

# ADDRESSING LOSS AND NOSTALGIA: TWO CUBAN DIASPORIC NOVELS OF THE NINETIES



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## Abstract

My study analyzes two texts that are essential for understanding the Cuban literary diaspora in the 1990s. By looking at the representation of the migrant experience in both Jesús Díaz's novel *La piel y la máscara* (1996) and *Inventario secreto de La Habana* (2004) by Abilio Estévez, I examine their significance for the corpus of diasporic literature that has been central to Cuban society for the past sixty years. My article addresses not only the way in which these works are contextualized as part of a diasporic literature tradition, but also how loss and nostalgia play an influential role in shaping the identity of the migrant subject.

## Key words

*Cuban literature, diaspora studies, transnational literature, Cuban diaspora*

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## Introduction

In his seminal study on migration, James Clifford establishes the first theoretical elements for contemporary studies on diaspora. Clifford analyzes how modern, diasporic communities construct a physical and symbolic space that is inspirational and significant for these individuals living in a nation different from that of their origin. Clifford questions the types of narratives that such a cultural tension produces, and, more precisely, he assumes the parameters used by the theorist, William Safran, to establish what defines a diasporic community. For Safran, a diaspora constitutes a community of individuals from the same nation or originating territory and dispersed in at least two localities around the world. In addition, this community should produce and maintain a living memory of their country of origin, hold a discourse that expresses the difficulty of integrating into their new society, and promote the idea of a possible return to the country left behind (qtd. in Clifford 1997, 244–47). The study of diasporic cultural and communicative productions is

essential for contemporary humanist studies because, as Rosa Tsagarousianou and Jessica Retis explain, “in an increasingly globalized world, the mediascapes that enable interaction across distance are crucial in shaping transnational, national and local politics, cultures, and identities” (2019, 4).

Recent studies on Cuban literature in the diaspora have applied the general framework established by Clifford and Safran, which assumes the existence of an active diasporic community, formed by Cuban émigrés. Such is the case with Beatriz Rodríguez-Moureló’s book (*Encounters in Exile*, 2006) about themes used in Cuban literature produced outside of Cuba during the nineties, and Raúl Rosales Herrera’s book (*Fictional First–Person Discourses in Cuban Diaspora Novels*, 2011) about novels from the eighties and nineties and the way in which an exile identity is created through the use of a narrative, which focuses on the experiences of the self as an emigrated subject. My work assumes the general coordinates that Clifford and Safran suggest, distinguishing the existence and activities of diasporic communities and also the type of characterization and periodization usually used in literary and cultural studies and in the social sciences, to refer to the migratory waves originating from Cuba after the establishment of Fidel Castro’s regime in 1959.

Jesús Díaz’s and Abilio Estévez’s autobiographical novels belong to a genealogy that includes several authors from the Cuban diaspora, who also attempted the genre of self-representation. As scholars, such as Iraida H. López, have argued, the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties is a rich period for autobiographical works of great importance for the history of Cuban exile literature and Cuban-American literature. Among these renowned books are Heberto Padilla’s *La mala memoria* (1989), Reinaldo Arena’s world-known *Antes que Anochezca* (1992), and Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s *Next Year in Cuba* (1995). On the other hand, it is also during the 1990s that literary studies link the autobiographical genre with and Cuban diaspora literature, such as Isabel Alvarez Borland’s *Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona* in 1998, and Stephen J. Clark’s *Autobiografía y revolución en Cuba* in 1999 (López 2015, 19-32).

There is consensus among scholars that Cuban emigration be analyzed through specific migratory “waves”, determined by those periods in which the Cuban government allowed its citizens to leave the country and move, primarily, to the United States (see Duany 2017). During the first two migratory waves (1959-1962 and 1965-1973), more than half a million people abandoned the country. The wave known as the “Mariel Exodus” brought close to 125,000 Cubans to Florida between the months of April and September of 1980. With the wave known as the “Balsero Crisis” (August to September 1994) 30,900 Cubans fled due to a profound economic and social crisis catalyzed by the end of the European Socialist Bloc’s economic subsidies to the Cuban government after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Finally, the fifth migratory wave began in May 1995 and continues until the present day. During this so-called

“Post-Soviet migration”, hundreds of thousands of Cubans left the country after Cuban authorities loosened migratory restrictions.

