La cuentista cubana: Healing Powers of the Female Storyteller in Chantel Acevedo's *Love and Ghost Letters* and *The Distant Marvels*.

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The 1990s Cuban-American boom marked a significant and noteworthy body of literature produced by a diverse group of writers, including a formidable list of female authors. Literary critics have examined and published ground-breaking insights on the works of Cristina García, Achy Obejas, Margarita Engle, and others. Thirty years later, another collection of writers has been making waves in this Cuban-American and Latino/a/x space. As Iraida H. López and Eliana Rivero suggest in their edited compilation of short stories and selections, *Let's Hear Their Voices*, this latest wave of Cuban-American writers pertains to a second generation that was born between the 1960s and the mid-1980s (López and Rivera xii). These American-Born Cuban (ABCs) or "AmeriCuban" writers share a unique set of characteristics which set them apart from their predecessors in such a way that begs for an analysis and a close reading of their artistic production. Authors such as Ana Menéndez, Richard Blanco, Vanessa Garcia, and Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés gravitate toward the very threshold of what hybridity signifies and harness the direct and indirect experiences of memory and family storytelling. As López states, these writers "…tend to be critical of their ancestors for putting politics ahead of family relations, active ties with the motherland" and focus more on recent arrivals from Cuba or simply the pressures of quotidian life (López and Rivera xxiv). One such author who falls squarely into this group is Chantel Acevedo. Born in Miami to Cuban parents and winner of the Latino International Book Award in 2005, Acevedo has published a variety of fictional works for both adult and young adult (YA) readers. She is currently an associate professor of English and the director of the MFA program at the University of Miami. The aim of this article is to contribute to the aforementioned discussions of the latest generation of Cuban-American female writers by exploring two of Acevedo's novels, *Love and Ghost Letters* (2005) and *The Distant Marvels* (2015). It is my hope to highlight the Cuban-American condition of the new millennium found in Acevedo's work along with the interplay of memory, healing, and storytelling from the female perspective.

Theoretical Framework

In his article, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall suggests a two-prong approach to studying diasporic identity. The first proposes viewing cultural identity as one shared culture, a sort of "collective 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves,' which people with a shared history or ancestry hold in common" (Hall 393). The second prong of his proposal argues that there are "points of similarity" in cultural identity that coexist with "points of deep and significant difference…which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become.' We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity,' without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness'" (Hall 394).

Although Hall is not speaking specifically of the Cuban-American diasporic identity, his observations can be applied to this group's particular situation. Reading the Cuban diaspora from Hall's first definition, we can assume that there is an unbroken connection, both inside and outside a historical and political context, for Cuban exiles and their subsequent generations living in the

United States. This might suggest a lack of fragmentation of memory and variation in exilic experiences with Cuban family members, but in reality, his second prong emphasizes and recognizes that identity can be multiple and fragmented and engages difference instead of denying or excluding it.

In his autobiographical text, *Cuba on my Mind: Journeys to a Severed Nation*, Román de la Campa introduces a reading of his personal experience as a Cuban-American who belongs to what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls the "one-and-a-half" generation. In addition, he offers his expertise and experience to analyze the dense framework that includes Cuban communities on and off the island. After moving to the United States as a young teenager (via the Peter Pan program), de la Campa remembers his constant reevaluation of his national identity. He explains, "During these years my sense of national identity—a construct always bound by language and culture--came under constant adjustment, beginning with the experience of Americanization" (Román de la Campa 65). While his continual search for his national identity played out, de la Campa tells of the Cuban-American idealization of the country they had left behind. He explains, "We could only imagine – or remember, from the context of our refugee status – a Cuba that was urban, middle-class, filled with trained professionals, and without any racial discrimination" (Román de la Campa 64). Here, de la Campa acknowledges the Cuban exile's wish to "remember" specific details of their homeland that were clearly not true representations of Cuban society before the Revolution. He therefore juxtaposes the words "remember" and "imagined" in the same sentence to question the legitimacy of what many Cuban exiles actually remembered about Cuba.

