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Hybridizing History, Spirituality and Genre in the Works of Lucha Corpi, Julia Alvarez and Achy Obejas

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Hybridizing History, Spirituality and Genre in the Works of Lucha Corpi, Julia Alvarez and Achy Obejas

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This project considers the work of three Latina authors who despite their different cultural backgrounds and the different narrative genres they employ; all create hybrid spaces within which to examine their experiences as hyphenated individuals. For this study, I focus on two characteristics of the hybridity concept. The first is the fluid, state of process, reflected by the fusion of two categories that create a third category which wavers between the two original ones. The second characteristic is the disruption of authority that hybrid concepts achieve when they challenge canonical and mainstream representations. I cross-culturally examine the way in which Lucha Corpi, Julia Alvarez and Achy Obejas have incorporated historical moments into their narratives by which they examine national as well as individual histories. I assess the way in which all three authors foreground spirituality in their novels turning it into a female centered activist space. Finally, I consider how Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas have had to create hybrid genres in order to accommodate the themes they deal with in their work.

To Papito and Mamita—
who could not be here to see the end.

Table of Contents

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Introduction

This study developed initially out of an interest to study the way Latina writers cross-culturally articulated through their novels their bi-cultural and bilingual experiences in the U.S. Despite being one of the most discussed Latina writers, I was interested in incorporating the work of Dominican-American author Julia Alvarez' into my dissertation since it was her novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) that triggered my interest in Latina studies.[1] Chicana Lucha Corpi and Cuban-American Achy Obejas completed the circle of Latina writers who addressed similar themes and whose work reflected similar patterns to those of Alvarez. An added incentive to work with Lucha Corpi and Achy Obejas' novels was the limited scholarship available on their fiction which allowed for a more original discussion on the subject. In looking at the scope of these authors' work, I realized that even though the earlier poetry, short stories and novels of Lucha Corpi, Julia Alvarez, and Achy Obejas did in fact address the complexities of a hyphenated identity, the later novels reflected how their position as subjects of hybridity compelled them to expand notions of history and spirituality using the very space within which they culturally functioned. This became the focus of my dissertation: *Hybridizing History, Spirituality and Genre in the Works of Lucha Corpi, Julia Alvarez and Achy Obejas.* Through Lucha Corpi's Gloria Damasco's detective series comprised of: *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), *Cactus Blood* (1995) and *Black Widow's Wardrobe* (1999), Julia Alvarez' historical novels, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994) and *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), and Achy Obejas' Cuban-American lesbian

[1] While she is one of the more published and critically explored Latina writers, the scholarship on her work is still far from comprehensive. It is primarily comprised of articles and dissertations referring to her work in the context of other Caribbean or Latina writers. The three books exclusively on her work are: Silvio Sirias' *Julia Alvarez: a critical companion* (2001), Giovanni di Pietro's *La dominicanidad de Julia Alvarez* (2002) and most recently Kelli Lyon Johnson's *Julia Alvarez: writing a new place on the map* (2005). While there are 93 articles on her work in the MLA database, only five articles discuss her novel *In the Name of Salomé* and only one focuses exclusively on the text. The criticism on her novels is comparable to that found on Cristina García, Ana Castillo and Ana Lydia Vega, much less than that found on Gloria Anzaldúa and Rosario Ferré, and much more than that found on Lucha Corpi and Achy Obejas.

novels *Memory Mambo* (1996) and *Days of Awe* (2001), I will cross-culturally examine the way in which these three Latina writers have incorporated historical moments in their narratives to examine national as well as individual histories. I will assess the way all three authors foreground spirituality in their novels turning them into a female centered, activist space while they also weave throughout their narratives feminist issues. Finally, I will consider the way in which all three authors have had to create hybrid genres in order to accommodate the themes they deal with in their work.

I anticipate that defining the term hybridity will prove to be a nearly insurmountable task given the wide range of applications of the term—most simplistically from biological to linguistic to cultural. [2] Cultural theorists and literary critics have made use of the term from discussions on Post-colonial theory to Latin Americanist literary discussions. In addition, critics of the U.S. border school as well as those of the Postethnicity school apply the term differently in their discussions.[3] Phrases such as hyphenated, contact zones, border zones, mestizaje, third spaces and liminal spaces add to the already variable filled discussion and are often used in conjunction or interchangeably with the term hybridity.[4] Even though critics like Ana María Manzanas and Jesús Benito use the term mestizaje and hybridity interchangeably, I agree with Néstor García Canclini that the term mestizaje should be limited to issues of racial mixture and does not apply as readily as hybridity to other categories like culture, hence my decision to use the term hybridity instead of an alternative like mestizaje. While the term hybridity has itself gone through a series of permutations, having been applied biologically, linguistically, and culturally, mestizaje for the most part has retained a firm link to racial mixture despite its application to other spheres.[5]

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[2] Throughout, discussions on hybridity have elicited from some a negative response where this phenomenon has been considered a menace. Mixture soils the purity of race, culture, religion, literary studies…clearly, in our discussion; hybridity enriches and enhances the notions of genre, history and spirituality.

[3] For an excellent discussion on this issue see Amiritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt's introduction to *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity and Literature*.

[4] Discussions on hybridity are likely to highlight the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Néstor García Canclini, Homi Bhabha, Robert Young, Stuart Hall, Mary Louise Pratt and Gloria Anzaldúa among others.

Once the scope of the term hybridity expanded from discussions exclusively centered on the former British colonies to include Latin America and the United States as well, critics became uneasy over the potentially limiting way this term might homogenize the diverse historical and cultural experiences of diverse colonized peoples. [6] This was also one of my concerns when applying the term hybridity cross-culturally to the work of Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas. Would it be a disservice to their texts to look at them through a lens that might not focus on their cultural differences sufficiently? I found that it was precisely the capacity of the term hybridity to apply transnationally that made it the most suitable term to use in a discussion of these authors' texts. The inability to see past the diverse cultural backgrounds of these authors would prevent us from taking notice of the larger scope of their projects. Despite the charged discussion on hybridity, it remains productive to apply the concept of hybridity to these Latina writers' work. It is the very chameleon-like quality that sometimes challenges the validity of the term that becomes the very reason why it works so perfectly in my discussion—applying equally to a discussion of theme as well as one of genre.

A brief overview of the various debates surrounding the term, allows me to delineate the complexities of the term I engage in my discussion. One such area of debate lies with the link of the term hybridity to post-coloniality. If I apply this term to once colonized ethnic cultures within the U.S., would that mean that I am by extension considering marginalized/ethnic groups within the U.S. post-colonial? If their status as

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[5] Covering in broad strokes, mestizaje as it was put forth by social scientists during the Spanish occupation of the Americas, was seen as a process of mixture between Indians and Spaniards. This mixture produced a new race called mestizo. After this, in the 1960s and 1970s, it was used by the Chicano Movement to acknowledge their indigenous past. From the Spanish Conquest onward, mestizaje has often like hybridity been seen as a negative phenomenon. It has taken critics like Anzaldúa, shifting the focus of and owning the term mestizaje, to expand the significance of the term and equally importantly transform it into an empowering label. Nevertheless, despite these critics who have expanded the notion of mestizaje to an ethnic and cultural amalgamation, race continues to be at the center of discussions involving the term mestizaje.

[6] In addition to this concern, expanding the scope of the term hybridity has created other debates. In *The Impure Imagination: Toward a Critical Hybridity in latin American Writing*, Joshua Lund extensively discusses the use of the term hybridity as it relates to Latin American literature, politics and culture and notes some of the tensions arising among Latin Americanists who note the term hybridity was being used in discussions on Latin American studies long before Homi Bhabha popularized the term in his discussions on Post-coloniality.

colonized groups, as for example Arnold Krupat maintains of Native Americans, continues but the literature produced by these groups "performs an ideological work similar to other postcolonial literatures" (Singh and Schmidt) then do I work with them as colonial or postcolonial entities? Manzanas and Benito address this issue extensively and cite the numerous discussions on the condition of African-Americans, Native-Americans and Chicanos in their colonial position within U.S. culture.[7] The discussion on these "internal colonies," a term which has been applied to other ethnic minorities as well, mainly focuses on the racial and economic struggles these groups face within U.S. culture. Alfred Arteaga has noted that these marginalized groups have been "kept apart and continued, linguistically and spatially, on reservations, in barrios, in ghettos, as if in a final attempt to avoid their inevitable hybridization, both social and cultural" (51 as qtd by Manzanas and Benito). What of cultural groups that have come from say, the Dominican Republic and Cuba where they were considered Other in mainstream society? In their current position as hyphenated groups Latina/os are not colonized equally by their mother country and the U.S. If Latina writers are residents of the U.S as are Corpi, Alvarez, and Obejas, their privileged positions as U.S. residents might call into question their membership in the "colonized camp" with relation to the rest of the world. [8]

While I do not wish to derail the discussion at hand, it is necessary to acknowledge the complexity of the baggage that comes with using the term hybridity in any discussion.[9] For the purposes of my thesis, I will not deliberate on the coloniality or

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[7] Manzanas and Benito advocate an extension of the term postcolonial to the situations present in Latin America and North America and give a thorough list of critics that have debated the application of the term postcolonial to spaces outside the British colonies. In addition, Manzanas and Benito comprehensively discuss the different issues at stake in presenting the U.S. as both a colonial and imperialist country citing the various critics from the 1960s onward that have examined the internally hybrid condition present within the U.S.

[8] While a case could be made for Native-Americans and Chicanos that their position within the U.S. is most similar to those conditions experienced by external colonies where their lands were usurped and they were exploited, it would take a great deal of discursive maneuvering to make the same case for other hyphenated groups within the U.S. For their part, in essays and interviews, Alvarez, Corpi and Obejas have focused not on their position as U.S. residents but rather on their position as hyphenated beings within U.S. culture.

[9] One could argue that just as with terms like "border studies," and "post-coloniality," hybridity has been overused to the point of compromising its effectiveness; yet, it is this universality that allows me to use this

post-coloniality of the US ethnic cultures, as it would lead me too far astray from my topic.[10] What I will discuss are the specific conditions of Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas as ethnic writers from three different cultural backgrounds within U.S. culture. The experiences of Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas are naturally colored by their specific immigration experiences. Corpi, who was born in 1945 in Jaltipan, Mexico came when she was nineteen years old to study in Berkeley, California during the burgeoning Chicano Movement. By contrast, Alvarez was born in the U.S. in 1950 but spent only three months in the U.S. before her family decided to return to the Dominican Republic where they remained for ten years before fleeing the Trujillo dictatorship and settling in New York City permanently. Obejas who was born in 1956 in Havana, Cuba also immigrated to the U.S. with her family when she was six years old settling in Indiana until she was in her twenties at which time she moved to Chicago.

Of the three authors, Corpi's cultural background as a Chicana would most likely set her in the camp of coloniality, carrying the territorial displacement of her ancestors which permanently left Mexican-Americans as outsiders both economically and culturally. While Alvarez and Obejas are ethnic minorities within U.S. culture, within their own cultural groups they have been in privileged positions. Their particular cultural groups define the position they have vis-à-vis Anglos in the U.S. It is not the same to be a Chicana with the historical background that that entails as to be a Cuban-American who received (for many years) more opportunities and consideration than any other ethnic group within the U.S. Likewise, the relationship to the language and the culture in the U.S. changes with the age and economic situation in which these authors immigrated. It

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term while maintaining a coherent/cohesive discussion in which I am able to use a single term that applies to all the essential elements of my argument.

[10] While my focus will not be on determining if multicultural America and the marginalized groups within the U.S. should be conceived as post-colonial or would be better suited with another umbrella term, it is nevertheless important to note the discussions that are evolving around this topic. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt contend that we are faced with a new America that isn't bound by borders but rather defined by them. "Hybridity, with the hyphen as its graphic design is the representation of the border not as a separating line but as a vast contact zone" (71) Paul Jay more specifically notes the development of American Literature as an evolution in which critical attention is shifting to the "liminal margins and permeable border zones" out of which culture in America is emerging (168).

is not the same to have come as a child (Obejas), as it is to have done so as an adult (Corpi), or to have come from an upper middle class family that could afford private school (Alvarez), as opposed to a struggling student/mother (Corpi).

Whether ethnic minorities in the U.S. should be considered colonial or post-colonial is a difficult argument to resolve since there are many factors, including the relationship of the U.S. to the rest of the world, which complicates the equation considerably. It is beneficial to debate to what degree one author is more colonized than another. What is of some consequence for my discussion is that these authors, who do not readily fall into either a colonized or post-colonized camp (since this would imply that they had been colonized to begin with), work within a space of hyphenation. Standing in-between cultures (U.S. mainstream and ethnic), always influenced by both, they as a result produce a third space which I will refer to as hybrid. It is their position as Latinas within U.S. culture that has produced the generic and thematic hybrids that will be the subject of my study.

While there are countless ways in which hybridity has been defined, there are two characteristics that I have found to be particularly useful for my discussion. The first comes from García Canclini who explains that he displays a preference for the hybrid because of the way it implies a process as opposed to a state or condition. The categories that Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas merge remain in perpetual motion, in a state of "process," where there is an ongoing exchange of information that allows the third category, their hybridity, to remain in balance. For example, in Obejas' *Memory Mambo* she combines the Cuban-American and U.S. Lesbian novel to create a hybrid third Cuban-American-Lesbian novel that constantly remains in a "state of process" taking from one genre or the other as becomes necessary. Obejas borrows from both genres at times leaning toward one and then the other. As a result, *Memory Mambo* never entirely fits into the already established generic categories.

The second characteristic comes from Lund's assessment that hybridity denotes "an incessant disruption of authoritative legitimacy (e.g. pure race, pure genre, pure canon, pure reason)" (48). Alvarez, Corpi and Objeas are driven to create hybrid genres with which to re-examine conceptions of history and spirituality, in an attempt to

challenge these homogenous, often male-centered subjects. For instance, in Alvarez' *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Catholicism is fused with an earth grounded spiritualism to form a hybrid combining traditions from the patriarchally constructed institution and a more female-centered, practical spirituality that leads to social/political activism. Through this hybrid, Alvarez legitimizes an alternative form of spiritualism while she challenges the authoritative structure of the official Catholic Church. In conjunction, García Canclini and Lund's statements sum up the "kind" of hybridity I understand Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas are practicing in their work.[11]

As noted above, while Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas initially explored their hyphenated identities through their poetry, by the mid 1990s, together with a change of genre-- to the novel-- all three authors shifted the focus of their work to incorporate historical moments and characters, and elements of spirituality. They selected historically significant moments in their formation as Dominican-Americans, Mexican-Americans and Cuban-Americans respectively, from the Trujillo Dictatorship and the Chicano Civil Rights Movement to the Cuban Revolution. While the moments they select are important, the atypical perspectives the authors offer, the unusual connections they make and their ability to examine their individual queries through these moments of national history, are what make their narratives singular. More simply, Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas' approaches to spirituality are guided by an inclusive approach that incorporates elements of traditional religious institutions and unconventional alternative practices of spirituality. While the approach to spirituality differs somewhat from author to author, the constant that remains is an acceptance of the intuitive, supernatural and superstitious characteristics which have most often been linked to women, and summarily dismissed as inconsequential and frivolous.

Even though the historical moments and characters these authors highlight are important in and of themselves, it is in their function as mediators between a Dominican,

[11] Simplistically, I might add that I use hybridity as it is used in biology. Just as hybridization is important biologically because it increases the genetic variation and promotes greater growth and vigor, cross-breeding literary genres for example provides these authors with spaces within which to transform the previously existing discourses on history and spirituality. An essential difference between these two types of hybridity is the finite state achieved in biology versus the in-flux state I am trying to convey throughout my discussion.

Chicano/a, Cuban and U.S. reality, between a national and an individual history, and between what are considered "key" and marginal episodes of history (i.e. the hybridity of history) that demands closer attention. For example, a mention of the attack on Moncada Barracks by Fidel Castro and the rebels in Obejas' novel *Memory Mambo,* becomes a way of introducing the impact the Cuban Revolution has had on Cuban-American exiles in the U.S. and by extension on the Cuban-American protagonist who feels alienated from her Cuban roots.

Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas incorporate history both to inform and as a launching point for further representation. While the authors might flinch at the notion that their fictional narratives serve to instruct, for many readers, their exposure to these historical episodes/figures is limited to what they encounter in these narratives. While these novels might prove informative to individuals from say the Dominican Republic or Cuba, the target audience for these novels is clearly U.S. readers who are not as familiar with these historical periods.[12] Different from Corpi and Obejas who simply incorporate historical moments and characters into their narratives, Alvarez uses these historical figures and time periods as the basis for her novels. As a result, my discussion of Alvarez' novels requires a different approach to accommodate this divergence.

In addition to being informative, these authors use the inclusion of history as a way to comment on how historical records have been traditionally constructed (i.e. as individually composed, objective, detached narratives). They scrutinize the way in which history has been presented offering through their fiction an alternate approach. Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas also take to task the myopic lens used by historians to describe certain epochs of Dominican, Chicana/o and Cuban history questioning the events that have been omitted/overlooked in the master historical narrative. All three writers construct their novels as a compilation of stories that ultimately offer an alternate version of history not intended to substitute, but rather complete the existing one. These authors do not create a negative (neither/nor) exclusive space; rather, they intend to create a more complete

[12] Given that the novels are written in English this assumption is not much of a stretch. In her postscript to *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez herself acknowledges her readership when she states: "To Dominicans separated by language from the world I have created, I hope this book deepens North Americans' understanding of the nightmare you endured…" (324).

historical memory, a more nuanced hybrid inclusive space.[13] They recover and re-write historical figures and events into their fiction, in this way expanding canonical historical narratives. These authors do not privilege one historical narrative over another, they simply focus on alternate events and characters that have previously been glossed over or overlooked altogether. [14]

As fiction writers they are not the all knowing patriarchal scholar who carefully selects the events that are worthy of examination and presents them in a detached dispassionate tone. Theirs is a multi-vocal composition resulting from a community of voices that contribute to the narrative, though it is a female voice that ultimately acts as the organizing principle for all the disparate voices. This communal construction underscores the importance of multiple perspectives that help achieve a more balanced depiction. Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas frame their novels in such a way that the reader concludes the narrative with a more comprehensive understanding of moments in Dominican, Chicana/o and Cuban history while they are able to appreciate the subjectivity of the narrative. By offering different angles of a narrative account, they illustrate the range of perspectives that can surface even when examining a single event, while they privilege the perspectives of marginalized protagonists-- women, lesbians, Cuban-Jews, and Chicanas.

All three authors use these representations of the past as a way to explore and examine issues and questions in their own lives.[15] In part, history is used to explore

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[13] Similar to the issues that arise in discussing hyphenated identities where the focus shifts depending on the critic from a neither/nor standpoint where the individual does not fit into any of its two cultural backgrounds to a either/or mentality where the individual is capable of assuming qualities from both sub-groups.

[14] Other critics have examined the way in which traditional historical narrative has been altered by ethnic minority writers. My argument runs parallel to one such study by Bruce Simon who maintains that Maryse Condé and Bharati Mukherjee recover "silenced perspectives and re-imagine American history from the perspective of the disenfranchised" (415)—Condé like Alvarez refutes the notion that her writing is meant to correct historical record; she maintains her novel is not a historical novel, and her aim is purely to reorient the historical narrative.

[15] I maintain that what motivates these authors and their protagonists to reexamine certain figures and events in history is their desire to figure out where they stand in the present. Similarly, Emma Perez notes the impact history has on individuals by suggesting that history is "the way in which people understand themselves through a collective common past where events are chronicled and heroes are constructed" (7).

periods in their cultural past; however, this exercise also allows them to tackle issues of identity formation. In her book of essays, Alvarez admits that at the time of the publication of *In the Time of the Butterflies* she felt that she was "mapping a country" as a Dominican-American writer since she didn't have any models to follow in terms of style or subject matter. Writing about the Mirabal sisters and the Henríquez-Ureña women allowed her to become a pioneer in Dominican-American writing. She breathed life into Dominican figures that could act as role models for Latinas, and she used their stories to take up questions like: What is a patria? Who are we as a people? And of the Mirabals, What gave these women the special courage to challenge a dictatorship? For her part, as a Chicana who lived as participant and witness to the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, Corpi's revival of these historical episodes enables her to explore the ramifications and impact that the activism of the 1960s and 1970s had on Chicano/as in the present, the racial struggles as they continue in the Southwest and West coast, and the place of Chicanas' past and present within the Chicano Movement.

Finally, in the narratives of Obejas the potentially isolating position of Cuban-Americans as they negotiate their families' "Cubanness" and their more palpable "Americanness," the difficulties in reconciling a Cuban-American-Lesbian identity and the complexities of a Cuban-Jewish existence become central concerns. These themes developed in Obejas' novels can most patently be linked to her own experience as a Cuban-American Jewish-Lesbian author. In an interview with Ilan Stavans, Obejas describes how she stumbled upon her Jewish ancestry after a conversation with some women who were attending one of her readings. Like the protagonist in *Days of Awe*, Alejandra, Obejas had to do her own research on her cultural and religious ancestry because her father refused to answer her questions or even engage the topic. Alejandra's

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Likewise, In *Historia: The Literary Making of Chicana and Chicano History*, Louis Gerard Mendoza explains that his research stems in part from his understanding that "the road to [his] future is the road to [his] past" (6). Mendoza emphasizes the necessity for an "articulation and recuperation of women's voices in history and a critique of 'official' history produced by institutional historians" (14). In the same way, Nancy Hartsock who argues more cross-culturally, expanding the parameters of her discussion to include more than just Mexican-Americans, reinforces this viewpoint more inclusively when she affirms in her essay "Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Themes" that "we who have not been allowed to be subjects of history [women and minorities] are beginning to reclaim our pasts and remake our futures on our own terms" (25).

fictional journey of self-discovery mimics Obejas actual life. Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas do not distance themselves from the themes they explore in their narratives; rather, they engage some of the issues in their narratives on a personal level. For example, Obejas admits to having researched Cuban-Jewish history to understand her legacy better and declares that while she was always in contact with the Jewish community, in researching *Days of Awe*, she realized the complexity of her cultural and religious inheritance and the similarities and overlap these had with her Cuban identity.

Equally, Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas have their protagonist's look back to episodes of history as a way of better understanding themselves, their family and their culture. For example, in the course of her investigations Corpi has her protagonist Damasco, confront formative moments of Chicano/a history through which she re-evaluates the impact the Chicano Civil Rights Movement has had on Chicano/as in the narrative present and creates a space for her protagonist to examine the tension existing between her race (Chicanos or other Latino groups) and gender (white feminists). [16] On an individual scale, Damasco also uses this opportunity to reevaluate her commitment to present day political issues. Similarly, Alvarez' protagonists, Dedé and Camila, make sense of their own lives in the present day after revisiting the lives of their iconic relatives. Re-examining their sisters/mother's story, forces these protagonists to re-evaluate their lives while it reminds them of the vital role they play as guardians of their family's memory. The impact of history, though, is not reserved for the protagonists; secondary characters also experience the effects of historical events, as in Corpi's *Cactus Blood* where Carlota's pesticide ridden body represents the ills César Chávez and his fellow Chicano activists are battling.

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[16] Chicana feminism has been actively trying to find a space between the Chicano movement, and the white feminist movement occupying what Emma Perez labels a "third space" (*The Decolonial Imaginary* 1999). Due to the male dominated Chicano movement that did not give prominence to its female contributors "Chicanas felt excluded from the decision-making process by the traditional outlooks of most of the Chicano leadership. In reaction to feelings of exclusion from leadership roles, Chicanas launched their own organization of political activities. The main division between Chicanos and Chicanas stemmed from their debate over what should take priority, issues of sexual politics or capitalist economic and educational oppression. Equally problematic was Chicanas' relationship to the feminist movements at the time, since they distrusted the ethnocentric and reformist directions the women's movements had taken (Rebolledo 139).

Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas furthermore propose that by understanding the individuals who experience these historical moments, we can better understand history itself. In *Black Widow's Wardrobe,* Corpi achieves this in a roundabout manner by exploring the racial tensions and inequitable gender treatment of Malintzin Tenepal in Pre-Columbian times through her present day "incarnation" of Licia Lecuona. Through Licia we are able to appreciate the exploitation of women during the Conquest of the Americas especially when compounded by a minority racial status (i.e. indigenous, Mexican). Corpi shows that despite the chronological and geographical gap, the circumstances of these two women are not significantly different.

All three authors tie national and cultural history to the development of their protagonists. History and spirituality are not far removed philosophical concerns; rather, they have a direct impact on the everyday experiences of the protagonists. So much so that if the characters don't address these factors present in their everyday lives, their ability to function satisfactorily is impeded. In Obejas' novels for example, Alejandra and Juani's lives are fractured and unstable in part because of their tenuous relationship to their past—familial, and national. Characters like Corpi's detective, Damasco, cannot "move on" and solve a case until she embraces her spiritual gift of revelation. Once Damasco appreciates the value of the supernatural elements in her life, she becomes receptive to new forms of insight, both conventional and unconventional, increasing her likelihood of identifying key pieces of information necessary to solve a case. The protagonists of these novels explore their pasts, familial and national, passionately like detectives, certain that if they find all the clues they will be able to answer the questions in their present. Likewise, in hybridizing historical moments and characters Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas become something of detectives themselves tackling issues through their narratives as their protagonists do.

History for these authors is not a grand narrative, it is the local history tied in to the individual. Historical events are not stale, removed from human experience; there is a persistent sense of history as it "happens" to tangible characters. Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas highlight "minor" historical events and/or characters through the individual stories of the protagonists. Not only does a national history have an impact on historically

based characters in the narrative past like Salomé, the Mirabal sisters and, Malintzin Tenepal, but on historically based and purely fictional characters in the narrative present like Damasco, Dedé, Carlota and Alejandra. Conversely, Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas reflect on the impact that these historically based characters have ultimately had on the course of history. For instance, through the story of the Mirabals, Alvarez challenges a Dominican history that focuses on a dictator and "forgets" the rebels who helped unravel his dictatorship.

The key moments these authors select do not coincide with those emphasized by traditional historiography. Though these moments they have chosen might seem arbitrary, they are significant in that they are all "culture-defining"-- that is to say, the historical moments that these authors select have far reaching implications for Dominicans, Chicano/as and Cubans in general and these authors in particular. Alvarez, for example, has not chosen to go back to the pre-colonial encounter of Taínos and Spaniards; rather, she coaxes her readers to shift their perspective and consider an alternate point of origin in Dominican history such as the Trujillo Era, important in its own right. The two episodes she selects for her novels are decisive moments in Dominican history that shape the country, incidents of crisis that force the Dominican people to take action as they fight for independence and as they try to survive the Trujillo dictatorship. Corpi selects moments in history that shape Chicanas/os' presence in the U.S: the 1970 Chicano Moratorium, the 1960s Chicano Civil Rights Movement and Grape Boycott and the Pre-Columbian times of Cortez and Malintzin Tenepal. Obejas centers her first narrative on the post-Cuban Revolution fallout from the Cuban-Americans' perspective, but adds to that a Cuban national perspective in her second novel, *Days of Awe*. In this way she examines the experiences on both sides of the political and geographical line. Furthermore, she complicates *Days of Awe* with a look at Cuban Jewish history dating back to the Conquest of the Americas.

Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas choose earlier moments in history for their later novels. It is as if the more experience they have as writers, the farther back into history they feel comfortable venturing—Alvarez to 19th Century Dominican politics, Corpi to

Pre-Columbian times in Mexico, and Obejas to the formation of a Cuban-Jewish culture beginning with the Jews that came to Cuba with Christopher Columbus.

In the case of all three authors, while their initial work does explore issues relevant to their hyphenated position in the U.S., the later novels covering themes on a grander scale—historical periods and figures-- paradoxically reflect a more intimately-scaled connection to the author's lives. Each author portrays a different aspect of history: Alvarez focuses on historical figures, Corpi on historical events and Obejas on cultural history. Yet, they all use fiction/imagination to get at the spirit of history. Alvarez herself reflects on the impossibility of writing about the Mirabals except through a fictional narrative. She explains that this "epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic" could "only finally be redeemed by the imagination" (324). At the cultural level, these writers are products of a hybridized upbringing, who at the literary level create hybridized genres in order to contest at the thematic level the terms under which history and spirituality, two traditionally patriarchally dominated spheres, have been presented.

While the ethnicity of these authors dictates the historical and spiritual elements they explore in the novels, it is their gender that informs their focus, perspective and approach. All seven novels centrally locate solidarity and camaraderie among women. For instance in Alvarez' *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Minerva forms an attachment with Margarita, one of her father's illegitimate children, looking out for her, and pressing her to get an education, putting aside any personal feelings and appreciating the similar struggles this young girl has with her own. Equally important is the community of women that these authors create to guide and sustain their protagonists: from Damasco's friend Luisa who accompanies her in her investigation and ultimately takes a bullet for her, to the core of women assisting the Mirabal sisters during their underground activities and their imprisonment, to the women of Juani's extended family who support her through her journey of self-discovery.

Although the major connecting topic running through these authors' work is their thematic and stylistic hybridity, the centrality of gender in their novels also demands attention. While gender issues are colored by the cultural backgrounds of the authors (i.e. the patriarchal stereotypical machismo, the Latino perspective on the lesbian community)

it also stands as a category of its own applying to women regardless of their ethnicity. All three female authors exclusively center their novels on female protagonists, (Dedé, Camila, Damasco, Juani and Alejandra) and expand the notions of history and spirituality in part to include women's perspectives and voices, and integrate feminist issues into their narratives.

In the third novel in the series, *Black Widow's Wardrobe*, Corpi presents two instances of central Latina characters involved in relationships experiencing spousal abuse; Obejas uses Juani's and Gina's relationship to address the complexities of a lesbian relationship vis a vis a Cuban-American upbringing; and Alvarez underscores her historical narratives with commentaries on the inequality of the sexes such as Minerva Mirabal's struggle to receive a college education, achieved only by pleading and bargaining despite her intelligence and aspirations. Gender acts as a unifying element, for even though the focus of each author and the frequency with which they tackle feminist issues varies, they all reflect a commitment to emphasizing a code of sisterhood in their novels. Across cultures, gender acts as a unifying factor. Furthermore, each author shows that across generations women experience similar issues such as having their children taken forcibly away, being continuously pressured to conform by the men in the family, and handling the difficulties of engaging in a lesbian lifestyle. These authors create narrative pairings tying characters like Licia and Malintzin (*Black Widow's Wardrobe*), Salomé and Camila in (*In the Name of Salomé*), and Juani and Titi (*Memory Mambo*) by the experiences they face. Given Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas' desire to draw these gender issues into the treatment of their narratives, we could extrapolate that the narratives of Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas and the female-centered histories they create, are not bound by cultural imperatives but extend globally. This move accords with what Emma Pérez has called the internationalist scope occurring when gendering nationalist discourse (57).

Just as gender figures prominently in Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas' treatment of historical events and figures, they also link spiritual traditions to the plight of women. Transforming spirituality from a passive space to one where social change and activism are essential components has become more the norm than an anomaly among Latina writers and critics. Gloria Anzaldúa and Ana Castillo, two key voices in Latina studies,

have both devoted a considerable amount of their critical work to spirituality in Latina culture. Anzaldúa, who regards the spiritual as highly political, asserts repeatedly in her writing that spirituality can be used to effect social change, and acknowledges that her ability to resist oppressive practices stemmed in large part from her spiritual vision that connected her to the rest of the world. B. Marie Christian has observed in her analysis of spirituality as it is developed in Latina texts that there is "a persistent female network" which while it can't solve economic, social, and familial problems "can expose them and agitate for change," (226) just as figures like Camila, Dedé, and Damasco do in the novels. In addition to exploring the activist component of spirituality, Christian also notes the widespread female interconnectedness in Latina culture that is too prevalent to be ignored (209). Along these lines, Castillo has observed that "acknowledgement of the energy that exists throughout the universe subatomically generating itself and interconnecting, fusing and changing" allows us as individuals to achieve a sense of wholeness where we are more apt to contribute positively to the world (10). Interconnectedness comes to mean the connection of women to other women and the rest of the world, but also refers to the mind-body connection both employed both by Anzaldúa and Castillo. Latinas have refashioned the view of spirituality, integrating rituals of traditional religion without allowing conservative institutions to dictate the scope of their vision. Kristina Groover has observed that religion may in some ways be "the final frontier for feminists" who have tried to open the field dominated by patriarchal control (2). In Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas' novels, spirituality goes from being a male-centered abstract and remote practice to an inclusive, communal, lived expression which coexists with everyday life.

In discussing these authors' approach to spirituality, I will use the term syncretism to reflect the similar way the authors position themselves in relation to spirituality as they do to history. Syncretism often used interchangeably with hybridization is most often used in discussions relating to the fusion of traditional and alternative religious practices.[17] Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas re-examine the manner in which traditional,

[17] I will use the term syncretism in the same vein as Christian who characterizes syncretism as a broad sense of spirituality, a permeable practice involving the interplay of culture, religion and politics (xxvii).

conservative spirituality has been put forth. In considering these authors' take on spirituality, Christian's studies are especially useful and persuasive. Her comprehensive study of spirituality in Latina writers' texts focuses on different facets of spirituality across diverse national origins, generating a more profound discussion of the subject. The common link which Christian finds with a wide range of authors whose experience and treatment of Catholicism is heterogeneous, is the fact that they celebrate syncretism in their belief systems and "are not concerned with [Catholicism's] future but with its permanent presence in their history and heritage" (xxv). The same is applicable to any well established religious institution such as Judaism in Obejas' *Days of Awe*.

Alvarez, as mentioned previously, creates an earth-centered form of spirituality as seen in *In the Time of the Butterflies*; Corpi, on the other hand, throughout the series conserves Catholic practices through Damasco's mother, while she represents the supernatural through Damasco, submitting it as an equally valid belief system. In addition, significant though minor characters like Maria Baldomar, a curandera (folk healer), also place alternative forms of spirituality on equal footing with traditional forms. Finally, in *Days of A*we, Obejas uses the character of Nena, Alejandra's mother, to show the contradiction that can coexist when meshing Catholic and spiritist traditions. When Alejandra's father is dying, Nena lights candles and prays to her saints while she allows the Catholic priest to pray over her husband in his last moments. Her justification for this apparently contradictory behavior is that she will do anything to bargain for her husband's life. Obejas also presents the mixture of African religions and Jewish Cuban traditions as experienced in the Cuban countryside in the 1900s. Through these instances Obejas suggests the improbability of an unadulterated religious practice especially in a culture determined by its diverse inheritances.

In order to challenge traditional forms of history and spirituality, Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas have been compelled to modify the genres they use to accommodate their female-centered hybridized conceptions. Each author has created hybridized genres with which they re-examine history and spirituality. They combine forms of traditionally based genres to generate hybrid genres of their own making. Various literary critics have discussed Alvarez' two novels as historical fiction, testimonio, and crónica, which in turn

has generated confusion as to which label suits her texts most appropriately. Corpi's series stands somewhere between multicultural detective fiction and feminist detective fiction, both of which are themselves marginal genres that fly in the face of the original classical and hard-boiled detective traditions. Lastly, Obejas' novel *Memory Mambo* stands between the U. S. lesbian narrative and the Cuban-American novel while *Days of Awe* straddles the Cuban- American novel and the Latin American Jewish narrative.[18] These three authors create new hybridized genres transforming the literary landscape.

In a study that revolves around culturally hyphenated writers that reconceive the way history and spirituality are represented, there are a number of Latina writers of diverse cultural backgrounds that I could have chosen to include. In order to focus on the groups with the most representation in the literary field and in the interest of narrowing the scope of Latino subgroups, I focus on three hyphenated groups: Mexican-Americans, Dominican-Americans and Cuban-Americans. The only other hyphenated Latino group which is equally represented in literary discussions is the Puerto Rican-American group more commonly known as Nuyoricans. I purposely excluded this group because of the complicated colonial relationship between the island of Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland which has resulted in having nearly as many Puerto Ricans living in the United States as in Puerto Rico.[19] Not only did Puerto Ricans lose their autonomy after 1898 when Puerto Rico became a territory of the United States, but with the automatic granting of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917, Puerto Rican politics became inextricably linked to the United States'.[20] While all the countries of origin for these hyphenated

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[18] Manzanas and Benito view the magical realism genre similarly to the hybridized genres created by Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas where in similar fashion transgression is effected at the level of narrative representation (62). Part of my discussion of these women will try to determine why inside a ten year span, a shift occurred where these Latina writers found it necessary to work within hybrid spaces in their novels.

[19] According to the 1990 census approximately 2.7 million Puerto Ricans reside in the U.S. while the 2000 census showed 3.8 million Puerto Ricans residing on the Island.

[20] Despite my reluctance to include a Puerto Rican-American author because of what I consider to be complex issues which would cloud the analytical process, I could see the work of Rosario Ferré in her last three novels fitting into the parameters established in my discussion. In these novels, Puerto Rican twentieth-century history is incorporated into the narratives as the author examines the question of who gets to write history.

groups have had and continue to have connections and associations with the U.S., these in no degree compare to the political, financial and social dependency Puerto Rico has with the United States.

That is not to say that the hyphenated groups I have selected have had a tension-free association with the U.S. In fact, it is in part these tensions that provide material for issues addressed in these novels. In the case of Mexican-Americans, the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which converted the lands north of Mexico from Mexican territory to a part of the United States, while supposedly maintaining the rights and property of the residents of these lands, began what continues to be an oftentimes antagonistic relationship between Mexican-Americans and Anglos. The contentious relationship that Mexican-Americans have had with Anglo Americans in the Southwest and West has grown with the rising number of illegal immigrants originating in Mexico who face oppressive conditions in the workforce as a result of their alien status. Retaliation from the Mexican-American community has in turn increased the racist attitudes and positions taken by Anglo-Americans.

In the case of Cuba, with the American occupation during the early part of the twentieth century, the retaliatory response to the 1959 Revolution, and ultimately with the embargo the United States imposed on the island, the relations between these two countries have remained contentious. Meanwhile the Dominican Republic has been involved in political struggles since it gained independence in the early nineteenth-century that have continued well into the twentieth-century in large measure because of the thirty year dictatorship imposed by Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. The United States' support of this dictatorship partly out of fear of an alternative socialist government and partly to assure the continued supply of coffee, tobacco, sugar, and cocoa during World War II contributed to the prolongation of the atrocities committed by the Trujillo regime. The interference or purposeful U.S. detachment from situations met by these countries influenced the tenor of the relationships they were to have with the United States.

While the country of origin of these authors and its relationship to the U.S. informs Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas' narratives, their thematic and stylistic hybridization and their engagement of gender issues, results more from the amalgamation of their

experience as culturally hyphenated women. The first chapter of my study will focus on Lucha Corpi's Gloria Damasco detective series, my second chapter on Alvarez' *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* and the third chapter on Obejas' *Memory Mambo* and *Days of Awe*. The first chapter focuses on how Corpi successfully alters the conservative genre of detective fiction and incorporates historical and spiritual elements into the genre tailoring it to Latina experiences. Corpi highlights in her first novel, *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, the intersection of Chicanos and Anglos in California through the tensions arising around the 1970s Chicano Moratorium. [21] In her second novel, *Cactus Blood*, she features the demonstrations of the United Farm Workers Union led by César Chávez to whom she partly dedicates her second novel (she also dedicates it to her father).[22] Corpi not only revisits these moments in Chicano history, but through them she reexamines the evolution of the Chicano movement and women's place within it.[23] At various points in the novels, Corpi yields to the tendency to nostalgically

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[21] The Chicano Moratorium was held to bring attention to the disproportionate number of Chicanos in the Vietnam War and the need for this conflict to end. While Chicanos were only 10% of the population, in 1967 they accounted for almost 20% of those killed in the War. More than 20,000 attended the march and rally. The march ended with no major confrontations, but an incident at a liquor store nearby brought a massive response from police who surrounded the crowd, ask them to disperse, shot tear gas and started clubbing onlookers arbitrarily. The tumult lasted several hours and ended with three people being killed, among them Rubén Salazar, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times. Given that he had been an outspoken critic of the police in his editorials, many Chicanos were convinced that his death was intentional, though the inquest ruled it as accidental (132-133 *From North to Aztlán*).