The two novels that I analyze in this article were written by Cuban authors that led the fifth migratory wave. Loss and nostalgia are central themes in both of these stories. Additionally, both texts are good examples of the textual construction of a diasporic identity. *La piel y la máscara* (1996) by Jesús Díaz (Havana, 1941 – Madrid, 2002) and *Inventario secreto de La Habana* (2004) by Abilio Estévez (Havana, 1954) both make the reader emotionally complicit. The authors want the reader to go through the diasporic rite of passage by reading their literature. Even though both novels are written from the first-person perspective and include an abundant number of autobiographical elements, the way in which they share emotional territory with the reader is remarkable. This significant and traumatic space is constructed from memories of life in Cuba before they were replaced by the painful context of exile.

Specific components of the Cuban literary canon have been questioned over the years by a few scholars from Cuba, who have studied the Cuban literary production in the diaspora. Thus, Ambrosio Fornet still considers it necessary to embrace a "fruitful dialogue between the two parts of the nation—that which resides on the island and that which makes up the diaspora" (Fornet 2009, 255) in order to establish a definitive history of Cuban literature. Nostalgia has been analyzed as one of the ethos of Cuban-American literature. Raúl Rubio has systematically studied what he calls the "discourse(s) of nostalgia" within the cultural production of the Cuban community in the United States. Rubio argues that there are Cuban "nostalgic texts" that "evolve in response to the dislocations of the historical exoduses and diasporas occurring after the Cuban Revolution of 1959" (Rubio 2006, 13). In this same context, Dalia Kandiyoti has analyzed the commodification and consumption of nostalgia as a key element to sell "Cuba America" as an "exile identity" (Kandiyoti 2006, 81). For Kandiyoti, nostalgia as a theme would be commercialized when "racially or ethnically identified subjects commodify their own identities" (Kandiyoti 2006, 81). However, Kandiyoti concludes that there are nostalgic practices performed by the diasporic subject that are not "dependent primarily on marketable, politicized repetitions of idealized histories" (Kandiyoti 2006, 86) but are part of the need for these subjectivities to feel and to experience that they belong to a cultural and ethnic community<sup>1</sup>.

Jesús Díaz's literary work is one of the best representations of the progressive alienation of an artist choosing to confront the censorship of Cuban cultural

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed reflection on Cuban literature produced outside the island and its traits as a "diaspora rhetoric", I suggest reading Iraida H. López's excellent book *Impossible Returns: Narratives of the Cuban Diaspora* (2015). López profusely comments on what she calls "the poetics of returns", namely the textual, literary variations of "volver" (to return) to the physical or emotional homeland as a recurrent motif displayed by many Cuban diaspora's authors (López 2015, 1-33).

institutions. This is despite the fact that, prior to his exile, Díaz had cooperated with the government during the first three decades of the Cuban revolution. Abilio Estévez, on the other hand, creates a nostalgic revision of the history of the Cuban capital. Estévez not only revisits Havana's glorious and sensual past, which serves as an alternate to the sanitized version certified by the Cuban government, but also affectively relates the Cuban capital to several European milieus that are linked to narratives of exile in various ways. By creating those transnational connections, Estévez transmutes Havana into a transitional locality that will forever be associated with a community of Havanans that are now spread throughout the world.

### 1. Two Narratives from the 1990s Cuban Emigration

The novel, *La piel y la máscara*, recounts the paradigmatic journey of many Cuban intellectuals who, like the author, began their professional career supporting and collaborating with Castro's regime but ended up exiled as part of the 1990s' migratory wave. The main character of this novel is Oso, a film director who functions as an alter ego to the book's author, Jesús Díaz. Similar to what happened to Díaz during his creative life in Cuba, Oso suffers political censorship due to his cinematographic work. He is also heavily controlled and surveilled by the Cuban secret police. It is for these reasons that Oso chooses exile. For him, intellectual labor is not a mere individual right but rather an active exercise of citizenry. Exile is not a tragic, unforeseen accident but a political and radical choice born after his many attempts to exercise his creative work freely in Cuba, against the totalitarian machinery of those in power.