In *Cuban Writers on and off the Island: Contemporary Narrative Fiction*, Pamela Maria Smorkaloff argues that memory is a significant factor in both Cuban and Cuban-American literature. However, many Cuban-American writers seem to struggle specifically with this challenging matter. She states:

> Memory, competing visions and versions of events in the narration of a nation, and the tensions between home and world inform all Cuban literature of this century, but the off-island production of contemporary Cuban-American writers, in addition to such tensions, is much more weighted by memory, and the challenge of finding narrative strategies for engaging with the past without falling into the trap of idealizing it. (Smorkaloff 8)

Smorkaloff includes off-island Cuban writers within the strictly "Cuban" literary tradition. She contends that in many cases their works approach particular themes or dilemmas from a different angle. The concept of memory, she proposes, is one of the distinguishing themes of contemporary Cuban-American writers. This recalls Andrea O'Reilly Herrera's explanation of Cuba becoming a kind of "real-and-imagined" space. O'Reilly Herrera proposes that Cuban exiles seek the image of a lost and fragmented world that is partially remembered through nostalgia or reconstructed by those who either have never been to Cuba or were too young to remember when they left. It appears that this phenomenon is quite applicable when speaking about a particular topic Cuban-American writers explore in many of their characters: the obsession with and retelling of family history. Children of Cuban exiles tend to seek out their family's past by asking older relatives. For them, memories of Cuba and their relationship with the island are often based on the stories and experiences described by their parents and grandparents.

The relationship between individual and collective memory has been amply studied. In his book, *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs argues that individual memory is a part of group

memory, "since each impression and each fact, even if it apparently concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent that one has thought it over – to the extent that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from the social milieu" (Halbwachs 53). Halbwachs suggests that one of the social frameworks of memory is the family. He says:

> It is true that all sorts of ideas can call to mind recollections of our family. In fact, from the moment that the family is the group within which we pass the major part of our life, family thoughts become ingredients of most of our thoughts. Our kin communicate to us our first notions about people and things. (Halbwachs 61)

In other words, Halbwachs acknowledges the close relationship that individual memory and the family share. He emphasizes the importance of the family in forming personal memories by reminding us that the family helps define and determine our thoughts and recollections of the past. Cuban-Americans are particularly susceptible to this, because, for the younger generations, the family holds the key to memories of things past. Children of Cuban exiles struggle to remember what happened to their family on the island and often must re-create, re-imagine, and re-claim their family's past with fragments that are frequently distorted, consciously or unconsciously.

In a similar fashion, Marianne Hirsch considers how family is often a multifaceted construction that is subject to conflicting historical scripts. She suggests that photography is a "prism through which to study the postmodern space of cultural memory composed of leftovers, debris, single items that are left to be collected and assembled in many ways, to tell a variety of stories, from a variety of often competing perspectives" (Hirsch 13). Much of her study addresses the complex situation of the survivors of the Holocaust. However, Hirsch coins the term "postmemory" as a particular form of memory that is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (Hirsch 22). She states further:

> Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (Hirsch 22)

Hirsch's argument advocates a re-examination of the definition of memory and how it relates to the family structure. By suggesting that visual images from photography capture that which no longer exists, she offers an explanation of a particular memory that is driven by external narratives and imagination. Applying the concept of postmemory to the Cuban-American condition can shed some light on how children of Cuban exiles might process and subsequently recall their family history. In other words, stories or narratives that have been passed down by previous generations can become instilled as memories or "postmemories" in younger Cuban-Americans. Thus, the role of storytelling is an influential method of creating, sharing, and cataloging family history on and off the island. Moreover, the prominence and overall impact of the female storyteller within Cuban-American literature and artistic production should not be overlooked or ignored.

