

KING DAVID'S HARP



*Autobiographical Essays
by Jewish Latin American Writers*

Edited with an Introduction by
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JUBAN AMÉRICA

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Shortly before his death in Miami Beach in 1987, my maternal grandfather, Maximo Glinsky, stapled an old photograph to a small piece of cardboard. On the cardboard, by way of explanation, he wrote, "*Recuerdo de Linka de a donde yo nació en 1901, esto era nuestra casa y atras un jardin verde.*" His words were intended for his descendants, now living English-speaking lives in North America: "Souvenir of Linka, where I was born in 1901, this was our house with its garden in back." The picture, indeed, shows a house, or something rather more like a homestead. Three boys in knickers and hats, their faces dim and indistinct, cluster together just off-center; perhaps one of them was my grandfather. The ground is covered with snow.

As a good archivist and granddaughter, I have had this image carefully mounted on acid-free cardboard, put under glass and framed with simple, etched wood. Naturally, I removed the staples, which were beginning to rust. The picture now hangs in a quiet domestic space, above our used, \$150 mahogany piano, where I sit almost every night with my kindergarten-age son, Gabriel, begging him to practice his lessons. I had wanted terribly to learn piano as a child during the years after we arrived in the United States from Cuba, but my par-

ents told me they didn't have the space or the money; besides, they thought it wiser for me to learn to play a more portable instrument like the accordion or the guitar, an instrument you could take anywhere. I could not understand then how for my parents, who were in their late twenties when they decided to leave Cuba in 1961, all sense of permanence had been ruptured. Although they were themselves children of immigrants, they had never expected to have to leave Cuba, *nunca me ha ido*, I have never left. A piano in the drawing room—that, for me, is the epitome of a settled, bourgeois existence: the life of people whose citizenship documents are in order and who therefore have no reason to harbor an immigrant's fears, the life of people who don't expect a revolution to occur overnight and challenge their hold on the things of the world. And yet, what if, at a moment's notice, I had to leave? What would I take with me? I think of the picture above the piano, which traveled through two exiles, from Russia to Cuba and from Cuba to America. That picture, which by itself would have said very little, became, with the addition of my grandfather's words, an image of displacement, of deterritorialization.

The image-text harks back to a lost home in Byelorussia, the old country. That this home is undeniably lost is evident not only in my grandfather's use of the past tense, but in the fact that he tells the story of its loss in Spanish, which became the language of his reterritorialization in the New World. The brief, seemingly uncomplicated statement that my grandfather inscribed under the photograph of his birthplace, in which he locates himself as a minority speaker of Spanish, is redolent with politics and history. His Spanish embodies too many contradictions of territoriality and deterritorialization.¹

As any educated speaker of Spanish knows, my grandfather's text reflects a nonstandard use of the language. Following the Yiddish usage, he disregarded the difference between the first and third person, using the grammatically incorrect "yo nació" instead of the proper "yo nací." It seems eerie to me that he placed himself in the interface between

the first person and the third person, as if already imagining himself no longer here in the world of the living, no longer speaking as "I" but being spoken of, by someone else, as "he," already edging toward the third person of biography, of the narrator, of his own granddaughter's text.

Spanish was not my grandfather's "mother tongue." He was a stepson of the language, yet he claimed it as his own. He spoke Spanish to his children and grandchildren; the Yiddish that he spoke with my grandmother and others of their generation failed to get passed on, while English, learned in a second exile, never entered his veins. My relationship with my grandfather, a man of the Jewish European Old World, was lived entirely in Spanish. To be more exact, it was lived in a combination of Spanish and silence. My grandfather did not talk very much. He was suspicious of people who talked too much. He spoke telegraphically. His most memorable utterances were his jokes, tellable only in Spanish, a Spanish that showed a stepson's tenuous kinship to the language. His jokes were really questions, such as "¿Cómo ando?" to which he would answer, "Con los pies"; or "¿Cómo te sientes?" to which the reply was, "En la silla." These jokes—which were also the actual replies that he'd give when asked the Spanish equivalent of "How are you?"—encoded his refusal to say how he was "doing," his refusal to admit that he was "fine, thank you."