Before leaving Cuba behind, Oso is afraid that life in exile would not allow him to produce his artistic work because he assumes that he would need to prioritize his economic autonomy in a country where he will be a political refugee. On the other hand, *Inventario secreto de La Habana* sets the emotional stage for Abilio Estévez's memories of exile and transnational wandering. Unlike Oso, Estévez's narrator feels that he is part of a larger exiled group. He commiserates with all who, like him and against their will, end up separated from their families and communities. Thus, he describes the airport in Havana, where the families go to say goodbye to their loved-ones, who were forced one way or the other to leave the country:

Travelers and families invariably say goodbye with a tragic tone, as if one of them was leaving for a bloody battle or directly for death. Similar farewells to those that you could see in any situation of war. [...] Death is not always exactly death. Sometimes it is called separation, distance, absence (Estévez 2004, 71).

In *Inventario secreto de La Habana*, the narrator considers the consequences of the abundant amount of emigration generated by the Cuban political dictatorship an

irreparable social and emotional catastrophe. Estévez and Díaz's novels represent the Cuban emigration of the last six decades as a collective trauma; they actively attack any assumption of legitimacy and ethical integrity attributed to the Cuban government's political program. Both books offer the phenomenon of resounding disillusionment caused by the Cuban socialist project. Thus, Estévez's narrator makes temporal anticipation a metaphysical condition. In his view, the citizens of Havana reside in an immobile time, one that neither ends nor allows them to imagine a future of changes for Cuban society:

In Havana one waits. What? Everything. Nothing. Whatever. The true occupation is waiting. I'm not sure about the other type of waiting, the waiting that presents itself around the world. But the waiting that I know, the one in Havana, has a strong component of resignation. There is something in waiting that nullifies the will. [...] It nullifies obstinacy, tenacity, interest in transforming one's destiny, or whatever one calls that and what is found in the future, or in no other place outside of my hopes [...] (Estévez 2004, 74).

The ideal reader of these Cuban emigration narratives from the 1990s belongs not only to the community of Cuban emigrants who migrated earlier to the United States, a community that can afford and identify with cultural images created by nostalgia and loss, but also the transnational and global Cuban migratory culture that started right after Castro took power. These narratives from the 1990s are helping to both reveal and to give weight to the cultural and emotional impact on Cuban citizens around the globe. Exile, loss, and nostalgia are intrinsic components of contemporary as well as past generations of Cuban subjects. In these works, exile is a haunting reality that serves as a traumatic background to the story. It is an essential element for the development of both plots, and it is an unmistakable part of many of the dialogues and ideas discussed by the main characters. For the Cuban émigré community – and especially for the hundreds of writers, artists, and intellectuals that left the island during the 1990s, after the social and economic cataclysm that followed the withdrawal of support from the Socialist Bloc, these works guarantee the creation of an archive of the painful memories of Cuban enforced migration. Additionally, as a consequence, this archive stands in opposition to the manipulative discourse held by Cuban officials. Literature functions as an indelible alternative to the censoring that the Cuban cultural institutions do to the heterogeneous and powerful Cuban culture created outside of the island.

Unlike the editorial journey of works produced because of the first migratory waves (1959-1989), the first editions of *La piel y la máscara* and *Inventario secreto de La Habana* were printed by prestigious Spanish publishing houses. The influential creative status that both Abilio Estévez and Jesús Díaz had since the time they were still residing in Cuba is evident and shows that they had already achieved literary recognition in their homeland prior to deciding to live abroad. For this reason, both

books feature protagonists unable to imagine being forced to renounce to their creative careers. At the same time, they both reach the conclusion that, in order to write free from censorship and other political restrictions, they would have to migrate. Migration was the only way out – the ultimate way to react as an intellectual committed to his ideals.

In both books, the theme of exile is treated as something that impacts the Cuban population explicitly. There are references to other diasporas and societies receiving migrants. In both books, travelling – the migratory experience – happens as an organic part of life for citizens of these other nations. It is an inherent aspect of modern life despite the accompanying feelings of loss and cultural longing. In some passages, the protagonists of Estévez's and Díaz's novels affectively identify themselves with other émigrés, especially those coming from ex-communist countries, and consider themselves as “equals” cohabitating in the context of diaspora. In *Inventario*, Estévez extends his narration to a biographic and affective trajectory that leads two men, one Cuban and the other Polish, to be emotionally available for each other during a sentimental encounter in Germany. The Cuban, however, regards himself as less able to aesthetically enjoy the sources of “high culture” provided by his new migratory environment – Germany. The narrator of *Inventario* sees himself as ontologically limited, unable to fully rejoice in the intellectual pleasures that exile makes available for him. It is as if this emotional gap, caused by traumatic displacement, is incurable and has consequences for all of the human condition, including his ability to enjoy the best that a new culture has to offer:

I only related to a young Polish man who came to see me. [...] He was very young, he had beautiful eyes, as dark with nostalgia as they were mischievous [...] We communicated with gestures, with glances, and with a rather harsh French. I never knew how Walter had ended up here from Gdansk, in whose shipyards he had worked (although I'm sure he must have explained it to me). Instead, I got to know his love [...] for German culture. In this city (he used to say to me in his strange Polish French) the greatest German poets, Hegel and Hölderlin, were born. [...] And I, however, ungrateful and absent, no matter how hard I tried to find an emotion, I remained indifferent to their stories and it did not matter to me that Hölderlin had walked his delirium there. Trying to move, I found only a vigorous sense of loneliness, a strong dose of boredom, the recurring feeling that I was out of place everywhere (Estévez 2004, 332-33).

Both Jesús Díaz and Abilio Estévez share thematic traits with other novels by significant authors of Cuban diasporic literature from the 1990s, such as Daina Chaviano and Zoé Valdés. One of these traits is the element of a sex as a monetary transaction, the commodification of the body as a form of survival and only considered due to the strain of economic scarcity. As John R. Gillis has indicated, the act of remembering allows for a group, relative to time and space, to get a sense of identity and equality, “what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity” (Gillis 1994, 3). These diasporic works not only contribute to the consolidation of an identity

for the community outside of the country but also changed the definition of the Cuban nation itself through the creation of spaces of memory for creators and readers alike.

Cuban migratory literature from the 1990s seeks to rewrite the Cuban collective history, manipulated and distorted by government censorship. In the case of Jesús Díaz's novel, *La piel y la máscara*, literary fiction is used to denounce the psychological and creative damage caused by the political censorship while filming *Lejanía*, which Díaz directed in 1985. What Díaz seeks is not vindication for the film but rather to generate a memory of the infinite variations in which the Cuban authorities censored the work of artists and subjected them to surveillance and control by the State. Abilio Estévez's book, *Inventario secreto de La Habana*, creates, in part, a retelling of the author's arrival in exile and the emotional challenges it entails. However, it is also both a recollection of the memories of several generations of the Estévez family in Cuba and a literary reconstruction of the Cuban capital, from its splendid historic past to the shattered and heavily politicized present dominated by Castroism.

In both Díaz's and Estévez's books, Havana has enormous importance and satisfies the emotional demands of the Cuban diasporic community. As indicated by Araceli San Martín Moreno and José Luis Muñoz de Baena Simón, the city becomes a theme for global readers in the 1990s:

There is also a Havana that seems to complete a function of catharsis for those in exile. That Havana has been elaborated through memories, fragments of memories, and with personal topics that pertain to the Cuban imaginary collective. That imagined Havana owes itself, in great part, to the loss of natural readers of the authors and the necessity to *invent* an adequate object for their nostalgia (Rosales Herrera 2011, 134).

Jesús Díaz and Abilio Estévez execute what Rosales Herrera – referring to other Cuban authors of the diaspora – calls “performative acts of memory” (Rosales Herrera 2011, 135). These have a nostalgic element and feature Cuba/Havana as a ubiquitous presence in the backdrop of these dramatic works. For Rosales Herrera, this type of literary device and the recurring reminiscing about a place is a consequence of the existential insecurity that relocation to a new country implies:

For many Cuban émigré writers, this dynamic reveals itself through a pronounced focus, even a certain fixation, on the native territorial space of Cuba and its historical past, rather than on the exilic reality in which these writers find themselves at the present moment of composition. Yet, paradoxically, it is present reality, and the fear of loss associated with it, that largely commands and exacerbates a focus on Cuban national space (Rosales Herrera 2011, 133).

Both Díaz and Estévez enjoyed great influence in the Cuban intellectual society before going into exile to guarantee their creative and personal survival. As happens with many writers from the Cuban literary diaspora, they share a sense of

responsibility for what the model for a post-dictatorial Cuba should be. For James Clifford, having this connection to the nation's destiny constitutes one of the essential conditions required for a sense of community in the diaspora (Clifford 1997).