[22] Chávez, one of the most recognizable figures and leader of the Chicano civil rights Movement, led the California farmworkers grape strike in 1965. Despite the fact that Chávez did not consider himself a Chicano, and that most of his early supporters and staffers were Anglo-Americans, the Chicano Movement was most unified at this point. Chavez and the Union became nationally known. He insisted on non-violence, he relied on volunteers from urban universities and religious organizations; he managed to mobilize workers successfully. "Through the pressure of an international boycott against California table grapes, the UFW eventually succeeded in forcing major growers to sign a historic agreement"(129) *From North to Aztlán*) where working conditions for thousands of farm workers vastly improved. For the first time in the history of farm labor, the growers had settled a negotiated contract with a union representing migrant workers. (129) "By the 1980s Chávez was once again calling for a grape boycott to force growers to eliminate harmful pesticides in the fields and to sign contracts with the UFW to that effect"(129). When César Chávez died in 1993 more than 70,000 people participated in his Memorial march in Delano, California.

[23] Even throughout the Chicano Renaissance at the end of the sixties and early seventies approximately at the same time as "Anglo-American feminism was making its mark" (95 Rebolledo), Chicanas' work and concerns were considered minor and marginal. As a result of the men's exclusively nationalistic focus that viewed women's demands to address gender in the struggle as a betrayal, (calling them for this

reevaluate times of more active communal commitment (regardless of the circumstances creating this commitment), but she does not sanctify the members of the Movement, even making a member of the Movement a murderer in her first novel. In her last novel in the series, *Black Widow's Wardrobe*, Corpi addresses more directly issues of Chicana history, going back to Malintzin Tenepal, and the Spanish Conquest. As the series progresses, Corpi's protagonist reexamines elements of Chicano history and more clearly defines her position as a Chicana within the Movement and as well as in Anglo society.

The second chapter focuses on Julia Alvarez' *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé* where Alvarez recovers and draws attention to pivotal female historical figures previously consigned to minor roles in history. Like Corpi, Alvarez shifts from 20th century historical events and figures in *In the Time of the Butterflies* to 19th and 20th century events in *In the Name of Salomé*. Alvarez' novels go from exploring the Trujillo dictatorship through the eyes of the revolutionary Mirabal sisters to issues of Dominican national formation and identity through the voices and the lives of Salomé Ureña and Camila Henríquez. [24] Ruth Behar identifies Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* as a contributing text to "the feminist quest to bring Latin American women…into history as agents, out from under the shadows of those larger-than-life men who, too often, have treated the countries under their rule as their personal fiefdoms" (6). While Behar focuses on Alvarez' success in incorporating the Mirabal voices into a historical narrative, González Echevarría criticizes Alvarez' novel arguing that she "clutters her novel with far too many misdeeds, and misfortunes: rape, harassment, miscarriage, separation, abuse, breast cancer" (28). Rather than seeing these themes as factors detracting from her narrative, I believe they humanize the historical figures she beings to life while she addresses key feminist issues.

Finally, in the last chapter, I discuss Achy Obejas' novels *Memory Mambo* and *Days of Awe*, and the way in which she explores Cuban-American issues of exile, the

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malinchistas), women embraced and reconceived the image of Malinche "incorporating it into their literature and making her their heroine" (99 Rebolledo).

[24] Rosa Linda Fregoso points out that Alvarez joins other Latina writers like Helena Maria Viramontes in *Moths and Other Short Stories* (1985) and Demetria Martinez in *Mother Tongue* (1997) in applying the backdrop of military dictatorship and revolution in their novels (14).

conflictive relationship of Cuban-Americans to Cuba, and Cuban-Jews and Cuban lesbians to their fused identity markers. Following the trend of first generation Cuban-Americans, Obejas predictably centers her first novel on the responses and reactions to the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro and the exile status of Cuban-Americans. Her original contribution comes in her narrating history and addressing these issues of Cuban-Americaness from a lesbian perspective. By her second novel, Obejas more complexly addresses issues of exile by alternatively focusing on the experiences of those remaining on the Island past 1959. In addition, she complicates the notion of Cuban history by examining Cuban-Jewish history from the time of Cuba's "discovery" by Christopher Columbus to the demise of Jewish culture in Cuba after the 1959 Revolution. Like the writer Gustavo Pérez-Firmat who admits that in studying the Cuban Condition he is "trying to define the tone and timbre of a certain Cuban voice" so that he "may define [his] own voice, to explore [his] own means, and possibilities of survival as a writer, and even as a Cuban writer" (15), I contend that Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas explore history through their Latina protagonists in part to aid in their own cultural identity formation.

Through their protagonists these authors dramatize that who they are as hyphenated beings is closely linked to the combination of histories: national, familial, and individual. Given that other Latinas like Cristina García (Cuban-American) and Ana Castillo (Chicana) have incorporated elements of history into their novels (though not as centrally or extensively as Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas), and have incorporated hybrid forms of spirituality in their hybridized genres (in novels like *Dreaming in Cuban* and *So Far From God*), my aim with this study is not to claim that these connections are exclusive to Alvarez, Corpi, and Obejas, but rather to discuss the similar patterns in their work cross-culturally and also to formulate a theory as to why these particular Latinas have chosen to work with hybrid themes and genres. It is no coincidence that within a short span of time all three authors regardless of their cultural background have carved a hybrid space within which to take up their thematic concerns. They create a world of possibilities—where Chicanas can be private detectives, women can be underground leaders and national heroines. They've expanded the literary, political, historical, and spiritual spaces. They give voice to women's experiences, they reaffirm their own voice

as minority women authors and they provide, through their example and that of their characters, role models for future generations of Latinas and their writers.

Conceiving Chicana Detective Fiction: Lucha Corpi's Gloria Damasco Series

In the last 20 years, Latina/o writers have joined the influx of feminist and ethnic writers into the detective fiction genre, and Lucha Corpi carries the distinction of being the only Chicana author writing within it.[25] Notwithstanding her years of work in the literary field as a poet and novelist since 1980, Corpi remains to date a relatively minor figure in Latino Literature. While Corpi's poetry has received critical recognition and been included in various anthologies, her novels have only recently been the subject of critical analysis and remain known only to a select group of readers. [26]

In hybridizing the detective fiction genre by combining feminist detective fiction with multicultural detective fiction, Corpi expands the boundaries of the genre to include Latina experiences. In this chapter, I will show that despite the obstacles that the genre presents, Corpi's hybridization of the genre allows her to incorporate decisive moments in Chicano history and expand traditional notions of spirituality.[27] Through the Gloria Damasco detective series comprised of three novels-- E*ulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), *Cactus Blood* (1995) and *Black Widow's Wardrobe* (1999)—Corpi assesses her own and

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[25] I use the broad and comprehensive term of "ethnic" to encompass diverse detective fiction authors like African-American Walter Mosley, and Barbara Neely, Latina/o Cristina Aguilera and Rudolfo Anaya and Native-American Dana Stabenow. By writing detective fiction that highlights elements of their cultural backgrounds, each of these authors, in their own way, has expanded the literary parameters of the detective fiction genre.

[26] Articles like Tim Libretti's insightful, "Lucha Corpi and the Politics of Detective Fiction", probably the article most often quoted and referred to, as well as texts like Ralph Rodriguez' *Brown Gumshoes: Detective Fiction and the Search for Chicana/o Identity* and Susan Baker Sotelo's *Chicano Detective Fiction: A Critical Study of Five Novelists* have started to address the void surrounding Corpi's detective fiction novels. Other articles like Carol Pearson's "Writing from the Outside In: Constructs of Memory and Chicana Private Eyes in Three Detective Novels by Lucha Corpi" and Carmen Flys Junquera's "Murder with an Ecological Message" also contribute to the critical dialogue on Corpi's texts.

[27] While these are key elements to setting Corpi's work apart from other detective fiction writers, it is important to note that several Latino, African-American and Native-American detective fiction writers have incorporated spiritual elements and added historical components to their novels.

her protagonist's commitment to Chicano politics while she examines the impact of these events on the present day Chicana/o community. Likewise, Corpi uses her detective fiction novels to legitimize a woman's narrative perspective, as well as to reassess Chicanas' position within the Chicano community, as it was in the past and present.

Corpi candidly states that often what motivates her writing is a desire "to bring about justice, even if poetic;" a justice for Chicanos who have suffered as a result of oppressive and racist practices and for Chicanas who have either been silenced or muted at best and physically assaulted at worst. Her "justice" is not one filled with rage and accusations; in fact, it seeks to unearth these moments in history that haven't been incorporated into some master historical narrative, to pay tribute to those Chicano Movements and activists that changed the course for Chicanos in the U.S., and to give voice to Chicanas' experience as cultural and gendered entities. While she maintains a Chicana perspective in her novels, she holds Chicana/os to the same standards as Anglos and Mexicans.

As the only Chicana detective fiction writer, Corpi is in the unique position to incorporate her particular experiences as a woman and a Chicana into her narratives. Thus, she uses a Chicana detective, while she situates the solving of the mystery in historical moments of Chicano reality. She challenges the status quo by providing an authoritative female voice highlighting the Chicano perspective in opposition to and tension with Anglo-American ones and including spiritual elements as aids in the resolution of the mystery. While feminist detective fiction uses female protagonists and addresses women's issues, and multicultural detective fiction incorporates cultural and spiritual elements into the narrative, Corpi's innovation comes in the way she hybridizes the genre to incorporate these two elements into her novels, bringing together these two offshoots of traditional detective fiction, feminist and multicultural detective fiction. She transforms the genre, highlighting her gender as well as her ethnicity.

In choosing the detective fiction genre, Corpi has not only entered one of the most competitive genres in popular fiction, but also one of the most conservatively

constructed. In a market (mystery/detective) already saturated [28] with popular American women writers like Sue Grafton, Patricia Cornwell, and Sara Paretsky, Corpi's series has had to withstand the pre-conceptions and expectations of detective fiction readers which her work does not fully accommodate. [29] Given the conservative nature of the detective fiction genre, it is no surprise that Latina/o authors, outside of mainstream literary circles, have been reticent to write within a genre that has been known for its inflexible parameters. [30]

Given that Corpi's novels function as a series that build upon one another, I will analyze her first novel *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* most closely, and then will discuss in less detail the subsequent novels in the series. The narrative elements I discuss re-occur in *Cactus Blood* and *Black Widow's Wardrobe*, such that it would be repetitive to elaborate on similar patterns addressed so minutely in *Eulogy*.

In order to illustrate the extent to which Corpi hybridizes the detective fiction genre, I will briefly trace the development of this genre whose original traditions are the classical and the hard-boiled tradition. The classical tradition referring to both European and American novels models itself on the narratives of Edgar Allan Poe, and Arthur Conan Doyle. The 1920s and 1930s brought what is considered the Golden Age of detective fiction with authors like Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie, Josephine Tey and Ellery Queen. For the most part, the setting is idyllic, an English country house or a quiet English village, where a brilliant man like Lord Peter Wimsey, or a sharp spinster like Miss Marple identify the culprit through their powers of deduction. Physical violence is downplayed in the novels with the exception of the violence that prompts the investigation. The police presence is minor, and the case is solved solely by the deductive

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[28] Kathleen Gregory Klein notes in *Diversity and Detective Fiction* that "recent statistical surveys indicate that 20 to 22% of all books sold in the US are some form of mystery or detective fiction and they are enjoyed equally by male and female readers..." (2).

[29] In *The Postcolonial Detective*, Ed Christian attributes the marginalization of multicultural detective fiction to the readers' expectations, both of those indigenous and not, "to follow conventions of the English or American form of the genre–an excellent example of hegemony" (5).

[30] Some Latina/o writers that have chosen to tackle the detective fiction genre are: Rolando Hinojosa who introduced the first Chicano homicide investigator in 1985, Cuban-American Carolina Garcia Aguilera and Chicano Rudolfo Anaya.

powers of the detective. The novels read as elitist in their choice of characters and setting and the detectives are often labeled "two dimensional." By the end of these novels, order in the narrative world is restored.

Meanwhile in America during the late 1920s and early 1930s, authors like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler resist what they perceive as the artificiality of the British detective tradition and developed the hard-boiled American school of detective fiction. In this tradition, the protagonist is customarily a white male, tough, solitary to the point of misanthropy, hard, detached, often witty and verbally cruel. Some recognizable examples of this hero are Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade and Mike Hammer all of whom adopt a cocky, characteristic flippant attitude. Hard-boiled narratives provide an unsentimental portrayal of crime, they do not present refined settings or murders, and the novel concludes as chaotically as it began.[31] While the British detective fiction relies on the mental swiftness of the detective, the hard-boiled novel focuses on the detective's physical prowess to subdue the villain. In both traditions, female characters exist within very definite parameters. In the British tradition the female characters of any consequence are innocuous, bound by civility and good breeding as well as by their status as amateur sleuths. In the hard-boiled tradition women are either victims, or vixens. Women are useless, for they either need to be rescued or restrained.

This portrayal changed with the advent of feminist detective fiction. In his introduction to *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction,* Glenwood Irons attributes the rise of the woman detective to two circumstances: the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 and "the increase in reports of abuse against women" (xii) which stressed the need for characters more capable of defending themselves. The nineteen eighties brought writers like Marcia Muller, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky to the detective fiction genre where they became prolific and popular. While women have long contributed to the detective fiction genre, it is with the advent of these contemporary

[31] In her detective series, Corpi emphasizes this feature by beginning and ending all three novels with turmoil and confusion. In *Eulogy* she begins with the murder and the Chicano Moratorium, and ends with the death of Luisa; in *Cactus Blood* she begins with Sonny Mares' death and the 1963 Strike, and ends with the 1989 earthquake, and finally in *Black Widow*, the novel starts with the attempt on Licia's life and ends with the 1991 Oakland firestorm.

female writers that the contribution switched from one where they followed pre-established parameters to where they transformed the genre to accommodate the female voice and experience.[32]

As feminist detective fiction has developed, there has been a concern among some critics that the sub-genre has not transformed sufficiently to accommodate feminist ideals. The detective fiction genre developed primarily by Anglo male authors portraying male protagonists, has traditionally strived to restore order in the world and re-establish the status quo. Given this trend, detective fiction critics like Kathleen Klein have claimed that there can be no such thing as feminist detective fiction because in restoring the status quo, feminist detective fiction writers would be restoring the patriarchal system they are trying to challenge. I would argue that feminist detective fiction writers have changed the original genre to give voice to women's experiences and to challenge through their very presence and approach as detectives the status quo.

While feminist detective fiction writers have created strong, self-reliant, shrewd protagonists that rely on their skills to successfully probe the cases they investigate, these women are also portrayed as flawed individuals who are finding their way both professionally and personally. Feminist detective writers challenge both classical and hard-boiled detective fiction with their female protagonists at the center of the plot and in control of the narrative voice. They also explore the inconsistent and uneven power relations among the sexes. The protagonists assert their female agency and challenge the pressure to socially conform by the example they set in their own lives, though they are aware of the constant struggle involved in resolutely keeping their choice of lifestyle. As

[32] The advent of women into the detective fiction genre has sparked a debate within which some maintain that prior to the 1980s and 1990s there was virtually no female presence within the genre while others have made it their mission to prove otherwise. With names like Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Anna Katharine Green to back up her arguments, Catherine Ross Nickerson, among other critics, has taken up the task of dispelling the notion that female detective writers did not contribute significantly to the genre and have not been a substantial presence in this tradition. In *The Web of Iniquity: Early Detective Fiction by American Women*, Nickerson traces the rise and development of detective fiction by women in the period between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of WWII. Similarly, Kimberley J. Dilley in *Busybodies, Meddlers and Snoops: The Female Hero in Contemporary Women's Mysteries* and Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple in "Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction" have demonstrated that there has always been a vast number of female mystery writers and that it has only been the gender conscious publishers and critics that have marginalized these works and authors.

women and private investigators, these protagonists understand what it feels like to battle against the establishment. Even though they don't view or portray themselves as defenders of the dispossessed and voiceless, (á la superhero), on numerous occasions, they end up being the only route to justice. In Corpi's novels, Damasco becomes the champion of Otilia Juárez, Carlota Navarro and Licia Lecuona, victims of the cases she investigates. Feminist detective writers commonly point out issues such as domestic violence and child abuse as well as corruption in politics, and religious institutions, in a similar manner that Corpi does through her Chicana characters. Female detectives often pay as much attention to the social elements as they do to the criminal that has constructed the scenario they are unraveling.

As a Chicana detective fiction writer, Corpi borrows from the feminist detective tradition, on occasion prioritizing her concerns as a woman over those of her cultural experience. While more often than not her cultural realities demand more attention, what is most important is the hybrid style that surfaces when she merges both her cultural and female experiences. Corpi creates a protagonist that exemplifies the harried life of compromise and multitasking and the tension in balancing personal and professional aspirations. Through Damasco, Corpi illustrates the difficulties that arise as a Chicana within a conservative, patriarchally-driven community when trying to reconcile feminist ideals with cultural allegiances. She wrestles with the difficulties surrounding her unorthodox profession as well as her role as wife and mother.

In her analysis of feminist detective fiction, Kimberley J. Dilley outlines certain patterns that she notes in the development of the protagonists in the genre. While these patterns are drawn rather rudimentarily, they are helpful as a starting point from which to discuss the way in which Corpi's novels fit within the parameters of the feminist detective fiction genre. Two of the categories which Dilley focuses on are the relationships that feminist detective fiction protagonists develop with family, and with a love interest, and the way in which these relationships define the development of the protagonist. Different from traditional and hard-boiled detective fiction, detectives no longer live in a vacuum; they are a product of the relationships they develop throughout their lives. While feminist detective fiction writers like Sue Grafton, Patricia Cornwell

and Kathy Reichs downplay the family connections of the protagonist, Corpi incorporates family members as live presences in constant dialogue with the protagonist, and in many instances serving as resources in her investigations.[33] Grafton's protagonist Kinsey Millhone is orphaned at a young age and grows up with a tough single aunt, Cornwell's protagonist, Dr. Kay Scarpetta's only family connection is to a niece who appears sporadically and even when she begins to play a more central role in the series her relationship to Scarpetta remains distant and conflicted, and finally, Reichs' protagonist Temperance Brennan has a daughter and ex-husband who make sporadic appearances in the series. None of the three authors feel the need to make the family members of the protagonists central to the protagonists' life or the plot development.

In terms of love interests, Corpi is more aligned with how feminist detective writers develop their protagonists' lives. Dilley observes that generally the protagonists are not married or ingenuously single. Either category could hamper the development of the protagonist, either because they would constantly have to negotiate their status as wives and perhaps mothers, or because the pressure to select a partner would distract from the narrative. Instead, these women have all been married prior to their investigative careers which relieves the societal pressure on this aspect of their lives. The protagonists, who do begin relationships throughout the detective series' select partners in related fields who understand the demands and pressures of their profession.[34] Corpi concurs with them that the most successful partner for her protagonist be with someone in her field of work.

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[33] In this respect Corpi's protagonist is similar to other ethnic characters. Both Nicole Décuré and Stephen Soitos stress the importance of family to the African-American protagonists of the detective fiction novels they survey. Mothers and children are active presences in the lives of the protagonists. Décuré and Soitos both note the difference from mainstream/white protagonists who are as a rule orphaned or single.

[34] For example Millone, Grafton's protagonist is divorced and mentions throughout her series how she is not cut out for marriage. The most successful relationships she has are with men in similar professions to her own who understand the demands her work places on her and do not question her lifestyle. For her part, Cornwell's Scarpetta is also divorced and begins a long term complicated tumultuous relationship for her protagonist with a retired FBI profiler still active in the field. Equally Reichs' Brennan is also divorced and begins a relationship in the series with a detective. In her case the only difference is that she has a daughter from her previous marriage.

Damasco's love interest is private investigator, Justin Escobar, who appears for the first time in the second half of *Eulogy*, when he is hired by Pita to protect Damasco. Justin and Damasco end up working together on this case and eventually in the subsequent novels become professional and personal partners. These two characters meet on equal ground. He treats her as his equal; they come into the relationship as partners in crime and later as partners in love. He is not surprised by her spiritual gift (which her husband and father had scoffed at) and acknowledges it matter-of-factly. Corpi creates a novel Latino who enjoys cooking, listening to blues, jazz, or Latin rhythms, works out his problems by taking photos, working in his darkroom, or carving out pieces of wood, is strong but not domineering, a gentleman without trying to be a savior. In short, he is an eclectic nontraditional man who allows Damasco to have her own interests and passions and to develop professionally to the fullest extent. Their relationship does not have fixed gender roles that threaten to upset the feminist dynamics of the novel. Yet, in *Black Widow*, Corpi "sends" Justin off on a case for almost the entire novel leaving Damasco to fend for herself. It is as if Corpi feared too much of Justin's presence might compromise her protagonist's resourcefulness. For the most part, the absence of Justin in *Black Widow* re-energizes Damasco by allowing her to independently develop her skills as a detective, as well as a resourceful attitude to difficult situations.

A final point of commonality that Corpi has with feminist detective fiction writers is her approach to physical violence and the use of guns. As in most feminist detective fiction though violence is incorporated into the narrative, the authors' stress lies on the repercussions that result from the violent encounters. Detective work is no longer exclusively about violent encounters, exciting chases, and amazing discoveries as in the hard-boiled tradition. Detectives choose to own guns, but are careful in using them only in cases of self-defense. Dilley observes that: "The novels of women PI's portray a more authentic scenario with guns...Guns destroy families, and lives; they can also damage the user's humanity" (44). The repercussions that result from violent encounters spill over from one novel into the next. The physical and emotional injuries the protagonists carry are battle scars that serve as reminders of what is not "right" in the world. Violence is not seen as the ultimate solution, but instead opens up scenarios where the protagonists

question the morality of their actions. It reinforces their vulnerable place in the outside world, the connection they have with the victims they help and protect, and the dangers of their profession. Feminist detective fiction ceases to glorify and glamorize detective work and puts stock in describing paper work, research, and logical guesses. Addressing this issue, Damasco explains to her mother's best friend Nina Contreras, who has been gushing about the exciting life Damasco must lead as a private investigator, that though detective work might seem glamorous, it for the most part "feels like any other job" (53)

Corpi incorporates violence as a last resort and usually makes violent encounters creatively physical, using a bat or a potted plant instead of a gun.[35] As in other feminist detective narratives, the effects of violent encounters spill over into her future novels. Thus, in *Eulogy* after her best friend Luisa Cortez dies taking a bullet meant for Damasco, the psychological and emotional scar left by her friend's absence is evident in the subsequent novels. By the time Damasco appears in *Cactus Blood*, eight months have passed since Luisa's death, but Damasco is still in danger of being overcome by nostalgia and sorrow. She thinks of her friend's death as her own fault and says, "I would always feel I owed Luisa my life, and there wasn't a chance in heaven or hell that I could ever repay my debt to her" (31). Even though she comes to terms with her friend's death, she is extremely conscious of the potential consequences involved in using physical violence. Nevertheless, Damasco is also conscious of the dangers in her profession and realizes that she needs to take measures in the form of gun ownership to protect herself.

In *Eulogy*, since Damasco is only an amateur detective the issue of owning a gun does not arise. But by *Cactus Blood*, knowing that her mother is on her way to becoming a private investigator, Damasco's daughter Tania, suggests that she buy a gun and learn to use it. Damasco is shocked, but Tania responds, "'I worry about you. If you're going to be a private investigator, you should know how to defend yourself"(41). Shortly after this conversation, an intruder enters Damasco's home and as she considers the best plan

[35] By the end of *Cactus Blood*, Damasco is forced to use a gun for self-protection despite her reservations. On this issue Corpi stands midpoint between feminist detective fiction where protagonists find guns to be a reality of the job, but use them judiciously, and multicultural detective fiction where for example, African-American Barbara Neely's protagonist, Blanche White, who does not carry a gun and solves crimes using other resources at her disposal.

of action she reflects: "Trying not to dwell on my daughter's more drastic suggestions for my self-protection, I got Tania's baseball bat and walked slowly towards the door" (138). Damasco starts to seriously consider the possibility of owning a gun but believes that, "the mere possibility of owning that kind of power over life made me feel giddy, and my skin crawled with fear" (127). By the end of the novel, as they embark on a dangerous part of their investigation, Justin gives Damasco a gun. She describes it as a small gun that felt like a toy in her hands. Though Damasco protests, Justin ignores her reservations and shows her how to use the gun. Damasco wonders if she would be capable of pulling the trigger, and soon after finds herself shooting at the murderer.

In *Black Widow*, even though Damasco has become a licensed private investigator, she still wields the power of a gun carefully. She would rather keep her gun between her belt and the waist of her pants and carry her mace instead. While she has to rely on her gun, she remains apprehensive, "I felt a chill go up my spine as I reached for the pistol. No matter how many times I'd held a gun, it still felt cold and strange in my hand until my skin and mind adjusted to it" (162). Realizing the deadly consequences of using a gun she takes her responsibility seriously. By the end of *Black Widow* Damasco gets injured by a bullet as Justin had at the end of *Cactus Blood*. In both cases they recuperate, but the dangers of their profession are ever present.

While Corpi adopts features of feminist detective fiction, she also incorporates cultural elements that place her work within the multicultural detective tradition. This proves an interesting juxtaposition of elements uniquely combined in Corpi's detective fiction. Just as feminist detective fiction puts into question the misogynist values espoused by the traditional form of the genre, multicultural detective fiction disrupts the portrayal of a homogenous racial and cultural world.

Multicultural detective fiction was born out of the urgency of marginalized voices to be heard and represented within previously homogeneous mainstream traditions to demonstrate that issues of race and culture were not incompatible with the detective fiction genre. Multicultural detective fiction mainly includes texts written by minority authors with African-American, Native American and Latinos as the protagonists. One of the liabilities of this sub-genre is the tendency to be too inclusive. The sub-genre loses

cohesiveness by including texts written by or about groups marginalized for reasons other than race or culture. However, the only common factor among texts falling under the label "multicultural" often is the position they hold as "other."

The critical work on this sub-genre of detective fiction is still developing.[36] As a result terminology is still under debate. Seemingly interchangeable terms like "multicultural," "post-colonial" "diverse," and "multiethnic" used in theorizing this sub-genre, create an amorphous guideline within which to discuss these texts of "otherness." The constant in these texts is critical analysis of marginality and minority within the genre of detective fiction. [37]

What distinguishes each critical text is how each editor defines and interprets "marginality." While Klein includes feminism, anti-Semitism, ethnicity and race, Gosselin focuses on race and gender allowing for one disparate section on gay and lesbian crime fiction. For the purpose of clarity, and since my analysis focuses on race and cultural background as Gosselin's anthology does, I use Gosselin's term "multicultural detective fiction." Gosselin broadly defines multicultural detective fiction

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[36] Texts like *Diversity and Detective Fiction* (1999) edited by Kathleen Gregory Klein, *Multicultural Detective Fiction: Murder From the 'Other' Side* (1999) edited by Adrienne Johnson Gosselin and *The Postcolonial Detective* (2001), Ed Christian ed., and *Sleuthing Ethnicity: The Detective in Multiethnic Crime Fiction* (2004) Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller eds. have contributed the critical analysis of this subgenre. More specific parameters, the following texts study the African-American and Chicano detective fiction narrative. Stephen Soitos' *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* (1996). Soitos' text specifically addresses the intersection of the detective fiction genre and the African-American experience as seen through the writings of African-American authors. Though his text does not broadly address multiculturalism in detective fiction, it provides an in-depth analysis of "black detective fiction in relation to race, class and gender" (4). Soitos innovatively brings race to the forefront, altering the previously held "white perspective" on the detective fiction genre. While Ralph Rodriguez' *Brown Gumshoes: Detective fiction and the Search for Chicana/o Identity* (2005) focuses on five Chicana/o detective fiction writers and "situates the Chicana/o detective novel as a signal marker of post-nationalism" (Rodriguez 12).

[37] In their essay "Ethnic Detectives in Popular Fiction: New Directions For An American Genre" (1999) Gina and Andrew Macdonald face a similar dilemma of finding the proper terminology to help clarify the label "ethnic" and "multicultural." They find the phrase "voices not previously heard" used by Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter in *New Worlds of Literature*, helpful in clarifying the label "ethnic" or "multicultural" as this incorporates Native-American and Mexican-American cultures as well as cultures of religion, gender and race. Despite merits of their arguments and the unquestionably problematic nature of terms like ethnic and multicultural, I shall use the broad term "multicultural detective fiction" for the purpose of my discussion in this chapter.

as stories “in the hands of authors whose cultural communities are not those of the traditional Euro-American male hero, whose cultural experiences have been excluded from the traditional detective formula, and whose cultural aesthetic alters the formula itself” (xi-xii). Her analysis rests on the perspective and cultural position the authors hold.

One way in which the novels’ cultural perspective comes through most clearly is in the characterization and development of the protagonists. In multicultural detective fiction, protagonists afford us a complex perspective since their position as detectives on the fringe of law enforcement is complicated by their position as minorities at the margins of society.

In *The Postcolonial Detective*, Christian describes minority detective figures as: “...usually marginalized in some way, which affects their ability to work at their full potential; they are always central and sympathetic characters; and their creators interest usually lies in an exploration of how these detectives’ approaches to criminal investigation are influenced by their cultural attitudes”(2). Ultimately, Christian sees such detective figures that blend police techniques with indigenous cultural knowledge as sites of hybridity who are more able that Anglo detectives because of this fusion. In Corpi’s novels, Damasco exemplifies Christian’s hybridity in the way she combines traditional forms of investigation, interviewing suspects and following leads, with her spiritual visions and dreams.

Concurring, Andrew Pepper observes that the principal difference and advantage of detectives coming from marginalized groups over Anglo detectives is their ability to see the world as a polyethnic environment, and identity formation as problematic. Pepper recognizes that the detectives’ fractured sense of self which comes from alternating between at least two cultural experiences, affords them an understanding of the overlapping and unstable nature of racial and ethnic categories which in turn gives them insight into the worlds (both white and ethnic) that they investigate.

Given the overly inclusive yet imprecise quality of multicultural detective fiction, it is hard to pin down any but their broadest commonalities. I focus my discussion of Corpi’s novels in relation to African-American, Native American and Latino detective

fiction and how they incorporate spirituality and cultural elements. African-American Barbara Neely, for example, has her protagonist, Blanche White, use ancestor worship and extrasensory perception as resources to solve the mysteries. [38] In Native-American Sherman Alexie's, *Indian Killer*, the main characters are haunted by dreams and spirits and ghosts as part of the narrative landscape, while Chicano author Rudolfo Anaya has his protagonist, Sonny Baca, learn about the folk beliefs of his ancestors and become a "brujo" himself. Corpi has Damasco validate figures like the curandera who uses herbs to heal, and the spiritualist who "transports" Damasco in a spiritist session, and accept as genuine her visions and clairvoyant dreams.

This spiritual component is one of the more representative characteristics of multicultural detective fiction. In discussing this, Gina and Andrew Macdonald express their reservation that too many supernatural or spiritual elements might work against the genre and have an end-product that is "muddled and unsatisfactory" (78).[39] I agree that placing such importance on spirituality works against the genre, but not necessarily as a detracting force. Yes, it works against the limitations of the genre, yes, it empowers alternate views of knowledge, and yes, it requires readers who are willing to suspend their disbelief, but not anymore than is necessary to believe that a protagonist "solved" the mystery and wrapped the case into a neat package in the space of the narrative.

Multicultural detective fiction incorporates various ethnic perspectives. For example, Neely includes the perspective of her protagonist, a working class (domestic worker) African-American woman whose racial and economic concerns become a part of

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[38] In "Black Detective Fiction" Stephen Soitos explains that "hoodoo or alternative religious practices are major factors in differentiating black detective texts from other detective novels" (97).

[39] While their concern on the issue of spirituality is a legitimate one, their perspective denotes a narrow vision which they exhibit in their general analysis of multicultural texts. In their 1999 survey of multicultural detective fiction, the McDonalds expressed their regret at the lack of exemplars which they could evaluate. It would be hard not to label their analysis as faulty and incomplete given the numerous multi-ethnic texts they did not include in their analysis. By 1999 authors like Michael Nava had written six detective fiction novels, Corpi had published three and academics like Stephen Soitos had already published a study exclusively on African-American detective fiction. More justifiably, a decade before, Maureen Reddy had similarly lamented in *Sisters in Crime* that "despite a great deal of searching, I have yet to find a crime novel written by a woman of color ..." (16). She couples this absence with the fundamentally conservative nature of the detective fiction genre that only provides space for the white experience.

the series landscape. In the same way, Native-American and Chicano detective fiction addresses culturally specific issues like acculturation, racism, and historical marginalization.

Illustrating the hybrid identity of Chicana/os within U.S. culture, Corpi suffuses her work with commonplace elements of Chicano culture within a California backdrop. Yet Corpi's California seems a different universe from mainstream America. She creates a world of Latina/o characters Dora Saldaña, Lester Zamora and Rosenda Cabral; frequented restaurants like "El Torito Restaurant," "Taquería," and "La Ultima;"and of historically significant times and places like the Chicano Moratorium and the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. She describes an alternate reality to that of Sue Grafton, for example, who also sets her work in California. Corpi's California is full of flavor, Spanish speakers, contentious encounters between minorities and Anglos. Just as the smell of tamales permeates Damasco's being and "calls" to her, so should her readers be "transported" by the atmosphere Corpi creates in her novels. Her characters don't eat hamburgers at McDonalds, but rather crave the greasy equivalent of taco de carne asada. Spanish is interjected throughout the narrative and the majority of the characters have Spanish surnames. Though her setting, atmosphere, and Spanish language usage exemplify the hybrid reality of Chicanos, Corpi grounds the narrative in Anglo cultural experience by also including more mainstream elements like the Baseball World Series. She fluctuates between traditional Chicana/o culture seen in the homes of characters like Otilia in *Eulogy* and Art Bello in *Cactus Blood*, and American mainstream popular culture that inform the characters' daily lives.

While both feminist and multicultural detective fiction expand the genre, they also maintain firm ties to traditional detective fiction. Thus, Corpi is aware of the tradition that has preceded her work, and at various points spoofs it. As an amateur detective in *Eulogy*, Damasco is in the same position Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple were in Agatha Christie's mystery novels. Corpi conjures up their images and then replaces them by her own. When Damasco and Luisa are surveying an area where they are to meet a gang member who has information on the little boy's murder, Luisa facetiously asks: "What are we supposed to be doing now? Looking for clues, my dear Miss Marple?" (47) or

later Damasco comments to Detective Kenyon, "Doesn't a detective have to be a combination of Hercule Poirot and Philip Marlowe?" (76) Feeling self-conscious about this comment, Damasco explains that, "Laid up with a broken foot during my first summer in high school, I had read most of Agatha Christie's and Raymond Chandler's detective novels"(76). Corpi acknowledges both the classical and the hard-boiled detective traditions from which her own genre version has come so far.

Corpi re-examines formative moments in Chicano history: the 1970s Chicano Moratorium in Los Angeles, California, the Delano Grape Pickers Strike in 1973, and the history of Malintzin Tenepal in the sixteenth century Conquest of Mexico that became the inheritance of present day Chicanas.[40] Through the histories of two influential families, the Peraltas and the Castro-Biddle's, Corpi examines in a more cursory way the nineteenth and twentieth century history of clashes between Mexico and California in the Mexican-American War. Corpi accesses these moments in history through individual and familial histories, in this way inextricably linking the national and the personal.

Just as Corpi reflects on the cultural and personal impact these key moments of Chicano/a history have had, so does her twenty-three year old Chicana protagonist Gloria Damasco. As a nineteen year old student coming from Jalitpan, Mexico to study in Berkeley, California during the height of the Chicano Movement, Corpi participated and witnessed the events she writes about; so it is no surprise that she would revisit these episodes of history with the distance of time that would allow her to more objectively re-evaluate these events. For her part, in the course of her investigations, Damasco comes across these moments in history that force her to remember, face and reconsider the implications these events have had on her community and herself.

In her first novel, *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), Damasco and her friend Luisa Cortez come upon the body of a little boy in an alleyway as they are running away

[40] The life of Malintzin Tenepal has for many years been used to reductively encapsulate women of Mexican descent. For Chicanas, the historical/mythical character known most commonly as La Malinche has become both a figure representing the historical tergiversation created by a male misogynistic perspective, as well as a symbol of strength and courage in the face of insurmountable obstacles. Norma Alarcón provides one of the most detailed studies of Malintzin in "Traduttora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism" (1989). While in *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (2000), Sonia Saldívar-Hull discusses this figure and lists numerous articles in which female authors try to rectify the misrepresentation of this historical figure.

from a Chicano demonstration, which later came to be known as the Chicano Moratorium, gone wrong. At first, it seems to be tied into the violence they have just witnessed at the hands of the Los Angeles police. It slowly unfolds that this boy's death is not directly related to the demonstration, and Damasco takes up the task of answering who is responsible and why. As Damasco discovers clues that help her resolve the mystery, she slowly uncovers truths about herself as a Latina within California US society, and as a spiritual being. More than in her subsequent novels, reader and detective are most allied/ aligned. The discoveries made are made together.

Corpi begins *Eulogy* by overlapping from the novel's start the national and the personal.[41] She alternates describing the Chicano Moratorium with the discovery of four year old Michael David Cisneros' body. Corpi describes the chaotic, violent clash that followed an otherwise peaceful Chicano demonstration protesting the Vietnam War and the uncommonly high incidence of Chicanos enlisted resulting in significantly disproportionate Chicano casualties, followed by an account of the discovery of a little boy's defiled body that seems surprisingly at peace despite the riot going on around him. While these events might seem disparate, their juxtaposition is appropriate, because just as the idealistic expectations of maintaining a peaceful assembly and the physical bodies of the March demonstrators were shattered, so was the body and childlike spirit of Michael Cisneros. In both instances, racism is the driving force behind the attacks executed by Anglos who already had a history with the victims (the little boy and the March participants), and which ultimately had long lasting repercussions.

Placing Damasco as a participant in the Chicano demonstration allows Corpi to describe in detail the confrontation between police officers and demonstrators from an eyewitness' perspective:

> When a few of the marchers became disorderly, they were subdued by police officers in a brutal manner. People gathered around them

[41] Along the same lines, Libretti argues that the chronological parallel of the murdered child and the assault on the Chicano demonstration are proof that the two are connected. Though he also focuses on the juxtaposition of events, he arrives at a different conclusion reasoning that the murderer killed the child because of his hatred of all Chicanos, or as a symbol of attack on the movement.

> and protested the officers' use of undue restraint. A bystander threw a bottle at the police, and five hundred officers armed with riot equipment marched against us. Our day in the sun turned into a bloody riot… (18).

She describes the rest of the confrontation as an exercise in violence where tear gas and batons are used to "pacify" the masses. By the end of the ordeal, numerous demonstrators are wounded, hundreds jailed, and three people are dead, among them the controversial Chicano journalist Ruben Salazár known for his vocal critique of Chicano exploitation.[42] Other than using fictional characters to portray the demonstration, Corpi's description of the March aims at authenticity. While she does not sensationalize the event, she provides enough details to create a mental picture. Corpi's realistic description of the March forces those who experienced the event or knew about it to revisit this historical moment and reassess its impact, and urges those who had not heard about the Chicano Moratorium to learn more about it and recognize its significance. [43]

In providing such a description of the Chicano Moratorium, Corpi equally emphasizes the gravity of the clash, as she does the escalating tension and animosity among Anglo-Chicano relations that is the byproduct of this conflict. Damasco describes how odd it felt to walk on the same streets where so much turmoil had occurred, while typical routines were in progress. The only tangible reminder of the Chicano Moratorium she notes is a plaque on the wall in honor of slain Ruben Salazár at the site of his death.

Damasco's vivid first person description exemplifies Corpi's approach to history; she illustrates the direct impact that historical events crucial to Chicana/os have on individual lives. Historical events are not mere facts appearing on an official document but rather, incident that can alter the course of individuals' lives and their communities.[44]

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[42] The demonstration that came to be known as the National Chicano Moratorium was until 2005 the largest protest organized by Chicanos. Accounts of how many demonstrators were present range from 20,000 to 30,000 people. Even today, participants like Hermán Baca from the committee on Chicano Rights holds this event as a critical moment in Chicano history that young Chicanos need to remember so that they may build on history and produce change.

[43] History plays a fundamental role in the development of Corpi's novels so that most of the critics reviewing her work explore this theme in the course of their discussion.

Damasco distrusts authority figures--and specifically law enforcement officials-- who have repeatedly abused their power with the Chicano community. After the Chicano Moratorium, Damasco's skepticism is even more justified. Despite this understandable wariness, she begrudgingly appeals to authorities when she discovers Michael David Cisneros' body. Damasco is forced to rely on a detective from this same Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) which she condemns for its violent actions.

