fiar

FORUM FOR INTER-AMERICAN RESEARCH (FIAR) VOL. 14.2 (NOV. 2021) 9-24
ISSN: 1867-1519

Producing Home in Achy Obejas' *Days of Awe* (2001). Homing and Remembering as Diasporic Practices

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Abstract

Cuban diasporization and the geographies of Cuban homes in- and outside Cuba are at the core of the novel Days of Awe (2001) by U.S. Cuban writer Achy Obejas. The novel discusses the tensions experienced from a Cuban diaspora perspective between the "desire for a [remembered and imagined] homeland" and a "homing desire" (Brah 1996), between the global currents of de- and reterritorialization, and the protagonist's attempts to appropriate different spaces as home. The aim of my article is to explore how "home" is performed as a spatiotemporal phenomenon in Obejas' novel, on which scales "home" is produced (global, national, local) and how the tension between remembered homes and the current locale of living is elaborated. Proposing to define home as a social space, a negotiation between homing practices, concepts of home, and lived experiences on different geographic and temporal scales, I particularly focus on the practices of homing and remembering in the urban spaces of Havana and Chicago and in the micro space of the family home/house as both a social and material space.

Keywords: home, diaspora, space, deterritorialization, U.S. Cuban fiction, Achy Obejas

Introduction

> On the island's coast, a few mangy dogs, bats, and a tempest or tow of wild bees came to rest on the columns of the boats. It swelled with frogs in its crevices, snails crawled the walls. Birds with feathers frazzled like uncombed hair perched and called. There were clear days and days of fog, nights when the stars flashed across the sky and others when they refused to shine.
> That was usually when the boats would moan from the weight of the natives scaling the tower. (Obejas, *The Tower of the Antilles* 157–158)

In her short story collection *The Tower of the Antilles* (2017), Achy Obejas draws on the image of the Tower of Babel. In the eponymous short story, a tower made from shipwrecks and makeshift rafts stands for the linguistic, cultural, and political fragmentation of the Caribbean due to forced in- and outward migration, genocides, and colonialism, in general, as well as for the diasporization of the Cuban population, in particular. The Tower of the Antilles—and the subsequent dispersal it suggests—symbolizes the crescent spatial, linguistic, and cultural disconnection amongst Cubans *dentro y fuera* in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution (1959). The image of the Tower of the Antilles then epitomizes more a sense of loss, homelessness, and uprooting than solely referring to the proverbial human hubris condemned in *Genesis* 11, 1–9.

Cuban diasporization and the geographies of Cuban homes in- and outside Cuba are also at the core of Obejas' second novel *Days of Awe*, already published in 2001, in which she uses the trope of the Tower of Babel for the first time:

> According to the Bible, the universal language I've dreamt about existed once, in what was the nascent city of Babylon. Its people were the descendants of Noah, prosperous but much too ambitious. They thought they could build a stairway, a tower to heaven. The Bible doesn't mention any discussion, not a single voice that questioned the wisdom of such a crazy notion. And so the Babylonians set about their impossible labor.
> God, of course, was unimpressed.

> The punishment inflected on the early Babylonians for their presumptions was not merely to level the Tower of Babel but to create babble itself: Language was fractured into a confusion of tongues, chaos ripe for misunderstanding, hatred, and revolution. (93)

Going beyond Cuban-Cuban problematics, the novel takes an interdiasporic and a postmemorial stance constituting itself as a multidirectional "knot of memory" (Rothberg, Sanyal and Silverman). [1] The text places Cuban dispersal after 1959 in a larger historical and geopolitical context by referring also to Afro-Caribbean and Chinese Caribbean diasporic communities and by entangling it largely with the Jewish diaspora in the Caribbean, which started with the 'discovery' of the Americas and the expulsion of all Jews from Castile in 1492. [2] Focusing on the relation between second-generation Cubans in the United States and Cubans in Cuba on the one hand and on the history of Sephardi and Ashkenazi dispersal on the other hand, the novel reflects upon the tension between the proverbial imaginary (and remembered) homelands and actual locales of diaspora communities from a geopolitical macro perspective. By the same token, the homodiegetic narrator's Ale memories and notes, which constitute the corpus of the novel, revolve incessantly around the nature of home as a place, a memory, a practice.

The aim of my article is therefore to explore how "home" is performed as a spatiotemporal phenomenon in Obejas' novel, on which scales "home" is produced (global, national, local) and how the tension between "imaginary and remembered homelands" and the current locale of living is elaborated. Proposing to define home as a social space, a negotiation of homing practices, concepts of home, and lived experiences on different geographic and temporal scales, I particularly focus on the practices of homing and remembering in the urban spaces of Havana and Chicago – the protagonist's hometowns – and the micro space of the family home/house as both a social and material space.

1. Re-Thinking Home and Space in Caribbean Diaspora Cultures

Diaspora spaces, i.e., the spaces of diasporic subjects, can be understood, as phenomena of spatio-temporal entanglement and of the simultaneous tension between different dimensions of social space. [3] Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's triadic model of social space as a starting point, I conceptualize space as both a product and a perpetual process of negotiation between three dimensions: *espace perçu, espace conçu,* and *espace vécu* (Lefebvre 50–51) —perceived space, conceived space, and lived space—or the representation of space, spatial practices, and spaces of representation (42-43). [4] Whereas the 'representation of space' or 'conceived space' refers to spatial norms and spatial practices point to the actual everyday actions that 'users' of space carry out, 'spaces of representation' stand for the imagination of space and the symbolic meaning of spaces as they are, for instance, fleshed out in fiction. Diaspora spaces, as dialectical negotiations of social spatial practices, spatial concepts, and spaces of representation, are constituted by the individual spatial production of diasporic subjects through their body and mind. In line with the definition of diasporas as "transnational imagined communit[ies]," these subjective spaces are collectivized through shared diaspora discourses and consciousness as well as by transnational social practices (Sökefeld 267–268). Diaspora spaces are all but unpolitical. On the contrary, geopolitical global contexts influence the production of diaspora spaces through the lived experiences of the subjects, for instance in the face of the (im)possibility of returning to their imaginary, remembered or 'real' homeland, making the geopolitical tangible on a subjective and local level. Also, the political relevance of individual experience becomes visible when media, texts, and images engage the experience of migration and diaspora in the context of geopolitical processes and globalization, repand them, and contribute to the emergence of "imagined communities" (Anderson) or, on a larger scale, "imagined worlds" (Appadurai; Epple and Kramer). This is especially true for Caribbean

diaspora cultures and literatures for they negotiate the social and cultural consequences of larger-scale geopolitical and global processes, such as the first and second diasporization of Afro-Caribbean or Asian-Caribbean populations or the socioeconomic and political upheavals in the wake of colonization and decolonization. In the U.S. Caribbean context, *home* is then part of the diaspora spaces that diasporic transnational subjects produce.