*La piel y la máscara* exemplarily shows the type of self-examination associated with Cuban intellectuals who left the island during the nineties. Díaz's novel demonstrates the transition of a Cuban intellectual that actively participated in the political system for the first few decades of the revolution but later embraced exile after becoming disenchanted with the socialist, authoritarian and all-controlling regime. When living outside his native country, the intellectual feels the need to critique his past, and this is precisely the kind of soul searching that generates the novel, *La piel y la máscara*. This is a choral, polyphonic work in which different actors who participated in a film offers a first-person perspective on what happens during the creative process, their personal approach to the history of the film, and how they perform their assigned roles. It is up to the reader to compose the overall story by connecting the various individual perspectives to construct a final version of the story, one which might be closest to what really happened during the filming of *Lejanía* – a reality to which no one would have access if it were not for the characters' subjective retellings.

The novel gives autobiographical elements an allegorical dimension. Díaz uses fiction to document the way in which, years before while filming *Lejanía* in Havana, the State invaded his creative process through the use of censorship and repressive power. The film recounts the story of an exiled Cuban mother living in the United States returning to Havana in the eighties, along with the first group of exiles allowed to enter the country after two decades of being banned from Cuban soil. After all these years had passed, she wants to see and catch up with her children, with whom she did not have prior contact and whom she had abandoned by fleeing the island even though her children were forbidden from leaving the country. This mother returns to Cuba with her niece who left as a small child and is now Cuban-American. The actors of the movie/protagonists of the novel find themselves living in 1990s Cuba – a society in economic and moral ruin, intensified by the end of Soviet assistance.

The director of the film and protagonist of the novel, Oso, embodies an idealist loyal to the Cuban regime during the first few decades of socialism. Díaz's book is paradigmatic in its demonstration of the different political incarnations of an intellectual. In other words, it shows him going from a committed supporter of the State to someone with no faith in the Cuban system. Going through these political stages is a painful process that concludes with a physical escape, dissociation from the Cuban geographical space to search for a future in a democratic country. Focusing on the figure of Oso, the author's alter ego, the novel serves as an update to the "political intimacies" of a lettered man who moves from being a sympathizer and collaborator with the Castro regime to become a fugitive and conscious critic of the

repressive political model he left behind. Visions of emigration do not escape this double perspective. What motivates the migrant characters, embodied by the mother and her Cuban-American niece, to revisit the island is an attempt to heal the wounds of nostalgia and to recover lost family ties, dissolved by the geographical and emotional distance between the Cuban emigrants and the family and friends they left behind in Cuba. The characters returning from abroad have been crafting an idealized image of the Cuban community still on the island. However, once they arrive in Cuba, they are shocked to realize that their Cuban family members are surprisingly broken, damaged by material misery, and the kinship ties have been diminished by silence, resentment and the trauma caused by family migration.

In Díaz's novel, there is an ethical need to reveal why he had previously acquiesced to the ideology of the Cuban political power, and how, in the present, this ideology would make one an accomplice in the systematic destruction of any chance to build a more inclusive and democratic nation and society. This is how Oso comments on his artistic endeavors as a film director, assuming that the most urgent contribution to his country is that his film, which denounces the dystopia of the Castro regime, can be carried out despite censorship and political repression:

It was [the film], among other things, about farewell to a revolution whose successes, already remote, I had vehemently applauded, whose brutalities, excesses and follies I had guiltily kept silent and before which I did not want to appear as a judge, but as a witness, as someone speaking from the vast and difficult territory of the irremediable (Díaz 1996, 23).

The theme of exile is part of what Oso uses to achieve success in his work. He emotionally manipulates the actors so that, when the characters they play have to remember their lives in Cuba before emigrating, Oso can capitalize on their nostalgia for the benefit of his own artistic creation. It does not matter how tragic the genealogy of the Cuban exile might be, with its terrible record on family separation and the high risk of death from leaving in physically dangerous or less conventional ways. This sad memory, related to the Cuban tradition of exile, does not impede Oso from using the nostalgic feelings associated with exile to get the actors under his power to use traumatic pain and emotions for inspiration during the filming of the final scenes of his film. In this way, the effects linked to exile add aesthetic density to his intellectual creation. This is how Iris's character reacts when she sees a place that reminds her of her son who drowned at sea while trying to flee on a raft:

– “There Omar broke a tooth!” She will shout and only then will she realize that she has evoked the unnamable.