Damasco gauges Detective Matthew Kenyon's worth by assessing his complicity in the March's brutality, "a middle-aged detective in the homicide division who had purposely, I suspected after meeting him, not participated in the assault on the demonstrators at Laguna Park" (21). Though she does not "lump" him in with the narrow minded officers of the LAPD, she does not trust him as she realizes that he uses her to get some of the preliminary answers in the investigation. In time, as the investigation continues, Damasco comes to trust Detective Kenyon's deductive abilities and even believes him to be fair and objective-- so much so that she agrees to help him lay a trap for a fellow Chicano despite the potential political ramifications. "In the summer of 1970," Damasco remembers, "everything anyone one of us did had to be considered according to its political impact on the Chicano community. So Luisa and I supported the unwritten rule that forbade Chicanos to go public on any issues that could be used to justify discrimination against us" (64). While she feels torn about "betraying" her cultural loyalties, she puts aside her concerns, trusting that Detective Kenyon has not singled out this suspect arbitrarily and is not racially motivated to lay blame on him. As it turns out, trusting her instincts about Detective Kenyon, pays off and this guilty man brings them closer to the mastermind behind the murder. This interaction of Damasco with Detective Kenyon allows Corpi to explore the complexity of Chicano-Anglo relations, especially charged by the added law enforcement component, while also examining the cultural bond within the Chicano community.

Juxtaposing the Chicano Moratorium and Michael David Cisneros' death facilitates a comparison between these two events as the cultural community is obligated

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[44] This is similar to Libretti's argument where he notes that "one cannot have done with history and that it will continue to erupt in and inform the present" (72).

to face the historical events they experience, so must the individuals face their familial and individual histories. Key events in the Cisneros' family past, starting in nineteenth century Mexico, set in motion events that lead to Michael David Cisneros' death. The family history starts with Luis Peralta who "played an important role in the politics of the region [California] while the territory was still under Mexican rule" (114) and his adoptive daughter Josefa Asunción who he did not acknowledge genealogically or financially.[45] Asunción had a daughter Cecilia Castro-Biddle who in turn had an illegitimate son whom she allowed Michael Cisneros and his wife to adopt secretly. Giving her child away began Castro-Biddle's descent into mental instability, from which she never recovered and which ultimately led to her suicide. As a result of the trauma of giving up her child under duress, she tries to kidnap her son Michael Cisneros Jr., but guiltily returns him four days later. Ultimately, we discover that Michael Cisneros Jr's grandfather Soren Bjorgun, put Castro-Biddle up to kidnapping her biological son, so that his own blood grandson, Paul, could remain the heir of the Cisneros fortune. Thirty-some years later, following his grandfather's example, Paul puts Castro-Biddle up to kidnapping her grandson, Michael David Cisneros and then he kills him.

As Michael Cisneros discovers his family secrets, he is forced to acknowledge the hatred his brother and grandfather had toward him and accept that "Paul—and even my own son Michael David—were, in the end, grandfather's victim" (186). Through Damasco's investigation, Corpi shows how the past surfaces through generations. By focusing on this generational cycle, Corpi reveals how at different points in the Cisneros' family history family members could have altered the course of history if they had faced their past and learned from their mistakes. Had Michael Cisneros' Sr. and his wife not hidden the abduction of their son Michael Cisneros Jr. and had they at the very least sought help for Cecelia Castro-Biddle, she might not have been susceptible to Paul's plot and Michael David Cisneros could still be alive. While the Cisneros' lives are forever

[45] By making Peralta a key player in both the Cisneros family history as well as the California/Mexico history, Corpi links both these stories in the narrative and demonstrates the connection between a national history and its individuals. In fact, Peralta plays a key role in the history of California as a general in the Mexican Army and a landowner covering area across San Francisco and Oakland. This thread of the narrative is explored further in the second novel in the series, *Cactus Blood*.

changed by their son's death, Corpi implies that solving his murder will put a period to this phase in their lives and allow them to focus on reconstruction. In fact, she creates a palpable need to resolve the case; if Damasco does not uncover Paul's complicity in the murder, Paul will complete his revenge on his brother killing Lillian, Michael Cisneros' wife and the little boy's mother. Corpi implies that leaving questions unanswered and business unfinished will consume them (literally, kill them).

Through these cultural and familial histories, Corpi also examines racism faced communally and individually. During the demonstration, the swiftly violent response from the police to a hint of a disturbance among the March demonstrators shows the police bias against the Chicano community. Still, Corpi does not limit her examination of racism to Anglo-Chicano relations, but examines racism within the Chicano community as well. By targeting racism as a whole instead of the individuals or groups who manifest it, Corpi condemns all racist behavior regardless of the participants involved. Corpi addresses intracultural racism in *Eulogy* when a Chicano activist Joel Galeano murders a Chicano gang member, Mando, who can identify Michael David Cisneros' murderer. Galeano murders Mando pragmatically for the sizeable payment he will receive for this service, but justifies it ideologically as an attempt to eradicate Chicano gangs, one member at a time.

At a familial level, the Cisneros family history is riddled with racism, from Soren Bjorgun's hatred toward his Mexican son-in-law and adopted dark-skinned grandson, to Paul's hatred of his brother whom he tries to destroy. Internalizing this hatred he inherited from his grandfather, eight-year old Paul scrubs his face until it bleeds to disprove the taunts of his private school classmates who accuse him, despite his fair skin of being as dark as his brother and father. At both a cultural and familial level, racism survives through generations and manifests itself overtly and surreptitiously.

Intersecting issues of ethnicity and gender, Corpi explores race through Damasco's position as a Chicana vis a vis Anglos and other Chicanos. As a Chicana, Damasco faces two predicaments: she is protective of her cultural group as it stands within the dominant culture, but not at the expense of her moral standards, and she is conflicted about her standing within the Chicano community when this very group

disregards her needs as a woman. At the beginning of *Eulogy,* Damasco finds herself torn between her political/cultural loyalties and her desire to uncover the truth about Michael Cisneros' murder. As she debates what she should do, Damasco remembers that her friend Luisa calls this predicament "one of the gray areas of conscience" (44) with no teachers, just their own judgment to guide them. Despite her uneasiness, she lays a trap for a fellow Chicano because she is certain he is somehow involved in the murder. Even though she turns out to be right, her anxiety over aligning herself with the Anglo police officer remains.

Equally complex is Damasco's position as a Chicana in a male-driven Chicano Movement. Corpi shows how tied Damasco's political struggle as a Chicana feminist within the patriarchally dominated Chicano Movement is her personal attempt to balance her professional and personal life. In both cases, Corpi focuses on the resistance Chicanas face as they try to fashion a gender-equitable world. In *Eulogy*, Damasco remembers how "Chicano nationalism and feminism didn't walk hand in hand before or during the summer of 1970"(66) at the same time as she recalls the negative reaction her now husband's friends had to her because: "I was too young, too intense, too intelligent and too independent. All capital sins…In time, almost all of them learned to accept me"(66). By strategically adding a commentary on the Chicano Movement together with a personal manifestation of this struggle, Corpi illustrates the spillage that occurs from political to personal. Just as it is necessary for Chicanas to make their voices heard within a Movement that considers any departure from the set goals a distraction if not a betrayal, it is equally necessary for these women to reaffirm their individual goals within a culture that relegates women to their roles as mothers and wives.

In *Eulogy*, more than her two other novels, Corpi lays out the challenging path Chicanas face in negotiating the domestic sphere with the public sphere. Swept up by her desire to bring justice to Michael David Cisneros and Mando, Damasco becomes absorbed with her first case, and regrets that she is "robbing [her daughter and husband] Tania and Darío of my attention and going without sleep and nourishment" (109). As a result, she passes out, spends a day in the hospital because of her anemia and exhaustion followed by a week of recovery. At this point, her husband, Darío hides the files

containing her case research in an attempt to dissuade Damasco from pursuing the case any longer. In a series of exchanges between Darío and Damasco that read more like conversations between a father and a child than a husband and a wife, Darío questions Damasco's choices and issues an ultimatum: "'what is more important to you, solving the case or keeping our marriage and family together? That is something you alone will have to decide'"(121). Damasco comes to a juncture in her life where she is forced to choose between pursuing her passion for detective work and maintaining her family life intact. In the end, she reluctantly gives up her investigation and justifies this decision by saying, "Throughout our years together, I had no reason to regret my decision, for Darío remained a loving understanding husband and father, and my daughter brought nothing but joy into my life" (122). Through this incident, Corpi highlights the dilemma Chicanas face in trying to function within a conservative community that urges a strict adherence to traditional roles. While the decision to abandon the investigation appears to be Damasco's, Corpi makes clear by the way she presents this exchange between husband and wife that there was no choice at all. Darío makes it impossible for Damasco to explore her investigative interests while preserving her family life.

While Corpi shows how Damasco abandons her detective work because it threatens her relationship with her husband, she complicates the situation by giving us a glimpse into Darío's motivations. Feeling remorseful, Darío confesses to his daughter Tania that he had forced Damasco to stop investigating her first case in part because he was jealous. Tania relays to her mother her father's insecurity about Damasco's passion for detective work because he was unable to share her love for it and his regret for forcing her to stop as "he had caused [her] all this pain and made [her] very unhappy" (42). Portraying Darío as a complex individual, who despite some of his conservative views is an otherwise suitable and loving husband and father, reveals how men as well as women are the "victims" of a patriarchally conservative upbringing. While Corpi stresses the complexity of this issue, ultimately she emphasizes that like Damasco, women end up compromising with or reacting (as opposed to acting) to the men in their lives.

Corpi includes two other figures of authority representative of the patriarchal structure within which Damasco functions: her father and detective Matthew Kenyon, the

lead detective in her first case. Though we only meet Damasco's father through a handful of her recollections, his conservative perspective manifests itself in his disapproval of anything outside the norm such as her private investigating or her extrasensory experiences. Just as Damasco's husband and father stand as two patriarchal figures in her personal life, so does detective Kenyon in her first foray into criminal investigation. Their relationship is additionally complicated by his position in the LAPD, an organization already at odds with the Chicano community, and his position of authority as lead investigator in Damasco's first case. Damasco depends on Kenyon to access information on the case. Corpi justifies Kenyon's interest in the input of a civilian woman like Damasco, by making this Kenyon's last case before retirement due to a serious illness. It is only in these conditions of "half-manhood" that Damasco is able to get her "foot in the door" of the investigation. Once Kenyon realizes she is smart, intuitive and brave, he continues to include her in the investigative process even though she has gone back home to Oakland. Damasco and Kenyon's bond continues over time and distance, so much so that at the time of his death, though they haven't spoken in months, Damasco awakens with an excruciating pain in her head resonating the one Kenyon must have felt from his tumor as he died. Though their connection began as a result of a case, by the end of their relationship there is a "psychic" link between them. As a final gesture of his respect for her investigative qualities, Kenyon leaves instructions for all his personal case files to be given to her upon his death.

Despite his position as an Anglo-male law enforcement official, Kenyon is able to gain Damasco's trust and respect even though this does not translate into a conflict-free interaction. Kenyon's cultural background, gender, and profession are theoretically at odds with everything that a Chicana like Damasco stood for in the 1970s. Damasco describes her instinctual response to Kenyon's apparent condescension by saying, "I felt...like a child whose favorite teacher has scolded her in front of her peers. At the same time, I was angry at myself for letting him a man *and a cop* have that kind of authority over me. Why was I allowing him that power?" (99). In showing Damasco's vulnerability in the face of this white male figure of authority, Corpi realistically depicts the constant reassessment Chicanas experience as they attempt to stand their ground in front of figures

of authority, particularly those also in cultural conflict. Being an ethnic woman is not about having a fixed identity, but rather about how the *precedence* of ethnicity over gender or vice versa shifts according to the situation. It is not the same to have a Chicana defending her position within a Chicano community as within an Anglo one, since the latter requires a cultural negotiation as well. In *Eulogy*, Corpi's interest lays in the *process* by which Chicanas resist stereotypical boundaries, rather than in presenting an idealistic scenario. By focusing on the convoluted process of self-identification, Corpi demonstrates how even individuals as self-aware as Damasco's character allow themselves to fall unwittingly into stereotypical patterns.

Corpi though does alter the dynamics of the second half of *Eulogy* which occurs eighteen years after the first part, by removing all the obstacles that prevent Damasco from pursuing her career as a private investigator. Corpi "kills off" both Damasco's father, husband and detective Kenyon so that Damasco can resume her investigative exploits.[46] Yet, in this bold move, Corpi simultaneously portrays some of their noble qualities so we identify with Damasco's pain at their loss. Their deaths move her, often provoking great sorrow and nostalgia. Yet, in removing these three male characters, Corpi grants Damasco the freedom to embark on a career as a private investigator. As the second novel, when *Cactus Blood* opens Damasco's daughter is grown up, her husband and father have died, and Damasco no longer has the dilemma of straddling two separate spheres in her life. Corpi rids Damasco of "extra baggage" that would impede her professional development while she gives narrative space to another topic crucial to the Chicana/o community, the precarious position of illegal immigrants in the U.S.

Corpi dramatizes the pressure Chicanas face evaluating what should take priority, gender or race.[47] She portrays the unstable relationship Chicanas still have with Chicanos

[46] Libretti explains the eighteen year span in which Damasco ceases to work on her first case by concluding that it is Corpi's way of saying, "one cannot have done with history as it will continue to erupt in and inform the present such that the political models of the past developed to understand experience" (72). While this is a plausible explanation, I would argue that the hiatus is more about gender, her role as a female detective, than about her position as a member of the Chicano community in the 1970s. Though her cultural and racial identity comes into play throughout the novel, in this instance, it is her position as a woman, loyal to her duties as wife and mother, that dictate the development of the story.

who see privileging gender issues over cultural ones as a betrayal to the Cause. Yet, it isn't only with Chicanos that Chicanas have had to assert their place within their culture. Corpi illustrates this process of educating "outsiders" through an exchange Damasco has with Detective Kenyon when she corrects his usage of the term "Chicano women." Damasco explains: "I think I better start your education right now. You have to say Chicanas with an 'a' when you talk about us women" (68). Rather than accept his ignorance as a byproduct of his cultural background, Damasco points out his mistake and reminds him that Chicanas are not an addition to the men in their culture.

While she focuses her commentaries on Chicanas' experiences, Corpi at times broadens her observations to women generally, moving past cultural markers to shared gender experiences. Nearing the end of *Eulogy*, Damasco reflects both on the developments in the case and also on women's vulnerable position in society:

> Her thoughts drifted over the many mothers who had been involved in this case...They seemed to be caught in a game where all the main players were men, and the losers were all women and their children. When this was over– as in time of war and subsequent peace– the women would have to swallow their grief and their shame. They would have to support each other, then begin the long and painful task of rebuilding their lives. (170-71)

Corpi universalizes her characters' experiences, observing that women play too passive a role in determining their destinies, allowing men to dictate the course of their lives even when this means the women are left to repair the damage the men have done. Through

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[47] While Libretti's study of Corpi's detective fiction novels remains a central piece on the subject, he fails on one count—to take gender issues into consideration. He approaches the actions and reactions of Corpi's protagonist with an either/or mentality. That is, that she is either supportive of the Cause and her cultural background or she is not; taking a similar stance to the one taken by Chicano activists in the 1960s with relation to the women fighting alongside them. This approach misses an important component of Corpi's aim which is to represent the tension of culture and gender, though not exclusively, certainly as it is embodied in the protagonist, Damasco. On the other hand, Carol Pearson and Ralph Rodriguez have articulately and extensively discussed the tension of culture and gender as seen in Corpi's novels. Pearson focuses on how Corpi inscribes the presence of Chicana subjects into events of Chicano history. By the end of her article she concludes that in her detective fiction Corpi, (as well as Damasco in the narrative) has found a way to make a contribution as a woman while maintaining a connection to her culture and the Movement. Rodriguez centers most of his discussion on Chicanidad around the figure of La Malinche which he maintains "marks not only the acts of erasure in the dominant historical record, but also the masculinist ideological project of the Chicano Movement" (74).

camaraderie, a sort of experiential sisterhood, women gain the strength to move forward and perhaps even actively shape their destinies. Though Corpi does not portray Damasco or the other female characters in the novel as incapable of forging their own destinies, in *Eulogy* she emphasizes their reactive responses which give men the upper hand to control the women and their children's destinies. While some characters are strong, self-sufficient women, like Otilia (Michael David Cisneros' grandmother) they have to function in a world where control over their environment is a constant negotiation.

Throughout the detective series, Corpi builds a community of women whom Damasco alternately leans on or supports. This camaraderie is best personified in *Eulogy* in Luisa, who serves as a surrogate sister to Damasco. Luisa not only shares with Damasco the discovery of Michael David Cisneros' body, but accompanies her throughout this first case. Even detective Kenyon comments on this alliance when he jokes, "Did you tell anybody besides 'Dr. Watson' here?' Smiling he pointed at Luisa with the pencil" (58). Luisa keeps Damasco up to date on detective Kenyon's progress once Damasco returns to Oakland, and makes the ultimate sacrifice giving her life by taking a bullet meant for Damasco. While never to this extreme, throughout her three novels Corpi highlights the intricate connections Damasco attains with the women she encounters in her cases, as well as with those in her immediate family. In *Eulogy*, Otilia, the grandmother of the murdered child, provides an incentive for Damasco to follow the case through in order to bring Otilia some closure, but Otilia also serves as a resource by supplying personal information on the Cisneros family and even by devising a plan to gain access to the home of her son-in-law's brother's when he becomes a target of the investigation. Damasco feels simultaneously protective of Otilia and her family tragedy and indebted to her for trusting her with the family secrets and becoming her "eyes" on the inside. Corpi casts Otilia in a proactive role, empowering her despite being a casualty of her grandson's death. Otilia does not remain in a victim position, but actively engages in finding the person responsible for her family's tragedy.

In addition to the women Damasco meets in her cases, Corpi forges a matriarchal line for Damasco from her dead grandmother who "reaches out" from the dead, to her teenage daughter who forecasts the future. This family line acts as a support system for

Damasco, but also challenges her assumptions and expands her perspectives. Damasco's mother and daughter, Pita and Tania, actively participate in Damasco's life even helping her unravel her second and third case. They give her character dimension and depth, acting as frames of Damasco's past and future.

Reflecting her generational stance, Pita, concerned that her daughter can't take care of herself as she tackles her first case in *Eulogy*, decides to hire a private investigator to follow and protect Damasco. Two generations removed from Pita, Tania urges Damasco to buy a gun and learn to use it so she can protect herself while on a case in *Cactus Blood*. The ways mother and daughter go about "protecting" Damasco reflect two generational viewpoints: that of needing a man to care for and protect you, and that of taking your well-being into your own hands. Damasco stands at the center of these two boundaries—old-school conservative and modern feminist. On the one hand, while Damasco understands her mother's concern for her, she is insulted at the idea that she needs a man to protect her. On the other hand, while owning a gun seems like a logical step to take in her line of work, the thought of owning a gun and the power that it wields unsettles her. Through her mother and daughter, Damasco is introduced to a range of perspectives which broaden her outlook and allow her to connect more genuinely with the individuals involved in her cases.

While Pita and Tania seem to be always at hand, Damasco's grandmother, Mami Julia, only appears when Damasco conjures up her memory. Though Mami Julia has been dead for some time, Damasco repeatedly reminisces on her grandmother's philosophy of life and the advice she dispensed. In appealing to her grandmother's wisdom, Damasco reiterates the importance of her family's past and the impact this "historical" figure has, exerting her influence from the dead. In *Eulogy*, as she weighs her responsibility to her cultural community when faced with a potential Chicano killer, Damasco ponders the differences between Mexican-Americans' situation in her grandmother's time and Chicanas' in the present, saying, "Whereas my grandmother wouldn't conceive of killing a butterfly, I remembered she hadn't had any qualms about squashing the caterpillar to save the plants...How simple decisions were for my grandmother, I mused how black or white the moral question in them. In comparison, the dilemma I found myself had no

easy solutions"(64). Damasco notes the nuances involved in her position as a politically active Chicana who feels a cultural responsibility even as it comes at odds with her ethical principles. Though Damasco appeals to her grandmother's memory, she is not blind to the black and white perspective that her grandmother's ideas may represent on personal issues like male/female relationships or political issues like an ethnic woman's insistence on political representation.

Corpi credits part of her desire to write detective novels to a comment her grandmother once made: "There is no justice in this world" (1). Corpi tries to rectify this "truth" by giving victimized individuals, particularly Chicanas, a space within which to vindicate themselves and a voice with which to retaliate. By training her narrative lens on her Chicana characters, Corpi joins Chicana writers Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, and Denise Chavez, who also explore issues relevant to Chicanas, like the negotiation between ethnicity and gender and the challenge involved in thriving within a restrictive patriarchal structure. Corpi presents historical events through a Chicana's perspective, focusing on the interconnection between key events in Chicano cultural development and the Chicanas who experience them. Finally, Corpi's Chicana characters present a hybridized spiritual reality where alternative forms of spirituality and traditional Catholicism coexist within one individual who can appreciate the merits of both without diminishing the contribution of either.

Traditionally, detective fiction has created a rational, tangible world around which the narrative evolves. Damasco, like Native American detective writer Louis Owens and Chicano writer Rudolfo Anaya, incorporates spirituality into her detective fiction, rejecting the perspective that the spiritual and supernatural are incompatible with the detective story.[48] Reflecting their ethnic background, these authors weave shamans and curanderas into their detective fiction with ease.

In *Eulogy*, triggered by the discovery of Michael David Cisneros' body, Damasco "uncovers" her "dark gift" as she comes to call it, when she has an out-of-body

[48] In both Rudolfo Anaya's Sonny Baca detective series and Louis Owens' *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), the spiritual world, visions and ghosts, are key elements in the development of the narrative and reflect the Chicano and Native American background of the authors. The characters in the novels accept dreams and visions at face value.

experience as she “floats” over the rooftops. There up above, she observes the chaos of the March at the same time that she scrutinizes the defiled body of Michael David Cisneros. By giving Damasco this omniscient perspective, Corpi highlights the parallel narrative development of these two events. Other than skepticism, Damasco’s reaction to her vision is one of embarrassment, and she says “I had always sought rational explanations for anything that happened to me, using intuition to support reason rather than the other way around”(30). At all costs, Damasco wants to avoid the stereotypical assumption made about women being instinctual and emotional beings, so she initially resists her “dark gift” and appeals to her intellect to interpret these inexplicable events. Damasco explains that “whenever a conversation turned to any topic that might put into question a woman’s intellectual ability” (48) she quickly became defensive. Initially, Damasco finds her feminist disposition at odds with a heightened sense of awareness/clairvoyance. Eventually, though, she realizes that these supernatural experiences not only expand her notion of reality, but also force her to acknowledge that her intellectual acumen is not diminished by her spiritual enlightenment. In short, the rational and the spiritual are not mutually exclusive.

Throughout her novels, Damasco’s clairvoyance is linked inextricably to her involvement in an investigation. It is as if her whole being were at the disposal of the case. Even in her dreams, she is sorting through information that will help her solve the case. Investigation is no longer limited to the realm of the concrete (i.e. physical clues), and the world of her detective story is no longer limited to the material world. Corpi destabilizes the material conception of reality by adding a supernatural component. This supernatural ability complements her investigative abilities, rather than overshadows them. She does not solve the case by a “vision”; rather, these visions are presentiments of what is to come and act as additional sources of information. Damasco is ultimately empowered by using both her rational and her spiritual abilities. Corpi hybridizes the art of detecting by allowing the investigations to function on two planes simultaneously: the intellectual and the spiritual.

Corpi does not isolate Damasco with her “dark gift;” in fact she creates a support network of older female characters who practice alternate belief systems and accept her

supernatural abilities without question. The experiences range from her dead grandmother Mami Julia who was said to have predicted two minor earthquakes by reading the *signs*, to Pita and her best friend Nina who believe in "folklore learned from their mothers" (Flys-Junquera 107) while they remain faithful Catholic parishioners. In Mami Julia's case, while her folkloric belief system allows her to predict atmospheric changes, she remains devoted to the Catholic Church's traditions so staunchly that she complains to Damasco about the reforms taking place within the Catholic Church which allow Mass to be given in a language other than Latin. Corpi thus shows how it is possible to reconcile practices that on the surface might appear incompatible. These women become important presences in Damasco's life, acting as wise foremothers who foster and encourage her to embrace her gift.

While supernatural and alternative spirituality take center stage, Corpi acknowledges traditional religious practices as a core element of Chicana/o culture. Early in *Eulogy*, Damasco goes to Saint Augustine's Catholic Church in search of a place to think, and realizes the scent of incense and the familiar sights, votive candles, and a woman reciting the rosary in Spanish "brought back so many childhood memories" (42). Her senses make her childhood memories tangible. She admits that she likes watching the rituals of the Catholic Church, but adds irreverently that if she found herself in danger in the Church, she would appeal to the priest in the confessional as "I thought he'd probably be grateful for the interruption" (43). By integrating the Catholic Church into her narrative, Corpi demonstrates that regardless of cross-generational and cross-economic differences the Church remains a prominent presence in Chicana/o culture. So much so, that Mando a distrustful Chicano gang member chooses the Church as the only safe place to meet with Damasco. Their interaction in the Church turns out to be the last time they speak before he is murdered.

Not only marginalized Chicanos, like Mando, see the Church as a safe house but also more affluent members of the Mexican-American community like Cecilia Castro-Biddle who rely on the Church for guidance. While Damasco is trying to piece together Cecilia Castro-Biddle's past, she appeals to the local Catholic Church for information, judging that a transplanted Mexican would typically worship at a Catholic Church.

Damasco notes the financial distinctions amongst parishioners, the rich praying in a more affluent area and Church than the poor, in this way emphasizing the hierarchical arrangement within a hypothetically egalitarian organization. Damasco concedes that "despite my dislike for judging offspring in accordance with their parents' social preferences"(113) she had to consider that Castro-Biddle, from a well-to-do family, would never worship side by side with farm workers and waiters. Her instinct pays off and she goes to the affluent part of town to speak to the parish priest, Father John Stewart.

Respecting the responsibility of Father Stewart as confessor to Castro-Biddle, Damasco phrases her inquiries carefully. As Father Stewart informs Damasco that Castro-Biddle had taken her own life, concluding, "May God have mercy on her soul," Damasco knowingly responds "Amen" (113) and waits a minute in silence before continuing. At the end of their exchange, Father Stewart expresses his reservations at perhaps having burdened Damasco with the information she requested: "I pray I didn't place a cross on your shoulders" to which she responds "None that wasn't there before. Father"(115). This brief exchange denotes Damasco's familiarity with the rituals of Catholicism, being a lapsed Catholic. While Corpi emphasizes the knowledge of Catholic rituals and terminology in the Chicana/o community, she equally underscores the prevalence of alternative spiritual beliefs such as those coexisting in characters like Pita, Mami Julia and Damasco who become the embodiment of hybrid spirituality.

Corpi privileges multiple perspectives and voices suggesting the limitations that exist when narrating any history, national or familial, through a single perspective. While Damasco filters all the information, Otilia, Lilian, Michael Cisneros, detective Kenyon and even the voices of Paul and Michael Cisneros as kids (through Damasco's clairvoyance) contribute to the description of the Cisneros' family history and to solving Michael David's death. Through a minor character like detective Kenyon who has access to FBI files, Damasco learns the official- documented-by-authorities' version of Michael Cisneros' life from his birth to his son's. Through Kenyon we get uninspiring yet informative background information on the Cisneros family. Subsequently, Damasco has a vision of Michael and Paul Cisneros arguing heatedly over a childhood prank when

Michael tricked Paul into eating some of his pet rabbit's excrement. As a result, it appears, Paul feels betrayed by his beloved pet, kills it. This exchange is presented in broken snippets, like a dream, where Damasco mainly relays her perception of this exchange. Still, her description reads as if the events were happening at the present time instead of thirty years before, making Damasco's contribution to the family story more personal than that of detective Kenyon's. Finally, at the conclusion of the novel, Michael Cisneros fills in the gaps to his family history tying up the loose ends of the case. Michael remembers alternately with amusement and horror his and his brother's childhood which ultimately set the stage for his son's murder. Since it is his personal history, Cisneros' contribution reads like a private conversation to which Damasco is privy. All three narrators are presented as equally trustworthy, but their degree of familiarity with the Cisneros' history, their individual characteristics from cultural background to gender, and the vessel through which their information is presented, from an official document to a dream introduces different perspectives from which to examine the events at hand.

Similarly, through quotes from a range of sources, Corpi presents political events like the Chicano Moratorium. The Moratorium is presented in glimpses from minor characters like Detective Kenyon, Joel Galeano, and even the coroner at Michael David's murder site, to central characters like Luisa and Damasco. The coroner working for the LAPD, Dr. Donald Dewey, pronounces the names of all three of the casualties of the Chicano Moratorium for the first time, clinically explaining that their bodies will not be immediately autopsied while the events are sorted out, "Just buying time I suppose. They got themselves into a real jug of jalapeño this time"(27). Hearing this, Damasco wonders if his comments refer to the police officers or the demonstrators. Damasco's experience at the March is conveyed for the most part through her first out of body experience, where from the sky she sees parents carrying their children overpowered by gas fumes, policemen using their batons to strike the crowd while in contrast wealthy white people continue their daily activities in Beverly Hills undisturbed by the commotion. Simultaneously, Damasco's account is as descriptive as it is critical, noting the abuse of power by law enforcement officials and the indifferent response of the elite in society. Compiling all these stories to create a final narrative and viewing events through

radically different perspectives of gender, ethnicity, and age allows the reader a more nuanced description of events.

By *Cactus Blood,* Damasco is an amateur detective training for her private investigator license. Her partner Justin Escobar and she, who have formed both a professional and a personal alliance, are investigating the suspicious death of a Chicano friend, Sonny Mares. His active involvement in the United Farm Workers (UFW) Strike of 1973 leads them to believe that his death might be related to this event. As a result, a considerable portion of their investigation is taken up revisiting the events of this contentious moment in Chicano history. In *Cactus Blood* Damasco also comes to terms with her visions finally accepting them as part of her identity.

Corpi begins *Cactus Blood* juxtaposing national and individual histories. She sets the discovery of Sonny Mares' body against the video images of a documentary running on his television at the time of his death. The documentary presents the UFW's strike led by César Chávez, members of the clergy and other officials who showed their solidarity with farm workers' unfair wages and harmful conditions causing them to get ill from the pesticides used in the fields they harvested. The video shows how, despite the peaceful protest, law enforcement officials lost control and dragged, beat and maced the crowds. By detailing the events of this formative period in Chicano history, Corpi introduces uninformed readers to this episode, inserts these events into mainstream historical record, and compels Chicana/o individuals acquainted with these events, to revisit moments crucial to their communal identity. Corpi places Sonny Mares, Art Bello and Ramón Caballos at the center of the events. Sonny Mares dies under suspicious circumstances watching a documentary film about the 1973 strike in which he participated, Art Bello makes the film that documents these events, and Ramón Caballos appears on the film blowing up a pesticide tank in an effort to have the Cause taken seriously. Through these three characters, we get a first-person perspective on the events surrounding the 1973 strike. Thus Corpi dramatizes issues specific to this contentious period. In addition to inciting the growers, Ramón Caballos' violent tactics forced activists like Bello and Mares to testify against him in order to protect the integrity of the UFW group whose tactics advocated solely peaceful means of resistance. Even within a group of activists

fighting for the same cause, different tactics lead to divisiveness within the Movement causing strife and tension.

Corpi explores the hybrid Chicano identity by contrasting Chicano culture with Anglo popular culture. She begins *Cactus Blood*: "With the first of seven games scheduled for the next day, the main topic of conversation in Oakland was the "Battle of the Bay," as fans called the 1989 World Series between the Oakland A's and the San Francisco Giants" (12). As the radio in the background blares news about the game, Damasco and Justin receive news of Sonny Mares' death and begin examining his participation in the grape boycott led by Cesar Chávez. Corpi shows the clash and the co-existence of events as far removed from one another as an illegal immigrant's experience is from a legalized Anglo's. Corpi thus replicates Chicana/os' hybrid experience in the US where they participate in popular mainstream culture, as well as events exclusively experienced by them as marginalized members of society. Experiencing events of Anglo as well as Chicano culture enriches their understanding of their environment while also creating conflicts between their cultural identities.

Corpi is particularly skillful in *Cactus Blood* in vividly portraying the particular difficulties that an illegal Chicana might face. Through the figure of Carlota Navarro, an illegal immigrant who was raped as a teenager by her employer, Corpi simultaneously addresses the topic of sexual and physical abuse of women as well as the substandard conditions faced by illegal immigrants in the U.S. Corpi produces a first-hand account through Carlota. Her illegal status in the U.S. prohibits her from contacting the authorities when she is raped by her employer, or from seeking medical care when faced with a dangerous medical condition soon after. She relies on organizations that help the indigent, works as much as her medical conditions will allow and remains as invisible as possible in an attempt to avoid deportation.

Carlota befriends Damasco soon after they meet even though Carlota remains a potential suspect in the investigation of Sonny Mares' death. Through a series of interviews her friend Luisa compiled to create a record of the "Chicana Experience," Damasco uncovers details of Carlota's life when she first came to the U.S. Two days short of Carlota's fifteenth birthday, Dr. Stephens, the man she was working for, taking

advantage of the fact that his wife and two daughters were out of town, brutally raped Carlota. Subsequently, Carlota scrubs her skin raw in an attempt to remove the memory of the rape, and runs away inadvertently through some fields recently fumigated with pesticides. This produces a neurological disorder that plagues her for the rest of her life. Carlota describes the rape in detail allowing Damasco to vicariously experience the fear, horror and shock that Carlota experienced during her ordeal. As a teenager, alone in the U.S., Carlota had relied on Dr. Stephens to protect her as an employer and a father-figure but instead, he had betrayed this trust unspeakably.

To show that Carlota's rape is not an isolated incident but rather a too oft recurring occurrence, Corpi includes three other instances of rape. María Baldomar explains that her family forced her to marry an abusive drunk after he raped her and got her pregnant. This same man beat María and her daughter Josie, wasted all their income on alcohol and "offered" his daughter Josie to a friend who would have raped her if her mother María had not come home early from work. These examples show young naïve women losing their innocence through a sexual assault perpetrated by men they knew. Corpi also depicts sexual violence against a young college student who is raped and killed by a stranger on campus as she is walking home. Corpi illustrates the randomness of this attack by an unknown predator. This young woman was Justin's college girlfriend and he carries remorse and anger over her violent death because unable to meet her and walk her home, he feels responsible for the tragedy. Her death steers Justin toward a career in law enforcement.

Even though Carlota is not herself a field laborer, Corpi manipulates the narrative to reflect the Chicana/o illegal immigrants' experience on Carlota's body. Her body comes to stand for all the field workers who become ill because of their exposure to pesticides. Scared and isolated, these illegal aliens are victimized and their status as transients abused. In Carlota's case, Corpi describes how she was forced to live on the streets and seek medical help for her serious condition from groups volunteering their services to the indigent. One of the doctors that took care of her was Damasco's husband, who prior to his death belonged to a community-oriented group who tried to address the discriminatory treatment received by the underprivileged or the illegal. Through Carlota,

we see the intersection of personal and cultural history and understand how immigrant history is a lived experience.

Family histories as well as national histories that are not confronted have a way of resurfacing and triggering further destruction. Even though he felt it was cultural and political heresy, Sonny Mares chose to assist authorities to convict fellow Chicano Ramón Caballos. This decision ultimately contributed to his suicide. Taking advantage of this guilt and remorse allows Josie Baldomar to create confusion and throw suspicion on Caballos for crimes she is committing. In the same way, covering up the Stephens' family history, leads to further acts of violence. By hiding what her husband did to Carlota, Mrs. Stephens allowed resentment and hostility to build up in her children who, unaware of their father's past, try to harm Carlota because they blame her for their father's death.

Several characters: Josie, Art, Dieguito, Ramón and Damasco, all cultural minorities, help and protect Carlota. Through the relationship these characters develop with Carlota, Corpi highlights the cultural imperative that moves some Chicanos to political activism as it also encourages cultural solidarity on an individual scale. In all three cases, Damasco is compelled to help members of her cultural community to get justice. She realizes as each case proceeds that she has become personally invested in the outcome not only because of her need to find out the truth, but because she feels responsible for the victims in the case. In *Eulogy*, Damasco realizes that even though it would be easier to walk away from the murder of the child she and Luisa found, she has no choice but to continue investigating since, "...the spirit of the dead child had taken hold of me [and] I would no longer be able to go about my life without feeling his presence in me" (28). Damasco allows herself to be changed by the circumstances and individuals involved in her investigation. It is not only the victims that "call" out to Damasco, but also the people left behind to suffer like Otilia. In *Cactus Blood*, Damasco develops an attachment to Carlota and her commitment to the case stems in part from her desire to clear Carlota's name. By the end of the novel, Carlota who is deathly ill leaves for Mexico, her homeland. Damasco realizes the effect Carlota had on her as she finds herself "secretly fostering the false hope that Carlota would come back, though I knew I would never see her again" (249). Equally important is the connection Damasco forms

with the curandera (healer) Maria Baldomar to whom she promises that she will take care of Carlota. Maria Baldomar like Otilia in *Eulogy*, provides Damasco with a reason to solve the case, at the same time as she acts as a source of information and support. [49]

In *Cactus Blood*, Corpi most extensively explores issues of spirituality and specifically Damasco's clairvoyant abilities. Through María Baldomar, Damasco begins to embrace what she refers to as her "dark gift." Immediately upon meeting Damasco, María notices Damasco's ability to look into the past which María says is really the power to look into the future. Just as Corpi stresses the need for her characters to face their histories in order to move forward, María connects the spiritual ability to see into the past as a window into the future. Maria's relationship with Damasco is complex. Damasco feels responsible for this mother-figure while she is indebted to her for helping her embrace her clairvoyance that ultimately is of use to her in future cases. With María's guidance, Damasco stops cursing her ancestors from whom Damasco thinks she inherited the clairvoyance.

Through this relationship between María and Damasco, Corpi conveys the difficulties involved in being a spiritual healer or visionary in a society that scoffs at such practices. Not only do individuals practicing alternative forms of spirituality have to contend with skepticism and scorn from the general population, but they have to remain steadfast in their conviction to follow their spiritual path of choice regardless of the challenges. María serves to introduce Damasco to the idea of reincarnation. She repeatedly calls Damasco, Sabina, because she has the same "radiant spirit" (94) that her clairvoyant friend had before she died 43 years ago. Corpi does not press the issue of reincarnation but leaves the door open to the possibility. In *Black Widow's Wardrobe*, her third novel, Corpi develops the theme of reincarnation. In addition to María the curandera, Corpi includes other figures of alternative spirituality, Dieguito, the shaman, and Ramón Caballos the herbalist, characterizing their traditions as legitimate sources of

[49] Chicana critic Tey Diana Rebolledo describes the curandera as "a compelling figure in Chicano literature because she is a woman who has control over her own life and destiny as well as that of others. She incorporates intuition and rationality"(87). This figure is the prototype of the hybrid spirituality we have been discussing in this chapter. Corpi uses this cultural and literary figure as a guide Damasco in her spiritual journey.

knowledge. In *Cactus Blood*, Corpi's focus is on the different forms of alternative spirituality like the ability of Pita, Damasco's mother, to announce a massive earthquake that ultimately occurs. Even when she includes examples of traditional religion, Corpi frames them in a non-traditional way. In describing the March led by César Chavez, Corpi focuses on the banners the participants carry "bearing the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe" (17) reflecting the overlap of cultural politics and spirituality as well as illustrating the militancy of the Virgin as supporter and defender of her people.