The study of the female storyteller is not a new literary approach. Moreover, there have been numerous readings on female historical narratives challenging the status quo and giving voice to underrepresented groups, such as the Latino/a/x community. In her latest book, *Healing Memories: Puerto Rican Women's Literature in the United States*, Elizabeth García takes a profound dive into the silenced experiences of Puerto Rican authors in the US and suggests that many of them create "medicinal histories" to [re]claim memory and cultural history and to heal the trauma of being excluded from more traditional narratives (García 12). García contends that the female storytellers and the art of storytelling can allow for the opportunity of "self-healing" by including their own bodily and historical experiences as part of their narrative. This more personal and "feminine" version of history or *herstory* "places women at the center of their own healing" (12). Although García focuses on the particular dilemma for Puerto Rican-Americans (or Nuyoricans), her interdisciplinary investigation can easily be applied to Cuban-American ethnic women writers and their fictional counterparts and overall literary production.

Chantel Acevedo and The Female Storyteller

The first and the one-and-a-half generations of Cuban-American literary production were largely dominated by male writers, such as Gustavo Pérez Firmat and Pablo Medina, although there were some exceptions like Ruth Behar and Carolina Hospital. Women writers and their female protagonists, however, take center stage in this group of second generation Cuban-American ethnic writers and "…address an array of topics touching on the female experience such as intimate relationships, the need for self-definition, self-worth, and self-reliance, and the struggles to get ahead in a patriarchal and racist society" (López, xxv). These writers follow in the footsteps of their one-and-a-half generation female predecessors, like Cristina García and Achy Obejas, but are even more dependent on postmemory or "enclaves of memory" as coined by oral historian Miren Llona (Llona 80). Tapping into primarily indirect forms of remembering and storytelling, this generation of female authors marks its uniqueness by constructing narratives that draw not only from public spheres, but also from the private and personal arena.

Born off the island, Acevedo's upbringing in southern Florida deeply influenced her childhood and her perspective of recounting family history. She states, "Having grown up in Miami, surrounded by Cubans, the power of the stories told by all of those friends and relatives has had an immeasurable effect on my life, and my sense of myself as a Cuban-American" (Acevedo 297). In a 2015 interview, the novelist clarifies that her connection with Cuba was formed from shared family memories or what might be labeled as postmemories: "Whatever we did, ate, said, how we behaved, all drew comparisons to Cuba" (Acevedo 297). Furthermore, these storytellers, primarily her maternal grandmother, would share the trials and tribulations of their extended Cuban family and the struggles of living in a male-dominated society, as seen from the female perspective.

In what follows, I set forth an analysis of two novels from Acevedo, focusing on the fictional representations of the female storyteller as a driving force to reclaim family histories and to heal past traumas. Due to the author's own personal experiences of her grandmother's storytelling, I suggest that Acevedo not only creates literature that remembers and retells history from the female perspective, but also includes semi-autobiographical references of her own hybrid Cuban-American identity. Moreover, this beautiful and haunting artistic expression encourages the reader to reflect on the curious, but constant negotiation of memory, family history, and the role of the storyteller within the Cuban diaspora.

Love and Ghost Letters

Set in Miami and Cuba and encompassing almost fifty years of the island's history, Acevedo's first novel, published in 2005, is a magical tale of the lives of the Navarro and Concepción families. To begin, we must review the structure of this narrative. The novel tells the story of Josefina Navarro, the protagonist, and her tumultuous relationship with her father, Sergeant Antonio Navarro, and her husband, Lorenzo Concepción. The story is divided into four parts or books which span from 1933 to 1969 and cover some of Cuba's most important historical events during the 20th century, including the Cuban Revolution. This enchanting love story studies socioeconomic class, Cuban politics, state violence, and mysticism. Imbedded throughout the novel are what Josefina believes are Antonio's "ghosts letters" or letters written by her deceased father. In reality, these letters are written by her father who has escaped to Miami after a violent riot in El Cotorro. Through these correspondences, Josefina begins to understand more about his childhood and her family history. Although the central storyline revolves around Josefina, Lorenzo, and Antonio, I believe that there is a significant character who is easily overlooked: Josefina's nursemaid and companion, Regla. Given that Josefina's mother, Ana, died during childbirth, Regla becomes the default caretaker and glue which keeps the family together. Regla might be considered an unlikely mother figure, especially when comparing her socioeconomic class to that of Josefina's, however she not only flourishes in the role but also personifies García's approach and understanding of the underrepresented healer and storyteller.