A deaf silence will show his mistake and then the sea will be seen in the distance and a wave will break on the coast, as now, and we will approach the green mystery and the foam that has covered the image like a dream where the magic phrase will stand out, “a film by”, under which I will inscribe my name forever (Díaz 1996, 27).

Oso exploits an emotion well known by thousands of Cuban families and reuses it in a way that turns the actor's well of tears into an aesthetic object that becomes his artistic creation. Díaz's novel attempts to give voice to all the actors in the drama and characters in the book, including a character who is an infiltrated agent of the Cuban secret police. By so doing, he simulates a polyphony that provides a diverse number of individual opinions and perspectives that real Cuban society does not have. Díaz would propose a democratic civil exchange that precedes the kind of civic engagement that Cuban citizens should be allowed to perform. It should not be strange, then, that one of the characters, the actress Ofelia, who plays the mother that abandoned her children when she left the country, shares a vision of exile that focuses on the existential damages and the democratic limitations that the Cuban population has, including the ones who have been able to migrate:

No, the reproaches did not lead to anything. Why, for example, did the revolution not let them all go, if that was its wish? Why would Iris [the fictional character who returns to Cuba to regain contact with her children] have had to be able to silently endure the destruction of her world in order to preserve her sons, when she could go away with her husband and girl and live as one likes in Miami? Confused, I asked myself the forbidden question. What would I have done in your case? Ten years ago, when it was her turn to decide, I would have stayed in Cuba. For today, however, I would leave without hesitation for a single second, as I intended to do when I had the least opportunity (Díaz 1996, 15).

In the book's present, the best alternative to the immutability of the Cuban authoritarian State is abandoning the country. When Ofelia reconsiders her country's past, the ghost of the dead *balseiro* is made visible. In the film that Díaz's novel documents, one of the two sons abandoned by their mother dies by drowning in the sea while attempting to leave Cuba on an improvised raft<sup>2</sup>. His brother, the one that survived by staying in Cuba, destroys all traces of his *balseiro* brother. There is neither material nor narrative testimony of his late brother. The novel reveals the disturbing Cainite silence that symbolizes the divide in the Cuban population for people who support or are against those who emigrate to another country, the *Cubans who left us* vs. the *Cubans who stayed*. This is what the actor who plays the role of the brother who stayed in Cuba thinks of his character's act of betrayal against his dead brother:

It was not credible to me that Omar had taken his things on that excursion where he found death, I wondered where his photos were and I had a sudden revelation. Orestes had burned them along with Omar's clothes, books, and records with the wild joy of one who burns the body of his own brother; but he had not been able to burn his shadow, now interposed like a wall of guilt between my mother and me (Díaz 1996, 107).

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<sup>2</sup> "Balsa", in Spanish.

Through his novel, Díaz exposes a collective shame: the way in which the Cuban society – until the migratory wave of the 1990s – tried to ignore and erase the memory of emigrants from previous generations, mostly those who left after the rise of the communist regime. Despite this and the fact that the official history tries to silence the history of Cuban emigrants, the ghosts of the *balseros* who died while crossing the Florida strait on their way to Miami continue to return once and again to force characters to accept this trauma as an essential part in the modern history of Cuban society.

In *La piel y la máscara*, thanks to the character Omar's absence, the history of disappeared emigrants and of the deaths and losses generated by emigration in irregular conditions are made apparent. While Omar becomes a symbol, his memory embraced, and his character existing without omission or silence, it can be assumed that this historical and emotional restoration has to assign blame and go through some sort of collective trauma. For that reason, Iris, the character that allegorizes a macabre version of the nation/motherland, who left her children abandoned in Cuba while she moved to Miami, commits suicide. Only from this radical closure of the social wound produced by people pushed into exile can there be some kind of beginning among those citizens who – battered and traumatized in Havana – survive to rebuild the Cuban society of the future. The symbol of the lettered man, the character of Oso, is not included among the community members who should reconstruct the country after the symbolic sacrifice of the mother/motherland. Oso is more preoccupied with creating a powerful testimony of the social horror that he witnessed and in which he is included as a victim of authoritarian power.