Equally important to María and Carlota in Damasco's political and spiritual development are Pita and Tania who function as the framework within which Damasco flourishes. As a support network, in *Cactus Blood*, Pita, Damasco's mother, takes care of Carlota, a potential witness in the investigation, regardless of the difficulties involved as a result of Carlota's erratic behavior and recurrent seizures. While in *Cactus Blood* as well as in *Eulogy*, Tania draws Damasco out of her nostalgic moments by coming to visit her and participating in some of the family rituals they performed when their husband/father was alive. The simple act of watching a baseball game with her daughter allows Damasco to appreciate her "present" in its entirety. Finally, in *Black Widow*, as Damasco lays injured in a hospital after solving a case in Mexico, her mother and daughter catch the first plane available in order to be by her side. Part of Damasco's strength comes from knowing that she can always count on the women in her family, even though she works her cases on her own. Knowing that they back her up, gives Damasco the freedom to take chances and risk failure. Pita and Tania also provide generationally-specific viewpoints that enhance Damasco's perspective. While Pita shares her home remedies and her lived experiences, Tania reminds Damasco of younger Chicanas' political position: "they think you sold out, that you only did what the men told you"(39) and didn't exercise your feminism fully. Damasco is thus repeatedly challenged to re-evaluate her positions.

Corpi constructs personal and cultural histories through multiple voices/perspectives that create a more nuanced picture. As she is watching the video shot by Art Bello, activist in the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, Damasco remembers her participation along with Darío and Luisa in the 1973 grape boycott. "I relived that

sweltering summer day when all of us marched behind the coffin of a field laborer brutally beaten and dragged, then left to die in a ditch by Kern County Sheriff deputies," Damasco says, adding that "before that summer of 1973 came to an end, a second farm worker died...And thousands of farm workers ended up in jail" (18). Damasco's first hand description of the strike and the aftermath personalizes the events and reflects the impact they had on the individuals living them. Years later, activists remain faithful to their ideals still refusing to consume grapes by which they show their continued solidarity with the plight of grape pickers. Furthermore, Corpi sets in motion Damasco's recollection of the past with a detailed description of a video recording showing the March and the subsequent violence at the hand of law enforcement. Mediated through a camera lens, Corpi grants access to another vantage point showing the events surrounding the 1973 strike and the blowing up of a tank containing pesticides. To complete the historical re-creation, Corpi uses Art and Myra, active members of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, to illustrate the fallout Art and Sonny had to endure in the Ramón Caballos case, and the sacrifice as activists they were willing to make to help the Cause. Myra illustrates Sonny's commitment to the Chicano Civil Rights Movement by describing how he sold his car to contribute to the bail money needed for the farm workers arrested during the strikes. Though incorporating historical events into her narratives improve the quality of the narrative by informing and reminding the readers of often overlooked historical events and providing a backdrop from which the characters emerge, this tactic sometimes shifts the readers' attention away from the detective story which at points gets relegated into the background. [50]

In Corpi's first two novels, through Damasco's inner struggles as a Chicana within U.S. culture, Corpi examines Chicanos' historical position in a community of Anglo majority. Not only does Damasco reevaluate her active commitment to Chicano causes, but she is also reminded of her position as a racialized being amongst Anglos. In *Cactus Blood*, halfway through their investigation, an elderly lady assumes Justin and

[50] While I believe her first novel was most successful in meshing the historical and spiritual elements with the detective fiction narrative, Corpi herself maintains that by the time she wrote the third novel in the series she felt she had finally struck the right balance between all the narrative elements.

Damasco are looking for domestic employment because of their race. Damasco is livid that “gardener” and “housekeeper” are the labels that come to mind when this woman sees them, but Justin, assuming her narrow-mindedness is beyond repair, disarms her with his charm. This brief exchange illustrates the pervasive existence of racism as it forces Damasco to be ever conscious of her racialized identity. Libretti observes along these lines that during the course of the investigations part of the discovery process involves Damasco uncovering how she fits within her cultural and geographical communities (74).

By the final novel in the series, *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*, Damasco is a self assured licensed private investigator who investigates an attack on a woman, Licia Lecuona, who is participating in a candlelight procession honoring the dead. The narrative evolves as a result of a twenty-year old murder when Licia murdered her husband fearing that he would kill her and her unborn children. Most of her story is initially told by a progressive journalist, Celia Howard. Having taken an interest in the case, Howard writes a book about it. Through Howard, Corpi raises awareness of the limited options and rights women had in the past and by extension demonstrates how far society has come even though inequality among the sexes remains. Howard explains that Licia’s husband married her for her money and then proceeded to waste it on alcohol, drugs and other women. He also abused his wife physically and sexually, but since she never reported it to the authorities, and it occurred before it was deemed possible that a husband could rape his wife (before “battered wife syndrome” existed), his abuse was overlooked as a potential justification for her actions. Licia served her full sentence. When the novel begins in 1992, Licia has just come out of prison and someone is trying to kill her.

In *Black Widow*, Corpi foregrounds gender/women’s issues. Her focus on Chicana issues ultimately extends to issues faced by women regardless of ethnicity. Corpi presents a range of female experiences from single motherhood to spousal infidelity through the close knit community of women like Rosenda Cabral and Nina Contreras that aid Damasco’s investigative efforts as well as the victims and casualties of the crimes she investigates, like Licia and Isabela. Domestic violence is dramatized through Licia who

has come to be known as “black widow,” and through Isabela, Licia’s sister-in-law, who is verbally and physically abused by her husband. Though both these characters are Chicanas, domestic violence is developed less as a cultural issue than a gendered one. Corpi represents women who are active participants in shaping their future, boldly facing physical and psychological demons, as well as women who allow their lives to be shaped by others, succumbing to abuse and fearful of alternatives. Equally important is Corpi’s thorough consideration of Chicanas’ cultural legacy by way of Malintzin Tenepal, the mythical mother of forsaken women.

In *Eulogy* and *Cactus Blood*, Corpi focuses on historical events related to the Chicano community on U.S. soil while in *Black Widow* she goes chronologically further back in time, to Mexican soil where she examines the Chicanas’ historical inheritance starting with Malintzin Tenepal in the sixteenth century. Corpi uses this historical figure as a springboard to discuss issues of gender inequality and violence against women. In *Black Widow*, Corpi focuses on a historical figure as opposed to a set of events. Corpi lays out the history of Malintzin Tenepal’s life, the importance of this figure for Chicanas in the twentieth century, and the similar issues still faced by women despite the four century gap, such as the patriarchal structures within which women remain at the mercy of men. By foregrounding the issue of reincarnation in presenting the possibility that Licia might be the reincarnation of Malintzin Tenepal, Corpi fuses a discussion of spirituality, history, women’s issues and the detective fiction plot. By linking Licia’s experience to Malintzin Tenepal’s, Corpi draws a line of historical descent from sixteenth century Mexico (Malintzin Tenepal), to the 1970s California (Licia) and finally to the 1990s California (Isabela).

While there is no historical record of Malintzin Tenepal, and the different versions of her life story are contradictory, some “facts” that seem consistent are that she was an indigenous woman sold into slavery by her mother. She became one of Hernán Cortés’ slaves and came to serve as interpreter and intermediary between him and the indigenous people. She bore Cortés a son, but when she was of no more use to him, he married her off to Juan Jaramillo and took their son with him. Chicana critics like Norma Alarcón and Tey Diana Rebolledo have re-envisioned and reinvented the image of

Malintzin Tenepal, who has been traditionally portrayed as a sell-out and a harlot. [51] Alarcón and Rebolledo, among other Chicana critics and literary figures, instead portray Malintzin as a strong figure with agency who has been unfairly characterized by historians and much maligned by Mexicans. Alarcón explains that since the sixteenth century Malintzin has retained three names: Malintzin as she was known to the Amerindians, Doña Marina as she was baptized by the Spanish, and La Malinche as she was labeled by the natives amidst the Conquest and later on by Mexicans who blamed her for Cortés' success. Mexicans came to use this name and its derivative "Malinchista" to mean betrayer of race and country. Conversely, La Malinche is seen by Chicana writers as a victim of family and historical circumstances as well as the embodiment of the Indian race's subordination to the European white race. Rebolledo explains that "for many Chicana writers La Malinche chose to be a survivor– a woman who used her knowledge of language and political knowledge to survive"(64). Rebolledo emphasizes that perhaps the most significant aspect of La Malinche is "the transformation of La Malinche from a silent figure to one who presents her own dialogue with myth and history" (76). Corpi as other Chicana writers have done in their poetry and novels, educates those who are ignorant of Malintzin's place in history, as well as clarifies misconceptions that have surrounded her life story. [52]

Licia, whom Damasco is trying to protect, believes she is the reincarnation of Malintzin and that her life will follow this historical figure's path. As a result, Damasco is forced to execute an in-depth investigation into Malintzin's life in order to prevent history from repeating itself. Fearing that she will end up as badly as Malintzin,

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[51] For Chicanas, the historical character known most commonly as La Malinche has become both a figure representing the historical tergiversation created by a male misogynistic perspective, as well as a symbol of strength and courage in the face of insurmountable obstacles. Norma Alarcón provides one of the most detailed studies of Malintzin in "Traduttora, Traditora : A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism"(1989). While in *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (2000), Sonia Saldívar-Hull discusses this La Malinche and mentions numerous articles in which female authors try to rectify the misrepresentation of this historical figure.

[52] By the time Corpi writes this last novel in the series, she has underscored key formative moments of the Chicano Movement and Chicanas place within it, and chooses to shift the focus entirely to what Ramón Gutiérrez refers to as the "new chronology of Chicana history" which begins with the figure of Malintzin Tenepal rather than the turning point of 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

Damasco uses the resources at her disposal, friends and family, to gather information on this historical figure erased from historical accounts. Malintzin's life story becomes a legitimate source of information to help her resolve the mysterious circumstances surrounding Licia's life.

Pita and Nina, Damasco's mother and her comadre, relish the task of uncovering all the available information on Malintzin as if they were detectives themselves, with Nina acting like a Watson to Pita's Sherlock. Pita and Nina become champions of Malintzin horrified at the treatment she received in her own time and the unjust way her memory is still handled. They treat each new piece of information on Malintzin as an episode in a dramatic soap opera. In one of their "reports" to Damasco, having found a piece of historical scandal related to Cortés first wife's death, Pita and Nina leave the following phone message for Damasco, "'He killed her,'" I heard my mother say, 'He choked her to death. But he said she died in her sleep, even though the marks of her pearl necklace were all around her neck'" (83). Through Pita and Nina's research, Corpi not only presents the various versions of Malintzin's story, but also the names of literary critics like Bernal Diaz, Octavio Paz, and Norma Alarcón that have figured prominently in the debate surrounding this figure.

Given the discrepancy and the contradictory nature of what is available on Malintzin's story, and even more notably, the gap of information in the historical record, it is not surprising that Corpi underscores the need for a *community* of women to recover this cultural foremother maligned through history. Chicanas ranging from poets and literary critics to housewives, all have a stake in Malintzin's story given that they are all "hijas de la chingada" and consequently should assume responsibility in revising Malintzin's legacy. [53] Again Corpi emphasizes the presence of history in individuals' lives and their need to face the past in order to thrive in the present. As Damasco explains

[53] Similarly, Carol Pearson notes that it takes a chorus of female voices to depict Malintzin's tale. Malintzin's story has been shrouded in misinformation and misogynistic jargon like "Hijos de la chingada" which literally means sons of the violated one. While this phrase and the word "chingar" have countless interpretations, they are often used when referring to a betrayer of culture and country. Octavio Paz dedicates a chapter of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* to "The Sons of La Malinche" and a great part of the chapter to an analysis of the word "chingar."

in *Black Widow*, "I surmised that Chicana scholars and writers aimed at creating a new more positive view of La Malinche" giving Mexicanas and Chicanas "a better sense of themselves not as las hijas de la chingada…but as las hijas de la Malinche—the daughters of an intelligent woman who had exercised the options available to her and chose her own destiny" (97). Of history in general, Damasco observes in her discussion of Malintzin with Licia that "we would get a rounder view only if all sides were presented. But that's rarely the case" (120). It is Corpi's aim to present historical events and characters that will complement existing mainstream narrative and present multiple perspectives to provide a more inclusive narrative.

While Corpi devotes the bulk of her historical revisiting in *Black Widow* to Matlinzin's sixteenth century life, she also mentions briefly the 1969 Third World Student Strike. As Damasco returns to Cal-Berkeley for information on one of her suspects, she remembers the strike in which she participated when students peacefully demanded more recruitment of minority students. Following a six month strike, the Sheriff's deputies, the highway patrolmen, and the campus police officers violently confronted the students leading to the deployment of the National Guard to resolve the conflict. Though Corpi does not provide as much insight into this transformative episode as she does with the Chicano Moratorium and the 1973 grape pickers strike, she does emphasize this event as key in the development of a Chicano identity and community. Through Damasco's recollections, Corpi shows that in part, due to the stance that Damasco and her fellow students took in 1969, there are more Latinos, African-Americans and Asian-Americans represented in the student body at the university as Damasco observes when she informally surveys the campus. Having been one of those minority students studying in a homogeneously white Berkeley in the mid 1960s, Corpi emphasizes the need for ethnic diversity both to enrich the university setting and also to provide a more hospitable environment for minority students' educational experience.

Corpi uses the experiences of her Chicana characters to look into Chicana gender issues--from Licia and Isabela who are physically and psychologically abused to Nina whose unfaithful husband undermines her self-esteem at every opportunity. While these are clearly not issues exclusive to Chicanas, Corpi presents them as prevalent within the

Chicano community. Even though we are led to believe that Isabela turned a blind eye to her brother's abuse of Licia, Corpi portrays Isabela as a victim who, living in an abusive relationship herself, only has the strength to survive. Isabela's husband is portrayed as a tyrant who barks orders at his wife and two children, and physically assaults and verbally humiliates his wife. After hearing him slap her in response to what he deems her "disobedience," Damasco reflects, "I would have loved to charge back into the house, and, like a Don Quixote, do battle with Legorreta [the husband]. But I regretfully had grown beyond Quixote's eminent foolhardiness" (80). This evokes a realistic portrayal of domestic violence in which fearful victims and impotent witnesses do not speak up, or report these incidents so that the cycle of abuse continues. What would Damasco have accomplished by rushing into the house given the passive attitude of Isabela? Most likely, she would have gotten herself arrested for trespassing. Ultimately, because of her love for her children, Isabela decides to take a stand against her husband and her father who is equally domineering. She gives information to Damasco so that she can rescue Licia, and in the "final showdown" manages to hamper her husband's plans to kill one of the detectives trespassing on their land. Only the fear for her children's safety compels Isabela to break away from her father and husband and take control of her own life. In her depiction of Isabela's husband Legorreta, and her father Lecuona, Corpi draws a parallel between their contempt for others, particularly women, and for cultural artifacts belonging to less developed countries than the U.S. Both men illegally import Pre-Columbian artifacts from Mexico to the U.S. assuming a cultural and intellectual superiority, reminiscent of their treatment of women who they deem their own personal property. Finally, in making Legorreta a wealthy university professor, Corpi stresses the fact that abuse is not reserved for the poor and uneducated.

As a secondary point in the novel, Corpi includes the experience of Nina whose philandering husband she spies on so inadequately that he always discovers her. Though Corpi portrays the humor of Nina's situation, trapped in a loveless marriage with a man who won't let his wife make money doing something she loves (making lace) because he would lose face in front of his friends, the tragedy of Nina's situation doesn't escape Corpi.

In addition to the link the figure of Malintzin draws between Mexico and Chicanos, Corpi creates a more contemporary tie between the two cultures. In *Black Widow*, Damasco is temporarily paired up with another private investigator, Dora Saldaña. Though they dislike each other initially, by the end of their work partnership they have come to respect each other's strengths.[54] Trying to locate Licia, Damasco and Saldaña are forced to travel to Mexico and rely on their Mexican contact for cultural and geographical orientation. In a conversation between Saldaña and Mario Quintero, their Mexican guide, Corpi highlights some of the complexities of the relationship between Chicanos and Mexico. Saldaña explains that it is important for Chicanos to be acknowledged by Mexican people because: "We Chicanos are like abandoned children of divorced cultures. We are forever longing to be loved by an absent neglectful parent – Mexico—and also to be truly accepted by the other parent—the United States. We want bicultural harmony"(148). Having dealt extensively in the first two novels with the intricate relationship between Chicanos and Anglo culture in the U.S., Corpi uses *Black Widow* to examine Chicanos' relationship to Mexico-- the other country of origin that forms the hybrid Chicano culture.

Corpi develops spirituality differently in *Black Widow* than in her earlier novels. While she incorporates elements of traditional Catholicism and supernatural visions creating a hybrid spirituality as she does in *Eulogy* and *Cactus Blood*, she also expends a great deal of narrative time on spiritualism and reincarnation. Whether she is discussing a belief in a Catholic saint like Saint Christopher or a supernatural vision of conquistadors, Corpi portrays both cases matter-of-factly. As Damasco is about to leave for Mexico, her mother commissions her welfare to Saint Christopher, provoking an irreverent monologue in Damasco: "I didn't have the heart to remind my mother that Saint Christopher was among those stripped of their saintly power by the Pope. In Heaven, as on earth, no one was indispensable…if things in Heaven worked as on earth, he probably had been replaced, and his substitute might hear my mother's prayer" (141). Equally

[54] Corpi certainly saw potential for the development of Saldaña's character since together with Justin Escobar she made them the protagonists of her most recent detective novel, *Crimson Moon* (2004). In this case it is Damasco, who makes the cameo appearance in the narrative.

plausibly, when Damasco realizes that the Lecuonas were not dressed as conquistadores on the night of the Procession of the Dead, she realizes that she had "experienced a regression to a past life, or, worse yet, a hallucination" (157). At this moment, traditional and alternative forms of spirituality coexist seamlessly.

Reincarnation as a legitimate belief is first developed through Licia's conviction that she is the reincarnation of Malintzin. The parallels in Malintzin's and Licia's lives--they were both in love with Spaniards who abused them, and they both had sons that they named Martín who ultimately abandoned them-- cause Damasco a reason-based individual to consider this a possibility. Damasco ultimately settles on the rational explanation that given all that Licia suffered, watching as a child her father murder her mother and commit suicide, and then as an adult, falling into a physically and psychologically abusive marriage, her only "consolation was to live the life of another woman who'd been dead 463 years" (123). Still, Corpi toys with the reader. Licia disappears and presumably dies under mysterious circumstances yet, a year later, Licia (or her ghost) is spotted going into her home that is inexplicably engulfed in flames even though the fire department determines arson was not a cause and no human remains are ever recovered. On this ambivalent note Corpi ends the novel.

In *Eulogy*, *Cactus Blood* and *Black Widow*, Corpi negotiates elements of gender and ethnicity, incorporates pivotal moments of Chicano history and features a hybrid spirituality that combines Catholicism with alternative spiritual practices. In addition, by combining elements of feminist detective fiction and multicultural detective fiction she creates her own hybrid version of the genre. Corpi's series alternately imitates and subverts the traditional forms of detective fiction that precede her work. She works from within the genre, and through her example, of challenging the parameters of the genre, she serves as a role model for future Latina writers. As Corpi focuses on pivotal *moments* of Chicano history, Julia Alvarez in her two historical novels recovers female historical *figures* of Dominican history through whom she examines formative moments in the development of a Dominican identity.

Re-writing History in Julia Alvarez' *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé*

"The writing of history is one way of getting rid of the weight of the past" Goethe

While Lucha Corpi's focus in her detective fiction novels is on pivotal (Chicano) historical events, Julia Alvarez shifts the focus in her historically-based novels to historical figures (in Dominican history) around whom she develops her narratives. Relying even more heavily on history than Corpi, Alvarez uses the lives of The Mirabal sisters, Salomé Ureña and Camila Henríquez Ureña, forgotten historical figures, to examine periods in Dominican history, discuss women's limitations and options within a patriarchally-driven culture, and address some of the her own philosophical questions.

For two decades, Julia Alvarez has served as a representative voice of Latina experience. Though she began by publishing poetry, *Homecoming* (1984), it has been her efforts as a novelist that have won her critical acclaim and a loyal readership. With the publication of *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accent* (1992), ¡*YO!* (1997) and an autobiographical book of essays, *Something to Declare* (1999), Alvarez undeniably became the leading Dominican-American writer of the latter part of the 20th Century. Ilan Stavans confirms this assessment when he notes that "not since the early part of the twentieth-century larger-than-life scholar and essayist Pedro Henríquez Ureña delivered the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University in 1940-41…had a writer from Dominican Republic been the target of such admiration here"(60).[55] In her poetry, her novels, and her collection of essays, Alvarez betrays a partiality for the semi-autobiographical genre from which she departs with her two historical novels, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995) and *In the Name of Salom*é (2000).

In using factual events and figures of Dominican history, Alvarez appears to "distance" her subject matter from her own life, yet the two genres are not as disparate as

[55] Coincidentally, Stavans' comparison (made in 1996) anticipated the subject of Alvarez' next historical novel (written in 2000), the Henríquez Ureña family, specifically Salomé Ureña and Camila Henríquez Ureña.

they might appear to be. While Alvarez recovers personal/family history in one set of novels, her historical narratives recover a national Dominican history culturally tied to the author. Alvarez links her family history to her mother country [the Dominican Republic] in one instance by illustrating the burden they still carry from having lived through a dictatorial regime: "long after we had left [the Dominican Republic] my parents were still living in the dictatorship in their own heads" (*Something to Declare* 108); their habits of "repression, censorship, and terror" remained with them. Still, more important than her quest to understand her historical background is Alvarez' investment in recovering a cultural/national gendered past. Alvarez pinpoints two questions that lie at the center of her historical novels: "what gave them [the Mirabal sisters] that special courage?" [to fight a tyrannical regime] and in *In the Name of Salomé*, "What is Patria (mother country)?" or stated more simply, "who are we as a people?" Despite these universal concerns that Alvarez posits as central themes of these historical novels, it is clear that what she asserts as the goal and purpose of her novels is just one of many layers on which her texts ultimately function.

In her book of essays, *Something to Declare*, Alvarez describes growing up in a world full of limitations. Her essay "Grandfather's Blessing" humorously describes her grandfather asking at different points in Alvarez' life what she wants to be when she grows up. Alvarez remembers her replies: bull fighter, cowboy, pilot, and finally she settles on poet. While her grandfather welcomes this last choice of profession, Alvarez soon realizes the difficulties involved in becoming a writer. She struggles with issues that every aspiring writer struggles with—financial solvency, familial support, difficulty getting published, but it is the issue of finding her own voice that proves to be her most difficult obstacle. Alvarez explains her personal controversy with voicelessness: "it was difficult to find or trust my own voice using only these male [Yeats, Milton, Whitman] models" (160) that she had come to associate with literary success. Alvarez describes how even when she had discovered her voice as a female writer she still had to "gain confidence to explore my voice as a Latina and to write stories and poems using the metaphors, details, rhythms of that first world I had left behind in Spanish" (162). She remembers looking "for someone else with a Spanish-sounding name, someone else who

had come to English when she was ten, someone else to prove that I could become what I dreamed of becoming" (4). Her development as a writer was made more difficult because she felt she did not have literary foremothers on which to look back to for support. This changed with the eighties and the boom of Latina literary production. Even when she seemed to have found her "voice" and was on her way to becoming the foremost Dominican-American writer, she was publicly criticized by a well known Dominican female writer, Aida Cartagena Portalatín, for betraying her heritage by writing in English. While trying to define her place within unchartered literary territory, Alvarez realized that she was a writer in-between worlds: "that's why I describe myself as a Dominican-American writer. That's not just a term. I'm mapping a country that's not on the map, and that's why I'm trying to put it down on paper"(173).

Alvarez extends this desire to "gain a voice" into one of "giving a voice." In her semi-autobiographical novels, she gives a voice to Latina women—mainly through her recreation of her and her sisters' experiences. In her historical novels, Alvarez also gives voice to historical figures previously silenced by their relegation to mythical status or by their status as secondary "characters" in a history written by and about men.

I contend that these historical female characters Alvarez brings to life become useful models for her to look back to. She draws strong, committed, ordinary women who have behaved extraordinarily. In an interview given shortly after the publication of *Butterflies,* Alvarez explains what motivates her to write these historical novels: "to discover what she is thinking, to discover who she is and to understand the world in general. More importantly she writes as a way to reach out to others, to touch those from whom she is separated by time and distance" (Sirias 9). Alvarez is more specific in detailing her attraction to the characters of *Salomé*. After the publication of *Salomé*, Alvarez wrote in a collection on *Women Writing Resistance*, that she was struck by the response Camila gave at leaving Vassar to help teach in Cuba: "Vine a ayudar/I came to help" (212). It was the "simplicity and sweetness of the statement, the respect for human life at the most humble level, the hand outstretched" (212) that fascinated her about this woman.

I maintain that with these two historical novels, Alvarez creates what she ultimately needs—a female past from which to emerge. By re-creating these historical characters, she creates a national gendered past for herself and potentially for other Latina women as well. These historical figures function as gender symbols (as women—daughters, mothers, sisters), as culturally specific symbols (Dominican women or Latinas in general), and as individual beings whose aspirations and concerns remain timeless. With these historical characters, she brings back to life women who rose in the face of adversity while facing challenges different from her own, but inspiring nonetheless. Alvarez makes the women in these novels the heroines of their story.

In the Time of the Butterflies details the story of the Mirabal sisters and their role in the underground fight against the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo from 1930 to 1961. For 31 years, Trujillo exercised his repressive tyrannical rule over the Dominican Republic which included the torture and murder of thousands of people. The Mirabal sisters Patria, Minerva, and Mate together with their husbands became involved in the underground movement to overthrow Trujillo. Aware of the power the Mirabal sisters had acquired in the underground movement, Trujillo decided to have them murdered. The murder was staged as a car accident, and though the townspeople knew the truth, fearful of retribution, they were incapable of denouncing the dictator or his government. Though she chose not to be actively involved when her sisters were alive, Dedé, the fourth sister and narrator in the novel, becomes as much a part of the Mirabal history as the three martyred heroines. After their deaths, she accepts the responsibility of keeping alive the stories of these national legends as a means of preserving her country's faith in a better future for the Dominican Republic.

Prior to the publication of Alvarez' historical novels, the information available on the historical figures Alvarez portrays was lacking. In the case of the Mirabal story, Isabel Zakrzewski Brown points out that previous accounts by notable historians merely mentioned the sisters' legendary beauty and the tragedy of their accidental death (110), but left it at that. Similarly, the information available on the lives of the Henríquez-Ureña women was so scarce and partial that even though Sherezade Vicioso (Chiqui) had already written a biography on Ureña's years as an educator, she encouraged Alvarez to

write a novel on the life of Ureña. Vicioso hoped that in writing a novel about her life, Alvarez would be able to "draw back the curtains and reach Salomé Ureña the woman, the mother, the lover; the Salomé of the erotic poems [sic] those same ones that her son Pedro tried to relegate to oblivion; the solitary Salomé amidst the bustle of her students" (Vicioso 10).[56] This is precisely the "essence" that Alvarez captures in her novel through the perspective of Camila, rather than settling for the sanitized version that was previously available. Alvarez' fictional rendition of these historical characters helps fill the noticeable vacuum of information.

While her novels provide a useful source of alternate information on these historical figures, Alvarez' characterization of the Mirabals has come into question. On the one hand, Isabel Zakrzewski Brown maintains that Alvarez fashions stereotypes rather than real women: "…the pious one Patria; the pragmatic one Dedé; the rebellious one Minerva; and the innocent one Mate. The four come together to form a perfect whole…Alvarez thus is unable to elude the mythification process she had professed to elude" (110). Zakrzewski Brown makes a series of good arguments noting the novel's self-reflexiveness, the role Alvarez plays as translator and interpreter in the novel, and the ubiquitous nature of the dictator Trujillo despite the fact that his actual presence in the novel is metonymic. Conversely, she concludes with a simplistic analysis of the complexities of Alvarez' characters.

While Zakrzewski Brown's analysis of Alvarez' characterization is not completely off the mark, she overlooks numerous other qualities that Alvarez adds to her characters to make them multi-dimensional. Minerva is not always rebellious; Patria is not always pious and so on. In fact, one of the most poignant scenes in the novel is when Minerva is released from prison and privately despairs, wanting to have a "normal" life again where she can stay home and take care of her kids instead of always having to be the "brave" one. All the characters have moments in the novel when they step out of their "assigned roles" and grapple with their place in society. Alvarez forces her characters to negotiate their position as women in a very traditional environment with their decision to

[56] I include quotes from texts written originally in Spanish for which I provide my own translation.

become revolutionaries. The characters wrestle with their decision to participate in the underground struggle, becoming hesitant and uncertain in various instances.

Differently from Zakrzewski Brown, I would instead argue that where Alvarez' characterization falls short is in her use of her characters as literary devices. Each character represents an aspect of "female revolution," while showing how they all came to be revolutionaries --Minerva through her defiance towards unjust practices and repression, Patria through her sense of motherhood and her responsibility as a Catholic, Mate as a follower of those she admires and trusts (Minerva and Leandro), edging slowly into the revolution, and Dedé through oral history, after the fact, as the voice that keeps her sisters' story alive. Each sister functions as a literary marker, a way for Alvarez to lead her readers on a tight leash through the development of her novel. It is as if Alvarez were uncertain that her readers would have the capacity to understand how a group of upper middle class sheltered women came to be a part of such an extraordinary reality or if her readers would even be able to understand the complexities of revolution within a dictatorial state.

Despite her shortcoming, Alvarez intends to make her characters as "real" and "alive" as she can because she believes this is the only way she can "make them mean anything to the rest of us" (*Something* 203). It is precisely this realistic portrayal of the Mirabal sisters that allows Roberto González Echevarría in his *New York Times* review of *Butterflies*[57] to minimize the conviction and courage it took for these women to leave the safe space of their homes and actively engage in political acts of insurrection. In portraying these women as fallible and vulnerable, Alvarez opens the door to questions about their political commitment and steadfastness. Zakrzewski Brown discusses González Echevarría's opinion that the "Mirabal sisters are drawn into politics by Trujillo's intolerable wickedness rather than by any deeply felt or intellectually justified commitment," and adds that they appear to be reactive and passive. Zakrzewski Brown points out that González Echevarría neglects to take into account the motivation it took for these women to act within the male centered society of which they were a part, but I

[57] In order to simplify the discussion of both novels, the original titles will be shortened to *Butterflies* and *Salomé*.

would add that even if these pressures had not been present, their decision to join an underground which could and ultimately did lead to their death was brave and proactive. Why does their fight against unjust practices preclude their actions from being courageous and noteworthy? What is reactive and passive about organizing women in prison, offering one's home for weapon storage, and participating in clandestine meetings?

Depicting a less overt form of sedition, *In the Name of Salomé* follows the life of poet and educator Salomé Ureña from 1856 to 1897 and the life of her daughter Camila Henríquez Ureña from 1894 until 1973. Through the lives of these women, the history of the Henríquez Ureña clan and the Dominican Republic is detailed.[58] Numerous revolutions, civil strife, and the fending off of invasions from Haiti and Spain frame the narrative's development. As a national poet Salomé becomes a leading figure in articulating the nation's political drama, and as an educator she opens the path to women's education. It is this legacy that her daughter Camila carries with her as a burden, reminding her of what she must live up to. By the end of the novel, Camila learns to act on her mother's legacy rather than live in the shadow of it. Both women in turn learn the limitations of their positions as women and Alvarez allows the characters to negotiate realistically their place in society often falling short of an ideal balance between the private and the public sphere.

In *Salomé,* Alvarez avoids the pitfall of laying everything out for her readers and assumes they are adept at catching the literary markers that allow them to understand the motivations behind her characters. Perhaps because *Salomé* presents a more identifiable reality part of which novel is set in the United States, or perhaps because by the time she publishes this second historical novel she has become a more seasoned writer, Alvarez manages to steer clear of this flaw. Alvarez' readers (mainly US Americans) might engage more easily with this novel's plot partly framed within the United States, and partly set in the twentieth century. While half of this novel is set in the nineteenth

[58] The men in the Henríquez Ureña family have consistently overshadowed the lives of the women, especially the most famous member of the family, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, who was a Norton lecturer, essayist, journalist and literary critic.

century, even further removed from the twenty-first century readers than her first historical novel, the second half of the novel successfully bridges the gap in time. Alvarez adroitly fleshes out two complex characters that come to revolution more circuitously. Salomé becomes political through her poetry and Camila through her love of education and her desire to be the leader and teacher her mother was. One final feature of Alvarez's characterization that has been critiqued by Dominican historians like Miguel Aquino García has been her lack of historical accuracy when drawing her characters. García stresses the authenticity of his historical text that will disperse the confusion created by myths, legends and fictional accounts like Alvarez'.

While Alvarez re-writes history by filling in the gaps of previous limited versions, she also uses these historical novels to advance her own agenda; addressing issues of marriage, infidelity, childrearing, women's sexuality and inequality of the sexes. Equally important, she brings back to life (and affords them a voice) these historical characters who rose in the face of adversity facing challenges different from her own, but notable nonetheless.

Tension between history and fiction in Alvarez' novels

For simplicity's sake, I have been calling Alvarez' *Butterflies* and *Salomé* historical novels, but such a genre has inspired heated debates over the parameters of the genre and even its validity.[59] Does Alvarez' work fit into the historical fiction genre or

[59] In his classic study *The Historical Novel* (1962) of the nineteenth century realism novel, Georg Lukacs characterizes the historical novel as one a) set at least two generations in the past and b) including actual historical events and periods as it c) tries to convey how it was to be alive in another age through the perspective of specific participants. For his part, Avrom Fleishman's agrees and adds in his study *The English Historical Novel* (1971) that "what makes a historical novel historical is the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force—acting not only upon the characters in the novel, but on the author and readers outside it." Another term often invoked in this discussion has been historiographic metafiction introduced by Linda Hutcheon in the 1970s. In historiographic metafiction authors use history as the organizing principle and self-consciously draw attention to the relationship between fiction and reality in

can it be defined by another label more accurately? Could her novels just as easily be considered testimonio, crónica or a mixture of more than one genre? As a Latina writer who was praised for her original semi-autobiographical novels, did she just succumb to mainstream conventions and adopt a strictly conventional form?

In *Latin America's New Historical Novel* (1993) Seymour Menton asserts that "since 1979 the dominant trend in Latin American fiction has been the proliferation of the new historical novels" (14). Menton defines them as those whose events occur prior to the author's period. He reiterates that the novel's actions must take place in a past not experienced by the author for if it encompasses the author's own time frame, or even overlaps with the youngest generation of characters in the text, then the work is excluded from the "historical novel" genre (17). Menton adds that for texts to be considered historical novels they must subordinate the re-creation of a specific time period to timeless philosophical concepts (95). Based on Menton's definitions, both of Alvarez' novels would fall outside the parameters of the historical novel genre. While Menton defines the historical fiction genre rather restrictively, Lois Parkinson Zamora, Santiago Juan-Navarro and Middleton and Woods all assign the topic a broader spectrum.

In *The Usable Past* (1997), Zamora submits that historical novels are "texts that juxtapose conceptions of 'fact' and 'fiction' in order to test the capacity of novelistic narrative to represent historical realities" (xi). Zamora differentiates what she calls documentary fiction from other genres by its capacity to incorporate historical material while actively engaging it in service of the fictional account rather than merely as a backdrop for the fictional action (44). She studies literary works that enlarge the definitions of history (76) and focuses her analysis particularly on women writers like Sandra Cisneros, who have long been marginalized or excluded from the process of historical interpretation (158). Adding to this Juan-Navarro explains that re-conceiving

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the text by highlighting the construction of the text. Hutcheon states that "facts are events to which we have given meaning"(57) building on this Middleton and Woods add that "postmodern historical fiction is unconvinced that there is a single unitary truth of the past waiting to be recovered, and is more interested in who has or had the power to compose 'truths' about it whereas historical realist fiction tends to assume that the literary narrative has a special power to present the past in a language of the present and give direct access to the thoughts, speech and events of that other time without distorting their significance" (*Literature of Memory* 21).

what history is to be told "may have a democratizing effect since it allows even the most marginal of sectors to produce and validate their own versions of the past" (46). Historical fiction then allows writers at the margins to put forward their own versions of history authoritatively. Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes does not see this merely as an opportunity for marginal writers, but as their responsibility: "the role of marginal cultures is that of guardians of memory" (as qtd in Zamora 8). Both Alvarez' novels exemplify this through narrators that act as fictional guardians of memory. Through them, Alvarez records a set of events that might otherwise remain forgotten. As her novels inform, they also act as a catalyst for author and readers to experience how the past persists in their lives and can be embraced or resisted (*Literature of Memory* 22). Zamora elaborates on this, recognizing that the past is not only a part of our present reality, but "an essential part of the process of liberation, for an unexamined past operates as fate rather than revelation" (21). In both of Alvarez' novels the narrators revisit their past so they can take control of their present. As the historical fiction genre creates a space for marginal voices to explore the impact of history personally and culturally, it also evaluates the capacity of incorporating historical facts into a fictional account successfully.

Debating this issue Juan-Navarro discusses the historical novel's tendency to look back on itself as a constructed artifact. He focuses on marginal cultures' "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (40-41). In multiple instances, Alvarez attempts to draw attention to the fictionality of the text, but some of those very attempts backfire and undermine her intent. Her narrative weaves back and forth between the narrator's present time and the time within which the story takes place, splitting the narrative into fragments or clearly marked chapters that draw the reader's attention to Alvarez' construction of her novels. Every time the flow of the narrative is interrupted, it is as if the narrative is physically jolting us back into "reality." At the same time, constructing her novels as if they were pieces of a story, in the same way that real life stories come together, while democratically giving equal time to each of the people involved, creates the illusion that these women are telling their own stories as if they were reading from a journal or a diary. The narrative plays a similar tug of war

with the readers when Alvarez uses third person to recount the narrators' sections and in this way distances them from the stories they are telling, while the rest of the novel is narrated in first person emphasizing the testimonial tone of the texts.

In organizing *Butterflies* and *Salomé* by dates, Alvarez simultaneously reaffirms the historicity and the fictionality of her texts. Alvarez arranges her novels by years which create an aura of "authenticity" in the text giving it a historical feel, at the same time as it shows Alvarez' "hand" as novel writer who arbitrarily selects dates within which to set her narrative. In *Butterflies* she has a starting point of 1994 and then follows a chronological, though arbitrary, set of dates, for example 1930, 1941 and 1944 within which she develops the plot. She divides *Butterflies* into sections and dedicates the third section completely to the year of the Mirabal sisters' death --1960. Using her authorial discretion, she develops the narrative in slow motion dividing it into months instead of years as she does in the first two sections of the novel. While Alvarez also uses dates to organize *Salomé*, she takes greater liberties and uses these dates more stylistically than as historical markers. Camila's story is told in reverse starting in 1960 and ending in 1897 when her mother died. Salomé's story is told chronologically beginning in 1856 and ending at the moment of Camila's birth. Camila's life is so intimately tied to her mother's that her life goes backwards to the point where it intersects with Salomé's and only then is it able to come forward to 1973, the year of her death. Dates in *Salomé* reiterate the idea of the circularity of life; one life begins as another ends. Both novels begin and end with the voices of Dedé and Camila, in this way connecting the past to the present. It all ties in together, three year old Camila's life begins as Salomé is ending hers, or Dedé is looking back on her life as Minou and all the other Mirabal children look forward in theirs.

Even if we were to credit Alvarez' text with more historical connectedness than Alvarez is willing to recognize, through the narrative action, Alvarez raises the question: how reliable is memory? Even without intending to deceive, the process of remembering is at best selective and tenuous. Would Alvarez' texts seem more realistic if she had transcribed word for word the memories of Dedé and Camila? No. In *Butterflies* Dedé and Minerva exemplify how easily our memories can betray us. Mineva is surprised to

hear her friend Elsa reminiscing of a childhood moment completely differently than how she remembered it, "I wondered which of us revised the past to suit the lives we were living now" (264). Dedé remembers moments from her past and pauses in some instances to correct herself mentally/internally as she takes note of the inaccuracies of her recollection. It is inevitable that readers will wonder how reliable the "facts" in the narrative are, if we have no one to authenticate them. Yet, Alvarez does provide her readers with safe guards against faulty recollections by including multiple voices and perspectives in the narrative.