In the context of Caribbean mobilities, it is hardly surprising that spatial figurations, such as the island, the archipelago, the water, the ship, the plantation, and, as Stanka Radović (2014) has shown, the city and the house, have become important tropes of reflection in Caribbean texts. As Radović elaborates, in many Caribbean texts the house stands as a symbol for the desire to establish oneself as an independent postcolonial nation in the sense of a spatial-material, conceptual, and symbolic "room of one's own." In the wake of its protective function, the figuration of the house is closely linked to the question of cultural identity. The house or homestead also takes on a central role in U.S. Caribbean diaspora fiction, which draws on regional Caribbean traditions as well as on U.S. authors such as William Faulkner and Toni Morrison. Unlike in regional Caribbean fiction, in U.S. Caribbean diaspora texts the (multiscalar) spatial figuration and reflection of "home" do not simply discuss the search for a postcolonial space of one's own. Instead, these texts negotiate the tension that second-generation migrants experience between an imagined Caribbean homeland fading into distance and their actual locale of living. Home—specifically the homestead or house—may then represent both the Caribbean place of origin and the host country, the United States. The practices of remembering and homing depicted in the texts reflect upon the postmemory generation's relationship to "home" regarding different scales of time and (material) space. Through the production of diaspora and home as space(s), the texts also negotiate tendencies of cultural belonging in U.S. Caribbean communities torn between the potentially antagonistic forces between de- and reterritorialization.

In U.S. Caribbean diaspora fiction, de- and reterritorialization tendencies vary along lines of ethnic and national origins. Texts by mainland Puerto Ricans tend to emphasize the aspect of reterritorialization in the U.S. (although no longer necessarily in New York City); U.S. Dominican texts such as Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) often adopt a postmemory perspective while addressing issues of deterritorialization. U.S. Haitian texts, especially by Edwidge Danticat, also tend to emphasize deterritorialization and the aftermath of the Duvalier dictatorships – although recent publications have focused less on the question of remembrance than on the relationality of U.S. Haitian and Haitian spaces (Danticat; Gay). The texts published in the U.S. by Cuban or U.S. Cuban authors after 1959 occupy a special position with respect to the question of de- and reterritorialization and homing. While the earliest publications by Cubans in the U.S. looked back on Cuba and the Cuban Revolution with anger, the expression "life on the hyphen" coined by U.S. Cuban writer and scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat aptly describes the literary production and cultural positioning of the second generation, i.e., that of U.S. Cuban writers. In this context, Cristina García's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) represents the fusion of U.S. and Cuban cultures. More recent texts by U.S. Cuban women writers, such as Ana Menéndez' *The Last War* (2009) no longer turn only to the Cuban community in the U.S. or on the island but open up their gaze to different topics and spaces. Finally, as Iraida López has shown in *Impossible Returns* (2015), U.S. Cuban texts from 2000 onward particularly focus on practices of return to Cuba. Obejas' novel *Days of Awe* follows the patterns unveiled by López, linking the question of returning to Cuba to practices, concepts, and imaginations of home on different spatial and temporal scales.

2. Conceptualizing Caribbean Diaspora Space and Home

From a historical point of view, Christopher Columbus' *Carta a Luis Santángel* (1493) can be considered the first European medial production of the Caribbean as a space, as an "act of worlding" (Spivak 211–213). Columbus

gives the islands he thinks to belong to India names ("representation of space"), declares them Spanish possessions by raising the royal Castilian flag ("spatial practice"), and describes them in a language of "imaginative geographies" (Saïd 49-73), laying the foundation for 500 years of colonization, exploitation, and eurocentrism in the Americas. From a conceptual angle, Frantz Fanon's reflections in *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961) on colonies as profoundly dichotomous spaces are helpful for understanding these spaces' underlying ideology. [5] Fanon's considerations, indeed, highlight the core features of colonialism in Caribbean slave holder societies and their importance for the racist structure of colonial space: the supposed unbridgeable ontological difference between a white subject and an afrodescendent 'non-subject' (Soazo Ahumada) which is reflected in the spatial organization of Caribbean plantations societies and their disciplinary apparatus designed to keep the colonizers' and the colonized's world physically separated. To be sure, despite these accurate spatial and ontological concepts and depending on the place and time, the historical 'messiness' of spatial practices and lived experience in the Caribbean allowed to a certain degree for more flexible social and spatial arrangements (for instance, in the case of the *gens de couleur*). Nevertheless, the vestiges of colonial social space are still visible in current Caribbean societies as well as in Caribbean diaspora spaces in North America where different variants and temporalities of colonial space, power relations, and coloniality—from the United States *and* from different Caribbean regions—intersect, entangle, and conflict.

In this light, I understand Caribbean "diaspora space" as a relational space of multidimensional entanglements produced by diasporic subjects. Diaspora space is both the process and the product of a constant negotiation between different localities (Africa, the Caribbean, the United States or Canada), temporalities (first and second migration, here and now), cultures, and idioms (Creole, Spanish, English, French, Dutch) —and their according spatial concepts, practices, and imaginations. Diaspora as a state of mind and a space in suspension between the poles of de- and reterritorialization is also characterized by the tension between the "desire for a homeland" or a "homing desire," as Avtar Brah writes in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (Brah 180). Brah refers to the tension between an imaginary homeland as a "mythic place of desire [… and] of no return" (192) one might never have visited and an everyday homeland as the "lived experience of a locality" (192) where one might feel "'not-here' to stay" (Clifford 311). The "desire for a [lost or inaccessible] homeland" and the "myth of return" as key elements of a diasporic conscience and their translation into cultural expression prove to be two sides of the same coin. They imply that the "originary homeland" lives on as a remembered, ideologized symbolic space which is, however, "transformed by the ravages of time, transfigured through the lenses of loss and nostalgia, [and] constructed in the process of the search" as Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller point out in *Rites of Return* (Hirsch and Miller 3). [6]

Considering "home" a multifaceted spatial phenomenon and the realization of what Brah called "homing desire," we might draw on recent research in the context of transnational (forced) migration to define "home" and "homemaking". Sociologists Anna Steigemann and Philipp Misselwitz (2020), for instance, argue that home should be conceptualized as the localized idea of "bringing some space under control," even temporarily, and therefore they "operationalize home as a set of concrete spatial practices" (Steigemann and Misselwitz 630–631). In the same vein, they define home as a "permanent or temporary space where refugees achieve a sense of dignity, safety, [and] comfort through self-provisioning practices" (631). In a Lefebvrian perspective, they underline the conceptualization of three modalities of homemaking by Brun and Fábos (2015) as an apt framework for the analysis of concrete spatial practices. From this angle, one can differentiate between "home" as a set of everyday practices, "Home" as a set of values, traditions, memories, etc. and "HOME" as an institutionalized set of norms and regulations (Steigemann and Misselwitz 632). Within this framework, the connection between "values, traditions, memories" of a lost Home(land) and "home" as homemaking practices gains visibility: Not only is the idea of

the Homeland and former Homes transfigured through the lens of diaspora, but also inherited ideas of Home and Homemaking as along with contemporary concepts of HOME influence homemaking practices in second-or-more-generation diasporic subjects (both in the imagined Homeland and the locale of living).