If, for a writer like Jesús Díaz, the deep crisis in Cuban society can only gain redemption through the acceptance of a traumatic past that he tries to recognize and highlight, in a book like Abilio Estévez's *Inventario secreto de La Habana*, emigration implies emulating other traditions of international displacement. The narrator of *Inventario* finds himself living in Barcelona as a recent arrival in exile. Part of this experience is told not so much in relation to factual descriptions of the protagonist's journey of economic survival but through stories created by the narrator's psyche, ruminations of his subjectivity. The protagonist's mental wandering correlates to the process of adaptation to his new condition of geographic and emotional wandering:

You think you know what kind of loneliness could be the most intense. You arrive, for example, in the city of Stuttgart [...] and you discover that nobody is waiting for you. You don't know much English, much less German. You don't have a phone you can turn to. [...] In the subway from Manhattan to Queens... . You have never gotten lost in a city, just that, in this case, we are not talking about a city but New York. You walk and walk, looking for your direction, and the more you want to get closer, the further you go, the more you get lost, just like in dreams (Estévez 2004, 297-98).

For the narrator, life in exile has a condition of a pseudo-reality, where events do not have the same impact as those events and experiences that occurred during his life in Cuba. One of the new elements that Estévez's book brings to the diasporic narratives of the 1990s resides in its cosmopolitan openness. In this way, both Cuban émigrés and readers located in the island can have access to a global experience that citizens of other migrant societies already know and, perhaps, enjoy. However, his celebration of the immigrant experience is only surface level. The protagonist of *Inventario*'s new journey through highly multicultural spaces cause him to become psychologically dispersed, making him forget the purpose of life. This psychological dispersion opens the door to an existential relativism that annihilates what destiny might have in store for those who are lucky enough to have a chance at making their own lives without having to abandon their native country. It is for this reason that memory, the ability to reminisce, starts functioning as a compensatory mechanism against the existential void of his life as an emigrant. The emigrant's lack of cultural roots is compensated by the intimate writing of memories, the history of his family and the reconstruction of the fabulous past of Havana—now irreparably lost.

Jonathan C. Dettman reads *Inventario secreto* as Estévez's scriptural gesture to "reveal Havana's immanent Utopian dimension" (Dettman 2012, 85), as a form of resistance against the Cuban government's transformation of Havana into a kind of gigantic museum for the enjoyment of foreign tourists. For Dettman, Estévez opposes this commercialization of the city through a "memorializing praxis" (Dettman 2012, 85) that mixes fiction and memoir with the actual physicality of the city. On a testimonial level, Estévez intersperses a generational story of his Cuban family with remembrances of Havana's illustrious and astonishing past – all of which occur before the Cuban revolution. Telling the story of his family allows the narrator to demonstrate how the city's past splendor was a consequence of the success and well-being of its inhabitants. If the city is a catastrophe in the present, it is because all that was worth celebrating was annihilated by the Cuban communist regime. Although Havana was visited by illustrious artists and scientists in the past, in the historical present of the city, there are mainly allusions to the *balseros* desperate to escape and the need to avoid authoritarianism and poverty by fleeing the country altogether:

The sea, the marvelous, warm sea of Havana [...] is at the same time a sea of fear and also of distant promises, or to put it another way, that of escape. The paths of absence, that can also be of death, inevitably pass through the sea. Some friends tell me of how their families, during the Spanish Civil War, left Barcelona walking, arriving at Port Bou, and from there they went to France (Estévez 2004, 19).

As in Díaz's novel, the precarious options available to those wanting to emigrate from Cuba provide a tragic dimension to the story. Moreover, emigration from the island ceases to be a sign of Cuba's political and social exceptionality, rather it has become

evidence of a social imbalance serious enough to inflict major damage on other countries' social tissue. By relating the displacement of Cubans who deny the prevailing system to the exiles of the Spanish Civil War, the narrator could be suggesting a potential outcome for Cuba's destiny, one in which the trauma of forced emigration can be alleviated, as evidenced by the present geopolitical environment in which the narrator currently lives. On one occasion, when the narrator is at a bar in Mallorca, he could not avoid looking at two young people being affectionate with one another. While the female customer has physical traits that make him think of her to be a local, the waiter at the bar and the object of the woman's flirtation seems to be originally from North Africa. The narrator wonders and fantasize about the intimate story of that other emigrant he observes from a distance:

Is it possible that he crossed the strait [of Gibraltar] on an improvised raft [*"patera"*]? Speaking of rafts, of balsas, implies speaking of many things, perhaps among them that jump out are hope, danger, and death. I think that possibly I had not had a clear understanding of a similar risk until those days in 1994 when the sea of Havana was populated with rafts [*"balsas"*] (Estévez 2004, 40).