While Alvarez steadfastly maintains that *Butterflies* and *Salomé* are works of fiction, the way she constructs her novels tells a different story. Overtly she uses her postscript and acknowledgments in *Butterflies* and *Salomé* respectively to relieve herself from responsibility for anyone who might mistake her novels for a historical text. Yet, these sections create the opposite effect as well. By including all the research she has done like the letters written by Salomé, referring to the historical Mirabal sisters, mentioning the International Day Against Violence Towards Women celebrated on the day of the deaths of the Mirabal sisters, she makes history such a present force that it is difficult to demarcate a clear line between where history ends and fiction begins. Add to that the fact that for a large percentage of the readers this will be their only contact with these historical characters and this becomes their only source of information on the subject—their facts. Though Alvarez tries to distance her novels from the historical fiction genre by insisting that they be seen merely as fiction and works of her imagination, given that a large part of her novel is based on historical events and characters, it seems that her explanations given in the postscript/epilogue of *Butterflies* and *Salomé* carry little weight. [60]

[60] Benigno Trigo has noted this tension between what Alvarez claims she does in her novels and what she actually does. In discussing Trigo's observation Oliver explains that "the tension between what Alvarez says she is doing and what she does points to the tensions between any author's intentions and her products, especially when those intentions are to speak what has not been spoken or heard within dominant culture" (246). Using Foucault as the basis for her discussion, Oliver notes that Alvarez "is not as self-reflective about the ways that her writing is inscribed in a process of the production of truth and authority as is Foucault" (246).

Some other genres under which Alvarez' *Butterflies* has been discussed are post-dictatorial fiction, testimonio and crónica. Idelber Avelar describes post-dictatorial fiction as "writing obsessed with memories of authoritarian barbarism and with present-time nationally (and especially social and economic) self-definition" (119). While Ilan Stavans places *Butterflies* amidst Latin American works about dictators (novelas del dictador) and works written by Latina literary artists denouncing chauvinism, Isabel Zakrzewski Brown aligns Alvarez' novel solely with the novel of the dictator genre found in Latin American literature. She defines the genre as "a narrative in which the character of the dictator is a centrifugal force in regard to the plot" (111). Although Trujillo is an omniscient presence in this novel, to say that the novel revolves around him, would be to miss the point of Alvarez' work entirely. By turning the focus to the Mirabal sisters, making them into central characters of this historical time, Alvarez stresses the need to shift the focus away from Trujillo, and in so doing strip him from dictatorially dominating the historical narrative from his grave. Bridget Kevane puts it best when she says that Alvarez "emphasizes an alternative history of the era, one silenced by the dictator and incorporates the voices of the marginalized groups that fought to overthrow the dictatorship" (25) making them a part of official history. M.M. Adjarian believes that what makes "Alvarez' first foray into historical fiction unique in terms of form is that she starts from actual historical figures rather than fictional ones. Rather than using a completely fictional story as a vehicle for history, Alvarez uses history in this case, the history of the Mirabal sisters—as a vehicle for a fiction about their lives" (128).

Reiterating her focus, Alvarez titles her work *In the **Time** of the Butterflies*. This title overrides the recognized metonymic phrase used for this same time period--the Era of Trujillo. By doing this, Alvarez debunks Trujillo's larger than life status, that forty some years later still paralyzes individuals (i.e. her mother, or the man who heard Patria's last confession) with fear. *In the Time* also ties into the importance of Dedé keeping this period of history, this moment in time, alive to give hope to those broken by the horrors they faced. Acting as a repository of her family's story, Dedé has the potential to replace some of the memories of hopelessness by memories of courage and camaraderie. Focusing on this time as a time of active resistance allows the survivors of Trujillo's

dictatorship to derive strength from these women's stories to continue to work toward a free prosperous country.

Though not as outreaching as *In the Time of the Butterflies* the title *In the **Name** of Salomé* reiterates the fruitful period of Salomé's poetic production which energized a country. In the name of her poetry, countrymen showed courage and patriotism gaining inspiration from the "muse of the country." In her name the family, but especially Camila, live their lives trying to make a difference and live up to the high standards she set. Camila's final life-changing decision is made following her mother's and what became her own passion--education. Inspired by her mother, Camila seizes the opportunity to make a difference and contribute to Cuban society. Finally, the title *In the Name of Salomé* conjures up a religious connection imitating the Catholic refrain "in the name of the Father and of the Son…" which Alvarez plays on in the novel's plot as well. Alvarez blends the secular with the spiritual, infusing Salomé's influence at the peak of her poetic production, with a religious quality in which compatriots akin to pilgrims come to her to find answers.

Emphasizing Alvarez' role of witness and compiler, Gus Puleo toys with the idea of using crónica as the genre with which to discuss *Butterflies*.[61] Puleo labels Alvarez' *Butterflies* as a "falsa crónica"—by which "the one dimensional and univocal record of society…opens to an array of personalized events and accounts that reflect the experiences of individuals within a larger community" (11). He explains that falsa crónica is a term coined by Puerto Rican author Ana Lydia Vega "to describe her contemporary chronicle of historical events [and people] which she fictionalizes" (18). While Puleo uses Vega's work to make the connection from *Butterflies* to cronica, he acknowledges that the connection ends there as Alvarez does not use the same narrative style of satire and irony that Vega uses in her chronicles. [62] Clearly, *Butterflies* has the

[61] I use the verb "toys" because this is just one of the various genres he tries on the novel in the course of his essay. He links the autobiographical genre as well as the novela del dictador to the discussion of *Butterflies*.

[62] While Puleo characterizes Alvarez' novel as falsa cronica, he fails to take into account Vega's explanation of the term. Vega humorously discusses the reason why she added the adjective "false" to her title. It was necessary to appease her family and town dwellers that would know the events and people she

"feel" of chronicle in some instances of the novel, yet to try to read the novel completely under this genre would be forced. Although Alvarez' *Butterflies* has some traits that allow it to "pass" as cronica, it is evident that Puleo's link is tentative at best. Puleo suggests the potential that Alvarez' novels have to be analyzed employing multiple genres.

Zakrzewski Brown envisions Alvarez' role in *Butterflies* as both a translator and interpreter, who translates her "findings" of the Mirabal history from Spanish to English and acts as an interpreter between cultures. Alvarez wants her readers to be aware of her role as translator when she repeatedly interjects Spanish words into the novel. Zakrzewski Brown notes that mamá and papá are always used when referring to the Mirabal parents and the same occurs with titles like Don and Sor. For bilingual readers these minimal interjections seamlessly blend into the narrative. They flavor the language making it more precisely Latino. Still, this and to a greater extent Alvarez' use of phrases such as "mi amor," "compay" and "Dios te bendiga," might serve as speed bumps for English readers lightly jolting them and reminding them of their foreign status in the literature and history they are consuming.

In *Salomé,* Alvarez adds one more layer to her bilingual use. She uses the titles of the novel's chapters, alternating between Spanish and English, to suggest a "conversation" between the two protagonists. Each chapter with a Spanish title tells Salomé's story and each chapter with an English title tells Camila's. In turn, the chapter headings mirror each other so that chapter 1 in Spanish finds its equivalent translation in

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incorporated into her collection of short stories, as well as the "souls" of those characterized that might come to "haunt" her. She describes the writing experience as a battle, body to body between the fictional and the documentary, and adds that the word false allowed her to "rebel against the crushing tyranny of the strictly documentary" (31). In the end, she reveals how the tyranny that history was exercising over her writing was defeated—a woman whose grandmother had lived in the hacienda that Vega described in one of her stories approached her and told her that the Hacienda was exactly the way she had described in her narrative. This of course was surprising to Vega who had never seen a picture or found descriptions of the Hacienda and had created an imaginary place to include in her story. She ends her essay by saying, "how is it that even with the self-incriminatory title of false chronicles, that a literary text can, without trying to and even despite itself, fill a void of the past?..." is it perhaps that "a writer is a liar who when he lies sometimes without knowing it, lets some truths slip through?" (38). The response of that woman who with great emotion reflected how Vega had "brought her back" to her grandmother's time, is a similar response to that of Alvarez' mother who declares after reading *Butterflies* that "you put me back in those days. It was like I was reliving it all" (S*omething 111*).

Chapter 8 in English while Chapter 8 in Spanish translates what is in Chapter 1 in English. The chapter headings seem to work their way towards each other as the stories of mother and daughter do in the novel. Adding one more layer of signification, Alvarez selects titles of Salomé's poems as her chapter headings; "Ruinas," "Luz," "El Ave y el Nido," for example, are in addition related to the subject matter of the chapters. While Alvarez creates an intricate yet clear pattern in her table of contents, it is important to remember that all the layers of meaning that Alvarez adds before the narrative actually begins, could easily be missed by those who do not speak both languages. It is with the advantage of bilingualism, that Alvarez' readers are able to appreciate the full effect of her creativity.

A final lens through which to read *Butterflies* and *Salomé* is testimonio. Pieces of both novels come from the stories "told" to Alvarez by people who knew the women and men represented in the narratives. Alvarez herself acknowledges this genre's contribution to her work in an interview given in 2000, when she explains that she was influenced "by literature of the Holocaust and the testimonial literature that comes out of Latin America…it just goes to show that as a writer I am a mixture of traditions" (Heredia 28). Using testimonials, Alvarez incorporates the "living voices" she came across in her trips to the Dominican Republic, men and women, eager "to tell us their individual versions of that history" (*Something* 207). As Alonso Gallo argues, using testimonio enhances the credibility of historical facts in her narratives while it connects the individual experience to that of social groups (91).

Though Alvarez' work evidences characteristics of the novela del dictador, the crónica, and testimonio, her novels don't fit perfectly into any of these categories. As such, it is my view that the more general label of historical fiction remains the best suited term to describe her work. In writing about historical people and places and constructing versions of the world as it was in the early twentieth century and the nineteenth century, Alvarez' novels most closely resemble the historical fiction genre despite Alvarez' play with multiple time periods, specifically the present time, which make her novels a variation on the historical fiction tradition. Ultimately defying categorization, Alvarez

hybridizes the narrative so that it is simultaneously able to fit within a number of generic categories, but never fully within any one.

In a narrative in which, as feminist historian Gerda Lerner has observed, women's history has usually been excluded, Alvarez creates a space in which to include women's perspectives and experiences. Not only are these stories significant, but Alvarez deems the potential of telling stories to those who have power over us--the Scheherazade issue--of vital importance (*Something* 269). Until the 1970s, historical writing was dominated by men who determined the criteria used in judging the historical significance of past events. With women's growing presence in the field these criteria expanded to include the role of women and gender in history. Through her historical fiction, Alvarez creates a more even ratio of female to male perspective; still, it is indispensable to note the liberties Alvarez takes in overlapping and compiling events to suit her narratives. Given that as Lionel Gossman says writing history is an exercise of the present because the narrative created will depend on the questions asked of the past, what kinds of questions does Alvarez pose to conceive of her narratives as she does?

Finding the Stories

In the postscript and acknowledgements of *Butterflies* and *Salomé* respectively, Alvarez overtly reveals the questions that drive her to write these novels. While Alvarez' family connection to the underground first sparked an interest in the Mirabals' story, it is the recurrent question, "what gave them that special courage" that colors her narrative. For *Salomé* Alvarez explains that the protagonists are "re-created in the light of questions that we can only answer, as they did, with their own lives: Who are we as a people? What is la Patria? How do we serve?" and concludes that "this book is an effort to understand the great silence from which these two women emerged, and into which they have disappeared leaving us to dream up their stories and take up the burden of their songs"

(357). Both sets of questions are very broad and amorphous, but their import is tangibly present in the way Alvarez constructs both characters and plot.

Alvarez admits to being interested in the Mirabal story for years before she began work on her novel, but it was only when she had done enough research and accumulated "vivid details about them" enough to make the "godlike women" (272) accessible to her that she decided to tackle the project. This preoccupation with finding the "real" women goes hand in hand with her question on courage. Only in re-creating their lives through a realistic lens as vulnerable, fallible women, can Alvarez transmit the significance of the Mirabals' undertaking.

In order to stress the humanity of the sisters and in particular of Minerva who seems the most extraordinary, Alvarez speculates on what she assumes Minerva must have gone through in private, her insecurities and emotional breakdown amidst the most trying moments of the struggle, despite all historical accounts maintaining that Minerva never appeared disheartened by setbacks. Notwithstanding Alvarez "realistic" portrayal of Minerva, in her discussion on *Butterflies,* Raquel Romeu poses the question: was Minerva as progressive as Alvarez would have us believe? Depicting the historical Minerva as a woman unafraid of challenges which stood in her way of becoming a well-read lawyer and the first woman driver in Salcedo, Romeu adds that even other members of the underground, primarily male, described Minerva in biographical documents as a born leader. Alvarez' attempt to balance the fundamental nature of the historical character with a humanized version of these legendary figures is put to the test in Minerva's character.

In *Salomé* the questions Alvarez points to as the basis of her novel are even more open-ended than in *Butterflies*. While Alvarez asserts that "what is patria?" is a central theme of her novel, she maintains that this is indefinable, especially in light of her Dominican-Americanness which precludes a solid national identity. Alvarez does show the impact national identity and mother country have on our formation as human beings. Part of what Camila and Salomé become is a direct result of their experiences with their countries of origin and their countries of upbringing. Towards the end of *Salomé*, Alvarez responds directly to her own question, "it's continuing to struggle to create the country

we dream of that makes a patria out of the land under our feet" (350). This ingenuous reply presupposes that the connection between countrymen and country is fluid, capricious, and arbitrary and does not recognize the existent intricacies. Her second question, "how do we serve?" seems more present in her novel. By focusing on Salomé's work as a poet and educator and showing how Camila's life seemed to work up to that final decision to leave her stable life to go and serve the Cuban people/the Cuban cause, Alvarez shows how a desire to serve shapes these characters' destinies.

Given Alvarez' insistence that her work is purely "a work of the imagination" it is curious to see what historical events Alvarez focuses on and what events she reconstructs and changes. Alvarez prefers to deal with the past through fiction rather than fact, noting that for some subject matters that is the only way do justice to the story. In the case of the Mirabal story, Alvarez recognizes that only through fiction can the tyrannical regime of Trujillo and the lives of the Mirabals be explained.[63] Yet, in constructing these two historical novels, Alvarez adds factual research, personal family experiences and historical myths to her fictional creation blurring the line between her imagination and her research.

In *Butterflies,* Alvarez blends her own family stories with the Mirabal history. In "Our Papers" she describes how her godmother cleverly got Trujillo to grant her permission to take a trip: "At a state function, she told El Jefe that she knew he was a gentleman, and a gentleman would not refuse a lady a favor. She wanted so much to travel. The next morning a black limousine from the national Palace rolled up to her door to deliver the papers…" (*Something* 13). Alvarez draws on her mother's experience to more legitimately portray an exchange she creates between Trujillo and Minerva. Appealing to Trujillo's ego, Minerva requests the Dictator's permission to go to the university to study law. In much the same spirit as Alvarez' mother, Minerva "appoints" Trujillo her benefactor and savior "complaining" that only he can grant her the

[63] Oliver explains Alvarez' assertion: "Fiction then tells us something about life that history can't. It speaks to the heart in a way that 'immerses' readers in an epoch and helps them to 'understand' it" (246). The events that Alvarez presents through her fiction are so far removed from the reality of the majority of her readers (US readers) that she feels that only through a fictional narrative in which she humanizes these characters can their stories be appreciated.

opportunity her parents won't even consider. Like Alvarez' mother, Minerva successfully plays the dictator and gets what she requests. In another essay, "A Genetics of Justice," Alvarez describes her mother growing up under the Trujillo regime, not knowing of his horrid crimes and thinking of him as a sort of movie star, in much the same way as she initially describes the Mirabal family members. Alvarez admits that even small details like why Trujillo was called "chapita" behind his back came from stories her mother told her. Alvarez uses her family history as an added resource to lend authenticity to her fictional portrayal of the Mirabal family experiences.

In addition to her family's experiences, Alvarez includes facts she collects from her research. Through one of Alvarez' sources, William Galván's *Minerva Mirabal: Historia de una Heroina* (1982), we see some of the liberties Alvarez takes with the historical accounts. Alvarez changes the name of the young man who introduced Minerva to the underground, from Pericles to Lío. Other than attributing this purely to creative license, Alvarez' alteration of this name can be seen as a way for her to describe this character's destiny—to get himself and others into "un lío"—a great deal of trouble. Another minor yet significant change in *Butterflies* occurs when Alvarez creates Rufino as a recurring character though in reality, he was solely the chauffeur for the sisters' last trip. The chauffeur they had been using cancelled the morning of their fateful trip, so the girls asked Rufino if he would drive them. While Alvarez doesn't elaborate on Rufino's role, Galván says the girls had it on good authority they might have an "accident" on the road, and they told Rufino about the potential danger. Despite this, he chose to drive them anyway. For Galván, Rufino acted heroically and courageously choosing to take the sisters on their trip despite the risks involved. Alvarez makes Rufino the steady chauffeur so that her readers acknowledge his loss as much as that of the sisters and not merely see him as a casualty resulting from being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Lastly, Alvarez incorporates myths into her novel. Alvarez recognizes that myth and fact get easily interchanged living under a dictatorship. She notes: "we had undergone thirty-one years of a dictatorship in which the wildest myths had to be accepted as facts on pain of death. The dictator for instance decreed the country officially a "white nation" even though we are 90 percent mulatto and proof of the fact is all around

us" (*Something* 124).While Alvarez hopes to dispel the myths surrounding the lives of the women she portrays, she perpetuates some of these myths herself . For example, Alvarez perpetuates a myth linked to Minerva Mirabal. The story goes that Minerva was forced to dance with Trujillo and following a verbal exchange, Minerva slapped the dictator's face. Historians clear up this popular story explaining that what Minerva did was to stop dancing before the music was over. They also agree that metaphorically speaking what she did would have been akin to a slap on the face, and would have proved as insulting to Trujillo and as dangerous for her family. Alvarez seems to understand that it would be hard for late twentieth century readers to understand the level of Trujillo's retaliation and the gravity of the situation without a more explicit expression of Minerva's insubordination like a physical act of defiance.

By writing *Butterflies*, Alvarez manipulates a topic that has been taboo among Dominicans who even years after Trujillo's death, continue to censor themselves. Adjarian compares what Alvarez accomplishes writing this novel and what the Mirabals accomplished refusing to remain silent. *Butterflies* also allows Dominicans to see Trujillo come undone (on paper if not in real life) so that people like her mother can have the experience of seeing him for the pathetic man he was rather than the invincible tyrant they remember (106-07).

Alvarez also maneuvers the historical data to fit the narrative of Salomé Ureña's life. On the one hand Alvarez remains faithful to Max's (Salomé's son) recollection of his mother's final poetry reading where a man yelled at the end of her performance: "viva, the illustrious national poet" and Salomé, after inquiring who had professed his admiration, chose never to appear in public again. On the other hand, when she describes the events surrounding the unveiling of Salomé's true identity at the time when she was publishing poetry under her pseudonym Herminia, Alvarez overdramatizes what in reality appears to have been a seamless, understated transition. Historians assert that after a poem on "winter" was published naming Herminia the author, Salomé had the newspaper clear up the error in the next newspaper printing by adding her real name to her work. After this, she never used the pseudonym again and took full responsibility for all the subsequent pieces of poetry published.

Knowing that these novels are based on historical events and characters might compel readers to treat these texts as authorities especially since they afford a privileged look at the outcome even before the novels have begun. Alvarez crafts *Butterflies* masterfully and though we know the outcome of the novel from its inception, we are nevertheless "sucked in" to the inevitable fate of the Mirabal sisters. We want to "yell" to the sisters to postpone their trip, we want history to change, we may even feel that if we close the book the ending won't come to pass. Yet, in the end, we do continue to read, we do go through the agony of the characters' death and we do come to understand the conviction, passion and courage these very real, fallible women had in their lives. It is because we are shown the fears, doubts and human frailty of the Mirabal sisters that we come to identify profoundly with them and their plight. Alvarez is purposefully vague in her description of the last moments of the sisters' lives, focusing more on their life than their death and acknowledging that it would be impossible to do justice to their final moments and nothing would be served by portraying these moments in gruesome detail. Stavans, who is generally full of praise for Alvarez' work in *Butterflies*, disagrees and feels that Alvarez fails in describing the final moments of the Mirabals' lives. He suggests that had she used court testimony, news clips, interviews rather than a twenty-one page epilogue, the Mirabals' story would have been "more firmly in the flux of Dominican memory" (118). While the end of the novel would have been more memorable if she had relied more heavily on factual information, it would have changed the intent of her novel.

Through time, these historical women's lives have been forgotten as their stories become the substance of myth or they are omitted from the main discourse (history books).With *Butterflies* and *Salomé*, Alvarez "probes the silence of history" (Gossman 94). In the case of the Mirabals, up to the 1980s the material available on them, like Galván's *Minerva Mirabal*, was presented in an apologetic and fragmented manner. In Galván's book for example, a third of the text is about the Dominican Republic's economic and political history with a cursory glance at the Mirabal's story. Given the limited scope in the available texts, for many readers, Alvarez' version stands as the authority on the lives of the Mirabals and Salomé and Camila. Moreover, for these same

readers it is likely to be the only time they would ever cross paths with these historical figures. And, just like Alvarez' mother was transported into that period of Dominican history, so are many other Dominicans and non-Dominicans. Despite the fact that Alvarez goes out of her way to clarify that she does not intend to give her readers the real story, for those unfamiliar with this historical period/figures, this will be the "truth" that remains.

Narrative

Given the way that Alvarez was chastised by relatives for revealing "truth" about private family matters in her autobiographical novels, it is no surprise that the subject of "voice" becomes a recurrent theme in Alvarez' novels. In *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* and ¡*Yo!*, the character of Yolanda, who most closely resembles Alvarez, goes through emotional turmoil and breakdown as she struggles with words literally and figuratively, that will allow her to articulate her life experiences. She is the storyteller of the family and having been punished for speaking up in childhood, she wavers between self-censorship and the need for unbridled disclosure. In a different way, "voice" plays an equally important role in Alvarez' historical novels. In all four novels, Alvarez presents a multiplicity of complimentary and sometimes contradictory voices that function like pieces of a puzzle.

In the Time of the Butterflies includes the voices of all four sisters as they take turns narrating their family history from 1938 until their death in 1960. In addition, Dedé, the surviving sister, frames the novel in the present as the narrator that begins and concludes the narrative in 1994. With broad strokes, each sister describes the commonplace as well as the prominent events for a cluster of years which carry no apparent significance except to satisfy an organizing principle set up by Alvarez. All the "voices" meet in the final year, with each sister detailing the events leading to their

deaths, a few months at a time. In the last section of the novel, Alvarez "slows" down the narrative creating the effect/illusion of cinematic slow motion. Not only do her readers feel the weight of the impending events (as the characters do), but this method of lingering over the narrated events creates an atmosphere of nostalgia, not unlike the one found in a person's recollection of a loved one's last moments. Throughout the narrative, the voices of the sisters complement and contradict each other. Conflicting voices like the ones of Dedé and Minerva raise the question of accuracy in the narrative and of the recollections of the characters. On the one hand, their first person perspective lends the narrative an aura of authenticity; on the other hand, Alvarez' purposeful contradictions between her characters, emphasizes the need for multiple perspectives on a subject to gain a more well-rounded view of the event.

The narrative of *Salomé* follows a back and forth pattern alternating between Salomé's and Camila's voices. While Salomé's narrative develops in chronological order, Camila goes in reverse sequence. Both narratives meet at a midpoint, the end of Salomé's life and the beginning of Camila's (when she is three years old and her mother dies). The two voices complement each other. We understand Camila's life better by understanding her mother's. Salomé's remarkable life allows us to understand Camila's tendency to shy away from taking a stand on any issue which she "couldn't possibly" have carried out with her mother's boldness. At the same time, Salomé's teachings and beliefs are pervasive in Camila's life and give us insight into Camila's decision to go back to Cuba to educate in the same way her mother had done years before in Santo Domingo. Camila understands her life better by delving into the family archives that her brother Max asks her to go through as she writes the family history. Salomé's voice, as accessed through Camila, recognizes more faithfully the spirit of Salomé's life; unlike the painting Francisco Henríquez (Salomé's husband) commissioned for his wife—where he requested her blemishes and even her dark skin be altered to suit the concept of beauty of the time. Francisco Henríquez' attempt to beautify Salomé for posterity is undermined by the full disclosure of events found in the family journals, letters and diaries in the trunk. Camila comes to understand her mother's life, blemishes and all. Finally, she has more than just one painting as a physical representation of her mother.

In both historical novels Alvarez makes the narrators' voice prominent. Through Dedé and Camila, she illustrates a different kind of courage from that demonstrated by Minerva and Salomé. While Dedé and Camila chose to stay at the sidelines and in the background, and they never became protagonists in their own lives, they functioned as indispensable supporting characters (fictionally and historically). This understated courage leads Alvarez to cast them as equally important protagonists as their mothers and sisters. Dedé and Camila become protagonists of another kind—the shapers of stories. Alvarez becomes a supporting character herself telling the story of these wonderful women. She aligns herself with Dedé and Camila, taking the role of narrator one step further by then telling the narrators' stories in turn (those of the soft spoken protagonists).

Salomé begins with the "present" voice of Camila Henríquez Ureña, who has decided to spend her post-retirement years amidst the tumultuous environment of 1960s Cuba. As a justification for her apparently "insane" decision, she goes on to explain to a friend her family history beginning with the life of her mother, Salomé Ureña. The novel presents the childhood, adolescence and adulthood of Salomé. It illustrates her beginnings as a poet and a national symbol amidst a politically unstable climate of the Dominican Republic from the 1850s onward. In addition, Salomé's family life, her role as daughter, sister, mother and wife is described. As her friend listens to her story she wonders when Camila will finally get to her own life, "'I thought you were finally going to talk about yourself, Camila'" and Camila earnestly responds, "'I am talking about myself'"(8). Given that Camila's life is so intimately tied to that of her mother and family, it is impossible to tell where theirs ends and hers begins.

In both novels, Alvarez creates narrators of the "present" living relatives of the legends. Dedé in *Butterflies* and Camila in *Salomé* become the guardians of memory. A re-writing of the past becomes for them a way to understand the present. These guardians of memory have a number of elements in common: a) the novel becomes the narrative that needs to be told for them to fulfill their role and keep the story of the "legends" in their lives alive; b) they need to narrate the story to exorcise the ghosts of their past; c) the two narrators are portrayed as women who have allowed traditional stereotypes and norms to dictate their lives; d) the story becomes as much about them as about the icons

after which the novels are titled. In both novels, the memories come from a place of loss. The key players in their lives, mother/sisters are gone. Both Dedé and Camila were so busy caring for the memories of their loved ones that they forgot they were the protagonists of their own lives. Ultimately, they find their own place and voice.

Dedé's and Camila's voices frame their respective novels. *Butterflies* begins and ends with the voice of Dedé, the surviving sister, who "…feels bad when she can't carry off what she considers her responsibility. To be the grande dame of the beautiful, terrible past…she is the only one left to manage the terrible, beautiful present" (65). When cornered into admitting that she lives in the past Dedé asserts, "I'm not stuck in the past, I've just brought it with me to the present. And the problem is not enough of us have done that" (313). Dedé feels that part of her responsibility as the only Mirabal survivor is to remind Dominicans of their despotic past so her sisters will not have died in vain.

Likewise, the prologue and epilogue of *Salomé* are narrated in the voice of Camila. Camila remembers: "Her mission in life—after the curtain falls—to tell the story of the great ones who have passed on" (8). Ironically it is Camila's muted voice that is responsible for preserving the forceful voices of her larger-than-life family members who once overshadowed her. She accepts the role of family historian guardedly, recognizing the weight this responsibility carries—to give a voice to those who no longer have one. It is only at the end of the novel that Camila allows herself to come to the foreground of her life. By narrating Camila's and Dedé's sections in third person, Alvarez creates a distance between narrator and narrative. Also, she illustrates the alienation both characters feel even when remembering their own stories. To this effect Camila states that "long before she stepped into a classroom, she indulged in the habit of erasing herself, of turning herself into the third person, a minor character, the best friend (or daughter!) of the dying first person hero or heroine" (8).

Both Dedé and Camila show early in the novels the need to "confront" the past in order to exorcise some lingering ghosts. They carry the memory of these family members as tangibly as they might carry their pictures or their letters. In *Salomé,* Camila begins the project of family history reconstruction by creating a family tree. The very act of remembering every family member's name, even those of the numerous pets (bears,

parrots, pigs), forces her to acknowledge them: "Just introducing these ghosts by name has recalled them so vividly, they rise up before her, then shimmer and fade in the shaft of sunlight…Maybe it is a good thing to finally face each one squarely. Maybe that is the only way to exorcise the ghosts. To become one of them" (42). In *Butterflies*, after spending the day answering an interviewer's questions about the Mirabal sisters, Dedé realizes that her sisters' spirits have been in the house all afternoon. When Minou, Minerva's daughter, comes to tell her that Fela, the maid of the Mirabal household and a practitioner of spiritism, was unable to conjure up "the girls" for her, Dedé assures her that they are still around and it is just that they had spent the day with her. Neither Dedé nor Camila is portrayed as a believer or practitioner of the paranormal, but in both cases they matter of factly accept the presence of their dead relatives.

These guardians of memory are portrayed as women who have followed the lead of the men in their lives. Dedé explains why she didn't get involved in the revolution by saying that in her time women followed their husbands. She backtracks and doesn't let herself off the hook adding: "Such a silly excuse. After all, look at Minerva"(172). Within her generational limitations, Dedé is progressive enough to know that while she chose to follow her husband, partly because of the pressures put upon her by him and society, she also used this passive stance to avoid making a life altering decision on her own.

Similarly, Camila's life is dictated (personally, artistically and sexually) by the men in her family, and though she is aware of her passive position, she is unable to react/act against it. Camila lives her life by the standards held by the men in her family. She resignedly faces the fact that "all her life she has had to think first of her words' effect on the important roles her father, brothers and uncles and cousins were playing in the world" (85). Two striking examples that exemplify the power she has allowed her family to have over her life come in the form of her brother's influence over her love life and her poetry writing. In the first case, Camila gives up on a lesbian love affair, after her brother Pedro finds out about it. His disapproval and that of her family, if they ever found out, prevent her from following through on a relationship that has the potential to make her happy. Equally significant is her renouncing her aspirations to become a poet despite

the encouragement received from a famous established poet. After her brother reads her work he discourages her from pursuing a career as a poet and advises her to write only for her own pleasure. It is an interesting twist of fate that the women in charge of keeping these exemplary figures in history "alive," are themselves silenced in their personal lives. One might conclude though, that it is because they have found themselves so repressed in their own lives that they have taken their responsibility as "storytellers" so seriously.

In both *Butterflies* and *Salomé*, the narrator tells her story partly as an opportunity to re-examine her own life. Alvarez observes that to a certain extent: "the telling of the story decreases [their] sense of isolation"(*Something* 278). In addition, it helps the narrators come to terms with unresolved issues in their own lives. For example, in *Butterflies,* one of the narrator's (and the reader's) inevitable questions is why Dedé was the sister who survived? In the novel when Dedé wonders why she has been spared, her husband Jaimito responds, "'This is your martyrdom, Dedé, to be alive without them'" (308) and to keep their legacy alive, Alvarez seems to add. This issue haunted Alvarez as she compiled material to use in her novel. In "Chasing the Butterflies" Alvarez considers what it must be like for Dedé to be the one left behind to tell the story of her three sisters (203).

In *Salomé,* Camila is portrayed as a woman who never made any decision for herself and never took a courageous stand as her mother had so often done. She had received her mother's legacy of courage and dedication to an art and a country, but she never had the opportunity to test her own mettle in similar circumstances. In the end, remembering/narrating her mother's story gives her the strength to follow her convictions. By the end of the novel, Camila goes to Cuba because "I think it is time now to go back and be a part of what my mother started" (35). She realizes that if she remains quiet, if she does not follow her commitment through, "…I lose my mother completely, for the only way I really know her is through the things she stood for" (85). [64]

[64] During the Trujillo dictatorship in the 1930s, Camila, her father, aunts and half-brothers, flee to Cuba where Camila follows in her mother's footsteps by organizing a women's group that rallies against Batista's dictatorial rule. Throughout the years, Camila travels back to Cuba from the United States to visit her family. Cuba becomes a second home to Camila and she feels it is her duty to go back and support the revolution.

Like Dedé and Camila, Alvarez tells stories that allow her to deal with issues haunting her. Alvarez is haunted by her lopsided relationship with the Dominican Republic where she can enjoy the beauty, the family, and the flavor of the Island but doesn't have to cope with the hardships that other native Dominicans like Dedé and Camila face. By writing these novels and giving voice to these women's stories, Alvarez works through her own unresolved feelings.

The narrators' own lives have been overshadowed by the legendary women in their past. Camila reflects on the irony of being the guardian of her mother's memory, "she, the nobody among them, will be the one editing the story of her famous family" (38). While Dedé notes that "now after thirty-four years, the commemorations and interviews and presentations of posthumous honors have almost stopped, so that for months at a time Dedé is able to take on her own life again" (3). Still, she continues agreeing to interviews and then feels that "she is setting up her life as if it were an exhibit labeled neatly for those who can read: "THE SISTER WHO SURVIVED" (5). Her life is set up always in relation to her sisters. While these narrators live in the shadows of their historical families and have had their lives consumed by telling their stories, Alvarez allows us to see that they have their own stories to tell.

Mistakenly viewing Camila as an appendage to her mother, rather than as an entity unto herself, Laura Alonso Gallo puts forth in "'The Good, The Brave, The Beautiful': Julia Alvarez' Homage to Female History," a faulty and rather unflattering portrayal of Camila's character: "Camila does not share her mother's gift for poetry and is characterized as a disoriented, perpetually exiled woman…she reaches the end of her life single and what saddens her the most, without children to hand down to the American future" (98). Alonso Gallo overlooks Camila's character evolution. While we don't have any of Camila's poetry available, Alvarez describes an exchange with renowned poet Juan Ramón Jiménez who after reading Camila's poetry, encouraged her literary pursuits. Camila did not pursue this path because, as the novel illustrates, she was deterred by her brother Pedro. In Corpi's *Eulogy*, Damasco's husband exerts the same kind of forceful influence that deters Damasco from becoming a private investigator while her husband is alive. As to her ending her life single and childless—while this was a concern for some

period of her life, ultimately it is the least of Camila's worries. By the end of the novel, Camila has found the courage to live by what her mother taught and wrote about. Working towards a better country and a better America become the goals utmost in Camila's life.

It is often hard for Dedé and Camila to distance themselves enough from their family's stories to become entities of their own. Fernando Valerio's observation that the Mirabal sisters are seen as one unit proves to be an additional obstacle for Dedé to overcome. Valerio notes how the Mirabals are always referred to as one being—the sisters/the girls (95). The sisters' lives take on a significance larger than themselves. We certainly see this in the novel, but even in historical accounts of the sisters we see them treated as a unit. Dedé not only has to face this powerful aura surrounding her sisters, she is simultaneously excluded and treated as an outsider to her own family. She is never included in the phrase "the Mirabal sisters." Only in talking to some of the children of the Mirabal sisters, does Alvarez discover Dedé's existence. In the novel, Alvarez addresses this issue when Dedé is counting down the members of her family and feels like she is missing someone and realizes it is she who she has forgotten to count.

To the voice of the narrators and protagonists, Alvarez adds her own. Alvarez believes that "there is no such thing as straight up fiction. There are just levels of distance from our life experience…in spite of our caution and precaution, bits of our own lives will get into what we write" (275). As unlikely as it might seem to find Alvarez' voice in her historical narratives, it is indisputable that we do. To set up the space in which her authorial voice will not seem out of place/unusual, Alvarez reminds her readers of the fictional level on which her novels operate as well as the artistic liberties taken in her re-construction of history. In *Butterflies*, Alvarez clarifies in the postscript that, "what you find in these pages are not the Mirabal sisters of fact, or even the Mirabal sisters of legend" but instead she says, "what you will find are the Mirabals of my creation, made up, but I hope, true to the spirit of the real Mirabals" (324). Similarly, in *Salomé*, Alvarez explains in her acknowledgments: "the Salomé and Camila you will find in these pages are fictional characters based on historical figures, but they are re-created in the light of questions that we can only answer as they did, with our own lives…" Both these

statements give Alvarez plenty of latitude within which to draw her characters and the narrative.

Alvarez not only takes liberties re-constructing these historical characters but also projects her views onto some of her protagonists. Alvarez "appears" in the two historical novels in different ways. *Butterflies* unravels through the inquiries of a journalist/investigative reporter who wants to learn about the Mirabal sisters. This character, loosely based on Alvarez, frames the novel through which we gain entrance into the Mirabal home and legacy. While we don't have a physical representation of the author in *Salomé*, Alvarez' authorial voice comes through more plainly and forcefully in this novel. Through her characters, Alvarez comments on the inequalities of the sexes, a recurrent theme in both novels. She peppers the narrative with authorial commentaries.

In the first chapter of *Salomé*, Alvarez presents the politically unstable climate of the Dominican Republic in the 1850s. She describes one of the many times the Spaniards took control of the Island and the divisive effect it sometimes had within families. In this scene, Salomé's father and mother argue over the best course of action for their country. For Salomé, a little girl at the time, it is all reduced to colors—when the red flag is up, her father can come home and when the blue flag sways, he has to go into exile. Yet, she doesn't understand what it means for her family when she sees a yellow and red flag (the Spanish flag). We get Salomé's childhood impressions, "Perhaps yellow and red means that now all Dominicans will be friends again, and husbands and wives will live together…and girls will be allowed to write letters and own houses without having to explain themselves" (30). This thought process is obviously not that of a child, but Alvarez' commenting on the historical period through a personal, apparently spontaneous rumination of a child. Here her authorial commentary is disguised through the voice of a child. Alvarez ties the colonial nature of the Dominican Republic to that of the women in the country. Dominican men, fathers and husbands, control their wives and daughters because they feel women don't have the experience, knowledge, and strength to fight their own battles. In the same way, Spain convinces the Dominican men in power that their country will benefit from being a colony as they don't have the strength to fight off

enemies such as Haiti, and can benefit from a protective government with more experience and superior power.

We again "hear" Alvarez' twentieth century voice when she describes the inequality of gender relations through the voice of Salomé as a young woman: "It seemed to me unjust that this young woman's life should be ruined, whereas the rogue man went on with his engagement to a girl of a fine family with no seeming consequence paid…why was it alright for a man to satisfy his passion but for a woman to do so was as good as signing her death warrant?" (144). And then following this, Alvarez more boldly states "There was another revolution to be fought if our patria was to be truly free" (144)—the gender revolution. But it is not only issues of gender that trouble Alvarez. Through Camila, Alvarez voices the feeling of many Latinos that American US residents behave as if they were the sole inhabitants of the world. After hearing her best friend Marion admit that she would never have known who Salomé Ureña was had she not met her, Camila muses "She's not surprised. Americans don't interest themselves in the heroes and heroines of minor countries until someone makes a movie about them" (7) or writes a novel, I would add. Had it not been for Alvarez' novel, most readers of *Salomé* would never have heard of either of the two protagonists in the novel.

Alvarez' voice is harder to trace in *Butterflies*, probably because she diffuses it among her characters. She incorporates her voice into the narrative when she has Dedé scrutinize her husband, "a long look as if she could draw the young man of her dreams out from the bossy, old-fashioned macho he'd become" (175). Alvarez is critical of the domineering stance taken by some men in their relationships with women. Alvarez also addresses the limited opportunities for education available to women especially when women themselves sabotage their own progress. Minerva, the most progressive of the sisters, addresses this issue. Alvarez portrays Minerva defiantly responding to her mother's condemnation of "skirts in the law": "It is just what this country needs…It's about time we women had a voice in running our country" (10). In another scene, Minerva reminisces about her childhood and marvels at their good fortune in convincing papá to let them get an education, when it would have taken the guardian angel who

"announced to Mary that she was pregnant with God and got her to be glad about it" (11) to perform such a miracle.

Sometimes though, Alvarez' perspectives appear through the most unlikely characters. For example, Alvarez uses the character of Mate to address the issue of sisterhood among women regardless of class or color. Mate, the little sister, the most overprotected, naïve, sheltered character, is the one who "discovers" sisterhood in prison, "…we were talking about love, love among us women. There is something deeper. Sometimes I really feel it in here, especially late at night, a current going among us, like an invisible needle stitching us together into the glorious free nation we are becoming" (239). This revelation about the importance of sisterhood especially in the face of adversity comes from the character that had to evolve the most to achieve this understanding. Dominican women in general were more likely to behave and think like Mate than Minerva, given that Minerva was somewhat of an anomaly in conservative Dominican culture. Having Mate "discover" sisterhood in prison, normalizes the attitude and makes it clear that this is not so revolutionary and forward thinking that only someone like Minerva could hold it, but rather a outlook on life that all Dominican women should have.