What can we learn from these sociological considerations when approaching diaspora fiction? To be sure, fiction is not a mere copy, a simple reflection of what subjects tend to call reality, on the contrary, fictional texts are pieces of art which create their own spatial codes and aesthetic conventions. With Lefebvre, we can consider the spatio-poietic text itself a space of representation repeating (with an artistic and medial twist) spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation. Accordingly, we must keep in mind the aesthetic and narratological devices which allow a text to produce specific fictional spaces in the act of reading and differentiate between analytic categories such as space of narration / narrated space, spatial perspectives, and the semantics of space. [7] Reading diaspora or migrant fiction allows us to observe the practices of remembering former Home(land)s and homemaking in the near-to-referential spaces represented and reflected upon in the texts. Moreover, writing and reading can be seen as alternative homemaking practices with the help of which the writing subject tries to negotiate the tensions between de- and reterritorializing forces and ultimately to find alternative spaces to be called home.

3. The Production of Home(s) and the "Poetics of Return" to Cuba

In *Days of Awe*, Havana, the capital of Cuba, excels both as a mythical city resembling the biblical Tower of Babel, as an intimate space of homing, and as a *pars pro toto* for Cuban space – be it remembered or experienced in presence. Positioning itself as a diaspora text, Obejas' novel produces home on two different geographical sites (Cuba / United States), on three spatial scales (national, the local, the intimate) and in various temporalities (the early 1960s, around 1987, around 1997, and the time of narration). More precisely, the homodiegetic protagonist's discourse presents Cuba, her city of birth Havana, and her family's house in Havana as well as the United States, her city of residence Chicago, and her family's house in Chicago as home.

The prologue of *Days of Awe*, a paratext framing the main text, puts its readership *in medias res*, directing its gaze and pre-conditioning its expectations concerning space and memory. In the prologue, the first-person narrator Alejandra portrays herself as a literal child of the Cuban revolution, born on January 1st, 1959, the day of Fidel's triumphal victory in Havana. [8] Ale, however, stages herself not only as a child of the revolution, but even more as an offspring of the city of Havana, where on this day the bells ring incessantly, prayers fill the public space, and people make floral offerings to Yemayá, a Santería goddess of fertility, on the Malecón. [9] Although Ale describes public scenes and the Maternidad de Línea hospital without mentioning any eyewitness account other than hers, it is obvious that the memories of her struggle for survival as an anemic newborn and of Havana's urban space cannot be her own. Rather, they are second-hand memories, memories inherited from her parents, which Ale is bound to reconstruct on her trips to Havana as an adult. [10] By creating this volatile discourse, the prologue pre-structures the readers' perspective, expectations, and thus their production of Cuba as a fictional space. Cuba is presented as a space shaped by revolution and religion. The prologue also exhibits the mediated, constructivist, and collective character of individual memories while emphasizing the parallelism of Ale's family history with Cuban history. In doing so, the prologue anticipates the confluence of memory, imagination, and *histoire* as a structural feature of the text as well its elaboration of space. Space, so the novel seems to claim, is produced through multiple layers of individual and collective memories as well as representations and imaginations of space.

In the following section, I will explore how home is produced in the novel as a negotiation between Ale's homemaking practices, a set of traded values, and memories, as well as institutionalized concepts and representations

of home. I am particularly interested in the complex entanglements between spatial productions, (post)memory, and imagination the text unravels in three key moments, each of them corresponding to an imagined or factual return to the Cuban homeland: the narrator's depiction of her adolescent self's wanderings through an imaginary and remembered Havana, her almost thirty-year-old self's first material return to Havana, and her almost forty-year-old self's second return to a Havana ravaged by the economic crisis of the *período especial* in the 1990s. Ale's subsequent realizations of the diasporic myth of return are structured by a literary "poetics of return" (López), describing the patterns of action of Cubans *de fuera* visiting the island for the first time as well as their typical reactions when comparing the 'mythical homeland' with the Cuba they encounter. Ultimately, the novel unravels Ale's confrontation with her family's remembered-imagined-actualized houses and home(s) and emphasizes her homing strategies as both the protagonist and the narrator of the novel.

4. Imaginary Walks through Havana: Making Space out of Memory and Imagination

Even though Ale leaves Cuba as a toddler, as a teenager she embarks on imaginary walks through Havana using an old city map that she has found in her parents' home in Chicago. [11] As her mature self, the narrator, explains, the 28-year-old Alejandra remembers this childhood habit on the occasion of her "first [real] return to the Land of Oz [she]'d conjured in [her] dreams", "where [she] should have emerged like Aphrodite from the foam" and which she describes as "the Zion where [she]'d be welcomed after all [her] endless, unplanned travels in the diaspora" (Obejas, Days of Awe 55). As a result, the narrator presents a doubly mediated memory entailing, in turn, a twofold temporal, spatial and cultural distance. The memory of her imaginary walks is initially triggered by Ale's first physical return to Cuba in 1987 and the question posed by the border guard, "¿Es tu primera vez en Cuba?", which Ale answers with a faint "sí" (52): "Standing in the airless airport in Havana […], I realized I hadn't been completely honest: It wasn't really my first trip to Cuba, but my first return to the Land of Oz I'd conjured in my dreams." (54) In the first place, those imaginary walks through Havana compensate for Ale's difficult process of linguistic and social assimilation to the United States: "my English still fractured, my soul yearning for a place of safety in the brutal playground of U.S. adolescence" (54). Accordingly, young Ale imagines Havana as "a secret hiding place" (55), a "refuge" (56), and ultimately, as an alternative home. The imaginary space of urban Havana serves as a magical emergency exit from Ale's immediate surroundings. By virtue of her imagination, the young Ale—as the mature Ale recalls— transforms Havana into an idealized and stereotypical social space in which her family does not stand out either culturally or physically, where they are 'at home':