It is these refusals, so characteristic of how he spoke and didn't speak, that make me think my grandfather was acutely conscious that his was a colonized voice. The "sound" of a colonized voice, it seems to me, carries traces of the effort to resist speaking, to resist speaking "as usual." The locus of enunciation is challenged before any speaking can even occur. For the colonized speaker, language is never taken for granted; you cannot go into automatic drive. My grandfather's literal enunciations served as a continual brake on our becoming too comfortable in the language of our colonization, and yet, curiously, these enunciations were so thoroughly rooted in Spanish idiomatic

phrases as to be untranslatable. *Después de todo*, Spanish was my grandfather's language, in much the same convoluted way that it is mine now.

As a Russian, Yiddish-speaking immigrant, my grandfather learned Spanish in his early twenties after arriving in Cuba in 1924. He was one among thousands of Jews from Southern and Eastern Europe who were fleeing the legacy of pogroms and the difficult economic conditions that arose in the aftermath of World War I and the collapse of the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires, then the rise of nationalist ideologies increasingly threatened, and undermined, Jewish life. After the United States severely limited Eastern European emigration with its 1924 Immigration and Naturalization Act, a growing number of Jews were forced to imagine a future for themselves in the other America south of the border (Elkin; Elkin and Merks). Some Latin American countries, such as Argentina, seeking to whiten their population and find agricultural settlers to make their lands productive, had encouraged Jewish emigration since the turn of the century. But as conditions worsened in Europe, especially by the late 1930s, the U.S. government acted with supreme hypocrisy, pressuring Latin American countries to absorb the thousands of desperate Jewish emigrants who were being systematically prevented from entering the America north of the border.

Cuba, then a backyard colony of the United States, came under particularly strong pressure to take in Jews and, by 1938, had a Jewish population of about 16,500, most of whom settled in Havana, but with about 3,500 scattered among provincial cities and rural towns. In the years when Nazi power was being consolidated and Jews were attempting to flee Europe to any country that would have them, Cuba became the center of a lucrative traffic in visas, landing permits, and other immigration papers. Travel agents bought permits from Cuban officials and then resold them in Europe for three and four times the

amount they had paid. Most of these permits left their holders in limbo, allowing them only to land in Cuba and remain there until they had secured a visa to the United States. As the traffic in Jewish cargo intensified, some xenophobic American observers became concerned that too many Jews were illicitly entering the United States via Cuba. In a strictly confidential document on "European Refugees in Cuba" written in 1939, a consular official warned the authorities in Washington that "Cuba has long been a base from which aliens are smuggled into the United States." These "aliens," he explained, gained entrance into the country "by means of false visas, Cuban citizenship documents, passports, and birth certificates; by smuggling as stowaways on vessels, by smuggling in small boats hired for the purpose; and attempts have been made to smuggle by airplane" (qtd. in Levine 60).

Many Jewish emigrants had initially viewed Cuba as a way station, the route to the United States. After all, wasn't America only ninety miles away. Yet that America which was so omnipresent as a colonial power was, when it pleased, so conveniently distant. By the late 1930s, the goal of gaining entrance to the America across the border became less and less urgent for the many Jews who had made tropical lives for themselves, after awakening to the realization that Cuba was to be their America. Jewish Cuban intellectuals came to identify not only with José Martí's stance against racism, but with his dialectics of "Our America" versus "the America which is not ours," the America of the U.S. empire (Martí; Fernández Retamar; Saldívar). The Cuban Hebrew Cultural Society even sponsored a forum on Martí, as seen from a Jewish perspective (Matterin). When the outlook for Jews in Europe had grown dim, those who found a second home in Cuba, even if it was not quite the America of their expectations, had reason to be grateful. The Jews who stayed in Cuba became "Jewish Robinson Crusoes" (Elkin 88 [quoting Sander M. Kaplan]), stranded by a twist of fate on an island that many years later, from their sec-

ond exile in the United States after the Cuban Revolution, they would remember nostalgically as a paradise lost. In the words of the Jewish Cuban poet Sarah Luski:

*Will I again one day, dear Cuba
Or will I spend the rest of my life in exile
Longing for your sky, your beautiful beaches
Oh Cuba! My native land. (qtd. in Oberstein 4)*

As a result of the Cuban Revolution, those same Jewish “aliens” whom the consular official in 1939 had feared would smuggle themselves into the United States, concealing their “true” Jewishness behind the mask of a “false” Cuban identity, crossed the border into America after all. History repeated itself in an ironic way: the second time around, the Jews of Cuba gained entrance into America as Cubans, not as Jews. Fidel Castro called the Cubans who deserted the island, rather than work to build the revolutionary state, *gusanos*. The Cuban Jews in the United States were doubly “wormy”: not only had they abandoned the Revolution, as earlier, in the 1940s and 1950s, many had abandoned their Jewish-Communist ideals when they ceased being peddlers and became deproletarianized members of the Cuban middle class (Bejarano),² but they had also made their way into the U.S. body politic as Cuban refugees. Once in America, they would always have to explain that they were Cubans who also “happened” to be Jewish.

I need to interrupt this third-person historical interlude to speak, again, as “yo,” at least momentarily. Like my grandfather, I keep wanting to situate myself somewhere between the third-person plural and the first-person singular. Indeed, “yo nació” seems exactly right for getting at the peculiar confluence of identity that is implied in the idea of being Jewish-Cuban, or “Juban,” as they say in Miami. It has taken me a long time to reach an obvious conclusion: I am *cubana* because I am Jewish. I am *cubana* because my grandparents were un-

wanted cargo that could not be delivered to the United States. I am *cubana* because the border between “our America” and “the America which is not ours” is a real border guarded by guns and decorated with ink. If I am now welcome in the America which is not mine, it is because of my value as symbolic capital, as one of the human spoils of the victory of U.S. capitalism over impudent Cuban socialism. My parents taught me to be grateful that we ended up with the *yanquis* because in Cuba I’d be wearing clunky shoes and being told what to study. *Hay que dale, gracias a este país* (we have to thank this country) was the incantation I heard all the years I was growing up. So I can’t claim too much *cubanidad* for myself. My feet have worn out plenty of good leather, and I’ve studied what I’ve pleased. My documents are in order. I’m a legal alien, and I have an American passport that warns me, “Certain transactions involving travel to Cuba are prohibited.”

On the day I swore my allegiance to the United States, the woman who had examined me on my knowledge of American presidents while chain-smoking in a dingy office offered me a tempting proposition: I could change my name. It wouldn’t cost anything extra. No easier time to change your name than when you’re being “naturalized,” she told me. I was eleven at the time and felt as though this woman had bestowed immense power upon me. I didn’t even consult my parents; I immediately told her to erase that other name of mine, my middle name. I was a child who had been plopped into a New York public school without knowing a word of English, and there was nothing that filled my soul with as much fear as the thought of being ridiculed. I was terrified that one of my schoolmates would discover my middle name on some official slip of paper and make my life insufferable. That name was a deep, dark secret that the insecure immigrant child felt compelled to hide in feeble protection of her dignity. And so, whenever I’m asked my middle name, I always say I don’t have one. This name that I refused, I learned much later, was my grandfather’s mother’s name. She had been killed in her bed in Byelorussia by Nazi soldiers;