Estévez's narrator admits how, in a tradition with as many examples of maritime runaways as the Cuban one, he identifies with the exodus of the *balseros* in 1994. Even more explicitly than Díaz's novel, Estévez's book incorporates the "Balsero Crisis" as the defining moment by which only those citizens who did not really have economic means or strength of character remained in Cuba and avoided (or just postponed) joining the diaspora. But even so, those Cuban citizens who decided to remain in the island had plenty of reasons for wanting to leave:

Those [citizens] that stayed on the beach, believers or not, fell to their knees on the sand. They said their goodbyes and cried. The night began to fall on the *Rincón de Guanabo*.<sup>3</sup> The *balsas* were lost in the night, in that immense enigma that is the sea at night. [...] Those that were not old enough, or did not have courage, decision or opportunity to leave, stayed on the shore a long time, until the night was upon them (Estévez 2004, 69).

In both Díaz and Estévez's works, there is an ethical drive that pushes them to decipher national politics with an almost metaphysical sense ("we, wandering Cubans..." Estévez goes on to say at one point). For them, this prophetic role is embraced as part of the moral duties of intellectuals who were forced to emigrate. They are also concerned about the integrity and political future of the Cuban nation – about which they have a pessimistic view. In this sense, the predictions these storytellers make can be grim. Estévez, for example, refers to an emigrant community broken by some dark resentment, unwilling to rebuild itself despite the fact that

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<sup>3</sup> Beach to the east of Havana.

Cuban emigrants share a very strong cultural identity. This example shows his comments on a failed meeting with a Cuban trumpeter in Germany and how there is no possibility of reproducing an effective and functional national community abroad. Paradoxically, it is from a Polish emigrant from whom the narrator receives a compassionate gesture, when the Polish character makes it clear that he understands the quarrels and misunderstandings between migrants who share the same national origin, even within the migratory enclaves that the Cuban population was able to reach:

I believe that then I heard the trumpet. [...] And what surprised me was the melody, the familiar melody that brought me to another time, to another place, to happiness, and a far-off place (the happier the more distant; the more longed for the more remote). Happiness and a place that I knew were idyllic and for the same reason false, and that in any case I knew more attractive than the real ones (Estévez 2004, 335).

It is through artistic (the music) and affective (the type of sentimentality that the melody awakens) means that the narrator identifies another “equal”/Cuban in the migratory space. Estévez’s novel warns its readers that it might be too late for the Cuban society (with a massive population scattered throughout the global diaspora) to rebuild the Cuban national sense of unity. The current Cuban diaspora is determined by the need for individual survival, an existential urgency well known by all emigrants, which prevents a harmonious relationship between Cuban emigrants who meet abroad for the first time:

He stopped playing [the trumpet]. He looked at us. [...] “*Buenas noches*,” I said in Spanish. He didn’t respond. “I’m also from Havana,” I added and instantly I understood the falsity and ridiculousness of the situation, and, worst of all, I realized that I had made the biggest mistake. Something in his attitude told me. I can’t explain it. Violence broke out between us. [...] The trumpeter frowned. He spat with contempt. He turned to the river.

[...]

My Polish friend, with his appearance of a forest ranger, a farmer from Reymont, accompanied me with his complicit silence that at times was resolved by a supportive pat on my back. I thought that, for some mysterious reason, he, who was born in Gdansk, so far from Havana, had managed to understand (Estévez 2004, 336-40).

## Conclusion

Both Jesús Díaz and Abilio Estévez's novels agree that literature must provide spaces of memory that document the need and relevance of reshaping Cuban cultural identity, which implies the inclusion of cultural productions created by the diasporic community. The writers from Cuba's post-Soviet migratory wave use the literary field as an epistemological tool for rewriting the nation's historical past against the manipulated version drafted by the Cuban officials, to “clarify” passages of Cuban

reality and history – such as the traumatic outcome of citizens forced into exile – that have not been publicly accepted by cultural institutions on the island. This assumed civic duty present in Cuban exile literature incorporates the testimonies and the experiences of loss and nostalgia that are distinguishable traits of the migrant narrative. They are books that, through the context of exodus, are guaranteed to be disseminated and shared by a national community that perceives itself as globally relocated, ideologically heterogeneous, and cohesive due to diasporic practices, for which literature serves as one of its main contributors.

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