> As a child – my English still fractured, my soul yearning for a place of safety in the brutal playground of U.S. adolescence – I imagined a Havana in which everyone moved with my mother's sensual grace, talked like my father, and looked like me: I'm olive-skinned, with almond-shaped eyes the same blue-gray as Ytzak's, chestnut-haired and slender but with hips. […] (54)

Ale's imaginary walks through an imaginary Cuban urban space can be viewed as a spatial practice of homemaking, insofar as she seeks to "bring […] some space under control" (Steigemann and Misselwitz 630) where she can "achieve a sense of dignity, safety, comfort" (631). In Ale's self-depiction, both Cuban and U.S. spaces—the imaginary hometown and the locale of residence—become charged with ethnic and sexualized attributions. While in Havana, according to a set of inherited values and stereotypical 'Cuban' gender roles that Ale has internalized, the women move through the space with their curvy bodies full of "sensual grace" and the population speaks a distinguished Spanish, Chicago appears to be cold and rough. [12] However, as soon as adolescent Ale overcomes her personal crisis triggered by the dissonance between her Cuban appearance and her Anglo-

Saxon surroundings, the "imaginary metropolis" (Obeja, *Days of Awe* 55) of Havana loses its function as a refuge or an alternative home and falls into oblivion. Instead, Ale engages in the typical social activities of her U.S. peer group: "off to drama club, or swimming practice, to a meeting at the school newspaper, to smoke pot, to rock concerts in the Loop, to rendezvous with long-haired boys or willowy blonde girls" (56). At this point, the discursive elaboration of imaginary Havana's fall into oblivion is striking. The narrator sketches the city of Chicago as a counterspace to Havana, comprising Ale's childhood home in Chicago, which resembles a domesticated miniature of Havana transplanted to the North. This domesticated miniature, this Havana home in Chicago, is both separated and accessible from the outside by a "screen door," which adolescent Ale is accustomed to "slamming [,,,] behind [her]" (56). This very screen door represents a metaphorical gateway to her *cubanidad*, it is transparent but impermeable, temporarily denying Ale access to her cultural heritage: "Havana faded and my Cuban self vanished, like clearwings in early morning mist." (56)

As a child, Ale dreams of a Havana that reflects the characteristics of her nuclear family (sensuality, *latinidad*, Spanish eloquence); as a teenager, she uses conceptual spatial representations of Havana—the "weathered" map of Havana, and some "old and new" photographs (55) —as tools for her *rêverie*. [13] Reminiscent to Rousseau's *promeneur solitaire*, her daydreams of walking through the urban landscape of her imagined hometown Havana have the purpose of offering her self-knowledge: "photographs old and new about a constant cadence, about doors too close together, about a strangely comforting and untidy intimacy" (Obejas, 55).

This dreamed Havana only exists in her imagination and, mediated by the narrator's text, on paper. From the perspective of Lefebvre's phenomenological model of space, the Havana of Ale's childhood daydreams is constructed primarily through the dimensions of representation of space (city map and photographs) and, to a lesser extent, departing from a diffuse lived space in which Ale's "faded [childhood] memories," second-hand memories, and imaginings triggered by the photographs of the historical center of the metropolis superpose one another. [14] Young Ale's production of Havana as an urban space is not nourished by any material practices *in situ*, since material Cuba is absent, inaccessible due to geopolitical tensions. Consequently, Ale's spatial production operates in the same way as the myth of return, associated with the experience of deterritorialization, for it visualizes and invents the absent social space of Havana—albeit in a highly altered fashion—based on spatial representations and the spatial imaginations emanating from these representations. Adolescent Ale's spatial imaginings possess a particular function for her reterritorialization, for making herself at home be it in Chicago or in an imagined place. On the one hand, the imagined metropolis of Havana transforms into a heterotopia, a counterspace to Chicago that makes the "brutal [U.S.] playground" (54) bearable which Ale, an ethnically marked adolescent, perceives as a repressive "dominated space" (Lefebvre 49). [15] Ale actualizes this heterotopia by virtue of her imagination, as she longs for radical individual freedom ("wild and free") from societal pressure to assimilate and from her parents' counterpressure to remain Cuban. This is reflected in the absence of both parents and of the spaces associated with them in her imaginary walks through Havana. [16] Ale's imaginary Havana is characterized by the sensual rhythm of the incessant "human parade," (Obejas, 55) by a "strangely comforting and untidy intimacy," (55) and by spatial confinement ("doors too close together," (55) that counterbalance the text's aseptic and bourgeois image of Chicago as a metropolis of the North. On the other hand, the image of the city that Ale produces is detached from the actual Cuba. Her knowledge of the city proves to be dysfunctional and fragmented as the adult narrator states:

> I could, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, talk knowledgeably about how Compostela and Habana streets ran the full length of the district. I could place their intersections with Luz and Sol and inject just the right irony when mentioning Porvenir – a tiny,

> block-long street whose name means "a hopeful future".
> I didn't know the landmarks, I couldn't say where something as grand and imposing as the cathedral was outside of its postal moorings; nor could I say what kind of landmark rested on any corner if it didn't bump up against the Malecón. But I could do the math in my head an declare exactly when Tejadillo became Trocadero (right after the intersection with Prado Boulevard, with all its decrepit luster) I could talk about how the Malecón stretched all the way from Old Havana past the glamorous Hotel Nacional, how it curved and hugged the city of my birth. (55)

Adolescent Ale's irrefutable mathematical precision ("the math in my head") regarding the geography of Havana contrasts with her linguistic, cultural, and personal destabilization in Chicago. Her Havana project also proves to be fragile and artificial, for ultimately her walks follow the principle of the map ("carte") giving a comprehensive overview rather than the immersive principle of the subjective tour ("parcours"). [17] In addition, the abstractness of Ale's calculated spatial practices implies affective distance. Her clinging to the map and to the knowledge inscribed in it has a compensatory quality, given that Ale seeks to substitute her lacking spatial and sensual practice of Havana with conceptual knowledge. Due to this fixation on the rigid conceptual dimension of Havana, adolescent Ale's spatial productions are in tension with her need for freedom. This tension is expressed in the "strangely comforting and untidy intimacy" (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 55) of Havana as a space, an imagined hometown, that she has (re)appropriated via imagination, and in her marked disengagement from the "brutal playground" of her U.S. adolescence.