In one of Raúl Rosales Herrera's latest articles, entitled "Mariel in Contemporary Cuban-American Writing: The Power of Diasporic Postmemory," he examines contemporary second-generation, US-based, anglophone writers who arrived during or were influenced by the 1980 Cuban Mariel exodus. Focusing on texts from women authors, including Chantel Acevedo, Rosales Herrera also argues that Acevedo exercises postmemory "not only to confront the thwarted Mariel memories that have been passed down in familial and public domains, but also to validate and firmly situate a 're-membered' Mariel in the Cuban-American diasporic trajectory" (Herrera 2). In other words, these female writers seek to uphold their current diasporic identity by confronting, questioning, and confirming inherited memories that have been passed down through generations by engendering fictional accounts of intimate family history. In *Love and Ghost Letters*, Regla is arguably a secondary character who appears throughout the novel, but with limited development and depth. The readers know that she is black and practices Santeria, but are unaware of her family background, including her last name. As a maid, she has been assigned to care for the Navarro house in Havana, which stands as a clear status and socioeconomic symbol in the wealthy neighborhood of Vedado during the 1930s and 1940s. The novel opens with force as Regla predicts infant Josefina's future, proclaiming that "the child was to be unhappy and tormented all her life" (Acevedo *Love* 3). This comes as a shock to Antonio, who seems to acknowledge the power that Regla holds over his daughter and his family's future. As a sergeant in Havana's police force, he "was wary of the divinations of his black servant and began the habit of pressing his lips together with his fingers whenever the superstitious maid spoke of prophecy" (Acevedo *Love* 3).

As Josefina's caretaker and later her best female friend and companion, Regla comforts her adopted daughter by telling stories of "saints and the sacrifices made to them" (Acevedo *Love* 3). Years later, Josefina recalls Regla's tales, yet somehow confuses these stories in daydreams and visions where her birthmother would appear:

> In these dreams she always saw a beautiful woman on her knees in the corner of the room, praying through the noise of the sacrificial killing. She liked to imagine the lively figure was her mother, though Josefina had only seen the portrait her father kept hidden in his closet (Acevedo *Love* 4).

Without Antonio's blessing, Josefina moves to El Cotorro with her husband and quickly realizes that Regla's prediction is right: Lorenzo cannot provide the luxuries that Josefina is used to in Vedado. Moreover, Lorenzo is rarely home due to constantly searching for work and fraternizing with other women. During this turbulent time, Josefina begins her correspondence with Regla via the post: "Josefina wrote to Regla every day and received letters just as often, but only from the nursemaid. […] She missed Regla as much as any daughter would long for her mother" (Acevedo *Love* 29). This intimate correspondence, between Regla and Josefina, becomes the common thread that weaves throughout the entire novel. In addition, Antonio ceases all communication with his daughter, in order to punish her, and thus is completely dependent on Regla's knowledge of the extended family, such as the dates of birth of Josefina's children or the description of her home in El Cotorro (Acevedo *Love* 35).

During Regla's final visit with Josefina, the readers bear witness to the power and transformation of the nursemaid's influence: "Regla's own hands trembled with age, and as they lifted Josefina's fingertips into view, an inch from her eyes, Regla began to cry. The white flecks that had inflicted bad fortune on Josefina as a child were gone" (Acevedo *Love* 287). The bittersweet ending of *Love and Ghost Letters* rests on the hope of a continued healing for the female characters in the novel and a recovered family history via their voices and writing. Regla passes and Josefina's oldest daughter, Soledad, moves to Miami to marry a Cuban-American banker. Reminiscent of Celia in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, Josefina begins to share her family history with her daughter and granddaughter, Ashley: "Josefina also wrote a four-page letter to her daughter, her words overwrought, thinking about the day those letters, too, might stop coming" (Acevedo *Love* 308).

