative, because it was essentially my roommate, Tomás's, story, and he was dying" (32). Unlike Rogelio and Drake's talk about AIDS, the narrator and Sylvia not only openly discuss their "HIV status," but also place it within a commonplace conversation about "brothers and sisters...college." This attitude to bring HIV/AIDS into a discursive visibility and engage with its violent ramifications creates a narrative space that undoes the widespread fear of the disease and brings traditionally marginalized bodies to the forefront. Moreover, that the narrator juxtaposes Tomás's story with Sylvia's story situates the text itself as a multiple site of shared differences. It is through these shared stories where marginal bodies arrive at representation and the monolithic forms of representation created by dominant, oppressive forces are broken.

Although this story serves to highlight multiple accounts and moments of queer (un)belonging, one cannot deny the enacted and suppressed forms of violence directed at and between gay bodies. Tomás's decaying body is actively portrayed by the narrator, "[W]hen Tomás first got sick, he got what seemed like every opportunistic disease associated with AIDS: tiny zits that became huge rashes, major thrush, syphilis...pneumonia, and really bad periodontal infections" (38). This embodiment of a different queer (un)belonging (dis)places Tomás' body within an immunological borderless extreme: his defenses cannot keep diseases from invading his body. The erasure of an internal recognition between his body's defenses and the threatening force will be, sadly, his complete undoing. However, the physical deterioration he experiences causes him to treat his body as a form of expression, similar to the drag queens: "I need to shave off my hair, to wear a huge, powdered periwig. I want to be buried in something with ruffles, laces, and ribbons" (38). By desiring to shave his hair and substitute it with a "periwig," we witness not only Tomás's refusal to succumb to the disease's violent attack on his body, but also to mark his body as an unscripted, blank canvas: a canvas with the ability to represent multiple self-constructions that reclaim his presence. He determinately refuses to be undone by AIDS and thus transgresses the disease's violent control.

In order for Tomás to reclaim an empowered self, it is also necessary that he reject how a particular event or signifier, AIDS, determines his identity. His clothing, for example, comes to symbolize "the creation of a new mythos," an active construction of self that is integral and inclusive, performing alternative forms of meaning making (80). The "periwig," "ruffles, laces, and ribbons" are styles of excess that reinvent the way Tomás sees himself. In fact, by desiring to be dressed in marginal fabric pieces (ruffles and ribbons), Tomás finds himself manipulating the boundaries of gendered possibilities. The new mythos manifest in the ways Tomás' dress accounts for a multidimensional representation of self that shifts away from oppressive categories of identification. Similarly, in her discussion of la nueva mestiza consciousness, Anzaldúa advocates for the destabilization of physical and psychic boundaries that demarcate otherness. She claims that borders are dividing lines generating psychic, physical, and spiritual spaces, borderlands, where things are in constant transition. She writes, "[T]he prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead..." (3) Anzaldúa's radical politics position

racial, “the mulato,” and sexual categories, “the queer,” as analogous to one another in their experience of oppression, “*los atravesados*.” However, far from engaging in a discourse of Eurocentric cosmopolitanism that ignores the specific sociocultural experiences of different minoritarian groups, Anzaldúa disperses terms that carry multiple meanings. And much like Tomás has been rendered a pathology, the mongrel, queer, and perverse are subjects that are politically constructed by imperialist projects seeking to delegitimize their existence. It is necessary as both Anzaldúa illustrates and Tomás showcases in his desire to embody the feminine vis-à-vis drag to identify the intersectional oppressions of sexism and racism that marginalize non-normative communities. In the claiming of groups who have been outcast by border politics, we begin the groundwork for a pluralistic reading of oppression.

Arriving to a New Understanding of Belonging

Although each individual vignette in *We came all the way from Cuba...* is an independent manifestation of the tensions and complexities surrounding both diasporic subjects and gay identities, they all form part of a collection and thus speak about collective identities in relation to each other. In the transitory narratives of “Above All, A Family Man,” and “The Cradleland,” gay men must navigate the various crossroads of their lives, challenging reductive narratives of sexuality while simultaneously establishing a presence that is threatened by an incurable disease. Whereas in “We Came All The Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?” queer (un)belonging disrupts romanticized notions of belonging and brings into violent contact diasporic individuals trying to ground themselves in new homelands. Reading these stories within the framework of queer (un)belonging and Anzaldúa’s meditation on *nepantla* and *conocimiento* makes manifest how identities in flux or at the intersections of psychic and spatial boundaries constantly critique and are negotiated by various dominant forces that inform their lives. They embrace in uneasy ways the depravity of their queerness/otherness and negotiate new ways of understanding their identity as subjects navigating spaces of (un)belonging. Indeed, what both queer (un)belonging and *mestiza* consciousness embrace are the states of disorientation that queer subjects embody or inhabit that lead to moments of relationality. Their non-normative desires are always already in conflict with a heteronormative social order that marginalizes queer and diasporic bodies, rendering them invisible. Thus, Obejas’ book, like Gopinath states at the beginning of the article, “gives us a mode of reading, a methodology that allows us to ‘see’ both subjectivity and the workings of power differently” (636). The text functions as a witness to the multiplicity of movements that place power and differences in conversation with one another, while subverting the pretense that “deviant” identities, bodies, spaces, and temporalities do not exist.

Endnotes

¹ I will use a shortened title of Obejas’ text for the sake of differentiating between the title of the book and the title of the individual short story that is named after the collection.

² Rogers Burbaker. “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora.” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28.1 (2005). Brubaker’s article traces the ways in which the term “diaspora” has been used and transformed semantically, conceptually and between the disciplines. I used his article as a point of departure in order to validate my use of “queer diaspora” and “queer (un)belonging.”

³According to Brubaker, keeping the term “diaspora” within this framework allows us to view how various global movements have been defined or labeled as “diaspora.”

⁴ Garvey’s framework is essential to my reading of Obejas’ novel because it engages diasporic identities-in-formation within a relational framework. Instead of reading traditionally marginalized identities as existing in a binary tension with dominant forms of thought, I sought to read them in relationship with one other and what this, in turn, revealed about the text.

⁵ Gopinath’s use of the term “disorientation” is important to my interpretation of violence and the way violence represents a shift away from oppressive modes of thinking. My paper further elaborates how disorientation positions the subject in the neplanta state of consciousness raising.

⁷ Path of conocimiento is a term Anzaldúa developed across various publications.

⁸ McRuer’s book is an account on the queer renaissance that arose during important cultural movements such as the Chicano movement.

⁹ Translation: to find power and subversion within that violence that is mediated by the presence of diasporic subjectivities, in constant movement, that refuse to be fixed in a monolithic identity.

¹⁰ Cooper’s essay, “Queering the Family: Achy Obejas’s “We Came All the Way from Cuba...” originally takes the Freudian term used to describe the child’s fantasy of belonging to a higher social family and rereads it in Obejas’s story. According to Cooper, the father’s unconventional views of his daughter and his status as refugee help queer the family romance he imagines as a Cuban exile trying to give his daughter a better future.

¹¹ *Borderlands*, 76.

¹² *Disidentifications* examines the ways performance and artists use disidentification as a process by which the artist reformulates and negotiates his/her minority status in dominant discourse; in other words, how disidentification functions as an act of resistance.

¹³ Garvey’s use of the phrase “ideal unrooted relation” was meant to describe how tensions reveal a difference in meaning that may position the subjects/objects in conflict within an ideal account of relationality.

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