How to grasp the relationship between the practice of imaginary walks, decoupled from physical-material space, and memory? The practice of imaginary walks is primarily based on the substitution of the missing dimension of spatial practices by spatial representations and on remembered, imagined spaces from a (post-) memory, i.e., multi-temporal, perspective. [18] The city map and the photographs – emblematic representations of a physically absent space – are transformed into a surface of projection for Ale where an alternative to everyday life in the United States emerges. As a result, adolescent Ale produces an idealized and escapist space —a mental heterotopia that heavily resorts to a rhetoric of deterritorialization resembling that of Israelite Zion. In analogy with Zion as the Promised Land of the Jews, the narrator posits Havana as her lost and promised land. [19] Young Ale's imagination comes to predominate over her memories, selecting some second-hand recollections and relegating others to oblivion. Ultimately, within the novel, the narrator's text fragments constitute a space of representation produced through multiply mediated memories and imaginations, revealing the complex structure of diaspora space. From a diaspora perspective, space is characterized by spatiotemporal absences and their compensation through memories or imagination. This is true for Ale as a child and adolescent, as a young adult, and as matured person, and finally as the narrator of the novel, each version of Ale drawing on a different technique of compensation and alternative homemaking. While in childhood the experience of absence proves to be extreme, and Havana as a space of refuge and the original home is intensely imagined and finally repressed, upon her first return to Cuba, Ale, now in her mid-twenties, is forced to confront her spatial imaginations and Cuba or Havana as a contemporary rapidly changing place.

5. The First Return. Finding the Parents' House

Ale's imaginary wanderings through Havana serve as a substitute for a geographically and politically inaccessible reality. They produce a space that is deformed in comparison to the past and the present. Following the same dynamics as the diasporic myth of return, they constitute an example of how deterritorialized Cubans produce space, Cuban diaspora space, from a geographical and temporal distance. When returning to Cuba as visitors, they are confronted with a material and contemporary Cuba that has not frozen in time as their oftentimes distorted and re-invented recollection might

have. Another, contemporary layer is added to their productions of Cuban space, due to their spatial practices in material Cuba, such as those of walking on familiar paths or visiting familiar places. These practices typical of returnees are strongly anchored in the dimension of material-perceived space and in the temporal dimensions of space. [20] Ultimately, walking along familiar paths and visiting familiar places unfold a mnemonic effect. While classic diaspora discourses foster the idea of an impossible return to the lost and therefore mythical homeland, the moment of first return to Cuba has become a typical element of Cuban diaspora literature, reflecting disillusion and potential conciliation with one's roots: Ale's account of her "first return" follows the lines of a more general "poetics of [first] return" (López 2) to Havana that López describes in *Impossible Returns*. The emotional charge of this first return is reflected in the Ale's repeatedly aborted attempts to narrate her first return to Havana. She resumes her account of her arrival four times, as if the fragmented memories were eluding her and recomposing themselves into ever new versions of the same event. [21] The text's fragmentation also serves a reflective and a didactic purpose aimed at a U.S. or international readership. Each fragment of memory situates Ale's account in a given historical, political, and cultural context. The first attempt opens with a description of the political and economic situation in Cuba in 1987: "[T]wo years before the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, and eventually, the vast wasteland of the Special Period and Zero Option, the economic disaster that came to the island after the fall of the Soviet Union." (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 50) The second focuses on the transit of the U.S. delegation Ale travels with from the airport to Havana, the challenging attitude of the island's population toward the "gusanos," i.e., worms, the exiles now transformed into rich butterflies, and on the dramatic performance of gender relations in Havana's public space (57–62, here 57). At the same time, through its use of metaphors and its isotopies of the dark, the dirty, and the devilish, the text anticipates the historical catastrophe that will strike the island with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, leading to dramatic food shortages in the 1990s. [22] Her third attempt takes the transnational practices of U.S. Cuban returnees as its point of departure, emphasizing Ale's otherness. [23] In contrast to her fellow U.S. Cuban travelers' collective hysteria upon reaching the promised land, Ale – probably to overcome budding melancholy – claims to feel inner emptiness and a sense of invulnerability as the plane lurches: "What could be more dramatic than returning to the place of your birth and feeling nothing, absolutely nothing, but the slightest shiver of an echo from a bottomless pit" (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 75)?

It is this ostensible indifference—"my being Cuban [...] an accident of timing and geography" (67) —that the mature narrator exposes as self-deception. Two specific recollections expose this: one memory is linguistic while the other pertains to the realm of diasporic spatial practices. First, Ale-narrator depicts how she violates her professional ethics in Cuba as a biased, manipulative interpreter by correctly rendering what is meant, but using her body language to show her loyalty to the United States. Thus, she pretends to be a mere linguistic mediator, a machine for "convert[ing] one language into another" (76), who, "invisible" (76), has no position of her own: "I had no opinion or judgment" (76). [24] Nevertheless, she takes a clear stand against Cuba and the Spanish speakers by means of the material aspect of communication: "I'd indicate this with my body, by leaning or standing closer to the American, by deferring or simply gazing at him or her more intimately than the Spanish speaker" (75). By manipulating this situation of communication, by refusing to act as a pure and invisible materialization of a linguistic sign, Ale violates her very principle of interpreting as an approximation of a 'pure language'—"reine Sprache" (Benjamin 142) — in a Benjaminian sense. By this manipulation, by this corporeal performance, Ale not only reveals the discrepancies in the process of understanding and the general deficiency of human language (in the sense of Benjamin and *différance*), but also highlights the existence of an extra-linguistic non-discursive materiality. [25] However, Ale's manipulations also generate inequalities in communication, exposing the embittered front lines between the Cuban population *dentro* and

fuera, and illustrating the danger inherent in the transmission of the foremost political conflict to subsequent generations.