Alvarez aligns herself with the two narrators in the novels. As is the case with the narrators in both novels, Alvarez is a product of a family shrouded in silence. Alvarez grew up fearful of retribution for criticizing the dictatorship of Trujillo, but there was an even more insidious force muting her voice—her family. In her essay "Family Matters," Alvarez explains how "it was a woman's place to be the guardian of the home, and the family secrets…" (122), and adds that "by opening my mouth, I had disobeyed. By opening my mouth on paper, I had done even worse. I had broadcast my disobedience"(123). Alvarez rescues these historical characters giving voice to their experiences and compensating for their prolonged imposed silence that she understands through first hand experience.

Alvarez asserts that her goal is to immerse readers "in an époque in the life of the Dominican Republic" and to acquaint English-speaking readers with these famous sisters and the famous poet. Alvarez thus justifies taking on these larger than life projects while

she preempts potential criticism for her fictional reenactment of this historical period and its characters by proposing a vague intent to her novels. Still, this doesn't deter Ibis Gómez-Vega who notes critically that Alvarez' postscript: "is puzzling in its unabashed appeal to English-speaking readers because it assumes that people who have never known what it is to fear their own government can understand the lives of the Mirabal sisters" and adds that "the English speaking readers whose sympathy seems so important to Julia Alvarez may empathize with the characters" (246) but they will only be understood by those who have suffered the same fate, those from the same country the Mirabals fought to liberate. While Alvarez does over explain the motives of her novels, she is not "selling out" as Gómez-Vega implies. She makes the experience of the Mirabals as real and accessible as possible so her readers will gain a better understanding of the horrors Dominicans and specifically the Mirabals endured. Would Gómez-Vega suggest that readers who have not been through a horror like the Holocaust, for example, be excluded from reading Holocaust literature? Also, Gómez-Vega's jab at Alvarez' connection to her English-speaking readers seems to reveal more of the troubled relationship the critic has with English speaking audiences than any issues Alvarez might have. Alvarez has never referred to herself as a Dominican writer but rather as a Dominican-American writer, and has explained repeatedly her conscious choice to write in English. Alvarez makes history by making these periods and figures of history accessible through novelistic form to an English-speaking audience (mainly that of the North American market) for the first time. From this results the problematic issue of whether re-writing the history of a Caribbean Spanish-speaking country suffers in "translation"—linguistically, stylistically (from a historical model to a literary one) and culturally.

Alvarez covers all her bases: on the one hand, she presents all the research done in writing these novels, and on the other, she undermines these anecdotal accounts and historical documents used by stating that these historical characters are really creatures of her imagination. She clearly does not want her work to become "master narratives;" yet it is unavoidable that they will assume this role for readers whose sole exposure to these historical events and figures are her fictional accounts. We want to think of these

characters drawn by Alvarez as role models, but Alvarez constantly reminds us not to idealize them by placing her protagonists in situations where they become stereotypical.

Just as Alvarez struggled to find her own literary voice she understands the difficulty of Dedé and Camila to own up to their voices. She affords Dedé and Camila the space to move from playing secondary roles to becoming prominent voices in their lives-- first as narrators re-telling the stories of their families and then as significant forces in their own lives. In addition to creating a space for these women's stories to be heard, Alvarez uses their stories to address late twentieth century values and concerns. In both novels, Alvarez grants gender politics an arena in which to unfold and allows us to address a persistent question throughout the novel-- given the restrictive position these women had in society how were they able to be as revolutionary (politically and educationally) as they were?

Acts of Revolution

Consistently women have been involved in male-dominated areas to which they have gained access by imaginatively transforming their traditional roles to infiltrate historically masculine domains. This section will highlight the difficulties women and specifically these historical characters faced in becoming politically active and the ways in which they came to be revolutionary.

The protagonists of *Butterflies* and *Salomé* fulfill their roles as women within a conventional society, while stepping into a politically active arena. A key element of these novels is how these women reconcile their positions as wives/mothers/human beings with their role as activists. Not everyone finds this balancing act noteworthy. Ibis Gómez Vega for example, understands that the Mirabals' accomplishments "are not radical or subversive in any recognizable sense of the word" (95). However, not only are their actions subversive under "normal" standards as established by historians who note

that they acted the way most men would not have dared to act, but their actions are even more impressive when seen in the context of their narrow, limited position in society. [65] Even Dedé's actions after her sisters die and Camila's actions towards the end of her life reflect a radical break from traditional norms which had previously circumscribed them.

In drawing from the following articles on revolutionary conflict in Latin America, I am not attempting to standardize all the experiences discussed. Clearly, there are a multitude of differences among revolutions and revolutionaries and between the working class women and privileged women who participate in these struggles. While they are not made equal by the political unrest in their countries, or by the geographical, class, and racial disparity they face, certain gender issues at the core of revolutionary struggle seem to apply across the board. Using some of what has been written on women in revolutionary conflict, I will discuss how Alvarez develops this subject in her novels.

In *Gathering Rage: The Failure of 20th C Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda*, Margaret Randall theorizes that Latin America's revolutionary failures might have in part been due to the failure to address the needs and requirements of women within the revolution. While Randall's main contention is not directly relevant and much too complex to address in our discussion, Randall's stance that revolutionary conflict might serve as a potential site for female empowerment seems a more plausible and pertinent area to explore. Similarly, in "From Home to Street: Women and Revolution in Nicaragua" Barbara Seitz examines the struggle of Nicaraguan women and notes that "integrally woven into the fabric of these [revolutionary] developments has been the struggle of women for emancipation and empowerment" (198). Seitz points out that gradually, "the official and societal view of women in Nicaragua changed markedly with women's full participation in the revolution and under the Sandinista government which supported the women's movement and recognized the need to address and respond to women's issues" (203). That revolution gave women the opportunity to support their political viewpoints while it afforded them a space in which to break down barriers

[65] Two texts that highlight the courage it took for the Mirabals to act as subversively as they did are: Miguel Aquino García's *Tres heroinas y un tirano: La historia veridical de las Hermanas Mirabal y su asesinato por Rafael Leonidas Trujillo* and William Galván's *Minerva Mirabal: Historia de una Heroina*.

imposed on them by gender. How then does Alvarez depict her female protagonists' evolution within revolutionary conflicts?

These essays on women involved in revolutionary conflicts reflect how these women look back on revolution as a time of awakening (Seitz 204). Alvarez shares this understanding, as her protagonists undergo a transformation when they are exposed to their country's political unrest. It is as if their sense of self comes into focus once they are forced to face the political injustice that surrounds them; so that their struggle becomes one for all rights not only those related to national issues. [66]

In *Butterflies* Minerva best encapsulates this sense of awakening. While Alvarez portrays her as having a highly developed sense of justice at a very young age, she also shows how initially naïve and unaware Minerva was about the conditions in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo. Two pivotal moments that propel her toward her participation in the underground are her friendship with Sinita whose male family members were all murdered by Trujillo's men, and her friendship with Virgilio Morales, a member of the underground. Minerva describes her interaction with Virgilio: "when I met Lío it was as if I woke up. The givens, all I'd been taught, fell away like covers when you sit up in bed" (86). Minerva and Virgilio engage in numerous intellectual debates which reaffirm her convictions and fuel her determination to bring about social change. Through these two relationships, the atrocities of Trujillo's regime come into focus. Armed with this knowledge, her only recourse is to fight back in any way possible. Simultaneously with becoming politically active, Minerva breaks other gender stereotypes. She pursues at all costs her studies in law, abandons the Church because of its lack of support for the underground, reads "high" literature and is too busy to get married until the spinsterish age of twenty-nine.

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[66] Kelly Oliver makes a similar yet more gender focused assertion when she observes that "Alvarez's story of the Mirabal sisters' revolution against Trujillo is as much about their own local revolutions against the restrictions of patriarchy as it is about a rebellion against the restrictions of the dictatorship" (242). This awakening resulting from revolutionary involvement takes some characters longer than others. For the three Mirabal sisters it occurs simultaneously with their awareness of the injustices of the Trujillo dictatorship. For Dedé, it comes as a result of her sisters' death. For Salomé, it occurs through her poetry as she observes the tumultuous conditions her country and her people face, and for Camila, it comes when she discovers her "purpose" as an activist in Cuba, a genderless job where she sees she can fulfill her role as educator and practice her mother's teachings.

While Minerva goes outside of her family, Salomé learns about her country's political instability through her family's experiences. Her father's involvement in politics allows her to see that political matters can have an impact over personal lives. She needs to be informed and concerned over her country's affairs as they will have an impact on her life and that of those around her. It is not something far removed to be left to others. Mostly though, Salomé learns to have a passion and devotion for her mother country that drives her to write patriotic poetry that stirs her countrymen in times of turmoil. Simultaneously, Salomé becomes aware of the unjust system that treats women as second class citizens, discouraging their education and maintaining a double standard in moral and legal issues. This knowledge helps her appreciate her good fortune in acquiring an education and apprises her of the need to found a school for women to start leveling the inequalities in the society around her.

As in her previous novels, Alvarez explores the position of women in society in general and in the Dominican Republic in particular. Whether in depicting the women in her family or female historical figures, one of her "goals" is that of humanizing women. She shies away from any limiting stereotypical or even mythical depictions of women. This is especially important in her historical novels where she brings legendary figures to life. In the historical novels this translates into emotional reactions and expressions of fear, doubt and passion in her protagonists. For example, the second thoughts Minerva has after she comes out of prison, her wish to be a wife and mother, and no longer a revolutionary figure; or Salomé's dilemma when she longs to be loved by her husband as more than the muse of her country. By depicting this (internal) dichotomy, Alvarez reveals an added dimension, worthy of exploration, the participation of these historical figures in public life.

Towards the end of *Butterflies*, Minerva discovers she has to fulfill a role she no longer wants to play. She is tired of being a fearless leader of the underground and is surprised to realize that, "I couldn't think of anything I wanted more than to stay home with my sisters at Mama's raising our children" (257). She reveals, "I hid my anxieties and gave everyone a bright smile. If they had only known how frail was their iron-will heroine" (259), and more personally she observes in her relationship with Manolo that,

"Outwardly, I was still his calm, courageous compañera. Inside, the woman had got the upper hand" (267). Her public persona as revolutionary leader is so closely tied to her personal life that her political uncertainty spills into her relationship with Manolo casting doubt on the dynamics of their relationship where she no longer wants to be his political ally, only his wife. To present Minerva's convictions so precariously and highlight her vulnerability might suggest she was not completely committed to the mission of the underground, but what Alvarez is illustrating is the human component behind this woman's extraordinary actions. Clearly, she did follow through, participating and supporting the underground and sticking to her principles despite rumors about possible attempts on their lives. Through her fears and doubts we realize that Minerva's actions are not reckless but brave.

At different points of *Salomé*, Salomé feels torn between her role as national poet and her role as a woman. Salomé writes a love poem to her husband but is sadly taken aback when her husband dismisses her gesture by saying she must not squander her talent. He feels it does not become the bard of the nation to sing in such a "minor key" (177). Salomé is distraught and responds that she is a woman as well as a poet, but in the end she puts her intimate feelings aside and fulfills her "duty" as bard of a nation. While neither of these two women is trying to shirk their responsibilities to their country and their countrymen, they find it difficult to ignore their needs as women.

Women here take on an oppositional role to that of revolutionary. Alvarez leaves this tension ambiguous so that it can equally reflect the uphill, failed attempts of some women trying to reconcile these roles, or serve as an example of women who somewhat successfully have incorporated all roles into their lives. As an adolescent, Salomé wrote seditious poetry within a dictatorial regime, while Minerva defied Trujillo publicly as she helped organize the underground movement secretly. Both women knew that their own lives and those of their families would be in danger if they persisted in their endeavors, yet they steadfastly stood their ground. In the creation of her protagonists, Alvarez emphasizes the fact that these famous figures found great difficulty negotiating their positions as women and public figures (in politics as well as art).

These historical figures are simultaneously presented as products of their time, bound by certain rules and traditions, and pioneers of their time, as they break out of molds assigned to their sex. In humanizing these legendary women, Alvarez achieves two things: she makes these historical figures accessible and shows how amazing these women were in that despite their fears and doubts, they courageously defended their convictions.

Though revolution is described as a site for female awakening, it can also alert us to what are for some, as seen in the character of Dedé, insurmountable barriers to equality. In *Women and the Cuban Revolution* Elizabeth Stone argues that "the women who joined the struggle against Batista not only had to have the courage to face the repression and torture, but to face the prejudice against women's involvement in politics" (8). Alvarez sidesteps this issue drawing backdrops for the Mirabals and Salomé that are not openly hostile to women's political participation. She does address this prejudice against involvement in politics through a circuitous route by way of the relationship of Dedé and her husband. While she does not address tensions within the revolutionary circle, Alvarez does show the tension that results from a woman wanting to become politically active when her husband has chosen otherwise. Through Dedé, Alvarez illustrates women's perceptions of what is appropriate or proper, and through Dedé's husband Jaimito, we see a man's machista need to keep the woman in her "place." Alvarez allows us to understand the kind of pressure Jaimito exerts on Dedé when Dedé remembers his threats to leave her and never let her see her three boys, if she became involved in any of her sisters' activities.[67] While fighting a common cause leveled out certain men and women (the other three sisters and their husbands) or made them into equal partners in a common struggle, other men and women (like Dedé and Jaimito) were unable to get past the barrier set by traditionally established norms.

Paradoxically, traditionally cultivated aspects of womanhood such as motherhood have given women the license to enter revolutionary conflict. Seitz observes that "women

[67] Initially even Pedro, Patria's husband, has reservations about joining the underground when his wife seems committed to the cause. Still, his reservations don't stem from his need to command his household or in his belief that his wife is not equal to the task; instead his fear lies in the loss of life and property—the farm which had been in his family for generations.

became involved (in the revolution) first out of familial concern as mothers and later in a formal network for the cause of the revolution" (204). In Alvarez' *Butterflies* we note this especially in Patria who becomes the mother par excellence. Patria definitively decides to join the underground struggle the moment she sees a young boy being killed in a raid and on a more personal level when her own son's safety is threatened and he is imprisoned for anti-Trujillo activities. She offers her house which eventually becomes the "motherhouse of the movement" (166), and feels as if she leads "children out of bondage, the way they [the group members] all followed me obediently into the house" (165).

While part of Patria's maternal inclination comes from her human maternal feelings, part of her disposition also comes from her Christian faith that pushes her to see those in need as part of her flock that needs tending. Alvarez uses this connection of Patria to the Church to explore the Church's involvement in revolutionary conflict. Through Patria, we observe the evolving stance of the Church in relation to the underground movement and the Trujillo regime, and the position of submission anticipated by the regime which led them to underestimate the power of both groups.

Throughout Latin American history, the Catholic Church has invariably allied itself with the ruling classes. In *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*, Randall observes the contradiction of Church and government, "while the Spanish Catholic tradition preached of women in the home, passive, dependent and 'ornamental' the world around them demanded something else. History forced them to assume positions and make decisions that along with their economic activity, increased their social and political involvement" (xvi). Randall further explains that slowly there began changes in the Church's position through isolated cases and individuals within the Church who realized that there was no contradiction between revolution and Christianity. Progressives in the Church began to support the revolution.[68] These progressives would come to be called in the mid to late sixties proponents of liberation theology. Liberation

[68] The struggle between the Church and the proponents of liberation theology has been going on since liberation theology first came on the scene in the 1960s. Still, by stating in January 1979 on a visit to Mexico that "this conception of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth, does not tally with the Church's teachings" (Encyclopedia Britannica online) Pope John Paul II put an end to any support for liberation theology that might have existed within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

theology explores the relationship between Christian theology (usually Roman Catholic) and political activism, particularly in areas of social justice and human rights.

In *Butterflies*, the Church's stance begins to evolve from one of passive acceptance to one of steady rebellion. Patria's transformation mirrors that of the Church. Patria recalls "every week his [Trujillo's] picture was in the papers next to Monsignor Pittini, overseeing some good deed" (51). Patria comes to realize that the Church is not the hierarchy that leads it, but the people within it, who actively practice their faith (the progressives Randall alludes to). Patria is uncertain if her religious faith has been misplaced, but eventually is able to reconcile her faith with the revolution. While traveling five months pregnant, on a religious retreat with a priest and thirty other women, Patria lives through a shell explosion which the government guards initiate against the peasants whom they believe belong to the underground. In the middle of the commotion, Patria sees a young boy no more than her daughter's age running fearfully toward her; she cries out for him to throw himself on the ground, but is horrified to see "his eyes found mine as a shot hit him square in the back. I saw the wonder on his young face as the life drained out of him…" (162). At that moment, she realizes she cannot let her countrymen, brothers, sisters, children, her human family, as she puts it, die. Eventually, so do some members within the Church who, unable to withstand the horrors surrounding them, decide to take action by forming a Church Militant and recruiting campesinos while spreading God's word.

Salomé's founding of a secondary school for girls in the 1880s is as revolutionary as the Mirabals' underground experience. While revolution, "a sudden radical and complete change," is often associated with overthrowing governments, this definition is equally appropriate for "fundamental changes in the way of thinking about or visualizing something" (*New College Merriam Webster Dictionary*) like a woman's education. Through her seditious poetry directly related to the political climate of the Dominican Republic at the time, her successfully ambitious project of educating women began a forward thinking trend that would propel future changes in the position of women in Dominican society. Camila, the historical person not the fictional character, describes her mother as a woman who "set herself apart from existing molds, from the limiting

existence of the women of her time…her action was innovative; her attitude could be considered revolutionary, but in all she said and did there was never a sign of violence or discord" (qtd. in Rodríguez 405). Camila adds that her mother "dedicated herself to the formation of Dominican women, to make them aware of themselves and of their possible influence on the destiny of the country" (406) and "…so it was that the work of Salomé Ureña in favor of the cultural and social elevation of women—work which today may be considered feminist though she never used that expression to describe it—ties in perfectly with her aim of serving her country and the world" (407) [my translation].

The fictional Camila expands on the accomplishment of Salomé's enterprise: "Mama had opened the Instituto de Señoritas in 1881 in her front parlor and except for the hiatus when she was ill, the school had survived dozens of revolutions and civil wars and changes in government" (340). It was the steady commitment to progress and education that allowed this school for girls to survive the radical changes surrounding it. The question Alvarez poses at the beginning of the novel through the voice of a young Salomé and at its conclusion in the acknowledgments, "what is patria?", is answered partly through the actions of her two protagonists. Through their dedication to education both in the Dominican Republic and in Cuba, we are shown how on a small scale these women were creating a homeland out of the soil on which they lived.

Private Sphere and Home Space

Discussing Alvarez' historical characters solely from a perspective of their public lives and their activism, provides a lopsided discussion of these women. One of Alvarez' aims in creating these historical characters is to make them realistic, three dimensional, complex, women with whom her readers can identify. On a larger scale, Alvarez' historical novels appear to follow Catherine Wiley and Fiona Barnes's understanding that "storytelling and unearthing repressed histories can create coalitions that empower women to rethink the definitions and possibilities of family and home" (*Homemaking*

xvii). On a fictional level, the two narrators reconceive family and home through their storytelling, and on a realistic level, the readers will hopefully allow these historical characters' lives to alter their conceptions of family and home. The home space of these historical characters is more than just the space to which the women are relegated when their lives get too complicated. It becomes a space of power—the fortress to be guarded by Doña Chea and her daughters against the SIM and any one else threatening their peace. It is also one of Patria's reasons both for not joining the underground and also for joining. It is the place where, as Daniuska González González observes, Mate and Minerva long to return to after they are imprisoned and the place from which Dedé keeps the girls' memory alive (66).

For Salomé, as a young girl, home is a space where she is free to write her seditiously patriotic poetry, where women are raised to believe that they deserve to have an education, and where sisterhood, a bond among women, is cultivated. In Camila's case, her home space changes so often that it is hard to attach any significance to any one place. Part of her journey is her attempt to find a place in which to settle down. In her mid sixties, she realizes that Cuba is the perfect place to live out the rest of her productive life: "It was time to come home…or as close as I could get to home" (349) Camila acknowledges to her niece.

Having discussed the public personae of Alvarez' historical characters, it is equally important to focus on the personal development of these women. Both the Mirabal sisters and Salomé continue to have a family life with children, parents, siblings and husbands to manage while they participate in public life. This issue which even in the twenty-first century is an ongoing tug-of-war/source of tension for women is comprehensively developed in these novels. Home is a safe space to come to, but it is also a place where other sources of tension continue to plague these women: from life altering issues of illness, infidelity, and death to minor but nonetheless existent demands of house and home.

For all of Minerva's heroism and courage, her husband's infidelity unravels her, even though this is not the first time Minerva has had to face this kind of betrayal. Her father had a family on the side (a mistress and four daughters), a transgression which

Minerva condemned vehemently, while she compassionately spared the daughters of this union any blame. Driven by her love of education and her interest in her fellow compatriots, Minerva goes so far as to help the eldest daughter of this "other" family get an education so she can help her mother and sisters progress. Through these instances when Minerva is disappointed by key men in her life, we see two telling facets of her personality—initially her vulnerability and humanity and later her resolve and strength.

In *Salomé*, a similar scenario occurs--Salomé comes to terms with her father's infidelity when his mistress and his two daughters show up at his funeral. Until then, the reason for her mother's separation from her husband had remained vague. Like Minerva, that is not the last time Salomé is disappointed by a man in her life. By accident Salomé receives a letter from her husband intended for her brother-in-law which mentions a mistress and child that he supports in France while he concludes his medical studies. Salomé is distraught and writes to him: "You have broken my heart. Stay as long as you like…I do not care to ever hear from you again" (232). Like Minerva, Salomé's father had also cheated on her mother. Because Salomé is so young when her mother forces her father out, Salomé's relationship with her father does not suffer as much as it did in Minerva's case.

Both characters also face the death of their fathers. Even though they are about the same age (mid-twenties) when their fathers die, Salomé's response is more intense than Minerva's. At her father's passing Salomé is despondent and two years go by before she even takes part in social activities. Minerva , on the other hand, seems to have been shaken by her father's death, but ends up being the strong one of the family. Perhaps the difference in vocation-- poet vs. underground leader--creates different approaches to this crisis. In the end, both these women go on despite the heartache and disappointment in their personal lives. In some ways, their personal dilemmas end up taking a back seat to their sense of moral responsibility to the society around them. By showing that her protagonists deal with issues that many women face, Alvarez challenges the notion that in order to act as bravely as these women did, one would have to be some kind of super woman immune to the pressures of daily life. That is to say, one need not be a jungle-living, gun-toting woman to be revolutionary.

In making "home" a place not only of refuge but also of power, Alvarez alters/expands the concept of home life from the traditionally conservative space for which it has been known in Dominican culture. Nevertheless, home is not a static concept in her work. While the mother's house is a haven in *Butterflies*, it is so because of the constant adaptation of the family to the circumstances in which they are forced to live. When the SIM "secretly" camps out on their grounds forcing the women to watch everything they say and do even inside their own home, the girls creatively circumvent the guards' eavesdropping by using code words and leaving their sentences constantly unfinished. More humorously, they say "bless you" every time a guard sneezes outside even though the Mirabals are not supposed to know they are out there watching, or they leave ash trays for the guards to avoid having the men's cigarette butts polluting their bushes. While their homes are tarnished with Trujillo's violence when the guards come to take Minerva, Mate, Pedrito, Leandro, Manolo and Nelson to prison, the women that remain behind refuse to feel afraid in their own home and focus on finding their relatives, making their stay in prison as humane as possible, and getting them out. They actively seek solutions that are accessible to them rather than passively accepting the circumstances doled out to them.

"Home" in *Butterflies* is a specific location, the girls' homes, but ultimately, it is the mother's house where they all come back to and where Dedé and her mother raise all the cousins after the sisters' die. In *Salomé,* home is a more expansive term encompassing mother country; hence the question Alvarez poses at the beginning and the end of the novel: "What is patria?" Salomé's poetry, the dialogue between Camila and her siblings, and one of Camila's most pressing questions is about the mother country. Where do we really belong? What makes us a part of one country and not another, birthright, family history?

These perceptions of home and homeland echo Alvarez' own concerns. On one of her adolescent trips back "home" to visit her extended family, all of which is in the Dominican Republic, Alvarez realizes how "hyphenated" she has become. She experiences the security and boisterousness of large family life in the Dominican Republic, but she also feels displaced as she tries to communicate haltingly in Spanish, or

even finds herself clashing with her elders who aren't as "liberated" as she. While her formative years are spent in the Dominican Republic, her maturity and her craft come while she is in the United States. This "in-betweeness" which she eventually comes to label Dominican-Americanness, for a long time is an unresolved issue/concern. Through *Salomé,* Alvarez deals with some of these very issues of motherland and homeland. Where is home? Where do she and *her dominicanidad* belong?

Finally, Alvarez significantly highlights her protagonists' complexity through the titles of her historical novels. The titles of both emphasize the intricacy of her protagonists. Both "In the Time" and "In the Name" seem to imply that the protagonists stand for/represent more than themselves. They stand for a period of dictatorship, for a time of revolution, for a period of national definition, for a time when "butterflies" meant defiance, for a moment when the name Salomé was synonymous with "patria." The paradox is that these historical figures also stand for purely individual human forms of their mythical historical counterparts, so that they simultaneously represent a country, Latina women and themselves. The courage of these historical characters is reflected not in their actions but in their determination to follow through on their actions despite their personal reservations and fears.

Spirituality

In the same way that Alvarez "grounds" her characters so that they don't remain as merely mythical representations, she also turns religion and spirituality into earth-based experiences. Spirituality is no longer far removed and ethereal; it is part of everyday life prompting militancy in the face of injustice. Alvarez creates a hybrid spirituality that combines traditional Catholic rituals with revolutionary activism.

In her study devoted to folk Catholicism as represented in the works of US Latina writers, Barbara Marie Christian claims that Alvarez' characters "fault the orthodox Catholic Church for a failure to defend the poor, the dark skinned, the female and the

disenfranchised" (iv). In *Butterflies* Alvarez negatively portrays the Church's passive acceptance of the abuses Trujillo perpetrated on the Dominican people. To support her argument Christian quotes a naïve Patria who innocently wonders why Minerva is so opposed to Trujillo since: "every week his picture was in the paper next to Monsignor Pittini overseeing some good deed" (51). Christian explains that when Church teachings clash with lived experiences, religious followers often reconciled both realities by creating what she calls "Folk Catholicism." She describes Folk Catholicism as a way for torn Catholics to avoid abandoning their religion completely "thereby losing the comfort and cultural unity they gain from it"(32). As a result of Catholics' disillusionment "some followers [feel it necessary to] discard or amend official beliefs and practices."(32). [69]

Even though Alvarez initially does focus on the Church's complicity with Trujillo, she also shows how the power of religious symbols came to serve the underground cause well. In what officials came to call the "Crucifix Plot," the members of the underground decided to wear crucifixes prominently, as a sign of solidarity, and to sing religious songs whenever one of the prisoners was taken for torturous interrogation. This method of resistance proved successful as Trujillo, feeling his authority challenged, had all the crucifixes taken away and all religious singing prohibited. While the underground members had their crucifixes forcefully removed, this was a significant victory for the underground. Despite the difficulties in maintaining communications among the members in prison, they were able to show a united front and to bravely challenge Trujillo and his dictatorship by their demonstration. Trujillo's response showed how seriously he took the challenge to his authority, even though he still had the power to oppress.

At the same time as the underground made use of traditional symbols to further a revolutionary cause, the local Catholic Church was revolutionizing its perspective on the Dominican state of affairs. Alvarez describes how local Church policy evolved and called for active participation in preventing further bloodshed and violence at the hands of

[69] Christian's Folk Catholicism follows a similar philosophy to that held by practitioners of liberation theology discussed previously.

Trujillo. Despite their initial reticence, the Catholic Church publicly announced their change of heart. Alvarez describes the pivotal point of the Church's transformation when the Catholic bishops prepared a statement of action to be read in every Sunday mass throughout the country. This public acknowledgement began a contentious relationship between the Church and Trujillo which was to last through the rest of his dictatorship.

While spiritual issues appear throughout *Butterflies*, they play a minor role in *Salomé*. Alvarez creatively juxtaposes traditional religion with both secular issues and spiritism. In *Butterflies*, religion surfaces mainly in relation to the character of Patria. She is the most religious of the sisters who early in her life intended to become a nun. The turning points in Patria's life are all linked to religious events or language. In a holy week celebration at the Church she meets her future husband, her awakening to the revolution occurs during a religious retreat, while her decision to join the underground movement stems from her sense of Christian responsibility to her fellow Dominicans. Her narration of the events preceding the sisters' murder is phrased in religious terms: "And on the third day He rose again…On my third day at Mamá's instead of a resurrection, I got another crucifixion. The SIM came for Mate"(201). [70] It is through Patria that we "see" the transformation of the Church clergy from passive observers to active participants against Trujillo.

To show that spirituality does not exist in a vacuum, Alvarez introduces secular issues within a spiritual context. On a pilgrimage taken by the Mirabal women in honor of the Virgin Mary, the mother reveals to her daughters that she has found out that her husband has been cheating on her. Alvarez strategically places this discussion to stress the need for spirituality to co-exist with worldly affairs. At this point in *Butterflies*, Patria has been going through a crisis of her own. Following a miscarriage and having become aware of the horrors taking place in her country Patria begins to have a crisis of faith. Through this pilgrimage Patria realizes that she has been looking for divinity in all the

[70] The interjection of religious images from the Passion of Jesus Christ used in Patria's chapter is similar to a sequence narrated by Chicana Ana Castillo in her novel *So Far From God* (1994). Castillo writes: "Jesus fell and people all over the land were dying from toxic exposure in factories" (242). While Castillo's use of the Passion of Christ is more extensive and detailed, it is interesting that both Latina authors recall religious imageries to then secularize them. In Castillo's case to highlight the plights of a community, in Alvarez' case to highlight the plight of a family.

wrong places. It is not in the heavens far away from her, but here on earth and all around her in the faces of her countrymen: “I turned around and saw the packed pews, hundreds of weary upturned faces, and it was as if I’d been facing the wrong way all my life. My faith stirred”(58). Patria’s “discovery” sounds very much like Alvarez’ take on the correct approach to spiritual life, which embraces rather than ignores earthly preoccupations.

Alvarez tempers Patria’s positive religious experience with various egregious examples of government sponsored religion. In the beginning, Trujillo uses the Church to further his agenda by donating money to the Church and getting it to turn a blind eye on the unspeakable acts occurring under his rule. On a smaller scale, though significantly symbolic, the connection between church and state is reflected by the placement of Trujillo’s picture in Dominicans’ homes right next to the picture of Jesus Christ. In the Mirabal home the picture of Trujillo hangs next to that of Jesus Christ like two “deities” standing side by side. Even when the Mirabals have become disillusioned with Trujillo’s rule, they are forced to leave the picture displayed prominently in their home to show their loyalty to him. So, even in the privacy of their home, he is always watching them. The joke then becomes that unfortunately, the “proximity” of Jesus Christ to Trujillo does nothing to help the dictator rise above his barbaric practices.

Approaching the issue of religion from a different perspective, M.M. Adjarian introduces the term “Marianismo” into the discussion. Marianismo, the cult of female spiritual authority, celebrates a long suffering patience and moral superiority like machismo celebrates virility and courage. Women are portrayed as superior to men yet this supremacy occurs “within an area circumscribed by patriarchy”(147). Adjarian believes that Alvarez creates the Mirabal sisters in the image of the Virgin Mary remaking the Virgin Mary into a political militant. Furthermore she argues that Alvarez constructs a female trinity in the figures of Patria, Minerva and Maria Teresa that counters the traditional male trinity. While this is an interesting interpretation, Adjarian is forcing a reading of the Mirabal sisters that doesn’t quite correspond. Assuming this connection between the Mirabal sisters and the Virgin Mary did exist; Alvarez would be sanctifying the girls and placing them into a pre-existing equation created by men. This

goes precisely against Alvarez' project. Not only is she trying to break away from pre-established molds but she is trying to humanize these figures which have been "deified" for much too long. Adjarian does discuss how Alvarez re-humanizes these freedom fighters and the qualities they represent (i.e. justice and patriotism). Yet, her argument falls short in her assumption that if Alvarez infuses the Mirabal sisters with traditionally "female characteristics" she must be equating them to the Virgin Mary. However, these qualities of traditional womanhood reflected by the Mirabal sisters are attributes that were valued by Latino culture in the 1950s. Whether they came originally from a desire to emulate the Virgin Mary is irrelevant because by the time the novel takes place these characteristics have become the staple of Latinas' behavior/a fixture in the Latino value system. Alvarez shows these women as products of their time, making their departure from this world into the underground world of revolutionaries that much more astounding.

Even though *Salomé* is less informed by religion and spirituality, Alvarez does acknowledge the pervasiveness of religion in Latino culture. With the nineteenth century Salomé and her sister Mon, we see the ritualistic constancy with which Latinos participate in religious life. While the Ureña family is not excessively religious, during Salomé's mourning period the only social activity she regularly participates in is going to Church on Sundays. This reverence for religious life is balanced out later in *Salomé* with a "blasphemous" scene that takes place between Mon and a three year old Camila. After Salomé's death, in an attempt to keep her mother's memory alive for her, Mon encourages Camila to conclude each prayer with the traditional "In the name of the Father and of the Son" but to add a variation to the ending "and of my mother Salomé, Amen." With this, Salomé becomes an ever present "deity" in Camila's life. Through this association of her mother with her daily prayers, Salomé becomes larger than life for Camila. She becomes like other religious figures that she can't see but in which she continues having faith. When Camila's father finds out about this sacrilegious practice, he forbids Camila to repeat it, but she continues to use this "prayer" even as an adult. While Camila is not shown as having any inclination to participate in religious rituals, her reverence to her mother's memory is infused with a spiritual quality.

Finally, Alvarez incorporates religion into her novels by showing how traditional religious practices and popular spiritist practices co-exist in Dominican households. Ilan Stavans calls the interwoven Catholic and spiritist beliefs syncretism. In the Dominican Republic this syncretism combines traditions of Catholicism with Afro-Caribbean practices. Christian adds that many Latina writers "accept that Catholicism and spiritism coexist because they have witnessed the phenomenon among the people about whom they write"(142). In works by Latinas it is not unusual to see a devout Catholic appealing to practitioners of Santería for help. In her detective series, Corpi similarly incorporates Catholicism with alternative forms of spirituality in that reflect her Chicana cultural background. Instead of blending Santería and Catholicism, Damasco equally appeals to her Catholic background as to a wise curandera. This blending of spiritual worlds appears prominently in Alvarez' semi-autobiographical novels and to a more negligible degree in her historical novels. Still, both Dedé and Camila are Catholics whose moment of clarity comes from "listening" to the "ghosts" that surround them. Camila reflects that "just introducing these ghosts by name has recalled them so vividly, they rise up before her, then shimmer and fade in the shaft of sunlight…maybe it is a good thing to finally face each one squarely. Maybe that is the only way to exorcise ghosts. To become them" (42).

In *Butterflies,* when Minou complains to her aunt Dedé that Fela, the servant of the Mirabals, was unable to contact the sisters, Dedé without a hint of mockery explains that they have been spending the day with her. This is a change of heart for Dedé, who had previously been horrified to learn from a Catholic Bishop that Fela had been using a shed in her backyard to conjure up her sisters' spirits. She had had to force Fela to close up shop, unable to bear the thought of her sisters' memories being used to cure people's ailments. More lightheartedly, Alvarez deals with spritism early in the novel, when she has Fela dispensing advice to a young Mate through coffee cup readings, spells and magic powders which for the most part Mate uses in lieu of daisy petals to determine her true love. While Alvarez only glosses over religious and spiritual themes in *Salomé,* she incorporates prominently conventional religious and non-traditional rituals to reflect the syncretic practices present in the Dominican Republic. While Corpi's novels illustrate spirituality as a blending of Catholic rituals and supernatural visions and dreams,

Alvarez' portrayal of spirituality is much more grounded in "reality." Alvarez is limited by her desire to remain faithful to the essence of the historical Mirabal sisters.

Through Alvarez' fiction the Mirabals and the Ureñas and the time periods within which they existed come alive. Ana Lydia Vega explains this connection of history to literature: "never was the connection of the personal and political so evident—to exist as individuals, we needed to become amateur detectives and seek the clues of the past. Yet, in seeking this history we didn't go to the History Department or the Social Sciences Building…was it that we sensed we needed to invent a past for ourselves?" (*Historia y Literatura* 26) Yes. In creating female figures that she and other Latinas are able to look back on/up to, Alvarez revises history. She understands that to find fitting cultural ancestors, she can't rely on traditional history books that assign minor roles, if that, to those she would view as her predecessors.

By focusing on the lives of the Mirabals (within the Trujillo dictatorship) and the Henríquez Ureña family (amidst the civil wars and the changes in government) Alvarez implicitly questions the focus historians have had on other figures or events. While there are substantial amounts of information on Trujillo and his dictatorship, there is little on the underground movement, their uprisings and the role of women within these dissenting groups. Similarly in *Salomé,* Alvarez takes the focus away from the numerous presidents and the political instability of the Dominican Republic in the nineteenth century and focuses on the poet who inspired a nation. Alvarez is not saying that what has been written is unimportant, only that much of what has not been written *is* important. Alvarez' project contradicts and counteracts canonical narratives by giving a rarely heard version of events. Through her novels, fiction is able to mediate between the historical worlds of the past and the present. In the following chapter, I will focus not on historical *figures* like the ones Alvarez' brings to life, but rather on historical *communities* through which Achy Obejas considers the Cuban Revolution and Cuban history generally.

Expanding the parameters of Cuban-American narratives in Achy Obejas *Memory Mambo* and *Days of Awe*

Of the works discussed in this study, Achy Obejas' novels most stubbornly defy categorization. Lucha Corpi clearly focuses on Chicana/o pivotal events through the perspective of Chicana/os, and Julia Alvarez draws attention to overlooked Dominican historical figures through which she represents formative moments in Dominican history. Obejas however focuses on a less definable *community* history (lesbian, immigrant, national, Jewish) as it intersects with Cuban national history. Like Corpi and Alvarez, Obejas uses individual and family accounts to re-examine moments in Cuban history. Unlike the other authors, the historical events are not as critical, but serve as a way to consider the experiences of ethnic, cultural and sexual communities.

Though Obejas' novels illustrate the complex and intricate relationships Cuban-Americans have with the island,[71] it is the lens through which she examines these experiences that sets her work apart. In *Memory Mambo* (1996), Obejas informs the experience of immigration to the U.S. with the lesbian identity of the protagonist Juani Casas. In *Days of Awe* (2001), she explores the buried history of Cuban-Jews and contrasts the Cuban immigrant experience to that of the Cuban-national individuals who remained in Cuba after the 1959 Revolution. By focusing on two relatively uncharted themes in Cuban-American fiction, lesbianism and Cuban-Jewishness, Obejas expands the thematic breadth of the Cuban-American narrative. In both novels, Obejas also addresses issues of physical abuse, sexual assault, and adultery, focusing on the impact they have on the individuals involved, as well as on the family unit. As to spirituality,

[71] In this way, Obejas' novels echo the concerns of the majority of Cuban-American writers. Ruth Behar describes in *Bridges to Cuba* a trip back to the Island where she had the opportunity to meet Fidel Castro and while her initial impulse as an anthropologist was to jump at this opportunity, out of respect for her parents and especially her father's lifelong opposition to Castro and his government, she had to decline the invitation. De la Campa's text similarly reflects the conflictive feelings the author had at different periods during his life toward Cuba and the revolutionary project in part because of all the societal (Miami exile community) and familial pressures.

Obejas explores the African born santería, the blending of Catholic rituals and spiritist practices and the overlap of Judaism, Catholicism and Santería in crypto-Jewish tradition.[72] Finally, through *Memory Mambo* and *Days of Awe,* Obejas creates generic hybrids that blend the more thematically traditional Cuban-American genre with the more novel Latina Lesbian and Latin-American Jewish narratives.