As Elizabeth García contends, the process of storytelling or documenting family history via narrative form can serve as a healing experience for many women writers and their fictional characters. This is especially the case for women of color, like Regla. Although Regla's adopted family represents the aristocratic, and upper-level socioeconomic class in Cuba, her healing powers of storytelling still hold great significance. Her predictions of Josefina unhappiness in adulthood come true, yet more importantly, it is her desire to heal her "daughter's" pain that reigns supreme. By supporting Josefina and encouraging her to remember her family history, via oral and written (letters) storytelling, Regla identifies and relinquishes the trauma in her adopted daughter's life, which largely stems from Antonio's absence (due to his exile in Miami) and Lorenzo's infidelity.

The Distant Marvels

Chantel Acevedo published her third novel for adults, *The Distant Marvels*, in 2015. Divided into three parts and set in 1963 Cuba during Hurricane Flora, this epic novel is a family saga that spans generations. The story focuses on the protagonist, María Sirena, a retired cigar factory lector who recounts her childhood during Cuba's Third War of Independence. Almost the entire novel takes place inside Cuba's oldest private residence, Casa Velázquez, as the protagonist waits out the storm by entertaining six other elderly women with her family story. Acevedo

dedicates *The Distant Marvels* to her mother and her grandmother, but also to her "other mothers" which include her madrina, her "Titi," and her mother-in-law (Acevedo *Distant Marvels* 291). Fundamentally, this novel is the quintessential example of a female protagonist who self-heals and reclaims her family history via the art of storytelling.

One of the most significant leitmotivs throughout *The Distant Marvels* is the detrimental and traumatic effect of violence. Like *Love and Ghost Letters*, much of this pain and loss is directly and indirectly associated with the male characters who appear within the protagonist's tales. Although there are some exceptions, such as José Martí, these men are the culprits of the violence experienced by the female characters, including María Sirena. At the microlevel, the two most prominent examples are María Sirena's own father, Agustín Alonso, and the Spanish captain, Aldo Alarcón. Both vying for love and attention, these two men repeatedly demonstrate their vicious tendencies, especially towards María Sirena and her mother, Lulu. Aldo rapes Lulu and imprisons her with her daughter, "My mother and I spent the next fourteen years at the inn, prisoners of Aldo Alarcón" (Acevedo *Distant Marvels* 70). Likewise, Agustín is physically abusive to his wife and daughter throughout the novel: "'Papá, I can explain,' I began, but my father was upon me shaking me hard so hard that my brain rattled in my skull and my mother was yelling at him to stop" (Acevedo *Distant Marvels* 124). At the macrolevel, the protagonist tells of her trials and tribulations, shared with her mother, during Cuba's Third War of Independence. During this bloody conflict, María Sirena is a first-hand witness to death and destruction, mainly performed by men from both the Spanish army and the Cuban rebels. Agustín joins the fight and leaves his wife and daughter in a hidden *tallér* where other Cuban women struggle to support the male fighters. Agustín's abandonment of both his wife and daughter is traumatic and scarring, "Lulu ran after him, and I followed. […] Before I knew it, Lulu was sitting on the ground and weeping openly" (Acevedo *Distant Marvels* 141). Moreover, toward the end of the war and after the death of Agustín, María Sirena and Lulu are caught, held, and tortured by male soldiers in a reconcentration camp in La Cuchilla.

The structure of the novel is meaningful as the reader is transported through time and space via María Sirena's storytelling. As the group of Cuban women wait out the hurricane within the walls of Casa Velázquez, they too become active listeners and the de facto support system, Dulce says, "Tell your story, María Sirena, Go on" (Acevedo *Distant Marvels* 160). Acevedo's protagonist compares her ability to remember history and, more importantly, guarantee accuracy, "Like a good tyrant, Agustín was a storyteller, so that he remembered things in great detail, and what he didn't remember, he made up. None of this may be true. But I recall it all with precision, as if I'd lived it" (Acevedo *Distant Marvels* 50-51). Returning to "medicinal histories," we can make a clear correlation between Acevedo's character and what García highlights as being paramount in women's ability to self-heal and claim agency. As a professional lector for most of her life, María Sirena included her own personal stories, yet she would deny any ownership to them, "I would say, 'Now, I'd like to read a story from a not-so-famous writer. Perhaps you've heard of—' then I'd give a false name, 'Carla Carvajál.' […] Then I'd pretend to read from this so-called Carla Carvajál, but what I was really doing was telling my own stories, true stories, about my life" (Acevedo *Distant Marvels* 45). Yet, I believe that the opportunity to be surrounded by a group of women in Casa Velázquez motivates María Sirena to finally acknowledge authorship and to heal past injuries. In addition, this access of the non-traditional and "alternative sources of history" grants the readers a fundamental and unique viewpoint which we might apply to Cuban-American ethnic women writers in a more global manner (García 18). During the climax of the novel, the protagonist reveals her most painful secret: during her imprisonment at La Cuchilla, she