On her last day in Cuba, Ale's ostensible neutrality and need to distance herself from Cuba tips, and again Ale turns to walking the city as practice of appropriating a space as her home. Against her conscious will, Ale follows a common spatial practice of exiles or migrants who temporarily return to Cuba: [26] She ventures out in search of her former childhood home and strolls through Havana's urban neighborhood of Vedado. Doing so, she launches the process of reappropriating her past, as she meets Moisés, her father's childhood friend who will help her to discover contemporary Cuban reality. This at first unconscious act is, indeed, possible thanks to the imaginary walks in her childhood, making her familiar with Havana's layout, with the conceptual dimension of the Cuban capital. However, she does not know which specific everyday practices and what type of experienced spaces accompany this purely conceptual level:

> Stepping out of the Habana Libre, I was instantly situated. The exercise of years ago, of trying to memorize the street map of Havana, had come in handy throughout my stay. I found myself anticipating streets and intersections. I knew the order of things, even if I didn't always know where I was going. (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 69)

During her walk, whose original destination is the "Sephardic Center" (69), the non-fictional "Centro Sefardí," to deliver a letter from her father to Moisés, she drifts off towards the modern and formerly prosperous neighborhood of Vedado. This act leads her "as if by magic" to the house where she had lived with her parents as a child. The palace of her memories and imagination turns out to be less tall and less majestic than recollected ("square and barren"), the front door—an anticipated image of decaying Havana in the 1990s—is off its hinges, moldy and rusted:

> At some point, as if by magic, I looked up and saw my old apartment building sitting ashen on a residential street in the Vedado. I had remembered it palatial, but here it was, only three stories high, square and barren. There were no Greek columns to hold up the balconies, though I could have sworn I'd run around them as a small child. The windows were boarded up, the terrace from which my father and I had watched the panic during the bombings was chipped and lifeless. The front gate to the building, now slightly unhinged, bore the green and red traces of mold and rust that would paint all of Havana just a few years later. (69–70)

As she takes pictures of the house for her mother from different angles, Ale recalls scenes from her childhood and tries to re-imagine the place as it was 26 years ago, comparing her mental representation of the neighborhood to how she encounters it now. Again, the mnemotechnic function of the spatial practice of walking becomes evident, evoking memories that Ale compares with the present situation, updating and partially falsifying them. Moreover, the text underlines the fragility and the volatility of these memories: "But I remembered them, I was sure of it. [...] Or were all of these memories like those of the Greek columns invented" (70)? It is precisely because of this volatility that older layers of memory and space are reactivated and updated, i.e., compared with the present space.

The house as the material shell for a home, a private space – especially the two houses of Ale's family in Havana and Chicago with their entrance doors – has a particular semantic function in Ale's discourse: As a microcosm of *cubanidad*, it reflects Ale's social as well as her personal identity. Just as the screen door of her Chicago home symbolizes her temporary disengagement with Cuba, the damaged front door to her childhood home in Havana serves as a metaphor for Ale's return to a hitherto repressed and forgotten Cuban space. For only moments after discovering her old Havana home, the 28-year-old Ale will cross the threshold of the house of family friend Moisés Menach, a convinced supporter of the Cuban Revolution and a devout Sephardic Jew. This step into the Menachs' house proves decisive for the rest of Ale's life as it marks Ale's entry into the Cuba of the island population. It is through this symbolic outer and inner border crossing that will she

gain insight into (but not be part of) everyday life in Havana instead of dwelling in (second-hand) memories and imaginations. [27] Ale's first return triggers a more conscious search for her origins and is the starting point of her inner 'cubanization', allegorized in her amorous relationship with the *habanero* Orlando. Like the plane of Ale's first return delving into the dark Cuban night of the sparsely lit island, when searching for her childhood home, Ale delves into in an opaque mixture of memory, "olvido" (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 103) as a limbo between active forgetting and involuntary remembrance, and absence of memory. [28] The Menachs' house, however, which Ale describes as a space of familial and social cohesion, becomes Ale's virtual and material point of anchorage in Cuba. Following the subjective gaze of 28-year-old Ale and Ale-narrator, the text opts for a perspectival description according to Stanzel and to de Certeau's principle of the *parcours*, guiding the readers through the entire house and presenting selected objects and family members, thereby orienting the readers' gaze and their production of fictional space. [29]

As the preceding observations have shown, the novel depicts how everyday places become media of memory, city maps or photographs complement linguistically mediated memories of a past Cuban space. The space imagined according to first- and second-hand memories is then, as the novel postulates, superimposed, compared, and corrected with present Cuban space upon return. In other words, by revisiting remembered places, one's own childhood memories or the memories of previous generations are activated, validated, or subjected to critical revision. Accordingly, the text, the narrator's discourse and the plot, construct Havana as a multi-temporal and multi-spatial "Cuban palimpsest" (Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests* 21). [30]

6. The Second Return. Retrieving Lost Material Space, or: Matter over Mind

Homemaking practices and the house both as a point of emotional attachment and a metaphor for both the global and the local also play an important role in Ale's account of her second trip to Cuba, when she stays at the Menachs' house. Their family home reflects the continuing geopolitical tensions between Cuba representing socialism and the United States representing capitalist imperialism, the subsequent economic crisis in Cuba, and the decomposition of Cuban society on all scales. In 1997, the Menachs' home is hopelessly overcrowded; a second ceiling, a "barbacoa," (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 254) has been added to increase the habitable space. The promiscuity Ale had imagined as a child has now become a bitter reality. It no longer carries positive connotations, but rather is to be contextualized as a typical social problem during the *período especial*. [31] During her second visit to Cuba, Ale continues her homeseeking and homemaking practices by visiting the houses of friends and relatives, such as the home of her cousin Barbarita in the "underbelly of Varadero," (240) the dazzling tourist city, as well as the modest home of her parents in the neighborhood of Centro Habana. [32] Doing so, she not only reactivates a network of kinship but also seeks to approach, to internalize Cuba from a broader scale. While the narrator describes the glossy capitalist Varadero as a heterotopia that does not really belong to Cuba, as a "hysterical and hallucinatory" "neo-futuristic Cuba" (240) that is part of another dimension of reality, she perceives its counterspace, the stinking and dilapidated Varadero of the island population, as a space of intellectual and human prosperity. [33] Again, the narrator insists on the motif of the door when describing Ale's visit to Barbarita, whose house has been partially destroyed by a hurricane. In her account of the visit, Ale-narrator heavily aesthesizes the ruins and downplays the poor condition of Barbarita's "large home" (242), an attitude that can be explained by the symbolic value Ale both as the narrator and the character who 'lives' this moment ascribes to this episode:

> When we arrive at Barbarita's we know it's her house because there is nothing else, only brambles and bush. It is a large home, long like a train; we see it disappear back into the wilderness. The last hurricane not only tore the roof but the walls, too, opening the front room completely to the skies and

> the elements. Amazingly, the front door is intact – its frame a hard mahogany, with roses carved into its face, a knocker, and a doorbell with tricolor wires like the Cuban flag that leak out and down, along the exposed and weathered blue-and-white living room tiles. The door and the frame hang as if suspended in the air. (242)

Despite the dilapidated walls and the missing roof, the front doors of the ruin are intact; Ale crosses their thresholds with awed hesitation, performing a symbolic act of entry into an additional realm of her family history and of life in Cuba, which she idealizes as "not so bad" in terms of a counterprogram to U.S. individualism (242–244). Again, the readers' gaze closely follows the perception of space and perspective as seen through the eyes of Ale and Orlando, who gradually explore the interior of the devastated house.