Having already developed a reputation for her poetry and journalistic pieces, Obejas compiled a well-received short story collection in 1994. In writing *Memory Mambo* and *Days of Awe,* Obejas joined the ranks of other Cuban-American (ethnic) writers, Cristina García and Oscar Hijuelos.[73] While *Memory Mambo* has received a fair amount of critical coverage, mainly focusing on the intersection of cultural identity and lesbianism, *Days* inexplicably has not garnered as much attention.[74] Even though *Days* was well-received by reviewers, the pointed focus on crypto-Judaism and Jewish themes might have deterred readers and literary critics uninformed with such themes especially in a Cuban-American setting. [75]

More than in the texts of Corpi and Alvarez, Obejas' novels include facts that correspond biographically with the author's life. As with Corpi and Alvarez, Obejas uses her novels to sort through her own questions of identity such as the exploration of her Jewish origins. The evident similarities between Obejas and her protagonists compelled Maite Zubiaurre to focus on the autobiographical overtones of her novels. These parallels range from minor details like identical ages at the time of immigration (in Obejas and Juani) to the more significant features of sexual identity. Obejas insists though that while

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[72] Crypto-Judaism is the secret adherence to Judaism while publicly professing to be of another faith. The term crypto-Jew refers to the descendants of Jews that (usually secretly) maintain some Jewish traditions while adhering to other faiths.

[73] In his chapter on master codes in Cuban-American culture, William Luis sets Oscar Hijuelos' *The Mambo Kings* (1980) and Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) as the two foundational novels in Cuban-American fiction.

[74] In researching Obejas work I was only able to locate two articles written on *Days of Awe* since its publication six years ago.

[75] Obejas' next literary endeavor is as editor of a collection of short stories *Havana Noir* which will be published in October 2007.

some elements of her life story are represented in her novels, the bulk of the narrative does not portray her personal history as a Cuban-lesbian-Jew. Obejas compares the deep bond Alejandra forms with her place of birth (the physical house) in *Days* to her own faint connection. While Alejandra's residence at birth matches the address Obejas had when she was a child in Cuba, Obejas urges her readers not to place too much importance on this similarity given the different attitudes she and her protagonist ultimately have toward the house of their birth.[76] Obejas adds that while Alejandra's relationship to Cuba grew with her visits to the island, Obejas' own connection was secured on her first trip back to Cuba without having experienced the ambiguity with which she burdened her protagonist.[77] Despite Obejas' expressions to the contrary, her Cuban-American lesbian experience (like Juani), her Cuban-American Jewish experience (like Alejandra), and the circumstances that prompted both Alejandra and Obejas to delve into their family history in search of a Jewish connection, all link the author's life story to her protagonists. [78]

Obejas' writing is shaped like that of other Cuban-American writers by her immigration experience. Isabel Alvarez Borland chronologically categorizes experiences of immigration and the way they shape the writing of Cuban-American writers. Of interest to this study are Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's, *one-and-a-half generation* and what Borland labels the *Cuban-American ethnic writers*. [79] Pérez-Firmat defines the one-and-

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[76] While Obejas might not have been affected by the home in which she was born, she did form a profound tie to her country of birth. Obejas returns regularly to Cuba staying months at a time. In addition to feeling culturally and nationally tied to Cuba, Obejas' partner, who is a Cuban national, connects Obejas even more intimately to the island.

[77] Even though their relationship to the island came about in different ways, Obejas admits in a 1996 interview that "some years ago I'd even memorized the map of the city, and all the bus routes" (Harper) in the same way that she had a young Alejandra in *Days of Awe* memorize the street names on an old Cuban map she had found as a child.

[78] In *Days*, Alejandra's co-worker questions whether her ancestry is Jewish given that her grandmother's name Sima is Hebrew. Following a conversation where Alejandra vehemently denies any Jewish ancestry, she rushes to telephone her father whom she bombards with questions that he initially sidesteps and eventually refuses to engage. Obejas recounts a similar experience that prompted the writing of *Days of Awe*, when a Jewish woman participating in one of Obejas' readings asked her if she was Jewish. The woman suggested to Obejas the possibility that her family might have been conversos. Obejas, like her protagonist, also appealed to her father's knowledge of their family origins, but he summarily dismissed her plea for information (Brick 2).

a-half individuals as those who left Cuba as adolescents and as a result had a Cuban childhood and U.S. adulthood. Borland defines Cuban-American ethnic writers as individuals who came as infants or were born in the U.S. to first generation exiled parents. This group that is more firmly anchored in a U.S. culture than in a Cuban one views the Cuban disapora and the Cuban Revolution from an emotional and experiential distance. For them Cuba is interpreted by others. Imigrating at age six from Havana to the U.S. (Chicago) places Obejas' experience naturally between these two categories.[80] While Obejas was clearly not an adolescent when she came to the U.S., her childhood memories and language tie her to Cuban culture.

Cuban-American Literary Tradition

It could be argued that more than any other Latina/o literature, Cuban-American works are shaped by the political climate in their country of origin. While these texts share many of the concerns developed by other hyphenated Latina/o groups (i.e. the bicultural and bilingual realities faced in the U.S.), the 1959 Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro's continued control of the island become subjects to which the works return compulsively regardless of the stance the texts adopt. Given the steady stream of writers coming out of Cuba over almost five decades, Isabel Alvarez Borland, Eliana Rivero and Caroline Bettinger-López have identified markers that define the various waves of writers coming out of post-1959 Cuba.

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[79] Gustavo Pérez-Firmat borrows this term from sociologist Rubén Rumbaut. Different from Rumbaut who focuses on the marginality of this group to both the old and the new worlds they were a part of, Firmat emphasizes the unique position this group falls into where they are able to "circulate within and through both the old and the new cultures" (4) being marginal to neither of the two main groups.

[80] Obejas' predisposition for the indefinite and her apparent distaste for labels are illustrated in her choice of literary themes and hybrid genres as well as in her authorial persona. In an interview given to Marcia Froelke Coburn in 1995, Obejas amusedly noted that she was often "the most cross-indexed writer" (25) in a bookstore and this might certainly be the case after the publication of her two novels in 1996 and 2001.

The first wave of exiles coming to the U.S. in the 1960s generated a Cuban literature that preserved its linguistic, cultural and national historical legacy. In her study detailing the progression from exile to ethnic writer, Eliana Rivero observes that one distinctive characteristic of this first generation of exiled Cuban writers is their position as critical observers and not participants, and the distance they maintained from mainstream U.S. cultural perspectives preferring instead a dialogue with Latin America, Europe or even Cuba's insular past (169). [81]

Following this initial generation of exiled writers, comes the generation of Cuban-American writers that produced essays, theater, poetry and fiction illustrating their condition as Cuban born and U.S. raised individuals—the one-and-a-half generation. These writers long for connections to their "roots" and a more sophisticated identity that reflects an "ambivalence, a desire for reconciliation and a critical stance toward politics in Cuba as well as in Miami"(Zimmerman 37-38). Straying from the uncompromising position of the first generation of exiles, Cuban-American fiction writers Cristina García and Oscar Hijuelos, and non-fiction writers Ruth Behar, Ester Shapiro Rok, Gustavo Pérez Firmat and Román de la Campa, have richly explored the tension of their hyphenated reality.

Rivero and Bettinger-López declare that even *within generations,* the perspective of Cuban writers fluctuates depending on their immigration particulars. Their experience as émigrés varies whether they consider themselves *exiles* viewing their stay in their adoptive country as transitional, hoping to return to their country of origin, or if they view themselves as *immigrants* resigned to their permanent condition outside of their mother country. Equally important is the age at the time of immigration, as well as their familial situation both of which color the perspective they adopt once they re-settle. Finally, the ability to adapt to their new community depends on their place of re-settlement and their ability to communicate in their new language. In other words, the experiences Cuban-American writers recreate in their work depend on if the author

[81] In *Guayaba Sweet,* Laura Alonso Gallo and Fabio Murrieta explain that often the first generation Cubans' experience is reduced to "inside" and "outside" (of Cuba) and time is reduced to "before" and "after" (the revolution).

immigrated as a child or an adult, traveled alone or with family, settled in Cuban-filled Miami or predominantly white Indiana.

Language, Rivero notes, is central in distinguishing Cuban from Cuban-American writers. To illustrate her argument, Rivero contrasts the work of Cuban women writers alongside Cuban-American women writers in the U.S. The writers who choose to cultivate the English language become "'ethnics' that is, hyphenated Cuban-Americans" (168). While a U.S. education affords these authors the possibility of expressing themselves bilingually, it also "signals for them an established conscientization of minority status"(Rivero 173). Writing in English expands the target audience of their work, but it also signals a resignation to a marginalized position in mainstream U.S. society.

Behar and De la Campa, second generation Cuban-Americans, urge a more complex relationship of exiles to both Cuban and the United States in what they consider currently to be ineffectually simplistic. Bettinger-López adds that this already complex relationship of exiles to Cuba is compounded by the distinction that Cuban émigrés make between the Cuban nation and the Cuban state, "the first a geographical place and spiritual place seen as home, the second …characterized by a government body with a specific political ideology" (155). Cuban exiles might feel ties to a Cuban nation while they reject the policies and existence of the Cuban state.

The Lesbian Perspective

Even as Obejas maintains a thematic connection to Cuban-American fiction, in *Memory Mambo* she expands the thematic scope to include issues of the lesbian community. By writing in English, contrasting the experiences of both first and second generation Cuban-Americans, and setting Cuba at the center of the narrative; Obejas acknowledges the importance of her culturally hyphenated experience. The hybrid nature

of Obejas' text expands the scope of Cuban-American literature by its inclusion of sexual identity and that of lesbian literature by its ethnic focus.

In "'Marked by Genetics and Exile': Narrativizing Transcultural Sexualities in *Memory Mambo*," Kate McCullough situates Obejas' novel within the U.S. lesbian tradition where "just as lesbianism signals the site of Obejas' intervention into the long narrative tradition of the production of colonial subjects, the transculturated voice of this narrative signals an emergent moment in U.S. lesbian fiction…[situating] lesbianism in a broader, global political context" (579). [82] Just as Obejas' novel shifts the focus of the Cuban-American narrative to include the lesbian experience, so does ethnic and cultural exploration enrich the U.S. lesbian narrative.

McCullough unproblematically includes Obejas' novel in U.S. lesbian fiction, pointing to the need for diversity within this genre. McCullough assumes that the U.S. lesbian genre can accommodate a lesbian text equally concerned with ethnic concerns. In the same way that Latina feminist writers were dissatisfied with the racially homogenous perspective Anglo feminist theory adopted, Latina lesbian writers have had to move away from the U.S. Lesbian theoretical model that does not take into account the scope of their experiences.

In their introduction to *Entiendes?: Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings,* Paul Julian Smith and Emilie Bergman note that "while there has been much talk of respecting cultural differences in queer theory there has as yet been little acknowledgment that the powers of addressing national and linguistic borderlines requires a slow and patient labor of translation" (9). The general consensus among Latina lesbian theorists seems to be that at best there is a proposed objective to incorporate issues relevant to Latinas into lesbian Theory; while at worst U.S. lesbian theorists decline to address any issues besides those of sexual orientation.

Latina lesbians realized that they were expected to remain faceless when working alongside Latino and Third World groups as well as with white gay groups: "we can be

[82] In her article McCullough uses Mary Louis Pratt's definition of transculturation, the process by which "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (*Imperial Eyes* 6) which in turn came from Fernando Ortiz' discussion on Cuba where he notes that "the real history of Cuba is the history of transculturations" (*Cuban Counterpoint* 98).

colored enough to be used as a minority component…but we can't be too colored" (Carmona 36). [83] Given the inhospitable climate for Latina lesbians within Anglo-Lesbian theory, during the 1980s, Chicana lesbians took it upon themselves to establish a model that would represent both their cultural and sexual identity. They conceived a space that would incorporate their double marginality.[84]

Flavio Risech, Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich detail some of the difficulties that arise when cultural and sexual identities intersect. Risech observes that while there is a definite division within Latino gay and lesbian theory, there certainly is experiential overlap as well. As with lesbians and Anglo-feminists, when gay Latinos try to fit into the American-style queerness, they are forced to acquire a deracialized status (69). Arguelles and Rich remark specifically on the *Cuban* gay/lesbian experience, and the difficulties of integrating the Cuban émigré experience, with a frequently racist and classist, American gay/lesbian mainstream (125).

Risech, Arguelles and Rich underscore the difficulties that Cuban-American gay or lesbian individuals with progressive political views have in reconciling their "support for social advances of the Revolution" with their "revulsion for Cuban homophobia" (Risech 67). Arguelles and Rich critically record the continual "scapegoating of Cuban revolutionary homophobia" where all gay migration is attributed to repression of sexual orientation with no consideration for other incentives (i.e. economic). To counteract this tendency, Risech points out that while Cuban homophobia subsists today, it also existed prior to 1959 Cuba, and continues to also exist in Cuban Miami. Risech does not diminish the difficulties present in navigating revolutionary politics with sexual identity; however, he avoids simplistically vilifying everything Cuban-socialist.

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[83] In a 1996 interview given by Obejas she discussed her interest in the phenomenon that occurred in the U.S. "when there was almost a sense that you had to make a choice about what you were going to be: Are you going to be gay, or are you going to be Hispanic?"(Harper 3)

[84] Texts such as *Hispanisims and Homosexualities* (1998), *Reading and Writing the Ambiente: Queer Sexualities in Latino, Latin American and Spanish Culture* (2000) and *Tortilleras: Hispanic and U.S Latina Lesbian Expression* (2003) have provided the space within which to address some of the specific issues faced by the Latina lesbian community.

Amidst these tensions between and within cultural and sexually oriented communities, Obejas creates her hybrid novel *Memory Mambo*, where her protagonist's lesbianism is central. In Borland's analysis of *Memory Mambo*, she effectively contrasts Obejas' work to contemporary Cuban-American gay writer, Elías Miguel Muñoz,' highlighting their different approaches toward sexual and ethnic identification.[85] She claims though that Obejas does not focus on her Cuban past (108) evident by the setting of the novel exclusively in the United States. While the narrative might not be set on the island, the frequency with which the Casas' family history and memories relocate the narrative in Cuba contradicts Borland's assertion. Cuba's presence permeates the entire narrative becoming the point of reference to which the narrative continuously returns.

Memory Mambo details the journey of Juani Casas, a twenty-four year old Cuban-American lesbian, as she tries to understand her place in the world through her family and her Cuban history. Even though her family emigrates to the U.S. (Chicago) when Juani is six, their life in Cuba is set as the point of reference that all family stories revisit. Juani retains her ties to Cubanness through her nuclear and extended family, while her U.S. upbringing Americanizes her. When the narrative begins, Juani is anxiously trying to get out of a lie she has fabricated for her family and friends. In trying to understand her own behavior, Juani looks to her family history which she finds filled with contradictions. Though Juani accepts the impossibility of a definitive truth, she still tries to faithfully reconstruct her own personal history.

Through the relationship of Juani and Gina, Obejas illustrates issues specifically relevant to the Latina lesbian community, as well as clashes resulting from cultural and political differences. As a sexually out Cuban-American lesbian who does not consistently support any political cause, Juani is at odds with her girlfriend Gina, a closeted Puerto Rican lesbian whose national politics (as an independentista) and passion for social reform are central to her identity. While sexual identity is essential to Juani,

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[85] Borland argues that the contrast between Muñoz' cynical focus on homophobia in Cuban and Cuban-American families, to Obejas' more optimistic narration of Cuban-American lesbianism occurs because of their different immigration experience.

Gina believes it detracts from her *puertoriqueñismo* and her political goals.[86] Feeling that her political effectiveness would be compromised by a disproportionate focus on her lesbianism, Gina refuses to hold up her personal life to public scrutiny. She mocks conversations about sexual identity remarking, "That's so white this whole business of sexual identity" (79). Juani appreciates the contradiction when Gina calls Puerto Ricans her people but doesn't acknowledge her lesbian community, yet she fears antagonizing her. Through Gina and Juani, Obejas emphasizes the constant negotiation of Latina lesbians' competing identities (sexual, cultural, and political).

It would seem on the surface that a Cuban-Puerto Rican cultural background would tie Juani and Gina together in their position as Latinas within U.S. culture. However, Obejas uses these women's similar cultural backgrounds to illustrate conflicts that can occur when national politics are thrown into the mix. Gina relates to Puerto Rico as an independentista, and to Cuba as a Communist supporting Castro's policies. As a result, she views individuals like Juani who fled the Cuban Revolution as "gusana/os."[87] This in fact is the trigger that sets off a violent quarrel between Gina and Juani. Feeling betrayed and abandoned when Gina sides with her politically leftist friend as she singles out and insults her, Juani retaliates and physically assaults Gina sending them both to the hospital and ending their relationship. It isn't only Gina's Cuban politics that create a rift between them; Juani's inability to stand up to her family's derogatory Puerto Rican joke-making creates tension as well. Even before their relationship had "officially" started, Juani speculated on their incompatibility, not on the basis of personality or chemistry, but on their divergent political and cultural positions: "I know all too well how the world of politics, with its promises and deceptions, its absolute values and impersonal manifestos,

[86] The term "independentista" in Spanish literally means a person wanting independence. In terms of Puerto Rican politics, the term is loaded with images of revolutionary activity and a fervent sense of nationalism. While there is an independence party that participates in every Puerto Rican election, and some believe maintains the other two political groups "in check," they only garner a small percent of the votes at the ballots.

[87] In her glossary of terms at the end of *Memory Mambo*, Obejas defines gusana/o as "a pejorative used to refer to Cubans exiled from the revolutionary government; literally means 'worms' but actually refers to the shape of the duffel bags used by the first wave of refugees" (242).

can cut through the deepest love" (87). Yet, in this case Juani's declaration does not so much come from a lesbian perspective as it does from an individual in love.

Though Juani and Gina's relationship illustrates situations specific to the Latina lesbian experience, it also serves to highlight elements not bound to any identity marker. Gina's social politics serve to illustrate social problems of child labor in Asia or dangerous conditions for farm workers in California while the impact of her politics on their personal life highlight the ordinariness of their relationship. Juani describes how Gina's politics determined what music they listened to (nothing of misogynistic content), what clothes they wore (environmentally friendly), and what lesbian bars they went to (the ones with a mixed-race clientele). Juani's concessions in her relationship with Gina are one way in which Obejas normalizes their lesbian relationship by portraying issues that arise irrespective of any identity markers. In this instance, by treating their relationship as any other (regardless of cultural and sexual identity) Obejas demystifies the lesbian relationship for readers who might otherwise find it exotic.

Juani's lesbianism also becomes a way in which she can bridge the cultural gap between herself and Cuba. In trying to connect to the island that she only remembers through childhood images and family stories, Juani singles out the one figure with whom she feels an experiential connection, her Cuban lesbian cousin Titi. In Juani's mind, Titi stands as the cultural translator she will need when she visits Cuba. Juani simplistically reasons that Titi's inability to act out her sexual preference in Cuba connects them as "every lover she has ever had has been closeted" (76). She does not factor in their cultural and political differences that "allow" her in some U.S. spaces to safely be "out" and act out her sexuality. Titi does not have that choice at all. While Juani has to intricately maneuver her sexual identity around her family, for "I am as marked by genetics and exile [as my family]…but I'm also a stranger in my own family" (79) there is still the potential for her to freely practice her choice of lifestyle.

Juani assumes that Titi's fanatical desire to leave Cuba through Spain, Mexico, the U.S. or Israel using any mode of transportation (plane, bus, inner tube), is the result of her desire to "be loved in daylight"(76). This impulse to tie Titi's desire to leave Cuba based purely on her sexual preference reflects the propensity discussed by Arguelles and

Ruby to reductively attribute emigration in the gay/lesbian community to repression of sexual orientation. In Juani's mind, Titi's desire to leave Cuba can only be for one reason, freedom for sexual identity.

Obejas portrays Juani's family response to her lesbianism generationally. For Juani's parents and aunts, her lesbianism remains unspoken. There is a reciprocal understanding; the family will welcome her girlfriends into their homes and Juani won't overtly allude through actions or words to her sexuality. In order to preserve the family dynamics, Juani compromises. While her lesbianism is implicit to her family, her mother can't reconcile it with her Catholic faith and her father refuses to talk about it. Juani agrees to the "terms" set by her father who "avoids not just the topic of my sexuality, but any subject that could inadvertently lead us there"(80).[88] Her father can think of nothing worse than to have to address her lesbianism directly and decide if he will accept or reject her. Through this experience Juani comes to recognize that in her family the most important thing is not to be provoked into the truth. [89]

In contrast, Juani's contemporaries, her cousins and sisters, not only support her lifestyle, but on occasion offer encouragement or advice. Nena, Juani's sister, offers her up as a volunteer at a political meeting, setting her up successfully with Gina. Patricia, Juani's cousin, forces her to think about the way she has allowed the family to disrespect Gina's political views while offering advice on the problem. Another cousin Caridad goes out dancing with Juani and her lesbian friends until her husband Jimmy protests: "what kind of man would people think he was if his wife was always hanging with *tortilleras*?" [90](17). Obejas uses the defining personality trait of each of these women to

[88] Kate McCullough explains that Juani's lesbianism is recognized implicitly but not explicitly, and that her character does not function within an "apolitical lesbian utopia" but instead "she functions within an extended Cuban-American family itself located within a larger historical and political reality" (583).

[89] Obejas includes *in Memory Mambo* a telling Casas family anecdote to illustrate the extremes that some of Juani's family members will go to adapt their past to their image of what it should be. Considered the all-time-queen of denial, Juani's grandmother Nivia refuses to identify her husband's body when he dies in his mistress' arms because claiming his body would be admitting his infidelity. She would rather he be declared missing than have to admit his betrayal, and continues this charade for the rest of her life. This kind of denial that Obejas creates fictionally she describes in a 1996 interview as a cultural phenomenon, labeling Cubans as "the originators of the 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy"(Harper).

[90] This literally means tortilla makers but is used as slang for lesbians.

define the manner in which they connect to Juani's sexuality As the go getter, Nena makes things happen for Juani; as the politically correct cousin, Patricia chastises her cultural and political insensitivity; and as the easy going, entertainer, Caridad shares her social outings.

Although sexual identity is not central to Obejas' *Days*, it is still an essential component of the novel. In an interview with Ilan Stavans, Obejas explains that in addressing sexuality in her work her goal was not to promote assimilation but instead normalization. Obejas added that regardless of the sexual identity, it should be celebrated without judgment (*Days* 376).[91] In *Days* sexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality and experimental heterosexuality are normalized i.e. treated as a given fact. Obejas unceremoniously deals with sexuality, never pausing to examine Alejandra's bisexual relationships, or even address any possible tensions that might arise as a result of her atypical lifestyle. The focus in *Days* is not on sexualities considered marginal like homosexuality, but on the openness to all sexual encounters and experiences. Alejandra's life exemplifies the openness that Obejas aspires to portray. She has relationships equally with men and women, like Seth and Leni, with individuals that are married like Orlando or significantly younger like Celina. Thus in *Days*, Obejas successfully demystifies not only lesbianism but sexuality in general.

Judaism in Cuba

As sexual identity takes precedence in *Memory Mambo*, Jewish culture does so in *Days of Awe*. Just as in *Memory Mambo*, the way Obejas frames her subjects through Cuban culture make her approach distinctive. Just as Corpi informs her readers about

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[91] The following year, 2002, Laura Sheppard-Brick also interviewed Obejas about *Days*, observing that the protagonist's bisexuality was presented as an "unimportant fact of life" (3). While it appeared that Sheppard-Brick intended to show an approach of normalization to sexuality in Obejas' second novel, Obejas quickly pointed out that sexualities are always vital (3), emphasizing the importance of this aspect in her work.

events in Chicana/o history and Alvarez recovers figures in Dominican history, Obejas fills in some gaps of Cuban history by bringing to light Jewish culture and specifically the crypto-Jewish history in Cuba.[92] Like Corpi and Alvarez, Obejas expands national history by giving voice to experiences that have been overlooked and forgotten. But Obejas, more than Corpi or Alvarez, sets up her narrative with sections that treat history in the style of traditional historiography; incorporating a glossary of terms, a list of selected readings, and whole passages that read like excerpts from history books.

In *Days*, Obejas divides the hyphenated identity into its two original groups and draws parallels between them showing their connection even before they are conjoined historically. Obejas compares characteristics that distinguish these cultural groups: "Cubans and Jews both [have] families in which people [have] peculiar accents, both [cook] funny foods…both [live] lives in the subjunctive, and both, quite frankly, [think] they were the chosen people" (*Days* 104). Even though she admits in a 2002 interview that some of her cultural overlap is meant to be tongue-in-cheek, she does offer serious comparisons between these groups (Sheppard-Brick 4) Obejas likens their ruptured relationship to the homeland which suffuses their communal identity, but admits that in post-1980s Cuba, a transformation occurred with the sanctioned travel back to the island. While we might consider some of Obejas' fictional contentions stereotypical, since the majority of Obejas' readers are likely to be non-Cuban-American Jews, her declarations are likely to be taken at face value.

Cubans on the island also see parallels between Cuba and Israel in its "notion of a fierce, combatant, independent nation state, leading the nation's charge against historical enemies" (de la Campa 16). Likewise, Kelli Lyon Johnson connects the experiences of Cubans and Jews through collective memory maintaining that "for both Cubans and Jews [it] remains a primary method of cultural survival and identity" (35).

Personally, Ester Rebeca Shapiro Rok reflects on the difficulties she faces as a Cuban-Jew in integrating both parts of her identity. In "Finding What Had Been Lost in

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[92] Obejas stressed the difficulties in researching this theme given the hidden nature of Cuban-Jewish history (Sheppard-Brick 4).

Plain View" Rok explains that "the world lost to traumatic immigration becomes frozen in time, sometimes idealized, sometimes disavowed, but of necessity contained, encapsulated, while individuals and families struggle to re-establish a shared sense of coherence and stability in an unfamiliar world" (86). Rok purposefully phrases her statement in way that describes both her Cuban and her Jewish experience giving equal importance to both categories. As with Obejas' protagonist, Rok feels she must return to Cuba (after nearly thirty years) to begin the process of identity reconstruction.

Similarly, Cuban exiled anthropologist and poet Ruth Behar, struggling to mend her fragmented identity, describes how she went back to Cuba with a group of Jews bringing humanitarian effort to the one thousand remaining Cuban-Jews. Using her Jewishness to access the island, Behar hopes to create a space for herself in the Cuba of the present and ultimately reconcile her Cuban and Jewish identity (404). Behar observes that "Judaism is being revived on the island just as American Jews begin to take notice of the existence of Cuban Jews" ("Queer Times in Cuba" 406).

Conversely, Behar laments the absence of Jewish women writers in Cuba, a fact that she observed when trying to locate these women. Behar practically concluded that there were no Jewish women writers in Cuba because after immigrating they were "too busy learning Spanish and integrating themselves into a new culture" (xxxvii) to focus on any literary undertaking. However Behar offers hope with "the generation of Cuban-Jewish women who came to the U.S. as children and were educated in English in American schools and universities who are now beginning to write the histories and stories of their double diaspora" (199) in the same way that she is. To a great extent hybrid identities are the result of chance, where Behar is a cubana because she is Jewish. Had her family not been fleeing persecution in Europe, it is unlikely that she would have ended up in Cuba.

It might seem odd to have any Jewish presence in countries so unmistakably identified with Catholicism. However, Marjorie Agosín asserts that it is not anomalous to have a Jewish presence in Latin America, but rather "what is anomalous is that it has occupied such a nebulous presence in the cultures of the countries to which the Jews came escaping persecution" (x). Although Obejas' effort to draw attention to the

existence of this underrepresented segment of Jewish culture (the Crypto-Jews) is commendable, it is worth remembering that Jews have never been a dominant presence on the island. Even at its peak in 1923, the Jewish colony in Cuba did not exceed five thousand. At present, Behar mockingly refers to the Jewish presence on the island as limited to the structures built to sustain it--synagogues and cemeteries.

In Cuba as in Mexico and Argentina, the Jewish community divided into two groups separated by country of origin and language. Sephardic Jews who originated in the Mediterranean and North Africa spoke Ladino and French and the Ashkenazi who came from Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish. Despite their shared "Jewishness" these two groups maintained separate communities. Levine reiterates this phenomenon when he observes that "one of the major characteristics of Cuban-Jewish life was not only that Jews sought to preserve their identity as Jews, but that there never was a unified Jewish community" (6). Levine also explains that Cuban Jews never assimilated into Cuban culture except for individuals "who stopped being considered Jews" (292). Generally though, members from either group considered themselves Jews first and Cubans second.

Ironically, the Jews who most successfully accommodated to Cuban life were the ones who found themselves needing to flee the Revolution. After 1959, "ninety percent of Cuba's Jews left although Castro and his government bent over backward to avoid anti-Semitic actions" (Levine 305). An interesting phenomenon that occurred with Cuban Jews was that "ironically the same Jews barred from entering the U.S. as undesirable aliens by immigration officials fearing an influx of Jews in the 1920s and 1930s were welcomed as refugees from Castro's Cuba concealing as it were their 'true' Jewish identity behind the mask of a 'false' Cuban identity" (Levine 305). For political purposes, these refugees put their Cubanness on display and relegated their Jewishness to a lesser plane even though in reality their allegiances were reversed.

At present, the Jewish community with a limited representation in the Caribbean and a more visible presence in Mexico and Latin America has established organizations which address the particular needs of the Latin American Jewish Diaspora. One of these,

the Latin American Jewish Studies Association, disseminates fictional, historical, and theoretical pieces that address the unique concerns of this group.[93]

Obejas follows in *Days* "a common motif of Latin American Jewish narrative… the rewriting of history…the emendatory encoding of the Jewish subject into history" (Friedman 230). Obejas traces Cuban Jewish history by featuring the Jewish perspective on traditional historical accounts like Columbus' arrival on the island. Furthermore, the tension and conflict inherent in a Cuban-Jewish identity is seen through Alejandra, Enrique, Moisés, Ytzak and Sima. Obejas contributes to the Latin-American Jewish narrative inserting the distinctive Jewish voice into the Cuban narrative.

In *Days*, Alejandra San José is inimitably tied to Cuba's history when she is born on New Year's Day 1959 as the Cuban Revolution begins. Even though she emigrated with her family to the U.S. as a child, her desire to understand her Cuban-American-*Jewishness* compels her to return to Cuba, the origin of her cultural and family history. Through Alejandra's inquiry, Obejas covers a historical time-line from the fifteenth century Jewish presence in Cuba to the contemporary manifestation of the Cuban-Jewish community. As a Cuban-American, Alejandra's visits to Cuba are also occupied with comparing the Cuban nationals' experience vis-à-vis her family's and her own.

Obejas locates the origin of Cuban-Jewish culture in Spain at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. She explains: "twelve years after Ferdinand and Isabella's decree, when Christopher Columbus went looking for India, he took with him a trio of caravels staffed in great part by Jews fleeing Spain under an order of expulsion" (33). While these sections of historical narrative mimic the style of traditional historical accounts, Obejas' continual referencing of Jewish experiences and figures like the physician or the interpreter on Columbus' ship, and the parenthetical asides where she criticizes the position of the monarchs and the Catholic Church, thematically and stylistically distance her account from traditional historiography. By including a list of selected readings, a

[93] Pieces like Haim Avni's essay on Latin American Jewry interestingly focus on the coming of age of the Latin American Jewish community noting the irony of it occurring as a result of the Holocaust era which saw the "virtual destruction of European Jewry" (3).

glossary of terms in Spanish, Hebrew, Yoruba, and Ladino, and several footnotes within the fictional text, Obejas expands the scope and quality of the information she conveys.

Through three generations of characters, Obejas illustrates the difficulties, tensions and negotiations of Cuban-Jewishness. Ytzak, Alejandra's great-grandfather, wants more than anything else to be openly Jewish despite his fear and confusion. He is afraid because traditions such as burning an effigy of Judas during holy week prove how dangerous being Jewish continues to be in Cuba. He is confused by his inability to reconcile his passionate devotion to all things Cuban with Cubans' prejudice against his Jewish beliefs and practices. Perpetually dissatisfied, Ytzak's sole concern becomes his personal crusade to be culturally and religiously whole. Ytzak decides that practicing his Judaism takes precedence over everything else including his family, so he leaves his wife and child and moves to Havana where he can blend in with the urban masses.

While Ytzak is willing to sacrifice everything for his faith, his daughter Sima, Alejandra's grandmother, lives in fear of her father's displays of Jewishness as she practices Jewish rituals secretly. Sima is the archetypal crypto-Jew who travels from the country to the city every year for the Christmas festivities as she changes the linen and lights candles every Friday. Despite her estrangement from Ytzak, Sima travels to Havana to tend to her ill father and ultimately reconciles with him as well as her ancestral faith. As moved as she is by attending services at the synagogue for the first time, "she still [recoils] from acknowledgment outside the synagogue walls. Nearly five hundred years of shame and fear lingered in her soul and would not be exorcised so easily" (216). Even after her death, her funeral and tombstone are shrouded in her crypto-Judaism. While a priest gave his blessing at her funeral and then her husband recited the Kaddish when everyone had gone, her tombstone had a Christian cross on one side and a Star of David on the other. The contradictions that her cultural and religious identity brought her in life were plainly manifested at her death.

Enrique, Alejandra's father, has the most complicated relationship to his Cuban-Jewish identity. He stands between his fervently Jewish grandfather who kidnapped him at birth to have him circumcised in Havana without his parents' consent, and his prototypical crypto-Jewish parents. He is forced to choose allegiances and having done

so, amidst the 1930s anti-Semitism, regrets his choice and reproaches his grandfather for "how could he have thought being a Jew could possibly be a good thing? If he loved him so much, how could he have exposed him to so much hatred and pain?" (351). In the U.S., Enrique committedly performs his Jewish rituals and prayers every Friday night, though he can't bring himself to openly practice his faith as part of a community. He carries the conviction of faith of his grandfather and the need for secrecy of his parents.

On his deathbed, Enrique chooses to lay tefillin and recite his Jewish prayers with only Alejandra as witness. Alejandra mistakenly takes this to mean he has reconciled with his faith and will want a Jewish burial. When Alejandra finds out from her mother that her father wants to be cremated and have his ashes thrown in the Cuban ocean, she is tempted to ignore his last request and impose her own desire for a traditionally Jewish burial. Alejandra fails to realize that her father's last wishes perfectly conclude the tumultuous relationship he had with both Judaism and Cuba, both of which are intricately linked in his mind. Enrique's Judaism, wrapped in his parents' secrecy and bound in his mind with hostility and betrayal, would always necessitate a clandestine demonstration.

Moisés, Enrique's contemporary, is the only character able to reconcile his faith and nationality seamlessly. Moisés' relation to Judaism is colored by his family's openness and pride about their heritage. Different from Enrique, whose family members have a contentious relationship to their faith, Moisés' family are described as lapsed Jews who nevertheless embraced their faith. Moisés touts his Jewishnness though he freely interprets religious dogmas. When Alejandra observes that his children are not all named after some deceased family member, as Jewish custom requires, Moisés explains that the Sephardim aren't very strict, and "Besides, in Cuba we're Cubans" (79). Given his fanatical devotion to the Cuban Revolution, Moisés names his son Ernesto after the Cuban revolutionary figure Che Guevara. Just as he reconciles his Cuban-Jewish identity, he also blends his Jewish and revolutionary loyalties post-1959. Moisés explains to Alejandra that "For me, there is no contradiction. Jews are revolutionaries, the very first real revolutionaries" (167). Ultimately, Moisés becomes the repository of Enrique's Cuban-Jewish history and Alejandra's guide in her journey of self-identification. Enrique

selects him as chronicler of his family's Jewish history both for his inside knowledge, as for his constancy and loyalty.

For her part, Alejandra serves as both starting point and end point in the narrative exploration of Cuban-Jewish identity. It is her interest in her cultural and national history that force the San José family story and on a grander scale the Cuban-Jewish history to be revisited. Alejandra is certain that if she returns to Cuba, the place of origin, she will finally feel complete. In Cuba, Moisés helps her piece together her past, thus beginning the process of identity reconstruction that will incorporate both her Cubanness and her Jewishness. Alejandra becomes the hope for a future of integrated identities openly celebrating the Cuba-Jewish tradition.

In the same way that Corpi and Alvarez introduce key historical events through their protagonists' experiences, Obejas inserts Enrique into two crucial moments of Cuban-Jewish history. Through Enrique's experience, Obejas shows how the docking in Havana of the St. Louis in 1939 and the Nazi demonstrations taking place in Cuba around the same time forever altered the relationship that Cubans were to have with Jewish culture.[94]

The St. Louis sailed out of Germany in May 1939 with 936 Jewish passengers (and one non-Jew) destined toward Cuba. The passengers who had landing certificates issued by the Cuban government had no reason to think they would not be admitted on the island. Once the ship docked in Havana the passengers waited for a week for the Cuban government to decide their fate. Twenty-nine refugees were allowed to disembark. Some were not Jewish, some had valid entry documents, and one was sent to the hospital after attempting suicide; the rest were denied entry. The U.S. and then Canada denied the passengers asylum, forcing the ship back to Europe where Great Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium and France gave refuge to the passengers. A few months later World War II

[94] Cuba's overall record in permitting Jewish refugees to enter was among the best in the world, until Cuba's role in the fiasco of the St. Louis where 667 of the 907 passengers aboard died. Evidently, this left a historical blemish on their previously respectable record (Levine). There have been contradictory reports as to the number of people that survived after the St. Louis returned to Europe. The most recent attempt to uncover the fates of these passengers and personalize their experiences came with the 2006 publication of Sarah Ogilvie and Scott Miller's *Refuge Denied: The St. Louis Passengers and the Holocaust.*

began and within the year a considerable part of Europe was under German occupation (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Amidst a struggling economy, Cubans settled their hatred and frustration on immigrants and particularly Jews who they felt were limiting job opportunities for them. With an anti-Semitic and xenophobic atmosphere already present, it did not take much for the Cuban Nazi party to organize a large anti-Semitic demonstration that took place five days before the St. Louis left Germany. It attracted around forty thousand spectators. The two encounters that Enrique has with Nazi sympathizers and demonstrators reflect the hostile environment in Cuba in the 1930s. Obejas exposes this infamous period in Cuban-Jewish history to inform any readers unacquainted with these events, to reflect on its impact on the Cuba-Jewish community, and to illustrate through Enrique the identity crisis likely to ensue in a Cuban-Jew.

Obejas skillfully places Ytzak's Judaizing of Enrique alongside the growing anti-Semitic tendencies in Havana. The time when Enrique learns most about his faith, becoming an ardent practitioner of Jewish rituals, is ironically the time when it is most dangerous for him to be Jewish in Cuba. Moisés reveals two encounters with Nazis that defined Enrique's Cuban-Jewish identity forever. The first incident occurred after Ytzak took down a Nazi flag displayed on a house and its residents beat him and Enrique for their impudence. This beating left Enrique in a coma close to death. Despite recovering from his physical injuries, he remained emotionally shaken, and it was in this state that he experienced the St. Louis debacle.

It is only after her father's death that Alejandra discovers his participation in these historical events. On his deathbed, Enrique gives Alejandra a tattered picture of a young girl and later Moisés explains that she had been on the St. Louis while it was docked for almost a week in Havana. Enrique, who had volunteered to deliver papers, mail, and cans of food from relatives on the island, noticed and was noticed by this girl with whom he fancied himself in love. Moisés remembered how "when the ship finally pulled up its anchor, a great wail came from the ocean liner as well as the shore" (350). Moved by their impotence and aware that a return to Europe would most likely mean extermination, Enrique acquired a copy of the passenger list and followed the ship's trajectory in the

hopes of hearing that some individuals had been saved. Moisés's revelation allows Alejandra to understand the depth of her father's alienation toward Cuba and Judaism. Alejandra now recognized why "'Cuba was such an open wound to him [Enrique]…'" (351).

Six months after the St. Louis sailed away, Enrique amidst a crisis of faith experienced his second encounter with Nazi sympathizers. Absorbed in his own thoughts, Enrique mistakenly walked into a Nazi demonstration. Terrified by the demonstrators who confronted him, Enrique denied his faith and hauntingly joined them in saluting Hitler. His response condemned him to the strained relationship he was to have with Cuba, and to the guilt-ridden relation he was to have with Judaism. Unable to put these events behind him, Enrique dooms himself to practice his religion in silence.

Though most pointedly through Enrique, but visible in the other Cuban-Jewish characters in *Days*, Obejas underscores the conflictive and complicated process that a Cuban-Jewish identity necessitates. By placing the focus on Jewish figures and their experiences, Obejas revises the traditional Cuban historical narrative emphasizing the consistent presence of Judaism in Cuban culture, thus molding her novel into a Cuban-American Jewish narrative.