that was the story that reached my grandfather in Cuba years afterward. Her name was Fiegele, which means "little bird" in Yiddish, and in Cuba that name became Fanny, pronounced with a soft vowel sound. But for a chubby immigrant girl in America, that name was unredeemable. I'd become Fay-with-the-fat-fanny, forever and ever. It was already bad enough that I'd been made excessively conscious of that part of my body by *el grupo*, whose home movies of Castro's triumphal procession into Havana were punctuated with flashes of female backsides. On the edge of adolescence, I was only too glad to be able to strip myself of a name that would have made me even more distressingly aware of my budding sexuality. There seemed no way to liberate the name Fanny from its embarrassing American translation and fly with it—so I clipped my wings. In Mexico there are those candy skulls on sale for the Day of the Dead, with names like Vicente, Alfredo, Antonia, Catalina, and Esperanza taped onto their foreheads. When I have the blues, I start to imagine myself as a skull with the name Fanny engraved on my forehead.

The question of my name was on my mind because I was preparing to visit Cuba in 1991, and in order to be able to make that trip I had to acquire a Cuban passport listing my full name as it appears on my Cuban birth certificate. According to Cuban law, you cannot stop being Cuban. Even if you have been "naturalized" by another nation, you must obtain a Cuban passport to return to Cuba, at a cost of about \$300. I suppose that the purpose of this law is to keep track of the flow of *gusanos* returning to the country while drawing some revenue from them. But I don't feel at all cynical about my Cuban passport; I want to pay my dues for having been spared the clunky shoes and having been allowed to study for a career of dubious social value. So I now have a valid Cuban passport, in which I have recovered both a lost middle name and a lost surname. In Cuba I will be Ruth Fanny Behar Glinsky, I will regain the names that link me back to my ma-

ternal grandfather. I was named Ruth because my great-grandfather, Abraham Levin, my grandmother's father, who did make it to Cuba with my great-grandmother, was reading the Book of Ruth when I was born. I am not surprised that my mother, who was only twenty when she had me, agreed to name her baby girl to satisfy the literary whims of her maternal grandfather. My great-grandfather, the only truly practicing Jew on my mother's side of the family, was highly respected both for his knowledge of the Torah and for his unwillingness to force his religious views on others. The Levin family became a clan in Cuba. After my grandmother married my grandfather in 1929, they worked, together with my great-grandfather, to bring my great-grandmother and the remaining six children from Poland. Reunited in Cuba, the extended household settled in the small town of Agramonte, in the sugar province of Matanzas, where they ran a general store that sold everything from pins to mattresses. For many years, until another family arrived, they were the only Jewish family in Agramonte, and my aunt Silvia remembers, as a child, that the curtains would be drawn on Passover. But if they were Jews in the wilderness, known to local people as *los polacos*, they were not unhappy. In Agramonte, my grandfather belonged to the Lion's Club and grew roses and *guayabas* in the backyard, while my aunt Silvia and my mother played with the mayor's children. On many a quiet day, my grandmother would dress up and take her two young daughters to the station to watch, along with everyone else, as the train from Havana made its daily stop in Agramonte.

Eventually, my great-aunts and great-uncles moved out of Agramonte as they married, and left for more urbane destinies in Matanzas and Havana. For years my grandparents lingered in Agramonte. Only after my grandfather won the lottery in 1946 did they move to Havana, where they opened up a lace shop called Casa Máximo in the old part of the city. This little store on Calle Aguacate, which

still had its original sign with my grandfather's name when I visited Cuba in 1979, never brought in enough money for my grandparents to become more than insecurely middle class.