By actively delving into current Cuban spaces and Cuban spatial practices, Ale seeks to appropriate a Cuban past inaccessible to her, to undo her deterritorialization, and to 'reterritorialize' herself in Cuba by replacing her imagined Cuba by material experience. This project of homemaking must fail, however, because being brought up in the United States Ale has missed the opportunity of internalizing the spatial practices and social spaces in Cuba. As a result, this absence of material knowledge irrevocably exhibits Ale as *desde fuera*, as an outsider from the diaspora. Cuba as a space eludes Ale because of its historical depth, since Ale has not experienced Cuban living conditions in the 1990s by herself—promiscuity, confinement, endless queues, black markets—neither physically nor somatically. At best, she can approach them discursively, cut off from their materiality. In other words: Ale as a bodily subject is not shaped by this material experience, nor by its social practices; she must resign to imagining them through the distorting lens of nostalgia and diaspora. Hence, she is denied participation in the collective spatial production of 'Cuba' by the island population. This becomes evident in the arguments with her Cuban lover Orlando, who exhibits Ale's idealization of Havana and her romanticization of the economic crisis as projections of belonging that have nothing in common with the *Nada cotidiana* (1995) of everyday life on the island as described by Zoé Valdés: [34]

> "Don't romanticize this, Alejandra – you'd never live here," he says […]. "Not like us, not ever. If your parents hadn't taken you, you'd have left on your own. […] The problem […] is that you think you've missed something." "I did" I say. "I know I did". (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 244–245)

Far from being anecdotic, Orlando's personal critique also bears a metafictional dimension pointing at a more general critique of the romanticization, marketing, and consumption of an aesthetic of ruins and misery in Cuban films, works of art, and literature, which, by the way, Obejas follows in her third novel *Ruins* (2009). [35] One of the novel's fundamental insights fully crystallizes here: the materiality of a spatial experience triumphs over its discursive, or linguistic, appropriation, matter over mind.

7. Conclusion

Achy Obejas' *Days of Awe* proposes to its readership a polysemic Caribbean version of the Tower of Babel, portraying the Cuban revolution as a sort of hubris responsible for the dispersion of the Cuban 'people', for them speaking in different tongues, and ultimately for their sense of deterritorialization and homelessness. [36] Narrating the protagonist's quest for her own cultural identity and her efforts of reterritorialization in Cuba—of making herself at home in Havana albeit being brought up in Chicago—the novel reflects on the complex productions of home as a phenomenon of spatiotemporal entanglements—a "Cuban palimpsest" (Quiroga) —by second-generation immigrants. Through its narrative architecture as a set of non-chronological fragments and its plot, Obejas' novel both reveals and unravels how, for diasporic subjects, home is the result of a constant negotiation of different strands of homemaking practices; traditions, memories, and values of Home; and concepts of HOME (Steigemann and Misselwitz 632) that involve

different temporal levels and geographical sites.

For the diasporic narrator Ale and her younger narrated selves, home is situated on different geographical scales. Depending on context and time, she considers Cuba or the United States her homeland, this conceptual and political identification with a nation corresponding mostly to 'official' situations as a border-crossing or international professional contexts. The local scale of remembered-imagined or present urban landscapes, however, proves to be far more important for her productions of home that include a series of homemaking practices, especially imaginary or 'real' material walks through the city. Here, the text refers to common homing practices and second-generation "rites of return" (Hirsch and Miller): not only in the novel, but also in extra-fictional life, diaspora subjects frequently resort to specific practices of homemaking, relying on memory and imagination to compensate for the (geographical and temporal) absence of a lost homeland, and associating home with different affective regimes and cultures. In the context of the novel and in a certain (U.S.) Cuban literary tradition, Havana, experienced first in imagination and then in material space, plays a specific role, for it represents first an emotional emergency exit, a sheltering imaginary home, before turning into both a material reality and a challenge due to the permanent confrontation of hand-me-down memories and 'reality.' Ultimately, it is the intimate spaces represented by Ale's family's current and former houses which prove to represent the most important scales of home. Ale tries to recover these houses by visiting them *in situ* and by framing her account of return with childhood memories. As the example of the Chicago family home, as an idealized and slightly altered miniature version of Havana, or that of the family house in Havana show, the trope of the house represents a point of emotional attachment and a point of material attachment. It is a material vestige which may, however, act as an empty shell "transformed by the ravages of time" (Hirsch and Miller 3). To be sure, it is the actualization of the myth of an allegedly impossible return which brings a different dynamic to the diasporic tension between the "desire for a [remembered and imagined] homeland" and a "homing desire" in the locale of living. For at least in the Cuban case, this material return not only risks demystifying the imaginative homeland, but also renders tangible and negotiable glocal tensions between Cubans inside and outside Cuba.

Finally, if we think of the novel's space of narration in contrast to its narrated spaces, it is difficult to localize the narrator's geographical and cultural vantage point seesawing somewhere in suspension between the United States and Cuba, between de- and reterritorialization, between a sense of homelessness and the joy of homemaking on different sites. From this angle, the writing of the personal notes, recollections, and historical accounts as well as the assembling of those fragments into a text constitute themselves homemaking and spatio-poietic practices. "[B]ringing some space under control" (Steigemann and Misselwitz 630) and appropriating it, writing as homemaking puts a deterritorialized world into order and reterritorializes it, however torn and fragmented its representation may be. From a diaspora perspective, home turns out to be not one simple social space with a simple geography and unidimensional time, but a multi-spatial, multi-temporal phenomenon nourished by the practices of remembering and, for postmemory generations, of imagining and renegotiating.

Endnotes

[1] For "knot of memory", French: "nœud de mémoire," as a synonym for "multidirectional memories" see Rothberg, Sanyal and Silverman 2010.

[2] In this sense, *Days of Awe*, can be read as a "jewban novel", following the currents of sephardistic discourses in the late 1990s. See Kandiyoti 2012, 235, and Casteel 2016, esp. 6–7. See also Bettinger-López 2006, 113: "Jewban, a single word, dehyphenated the 'Cuban-Jewish' identity, thus loosening the community's explicit ties to both Cubans and Jews. 'Jewban' represented a separate, emancipated, and confident group identity that was historically linked to Cuba but rooted in Miami."

[3] On diaspora space see also Brah 1998.

[4] See Lefebvre 2000 [1974], 39–40, 46–57, 161–62.