becomes pregnant and unknowingly gives her child, Mayito, away for adoption: "Like a slave, I sold him [Mayito]" (Acevedo *Distant Marvels* 274). She has carried this burden for decades, but with the assistance and encouragement of these women, María Sirena is able to find some peace and acceptance before her eventual death.

Returning to López, we can underscore this new emergence of the female voice within a more intimate setting in Cuban-American literary production. In *The Distant Marvels*, this voice is crucial to expose, via female agency and storytelling, how patriarchal violence has affected the gendered body and psyche. Moreover, Hirsch underscores that this experience can be considered part of a mourning process, a fundamental component of healing: "For survivors who have been separated and exiled from a ravaged world, memory is necessarily an act not only of recall but also of mourning, mourning often tempered by anger, rage, and despair" (Hirsch 243). In the case of María Sirena, her haunting past is limiting and unyielding and thus she must "re-member, to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace, and to repair" (Hirsch 243). Furthermore, I believe that Acevedo's own experience with her grandmother's storytelling has highlighted the role of postmemory which has filtered down into her own writing. Acevedo creates a literature that lifts the voices that have been historically and traditionally underrepresented by emphasizing relationships between her fictional female characters and their enclaves of memory.

Conclusion

As I have noted, Acevedo attempts to the break boundaries that have encapsulated many earlier Cuban-American women writers. In her 2015 interview, she admits, "The complexity these days comes not from living on the hyphen, but from identifying as a Cuban when the Cuba-that-was has changed so much. […] What will it mean to call oneself an 'exile' when there is nowhere to be exiled from?" (Acevedo 299). Ruth Behar's and Lucia M. Suarez's latest work might clarify the author's conundrum, as they speak to a "Post-Bridges" sentiment for many diasporic Cubans (Behar and Suarez 6). Behar reminds us that "[t]o be Cuban is to understand that the island travels with you" and that Cuba has become portable (Behar 7). I believe that Acevedo cannot completely escape the socio-political and literary bonds that may categorize her but is successful in finding new areas of exploration and artistic expression within the Cuban-American literary space. With their unique structures and original plots, *Love and Ghost Letters* and *The Distant Marvels* harness the direct and indirect experiences of memory and family storytelling. In addition, the author's own personal experiences of the female storyteller allow for the inclusion of semi-autobiographical references that ask the reader to consider the larger context of Cuban-American art and literature.

In both *Love and Ghost Letters* and *The Distant Marvels*, Acevedo develops dynamic yet flawed female characters who express the desire to heal from past traumas. As I underline above, these injuries mainly stem from or have been inflicted by male counterparts, such as their fathers or their partners. By using the art of storytelling and the support and bonding of fellow women, these female protagonists employ their own bodily and historical experiences to offer a non-traditional and intimate version of history, or *herstory*, which situations them at the center of their own healing. As López acknowledges in *Impossible Returns*, female writers (and by extension, female fictional characters) "offer a counterbalance to a long record of exclusion from interpretive frameworks" (López 169).

In sum, it is my hope that this article might add to burgeoning body of literary analysis that shines a light on the latest characteristics of the Cuban-American cannon. As Acevedo continues

to contribute to this collection of unique narrative exploration, I firmly believe that her writing will deserve more in-depth readings and wider overall recognition.

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