Language as Site of Hybridity

One theme that neither Corpi nor Alvarez address in any substantial manner is the intersection of languages resulting from hyphenated identities. Most Latina/os alternate between Spanish and English, a practice that grows out of the material reality of their cultural origins. Obejas considers this subject not within the more conventional Latina/o subject, but rather within the Cuban-Jewish community.

Language presents another site on which parallels can be drawn between the Jewish and the Cuban experience. In the same way that language is central to a Cuban national identity, so it is to the religious and cultural construction of Judaism. For a

community of Latin American Jews, whose national and religious identities are represented by two different languages, there exists a complicated set of associations and allegiances that need to be negotiated by the individuals. Mario Szichman describes how his Jewish Latin American upbringing invested language with a myriad of associations/connections. He defines two kinds of words: Spanish that belonged to the place where the family settled and Yiddish and Hebrew which represented the world of guilt (163). Similarly, Ilan Stavans recalls that as a Mexican Jew, Spanish was his public language, Hebrew the one leading him to Zionism, Yiddish the one symbolizing the Holocaust, and English representing the entrance to redemption: the U.S. (229). While Stavans and Szichman convey a fractured identity where each language reflects a cultural experience in isolation, Obejas proposes an inclusive perspective to Cuban-Jewish multilingualism. Alternating between Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, or Spanish cements the construction of a Cuban-Jewish identity rather than becoming an isolating experience. Each language represents an aspect of their hybrid identity.

In his 2001 Obejas' interview, Stavans discusses the importance of language in *Days* and the way Obejas uses this subject to explore identity construction. Alejandra, Enrique, and Alejandra's mother's cousin Barbarita are all professional translators and interpreters. Obejas predictably incorporates Spanish into *Days*, but more unexpectedly also includes characters shuffling between English, Spanish, Chinese, Yiddish, and Ladino.[95] Obejas tackles the difficulties involved in translation and the ramifications for bilingual and bi-cultural individuals.

In *Days* language acts as an identity marker that can link or segregate individuals. Words serve as instruments used to defy or comfort, but regardless of how language and words are used, Obejas emphasizes the power they have. At the hospital after Alejandra's birth, as she receives the transfusions that will save her life, her father prays over her in the presence of a priest whispering in Hebrew, "Ner Adonai nishmat adam" (4) which Obejas translates as "The human spirit is the lamp of God" (364). By articulating his faith

[95] It is an acknowledgment to the 300,000 Chinese landed on the Island before WWII, the largest immigrant group apart from the Spanish, that Obejas has Alejandra's second cousin Barbarita become a proficient and talented translator of Chinese and maintain a lifetime relationship with a Chinese man.

through the use of Hebrew, Enrique defies the priest and the Catholic symbols (picture of Christ and crucifix) that hang on the walls around him. Olinsky on the other hand uses Yiddish as a code to identify himself instantly to a group of bathers on the Florida coast. Having just escaped from Cuba, Olinsky sees a group of "white haired old Jews" (30) to whom he shouts "Mir sind pleitim!"(30) meaning "We're refugees" (364). Yiddish becomes a way for Olinsky to quickly identify himself to these Jewish strangers, but it also serves to alienate Enrique who as a Sephardic Jew does not understand Yiddish.

In her essay "Lost in *El Olvido*: Translation and Collective Memory in Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe*" Kelli Lyon Johnson concentrates on the divergent approaches Alejandra and her father Enrique have toward language. While they both manipulate language as a profession, Johnson observes that "interpreter" and "translator" are distinctly different. Enrique's job as translator permits him to move only in one direction—from English to Spanish. He works with the written word which creates a permanent record of the linguistic transaction. In contrast, Alejandra's job as interpreter allows her to move back and forth between languages, and the byproduct of her work is relatively transitory. Johnson insightfully concludes that the openness and flexibility involved in Alejandra's profession prepare her to imagine and envision a space where her Cuban and Jewish selves can coexist.

Using Alejandra and Enrique's relationship, one already fraught with insurmountable conversions and silences, Obejas introduces the concept of cultural and linguistic inconvertibility. Ironically, it is in recognizing the impossibility of translating terms like "heaven" into Spanish and "escampar" into English where Alejandra and her father concur. Nevertheless, Enrique interprets this inability to translate terms as a quirk devoid of any meaning, merely a "fascinating dialectic conundrum" (11), while for Alejandra, searching for her place within a [bicultural, bilingual, and bi-religious] world, this inconvertibility is imbued with meaning and reflects cultural perspectives and attitudes. Alejandra wonders what it says about Cubans or Latinos in general that they "can't even imagine heaven enough to name it?" (11), but then retracts and imagines that it is their supreme respect for a higher power that prevents these Cubans from assigning a signifier to a signified. It is in discussing theoretical and philosophical matters that

Alejandra and her father's relationship does not require a "translator" like Moisés or Alejandra's mother, Nena.

Obejas sustains the lengthiest discussion on linguistic idiosyncrasies with the terms "querer" and "amar." With these two terms she playfully illustrates the inconsistencies within the Spanish language where "querer" can be similarly used to say you love, you want or yearn for, while "amar's" precision limits its usage to romantic love. Yet, as Alejandra observes, the word "amar" especially among Cubans, is invested with the melodrama of soap operas and poetry making it impossible to say with a straight face in real life. Enrique even explains to Alejandra that in reality it is a cold term because it could never be used with someone with whom one was intimate and playful. Alejandra herself acknowledges the cultural baggage language carries when she admits that "I said it to Leni [te amo] in moments of complete adoration but more likely because there were no knowledgeable witnesses, no one to make me follow through on its real and complete usage" (253). Only in the secrecy of her lover's apartment can she freely use this culturally-loaded term.

For Obejas, language stands as a potentially insurmountable barrier between cultures, generations and individuals but conversely, it can act as a bridge between these very cultures, generations and individuals who are able to decipher and translate. Fluency in more than one language grants these bilingual individuals a similar condition of privilege to the one Firmat attributes to one-and-a-halfers in their ability to slide between two cultures and two worlds. [96] Bilingual Cuban-Jews can experience both the Cuban and the Jewish culture fully sliding between one and the other as necessary.

Lived Cuban history

[96] For Alejandra's aunt Barbarita, being able to translate between Spanish and Chinese provides her with her life long profession as translator, creates an added link to her Chinese-Cuban lover, and allows her to enter a world outside of Cuba. Alejandra describes how following the events at Tiananmen Square a group of Chinese-Cubans came to Barbarita to get translations from the poems read at the time of the demonstration that would remain linguistically unavailable to the rest of Cuba.

Just as Obejas explores Cuba-Jewish history through Enrique's experiences, she revisits Cuban history through characters like Tío Raul, and Ernesto. Obejas highlights pivotal historical moments of Cuban history: the attack on Moncada Barracks, the revolutionary forces' control of Havana on New Year's Day 1959, the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Balsero Exodus. Like Corpi and Alvarez who marginally incorporate representative figures of Chicano and Dominican history, César Chavez and Rafael Leonidas Trujillo into their narratives, Obejas also creates a fictional character out of Fidel Castro, emblematic figure of Cuban history. Obejas also contrasts the attitudes towards Cuba and the Cuban Revolution through the Cuban-American and Cuban-national perspectives.

Obejas uses each one of these events in Cuban history as representative of its period of time. The Moncada Barracks signals the origins of the Cuban Revolution; New Year's Day 1959 represents Castro's success in overthrowing Batista's government; the Bay of Pigs invasion stands for the most public display of counterrevolutionary activity, and the Balsero Exodus epitomizes the desperate attempts of Cuban migration.

The two pivotal historical events portrayed in *Memory Mambo* are the attack on Moncada Barracks and Castro's triumphant ride through Cuba in 1959. Tío Raul, who had been a supporter and participant in the Cuban Revolution, describes the fiasco that the attack on Moncada Barracks turned out to be. He remembers that "for starters about half the cars got lost in Santiago, and never made it to the Moncada" (104). While historical narratives declare that Castro lost control of the vehicle he was driving which alerted the soldiers and eliminated the much needed element of surprise, causing a number of the revolutionaries to be slaughtered, Obejas has Tío Raul be the one who lost control of his vehicle beginning the sequence of events leading to the failure of the attack. Through Tío Raul's description, Obejas depicts these now legendary figures of revolutionary folklore, as just men and women passionately committed to their political goals but fallible and imperfect nonetheless.

Juani's mother, Xiomara Ruíz y García, witnesses Castro's ride across the island celebrating his successful control of the island in 1959. Obejas uses this historical event

not to revisit what is a well known and documented part of Cuban history, but rather uses it again to humanize the revolution. Xiomara describes this moment of men riding on tanks, shooting rounds into the air and getting drunk together as more of a celebration of careless young men than the serious revolutionaries that began exterminating their opposition once they took power. While she does not address this issue through any other character or at any other moment in *Memory Mambo*, she colors Xiomara's description with racial prejudice. Xiomara is horrified at her brown-skinned brother-in-law Tío Raul riding with his black friends on the tanks so much so that "each time she remembers the moment when Raúl, Fidel and his supporters waved and laughed at the multi-colored masses…she's reborn as a counterrevolutionary" (35).

While *Memory Mambo* focuses on Cuba's history up to the moment of the Cuban Revolution, *Days* covers a wider span of history from Columbus' "Discovery" of the Americas to 1990s Cuba. Since Obejas' focus in *Days* is on Cuban-Jewish experiences and life post-1959 as it is lived by Cuban-nationals, it is logical that Obejas does not detail historical events in Cuba that do not reflect either of these two eras.

Obejas ties the San José family to Cuban history by focusing on central events in the family saga that correspond to critical events of Cuban history. Alejandra is born on New Year's Day 1959, as chaos ensues all around her. As Alejandra struggles to live through multiple blood transfusions, the background is filled with cries of joy and despair. A doctor enthusiastically reassures Enrique, "It's a new day…your daughter will live because she is the first new life of this new day!"(2), while an embittered nurse hisses, "She is cursed, your daughter…for she has arrived on the darkest day in the history of the world!" (3). By describing the people taking to the streets, the radio playing carnival music and patriotic songs, and several patients lapsing into comas on hearing the news, Obejas evokes the confusion and mixed emotions that Castro's success provoked.

Two years later, Alejandra's family escapes from Cuba during the Bay of Pigs invasion. In April 1961, the San José family had planned to fly out of Cuba when U.S. planes flown by Cuban exiles bombed the airport and airbases in preparation for the Bay of Pigs invasion. Obejas describes the chaotic scene, police sirens howling, bombs exploding and people rushing to get out of the streets. Alejandra's family is desperately

trying to figure out what to do when Enrique's boss, Olinsky, appears at their door with a far fetched escape plan that luckily is a success. Alejandra explains that had Olinsky laid out his plan at any other moment where they could have thought through the details, they would never have agreed to participate. As it turns out, Olinsky's plan anticipated that every military ship and aircraft would be focused on the south of the island ready to attack, and consequently the northern coast of Havana would be deserted and free for them to escape (23). Obejas illustrates Cubans' confusion and mayhem focusing on the community experience rather than the tactical details of the attack. During the actual invasion, as the Cuban exiles are flying in, Alejandra's family is sailing out.

One final historical moment Obejas incorporates into *Days* is the Balsero Exodus in the early 1990s. Considered the fourth migratory wave, the Balsero Exodus was labeled this way because of the rafts, tires and inflatable objects used to take to the waters by as many as 34,000 Cubans in 1994 alone. Ernesto, Moisés son who was raised as a Communist in Cuba, uses a raft with some friends to try to get to the U.S. Alejandra receives a call from his distraught Cuban family who knew nothing of his plans or the desperation that would lead him to execute such a dangerous plan. Alejandra suffers to some extent the fate of other exiled as they await news from their loved ones. She contacts all the appropriate organizations in the hope of finding the Menach family member she loved most after Moisés. As it was in the novel (in 1994) and continues to be in the present, Cuban casualties are common in the crossing between Cuba and Florida.[97] Obejas focuses not only on the dangers of this crossing but on those left behind to mourn the casualties.

Like Corpi (with César Chavez) and Alvarez (with Rafael Leonidas Trujillo) who incorporate emblematic figures of their national histories as characters in their narratives, Obejas invents a fictional version of Fidel Castro, who interacts with *Days*' characters. Castro first appears in *Days* at the age of thirteen when Luis, Alejandra's grandfather, describes him as a passionate young man who hates so ardently the way his father treats

[97] In 1999, the Elián González case illustrated yet again the dangers faced by Cubans fleeing the island. Fourteen people including six-year old Elián and his mother, traveled on an aluminum boat hoping to get to Florida. Eleven people died including Elián's mother, and the boy finished the trip with two other men on an inner tube.

his workers that he tries to organize them to rebel. Soon after this incident, Castro stumbles upon a naked Enrique bathing in a river and inquires, "What happened to you?... Your thing, it's been cut or something" (136). Enrique explains that he is a Jew (the only time he volunteered this information) and Castro reflecting his early interest in economic standing asks if Enrique then is rich (136).

Obejas describes Castro early in his dictatorship as a charismatic and irresistible quintessentially Cuban leader who is able to convince masses to follow his ideals. By the late 1990s, Obejas depicts Castro as a ruler filled with "caprichos" (whims). Orlando matter-of-factly details to Alejandra Castro's outrageous proposals from the plan to develop pork and poultry that would taste like seafood, to the air conditioned cattle ranches that would increase production of milk, to the plan to yield ten million tons of sugar even though the island had never even been close to that before. While Obejas displays Castro's limitations, she carefully avoids grouping him with other dictators who use their time in power to amass wealth and behave decadently. She insists that his is a peculiar dictatorship where his insanity "is collaborative and collective" (130). The figure of Castro evolves in *Days* from a young adolescent, the topic of country gossip whose life intersects with Enrique's, to a man in command of Cuba who lives in the future and proposes one far-fetched project after another in the hopes of sustaining the island's economy. Molding Castro into a human, fallible, ill-advised *man* strips him of the mythical/legendary status that has surrounded this historical figure.[98]

By the very nature of Cuban politics dealing with Cuban history automatically entails addressing the Cuban Revolution. In both M*emory Mambo* and *Days*, Obejas draws characters with varying perspectives on the Cuban Revolution. While *Memory Mambo* focuses mainly on the Cuban-American perspective, in *Days* Obejas shifts her attention to the Cuban national point of view.

In *Memory Mambo,* Obejas uses the Casas' extended family to explore the different Cuban-American generational stances on Cuban politics. Juani describes Tío

[98] While Obejas' treatment of Castro in the later years of his dictatorship is less scathing than it is condescending, Alvarez brutally portrays Trujillo in *In the Time of the Butterflies* as an insecure, vain, ridiculously attired man, who overcompensates for his short stature and lack of a privileged lineage by abusing his power and forcing his way on women.

Raúl as the family member who at one time ardently supported Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution. After participating in the Moncada Barrack attacks and successfully escaping to Mexico in preparation for further revolutionary activity, his wife tricks him into coming back to the U.S. where he remains until the Revolution triumphs. He returns to Cuba "in time to climb on a tank for the victory celebration" (110). When he returns to the U.S., he is a changed man, never speaking about Castro or Cuban politics again. He even admits tentatively to his wife that he might have been mistaken about the Revolution. Tío Raúl's transformation from active supporter to disillusioned spectator reflects a certain group of revolutionary supporters who began to disassociate themselves from Castro's policies when firing squads executed four hundred and eighty three "enemies" in less than three months.

Patricia, Raúl's daughter and Juani's cousin, is a U.S. born first generation leftist Cuban-American who for a long time supported the Cuban Revolutionary project from the U.S. She travels back to Cuba with various communist brigades to cut sugar cane alongside workers in Cuba. Eventually, her revolutionary fervor wanes: "The revolution's dead, Cuba's just another miserable little Third World country, only a little more romantic than the others because Fidel's so charismatic" (154). With the exception of her trips to Cuba, her support for the revolutionary project becomes theoretical and merely reflects a connection of ideals.

Juani's father, Alberto José Casas y Molina who left Cuba in 1978, nostalgically remembers Cuba and is distrustful of the U.S. Cuba represents the time in his life when things were better, where his last name afforded him some privilege, and where he appears in pictures happy and carefree. His relationship to the U.S. is tainted by his belief that he invented duct tape and the CIA stole the invention from him. He rationalizes his modest success by the *Yanquis* interference in his destiny. Alberto's relationship to both Cuba and the U.S. is not a political one, but a personal one. Only in re-telling his duct tape story does he mention in passing the Cuban Revolution or Fidel Castro but mostly, Cuba is the place where he belonged.

Cursorily, Obejas includes in *Memory Mambo* the contrasting viewpoints of two Cuban-nationals, Tomás Joaquín and Titi, both Juani's cousins. Tomás Joaquín, a Fidel

sympathizer who visits the U.S. on special family occasions if he can get a visa, believes that any hardships he endures are necessary for the revolution. On the other hand, Titi tries at every opportunity and in any way to leave the island. She develops a reputation of being crazy with all her desperate schemes to escape.

Obejas devotes in contrast a significant amount of *Days* to the Cuban-nationals' experience post-1959 and their attitude toward the Cuban Revolution. Interspersed among these stories coming out of Cuba are a few scenes with Alejandra's parents that characterize their relationship to Cuba. As first generation exiled Cubans, Alejandra's parents are temperate refugees who "do not assume everything about the revolution is hideous" (52) though they won't consider returning until Castro is overthrown. When Alejandra returns to Cuba for the first time, they launch into "exile-style paranoia" (52) fearing that their actions, as deserters, might reflect on her and she will be detained there. Even though Alejandra's parents never quite fit in the U.S., they nevertheless resign themselves to live out their lives as exiles.

Moisés represents the consummate revolutionary who will rationalize any scarcity and shortage as a necessary consequence of his political project. He is never critical of Castro and never complains about his "caprichos." When Alejandra confronts him with the implausibility of Castro's plans, he replies, "People thought Leonardo's flying machines were crazy. Who knows who will be inspired by his [Castro's] ideas" (133). With the exception of a few characters like Moisés, Obejas refrains from simplistically categorizing these characters as plainly pro or anti-Castro. Instead, her characters reflect their internal contradictions.

Moisés' son Ernesto, once a committed communist, decides to escape Cuba in the 1990s during the Balsero Exodus and dies in the attempt. Ironically, the first time he meets Alejandra he contemptuously portrays the Cubans who try to leave the island. Using as an example his neighbor who unsuccessfully tried to escape on more than one occasion, Ernesto outlines the fate of those who try to escape but fail to get away. Seen as traitors, they are not allowed to pursue any prospect of any consequence and are viewed scornfully by loyal citizens on the island. Ernesto describes how seeing an ex-girlfriend leave felt like "a stake in my heart, like a betrayal" (222). This conversation

stands like a harbinger of his future. Even though Ernesto self-consciously admits that as most Cubans he had at one time contemplated leaving, but he dismissed the idea because he knew the betrayal would kill his father. Obejas leads us to believe that in order for Ernesto to have gotten past his communist upbringing, his concern over his father's opinion, and his knowledge of the incalculable risks of the voyage, he must have been hopelessly despondent.

Orlando, Moisés' son-in-law, stands between Moisés' unconditional support for the Revolution and Ernesto's disillusioned rejection. While Orlando maintains his political commitment, he is able to appreciate the inconsistencies within it. After a particularly revealing diatribe against Castro's "caprichos," Orlando clarifies that "the truth is, I'll never leave…I still believe we needed to do everything we did, it's just that…it didn't quite work out how we'd hoped. There are many reasons for it, many guilty parties, and not all of them are in Miami or Washington" (331). More than any other Cuban national in *Days*, Orlando epitomizes the conflicted revolutionary whose reservations do not invalidate his commitment.

Obejas' contrast between supporters and dissenters of Castro's politics provides a space of disparity within which to examine Cuban history, the transformative impact of Cuban politics on communities inside and outside of the island, and the development of a Cuban identity. By underscoring the contradictions within the communities in favor of or against the Cuban Revolution, Obejas reflects the complicated and conflictive nature of Cubanness and Cuban politics. As a Cuban born, U.S. raised individual who lives part of her time on the island and looks to the island as home, Obejas lives the contradictions she represents. Despite her connection to Cuba, she has also admitted that "I suddenly became very reluctantly grateful to my father for bringing us over here [the U.S.]"(Harper 7).

In *Memory Mambo* and *Days*, Juani and Alejandra base their idea of Cuba and Cubanness on their family stories and memories since their exposure to Cuba is limited or nonexistent. Both protagonists hope that returning to the island will irrefutably tie them to Cuba and make them "whole." Juani and Alejandra's connection to Cuba is rendered emotionally and culturally; Obejas does not designate any political stance to her

protagonists. As narrators, Juani and Alejandra detail the political positions of their family and friends without revealing their own opinions. Maintaining an apolitical standpoint allows these protagonists to engage a range of perspectives in a non-judgmental manner (the way an interviewer might). While Juani's lesbianism and Alejandra's Jewishness are key elements of their identities, their Cubanness permeates every aspect of their lives.

In *Memory Mambo*, Juani understands that without memories of her own, she has to rely on her family's history to discover her Cubanness. Even though Juani has not been in Cuba since she was six, she idealizes the island wanting to return "For belonging…To get away" (235) as if seeing Cuba would dispel her fractured sense of self. Juani feels like a pseudo-Cuban next to her Puerto Rican girlfriend Gina who has visited and knows more about her country of origin than she does. For Juani, "true" Cubanness seems elusive. In *Memory Mambo*, Juani resents Gina's familiarity with Cuba, not only her academic knowledge, but her practical experience acquired through several trips back to the island that Juani hasn't seen since childhood. The desire to know Cuba as intimately as Gina, compels her to plan a trip back. *Memory Mambo* concludes with plans for Juani's upcoming trip to Cuba.

Patricia becomes Juani's guide into the Cuban world. As the cousin who knows the most about Cuba, she informs; as the most educated and politically liberal Patricia supports her decision to travel to Cuba and offers to help her with all the paperwork. Nonetheless, as a now temperate revolutionary Patricia serves as a sobering note to Juani's overly-idealistic perspective. Despite her support of Cuban national politics, having traveled repeatedly to Cuba, Patricia understands that Cuba will not give Juani a sense of belonging in the way she imagines but rather she will fit in some ways and not in others.

Juani's final way "into" her Cubanness is through her father. As the head of the Casas household he represents the patriarchal nature of Cuban culture. Juani fixates on her father's one story of glory in Cuba where he insists he invented duct tape. Juani compulsively returns to her father's story as if understanding it will suddenly clarify her

Cubanness. While Juani "experiences" Cuba solely through others, Alejandra develops a more complex connection to the island with experiences of her own.

In *Days*, Alejandra's initial relationship with Cuba is colored by her parents and the Menach's family history, but as she travels repeatedly to the island, she forges a direct connection to Cuba. While Alejandra is more familiar than Juani with Cuba, its customs and population, she is still just a visitor. She does not experience the daily struggles of permanent Cuban residents. For Alejandra, her Cubanness is inextricably linked to her Jewishness. While she feels most Cuban through her relationship with Leni Bergman, she also feels most fragmented coveting Leni's unmistakable Jewishness. Alejandra marvels at how Cuban she becomes when she is with Leni: "between the two of us I was the expert dancer, the gourmet, the one who related the history of Columbus…I was the one who translated Ricky Ricardo's benign curses…I was closer than ever to all the dark peoples for whom I interpreted…I relished my own darkness" (179). Obejas plays with the role of "cubana" highlighting in Alejandra's "performance" the stereotypes that define Cubanness. While this relationship affords Alejandra the freedom to be as Cuban as she wants to be with no questions asked, she is torn by her longing to be equally recognized as a Jew like Leni. In this relationship, Alejandra begins to understand the identity labels she carries and begins to appreciate the complexity of being a Cuban-Jew.

Having spent the day with her second cousin Barbarita and her friends, Alejandra is moved by the "oddly paradisiacal" (*Days* 244) quality of their life despite the poverty and scarcity on the island. Orlando, who most realistically appraises the conditions of Cuba while maintaining his revolutionary commitment, retorts "don't romanticize this, Alejandra—you'd never live here" (244) and perceptively adds "the problem is that you think you've missed something" (245). Orlando understands Alejandra's nostalgia toward a Cuba she never knew, but he also recognizes the foolishness of idealizing the island and investing it with an untainted quality. As a visitor Alejandra enjoys the sights, the climate, the culture without enduring the difficulties like the rationing and the shortages. Orlando uses his influence to convince Alejandra to temper her unbridled enthusiasm.

Similar to Juani, Alejandra looks to her father as the connection to her Cubanness. As Alejandra tries to delve into her Cuban past, her father's authoritarian formality puts an end to any discussion. Alejandra's conversations with her father leave her feeling even more displaced and lost. Moisés acting as proxy for Enrique reveals to Alejandra her Cuban-Jewish history helping her understand Enrique's tumultuous relationship to Cuba and Judaism, and freeing her to create her own ties to Cuba and Judaism. As was the case with Juani, in order for these protagonists to uncover their past, they need to get beyond these reticent yet central patriarchal figures.

It is significant that Juani's and Alejandra's exploration of Cubanness occurs both within their romantic relationships with women and under a sphere of patriarchal control (the protagonists' fathers). Their relationships with *women* represent their choice as adults, while their family inheritance is something they have no control over. Obejas implies that cultural identity becomes the combination of who you were as child (your family history) and who you are as adult (your political and cultural choices).

Alternative Spirituality

In *Days*' Obejas draws attention to organized religion in the form of Judaism, while she also includes elements of African-born Santería. Defined as a "religious practice created out of necessity by African slaves in Cuba, who recast their gods in Christian forms to appease their masters and gain favor with the local priests. Sometimes the African deities correspond to existing Christian saints, such as the Virgin Mary, but other times they are invented…as Santa Bárbara" (*Days* 365-66). By incorporating Santería, Obejas acknowledges the presence of a legitimately practiced religion on the island.

In examining belief systems from Haiti, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Jamaica, Margarita Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert noted that "the Caribbean's African derived syncretic religious and healing practices [had] penetrated to the very core

of cultural development in the region" (xvii). Cuban Santería specifically, they explained, was "the product of convergence of Yoruban rituals and practices honoring the orichas or deities with the obligation to worship Roman Catholic saints" (xviii). While Santería initially functioned as a religion practiced by an underground portion of the population, it has become a powerful religion practiced extensively throughout the island.

Notwithstanding this popularity, there exists an "official invisibility" of Santería and any practices descended from African traditions. De la Campa pointedly notes this exclusion when he describes the Pope's 1998 visit to the island where the Pope met with "representatives from all other organized religions in Cuba" (144-45) but did not acknowledge Santería. De la Campa adds that: "it was a curious failure, given that Santería may be the majority religion in Cuba...and certainly the most popular" (145). It is ironic that in attempting to inclusively re-energize spirituality on the island, the Pope appealed to mainstream, traditional religious practices overlooking or more likely ignoring the most prevalent form of spirituality in Cuba.

Equally important to this official disavowal of Afro-Cuban Santería is the recognition it has gained among members practicing other organized religions. Ester Shapiro Rok and Ruth Behar, both Cuban-Jews discuss their experience with initiation rites in the Santería religion. Rok describes her experience with the deity Oshún as an enlightening experience which she valued over her Jewish spiritual development. In an attempt to convey the impact of Santería, Behar began a project that would study the way the Jewish diaspora meshed with the African diaspora.

In *Days*, Obejas introduces elements of Santería through the character of Nena, Alejandra's mother. From the moment Alejandra is born and her survival is under question, her mother combines Catholic and Afro-Cuban rituals to save her life. Alejandra describes how she makes the sign of the cross and then "extracts a small ball sheathed in fragrant mint and basil leaves" and unwraps a rooster's heart which she drops "unceremoniously in her mouth, chewing purposefully" (3). The fact that Alejandra ultimately survives, fuels her faith in her practices. From this moment, until the death of her husband, we see that at every critical moment in the family's life, Nena appeals to her Afro-Cuban traditions for assistance. Just as Nena has no trouble reconciling her Catholic

faith with more unconventional practices, such seems to be the case for a large part of the population in Cuba, where practicing a traditionally established religion is not at odds with Santería customs.

To a lesser degree than Corpi, Obejas includes premonitions through dreams and extrasensory perception. Enrique has a repetitive dream that takes place in their Cuban apartment where a battered angel is helped by kids on the street, but, unable to fly, disappears into the crowds of Cubans experiencing the Bay of Pigs invasion. Alejandra describes how her mother and father discussed and thought about this dream for weeks, "each consulting their own gods (214). They attach an explanation to the dream but Alejandra feeling they have overlooked important elements of the dream contributes her thoughts "in one of my first and last excursions into the realm of prophesies" (214). It becomes clear later that it was a premonition of Enrique's mother Sima's death.

The other instance of a supernatural phenomenon occurs in Cuba. Ester, Moisés Menach's wife and Ernesto's mother, also experiences a moment of extrasensory perception, similar to the one that occurs when Damasco feels her head throb as Detective Kenyon is dying of a head tumor elsewhere. Ester describes how the day Ernesto disappeared and presumably died, she was at the dentist having a tooth extracted. In the middle of the process the light went out, and as the dentist's sweat dripped into her mouth she could taste its sweetness like sugarcane—a sign that something was amiss. Simultaneously, the nurse began to describe the gruesome recovery of a human torso dragged off the coast, and Ester immediately understood that it was Ernesto's body.

Even more complicated than Cuban-Judaism is the reality of Crypto-Judaism. [99] The Spanish and Hebrew terms—marrano, converso or anusim illustrate this reality. [100] While Obejas uses all these terms in the novel, she singles out the label "marrano" in a

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[99] David M. Gitlitz dedicates his book *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of Crypto-Jews* (1996) to the phenomenon of crypto-Jews and the way in which they combined practices of Catholic culture with Jewish theology creating a religion of their own.

[100] In the glossary at the end of *Days*, Obejas defines marrano as "literally pig. Pejorative term for crypto-Jews from the time of the Inquisition to the present. Until contemporary times and the popular acceptance of anusim it was often the only available descriptive for persons who were publicly Catholic and privately Jewish." (363-64). Obejas defines conversos as "converted, forcibly or voluntarily" (360) and anusim as the Hebrew term for "forcibly converted Jews" (359).

defining scene occurring on the boat that carried Alejandra's family and Olinsky to U.S. waters. As they arrive to the Florida shore, seeing a group of Jewish retirees wading in the ocean, Olinsky identifies himself as a refugee from Poland via Cuba gesturing toward the rest of the passengers whom he describes: "All Cubans…except for him. He's Spanish, a Jew…'marrano'" (31).[101] Enrique who carries his Jewish inheritance in secret is nevertheless horrified to be labeled a crypto-Jew especially with the level of dismissal that the term "marrano" implies.

As much as Enrique loathes the term "marrano" he is still unable to escape his crypto-Jewish existence. Years later, an eleven year old Alejandra spies him through a basement window performing his Friday night prayers, " a mess of black straps around his left arm…his huge hands around a frayed book…draped in a white shawl, whispering airy, alien words" (108). Despite his disavowal of his Jewishness, he continues to perform his Friday night rituals until his death.

Obejas traces Enrique's crypto-Judaic inheritance to his parents, Sima and Luis. They embody the crypto-Judaic tradition more than any other characters in *Days*. Moisés describes Alejandra's grandparents as having a brass menorah in their home, in plain sight "right next to small icon of the Virgin of Charity" (117). These clashing forms of spirituality stand as the physical representation of their conflicted religious identity. By incorporating Catholicism, Santería and crypto-Judaism into *Days*, often as co-existing traditions, Obejas draws an intricate portrait of Cuba's spiritual diversity.

Conclusion

Through both *Memory Mambo* and *Days*, Obejas shifts the focus of the Cuba-American narrative by adding the lesbian and the Jewish perspective which had

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[101] Socolovsky insightfully observes that at this moment Enrique becomes "not quite Cuban, nor quite Jewish" (6).

essentially been absent from the Cuban-American novel. Obejas uses the Casas and San José family histories as an entry into Cuban national history in this way personalizing the historical experience. Obejas combines the personal, familial, and national which blur and complicate the historical account. In both novels, Obejas links communities that might otherwise remain separate, drawing common spaces between Cuban, Jew and lesbian.[102] Her novels challenge the conventional perspectives found in Cuban-American narratives replacing them with the Cuban, Jewish, lesbian and Cuban-national perspectives previously relegated to the margins.[103]

Obejas, like Corpi and Alvarez, also enhances mainstream historical accounts by featuring women's voices and considering gender issues such as domestic violence and sexual assault. Lastly, Obejas discusses the hybridized spirituality present in Cuban and Cuban-American culture which blends the African born Santería with Catholicism and overlaps Judaism and Catholicism in the crypto-Jewish tradition.

[102] This is not to imply that Obejas is the first or only author to make these connections. Stavans relates a case of author Sara Levi-Calderón who wrote an autobiographical novel of two women in 1990 and wrote it as a "case study of lesbianism in the Jewish community" (12).

[103] Just like Corpi acknowledges her detective fiction predecessors (Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler) Obejas explains that her final scene in which a fly is circling Juani as she decides to return to Cuba is an homage to Cuban gay exiled writer Reinaldo Arenas who used the "fly image and motif" in his novel *El palacio de las mofetas*.

Conclusion

In this study, I have argued that as hyphenated subjects, Lucha Corpi, Julia Alvarez and Achy Obejas have expanded the notion of history and spirituality to reflect their cultural and gender experiences. I have used the term hybridity to define the in-flux state in which these authors frame history and spirituality as well as to signal the challenge they pose to the traditional forms of these themes. Given their new perspective on these two subjects traditionally steeped in patriarchy, I have also argued that it was necessary for Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas to create hybrid genres to accommodate their thematic novelty and feminist position.

While I have endeavored to focus on the patterns that emerge from Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas' work, I have also been vigilant not to homogenize their projects or their individual cultural experiences as Latinas. Clearly, their cultural background (Chicana, Dominican-American and Cuban-American), their immigration experience (as an adult, a pre-adolescent and a child), and their genre choice (detective fiction, historical fiction, Latina lesbian and Cuban-Jewish narrative) have shaped their work. Nevertheless, their hyphenated identity within U.S. culture, their bilingualism, and their feminist perspective have compelled these authors to re-imagine their historical and spiritual spaces in similar ways.

The authors themselves use their fiction to explore their own identity issues as well as address culturally-driven philosophical questions. Lucha Corpi uses her detective novels to rectify her grandmother's lamentation that there is no justice in this world. She gives voice to marginalized experiences of Chicanas/os, highlighting racial and cultural disparity through formative moments in Chicana/o history. Alvarez conceives her novels through two queries: what gave ordinary women like the Mirabal sisters the courage to defy a dictatorship? And, who are we as a people, how do we define a patria (homeland)? By recovering these Dominican historical figures, Alvarez emphasizes a feminized perspective of history through which she gauges formative periods of self-identification

in the Dominican Republic. Achy Obejas' research for *Memory Mambo* and *Days* allows her to sort through the origins of her own Cuban and Cuban-Jewish identities. Through the marginalized perspectives of the lesbian Cuban-American and the Cuban-Jew she revisits Cuban national history. Highlighting the experiences of marginalized figures and communities allows Latinas of diverse cultural backgrounds, spiritual practices or sexual orientations to see their experiences represented while they fit into a larger collective narrative.

Even though they all focus on their national past, Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas consider different elements of their national history. Corpi develops the critical *moments* that have shaped the Chicano community in the U.S. expanding the mainstream historical accounts, revisiting the commitment and activism of the 1960s and 1970s and reminding Chicana/os of the continued need for social activism. Also, by reassessing the Chicano Civil Rights Movement from a Chicana perspective Corpi privileges the *female* ethnic voice previously considered marginal in the face of more pressing cultural struggles.

Alvarez' narrative recovers historical *figures* through whom she examines formative moments of Dominican history. She shifts the focus from the dictator who dominated the country and subsequently the historical accounts of the Dominican Republic between 1930-1961, to ordinary women who actively resisted his rule and became inspirations of the country. Likewise, Alvarez uses Salomé Ureña's life to springboard into a discussion of the tumultuous period of self-definition in Dominican history. Even though Ureña was the first person to win the National Medal in Poetry in the Dominican Republic (at a time when women were not taught to read or write), she abandoned her poetry to start the first school for women in the country, insightfully appreciating the need for the ordinary (teaching women how to read and write) as well as the extraordinary (writing poetry).

Obejas revisits the history of *communities*, Cuban-lesbian and Cuban-Jewish and uses their histories as entries into exploring the Cuban Revolution and Cuban history. By focusing on the intersections of Cubanness with lesbianism and Judaism, Obejas reflects the tensions and negotiations necessary in reconciling national, cultural/spiritual and sexual identities. Through the Cuban-American and Cuban national communities, Obejas

scrutinizes the impact of the Cuban Revolution privileging the individual perspectives rather than the emblematic figure of Fidel Castro.

Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas consider history through the experiences of "ordinary" individuals, not dominant representative figures in history— César Chavez, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, and Fidel Castro. In fact, all three authors demystify these emblematic historical figures by positioning them alongside the other characters in the novel. The authors adjust the national historical account to spotlight the community of people who supported the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, were shaped by the fallout of the Cuban Revolution, and resisted through the underground movement Trujillo's regime. All three authors personalize history by intersecting prominently the individual and the collective in their fictional renditions.

In Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas' work, spirituality is culturally-defined and adopts a syncretic quality which fuses traditional forms of religious expression with alternative spiritual practices. In her detective fiction, Corpi includes supernatural elements, Catholic rituals and spiritual figures of Mexican-American culture like the curandera. Similarly, Obejas includes dreams that act as premonitions, elements of Santería and rituals of crypto-Judaism. In contrast, Alvarez links spirituality to political activism emphasizing the Catholic Church's progression toward Liberation Theology as a way to rebel against the Trujillo dictatorship. Despite their different approaches to spirituality, Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas, all combine traditional and alternative forms of spirituality that reflect their cultural and historical realities and place equal value on the traditional as on the alternative forms.

Each author has for different reasons been representative in their area of specialty. Lucha Corpi who stands as the only Chicana detective writer is in the unique position to explore the intersections of her gender and ethnicity joining Latinas from other cultural backgrounds like Cuban-American detective writer, Carolina García Aguilera, as well as Chicano detective writers like Michael Nava and Rudolfo Anaya. Julia Alvarez is one of the most written about, popular Latina writers and certainly the representative of Dominican-American literature in the U.S. Achy Obejas has the unique distinction of

belonging to two hyphenated groups which allow her access to a Latina lesbian experience as well as a Cuban-Jewish one.

The works of Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas, fit into a Latina literary progression that began with the boom of Latina literature. In the 1980s, Latinas began to prominently explore issues of biculturalism and bilingualism as they intersected with gender and sexuality.[104] By the early 1990s, with the publication of *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1992), *Dreaming in Cuban* (1993), and *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), Julia Alvarez, Cristina García and Esmeralda Santiago wrote a Dominican-American, Cuban-American and Nuyorican bildungsroman within a year of each other. [105] Alvarez, García and Santiago each used a young female protagonist to illustrate issues of immigration and bilingualism, and the intersections of race, culture and gender. These novels also portrayed a community of different generations of women some of whom practiced syncretic forms of spirituality. These texts stand as literary and thematic precursors of Lucha Corpi's Gloria Damasco Detective Series, Julia Alvarez' *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *In the Name of Salomé,* and Achy Obejas' *Memory Mambo* and *Days of Awe*.

Corpi, Alvarez and Obejas represent a stage in Latina literary production that shifted the exploration of identity from a process in the present (as a child grows) to one in the past (cultural and historical ancestry). These authors are by no means the only Latinas making these connections, looking to their past or hybridizing spirituality. Contemporary Chicana authors like Ana Castillo in *So Far From God* (1994) and Helena Maria Viramontes in *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996) certainly reflect similar patterns to the ones I have outlined. Examining these literary parallels and perhaps delving into potential catalysts for these thematic and stylistic shifts might prove a fruitful avenue for future studies.

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[104] In "'Fronterisleña,' Border Islander" Rivero began compiling works by Latina women writers and studying them in a comparative manner, purposefully focusing on the women writers because "in reading their texts I had recognized …the same quest for identity and similar affirmations of 'being other' that had become an integral part of my American vivencia, or 'lived' experience" (341).

[105] Prior to these novels, one of the cornerstones of Latina Literature, Chicana Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984), addressed through a coming-of-age narrative issues of bilingualism and biculturality.

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