It was in Havana that my mother met my father. Their relationship was a cross-cultural encounter, for my father was a *turco* who came from a traditional Turkish Sephardic background, in which Ladino, the old Spanish of the expelled Jews, was still spoken at home. He had grown up street-smart near the docks of Havana, and, though a first-generation Cuban like my mother, his black hair and *habanero* style allowed him to pass more easily as a Cuban. His father was a peddler who worked only half the day and spent the afternoons playing dominoes with his buddies. If my mother's family were doing only moderately well, my father's family were barely making it. Some time in the late 1930s, when my father's family had gone hungry for several days, my grandfather brought home an excellent cut of beef. It had been given to him by one of his clients, and he presented it with enormous satisfaction to my grandmother. She refused to accept it because it wasn't kosher meat. My grandfather insisted she take it, saying it was a gift and that they were too hungry to be choosy. My grandmother kept refusing. My grandfather kept insisting. Finally, my grandmother took the meat from him. Holding it in her determined hands, she lifted the package high above her head and flung it out the window. The argument that ensued must have been momentous because the story about the beef that ended up in the street has never been forgotten in my father's family.

My father has often claimed that it was my mother who taught him to eat the prohibited foods that his mother had so vehemently kept out of her house. Not that my mother allowed unkosher meat in her house, either. At home she translated recipes from her Cuban cookbook, *Cocina Criolla*, itself a creole culinary mix, making kosher *tamales* and kosher *caldo gallego* by substituting chicken and Hebrew National beef fry for the pork that was supposed to be in these dishes.

But in the street, *en la calle*, it was different; there, Leviticus gave you license to taste more of the world. Keeping kosher stops at your doorstep. That has been our primary dietary rule, our culinary semiotics, our way of forging a Cuban identity we could lie in.

When we were recently at El Rincón Criollo, a Cuban restaurant in New York where my parents eat almost every weekend, my father adamantly refused to let me bring home what was left of my *pollo a la plancha*. "But it's just chicken," I protested. "I don't want it in my house, *y se acabó*, okay?" replied my father. "Case closed," as he likes to say. And yet he and my mother, like their friends in *el grupo*, will rush over to El Rincón for *frijoles* (black beans) and *bistec de palomilla* (fried steak) the day after the fast of Yom Kippur. I hope my mother will forgive me for remembering forever that late night summer outing in Puerto Rico when her front tooth, which I had no idea was false, fell out as she swooned *qué rico está este sandwich*, this sandwich is fabulous! while biting into the sweetly pickled ham-and-cheese Cuban special that bears the nostalgic name of *una media noche* (midnight).

In Cuba my mother would have remained a *polaca*, and my father a *turco*; at the very least, they would always have been the children of *polacos* and *turcos*. It is in the United States that they have settled into their Cubanness. In this America that is not theirs, they are viewed as Latinos, quirky Latinos, to be sure, but Latinos nonetheless.

My mother says to me, "With my accent, all I have to do is open my mouth and people ask me, 'Where are you from?' When they want to be nice, they say, 'Where are you from originally?'" She works in an overcrowded basement of New York University, checking that people's names are spelled correctly on their diplomas. In her office she's now the only Latina, and she finds herself having to straddle between her white American and black American female co-workers. She's neither white nor black in that context, but certainly a little more black than white. It doesn't help her much that she's white and Jewish because a white Jewish woman in America doesn't usually speak

the kind of “broken English” that Latinas and Latinos speak. Her accent and her ongoing struggle with the English language are an ever-present reminder that she is an immigrant in an America that is not hers, that she is “originally from “elsewhere.” She realizes she’s being “othered” all the time, and she notices how the black women in the office get the same treatment. And so, as she tells me, “I’m with them, with the women of color.” And I say to her, “Ma, don’t you see? Here you are a woman of color too.”

I was speaking to my mother from my own experience. I was denied a position at my university as a “minority” because it was decided that, given my Jewish heritage, I was not a racially pure Latina. And yet even this impure Latina gets counted as a “minority” or as a woman of color when the statistics are looking bad for affirmative action hirings. So I’ve decided that if I’m going to be counted as a “minority,” if I’m going to be on the margin, if I’m going to be a woman of color, I’m going to claim that space and speak from it, but in the interests of a politics that challenges the language of cultural authenticity and racial purity. I’m going to be a Latina, *no a las buenas, pero a las malas*, the hard way, because that’s the identity that, exactly inverse to my mother, they’re always trying to take away from me, because “I’m white like you, English-speaking like you, right-thinking like you, middle-class living like you, no matter what I say” (Morales 148).