[5] See Fanon (1961), 49-50: "Le monde colonial est un monde manichéiste." See also Kipfer 2007: 718.

[6] "In the language of diaspora, originary homelands are not simply there to be recovered: already multiply interconnected with other places, they are further

transformed by the ravages of time, transfigured through the lenses of loss and nostalgia, constructed in the process of the search. 'Root-seekers,' Alondra Nelson argues, 'also become root-makers'" (Hirsch and Miller 2011, 3).

[7] See Brüske 2018 on that.

[8] She defines this revolution by invoking the myth of Eve's fall from grace, as a primordial human ("*desire for something else*") as a striving for a "*greater world*": "*Revolutions, however, are as human as the instinct to breathe. […] Constant insurrection is in our system, in our programming, our cranial codes*" (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 1). In terms of content, Ale's birth and the genesis of revolutionary Cuba are thus conflated, while the novel's discourse prepares a semantic connection between the Fall and the Cuban Revolution, re-evoked in the discussion of the Tower of Babel (chapter X). See ibid. For Ale's self-presentation as a literal child of the revolution goes so far that she states the obstetrician emphatically had called her the "*first life of this new day*" (ibid.).

[9] This description already hints at the topic of confluence and competition between religions in pre-revolutionary Cuba, which is embodied in Alejandra as the child of a (Euro)Cuban devotee of Santería and Catholic, as well as a Jewish Cuban. The significance of religion, and particularly, the Jewish religion is anticipated by the life-saving blood transfusions Ale receives from her Jewish father. The topic of religion is framed by another paratext, the quotation from Martí's *La Edad de Oro* (1889) on the human resemblance of gods and religions that precedes the prologue and deconstructs faith and religion as human made.

[10] The account of the family's flight to Miami by boat in 1961 emphasizes the role Ale's father plays a keeper of memory and unravels how Ale-narrator's discourse superposes different recollections of that day. See 20–31.

[11] See ibid. In an interview with Jorjet Harper, Obejas mentions the fact that as a teenager she herself had memorized the street map of Havana: "In fact, I'd obsessed about Havana to the point that some years ago I'd even memorized the map of the city and all the bus routes. So when I got there I knew where I was going all the time. And in some ways I belonged right away, but I realized I didn't belong there attitudinally." (Harper 2, quoted by Wolfenzon 116)

[12] See, e.g., Obejas 154, 168.

[13] The concept of "reverie" (ibid.) alludes to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's archetype of the "promeneur solitaire," who wanders through rural landscapes and whose modern equivalent is Baudelaire's "flaneur" and his elaboration by Walter Benjamin in *Passagen-Werk* (1928-29, 1934–40). Whereas Rousseau's solitary hiker 'reads' nature in *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782) and, thereby, finds self-knowledge, Baudelaire's, and Benjamin's "flaneur" pose a critical gaze upon the urban landscapes of modernity. See Poppenberg 34–35.

[14] See Obejas 54–56.

[15] For Lefebvre a heterotopia is a differential space, excluded from spaces of everyday life and linked to magic, madness, but also to social inequality. See Lefebvre 189–190: "lieux de sorcellerie, de folie, de puissances démoniaques, lieux fascinants mais conjures;" "les périphéries, les bidonvilles, les espaces des jeux interdits, ceux de la guerrilla et des guerres." See also Foucault and Miskowiec 27.

[16] See Obejas 55: "Curiously, I never imagined my parents there, our apartment or the floral shop. I pictured only me, wild and free."

[17] See de Certeau 347–352.

[18] For a definition of "postmemory" see Hirsch: "Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present."

[19] The text alludes to the Israelite myth of the Promised Land as well as to a related literary tradition that includes the works of the "Hebrew poet from Al-Andalus" Yehuda Halevi, Ale's father's favorite poet. By the same token, the intertextual network also includes texts which are both geographically and culturally closer, such as Lyman Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). On Yehuda Halevi see: Sáenz-Badillos and Targarona Borrás (2003).

[20] On the interplay of space and time and the spatial conception of time as materialized in spatial layers see Lefebvre 57, 60, 104, 190–95.

[21] See Obejas 50, 57, 63, 74.

[22] Numerous allusions in the text refer to the future political and economic catastrophe of the *período especial* and reflect Ale's fear of santería ("discarded animal parts") and of the devil possibly haunting Havana ("breathing something like burning sulfur in the air" (see ibid.). These allusions serve the purpose of presenting Havana as a decaying city: "[…] there was a somber undercurrent in Havana even then, as if it knew what was coming […]", ibid.

[23] See ibid.

[24] See ibid.: "That I was invisible, that I had no opinion or judgement, that I was there simply to convert one language into another and that they should never address me as an individual but always focus their pronouncements on the other person. 'These are not my words,' I explained. 'I have no words of my own here.'"

[25] On the topic of linguistic deficiency and translation in the novel see Socolovsky 229–230, 232.

[26] The text mentions delivering mail, bringing in material goods illegally, and visiting one's former house as typical practices upon return. See Obejas 63–73.

[27] These fictional experiences coincide with the structured

dramaturgy of the return and memories of exiles to the island, as described, for example, by José Quiroga in *Cuban Palimpsests* (2005). See Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests* vii-xviii as well as Quiroga's (2011) essay "Bitter Daiquiris," in which he sketches out different experiences of returning to Havana. Quiroga emphasizes that a chronological narrative account cannot do justice to the actual experience of returning in its superimposing layers of recollections and impressions (see Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests* vii). Cuban architect Cecilia Bobes underlines how the exiled's visits to Havana have changed the idea of Havana as an urban space since the 1970s, redefining the borders between inside and outside. See Bobes 24.

[28] See Obejas 74. On the question of "olvido" see Socolovsky 234.

[29] See Stanzel 156.

[30] Quiroga uses the expression of "Cuban palimpsest" in the following sense: "Cuban Palimpsests is a book that migrates-from semiotics to history, from history to fiction, from the personal to the political, from the particular to the collective, from past to present, and from the archive to its dispersion. I think the only way to understand Cuba at this point is by migrating in this fashion, considering different aspects of a reality that is more than simply a palimpsest of past and present. Stated more clearly, and in a more imagistic fashion, I want to underscore the fact that Cuba has produced exiles, and migrants, but that Cuba itself is also migrating." Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsest* 21.

[31] See Obejas 55 compared to 310-311.

[32] See ibid.

[33] See ibid.

[34] See ibid. See Valdés 1995.

[35] For an analysis of the representation of the *período especial* and the aesthetics of filth: see Ebenhoch, or Exner 237-271.

[36] See Obejas 93.

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