My father gets Latinized not just because of his accent but because of his García Márquez eyebrows and moustache that come from his Sephardic origins. And he responds with *rumbero* humor, purposely mispronouncing words in English while parading about in a U.S.A. baseball cap and T-shirt. But some of his responses are also tinged with bitterness and an internalized racism that chills me. This past summer, as we cleared up our poolside snacks at an undistinguished Holiday Inn on the northern outskirts of Philadelphia, he said, “Don’t leave a mess, okay? *Porque si no van a decir, que somos puertorriqueños.*” “So they won’t say we’re Puerto Rican.” My father has often been

mistaken for Puerto Rican and this bothers him. Being Puerto Rican represents, to him, not making it in America, staying poor, not being a reasonable, white, middle-class, right-thinking person just like you. Yet it is as a Latino that my father earns his living. As the Latin American sales representative of a textile firm in New York City, it is his job to sell closeouts and other fabric that no one wants to buy on this side of the border to clients in Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico. And, indeed, he is remarkably successful at selling what the gringos could never sell, for he’s an expert border crosser. But when his humor becomes self-deprecating, he says he’s a junk salesman, a peddler of *basura*, of *shmates*. He’s the Latino smuggled into a company where all the bosses are third-generation American Ashkenazi Jews, who drive Jaguars. They’re nice enough to my father, but he knows he’s not one of the boys. So he takes their smugness with a grain of salt. Each boss, for example, has gotten a nickname. Mr. Sachs, pronounced “socks” with a Latino accent, is La Media. When things get rough at the office, my father phones my mother at NYU and says, “*Está La Media hoy que apesta*” (The Sock sure stinks today).

Lately it is Mr. Wolf, El Lobo, who is being difficult. And I am to blame. “*El Lobo está que aulla*” (The Wolf is about to start howling), my father tells me, as I hold a three-way conversation with him and my mother on the phone from Michigan. And my mother adds, “*Le vira la cara a tu padre. Se lo quiere comer—crudo*” (He refuses to look your father in the face. He wants to eat him—raw). El Lobo is angry, you see, because he asked my father to ask me to write a letter of recommendation for his daughter to help her get into the University of Michigan. El Lobo himself describes his daughter as indistinguishable from all the other girls at her suburban Long Island high school, telling my father that she needs a little extra something to get her into a place like Michigan. A letter from a professor at Michigan is just the mark of distinction she needs; surely I will understand. My father dutifully calls me and relays the order from El Lobo. I try to ex-

plain that I have no special power to get El Lobo's daughter accepted by the university. I try to explain that the university is not totally like the business world yet, and that merit still counts for something. I try to explain that it's not a good idea to fake it. And then I flatly say that I will not do it. I will not write a letter on behalf of a young woman on Long Island whom I have never met in my life. I don't care if she is the daughter of a werewolf who drives a Jaguar. My father starts to get upset, but my mother, who has been hovering around waiting to hear my response, gets on the phone and says, "*Te lo dije. Yo sabía que Ruty no lo iba a hacer*" (I told you, I knew, Ruty wouldn't do it).

So El Lobo is getting ready to howl. But, fortunately, it's still La Manzana, Mr. Applebaum, who signs the paychecks. And La Manzana adores my father. As my mother tells me so I won't feel too guilty, "*Me llama tu padre y me dice, 'La Manzana me tiene loco hoy dándome besos'*" (Your father calls and says to me, "The Apple is driving me crazy today kissing me so much").

To join together Latin American and Jewish, terms that are not "normally" joined together, creates a shock effect; as Saúl Sosnowski puts it, one encounters "astonished gazes and conflicting images of the accepted and simple clichés for both" (299). And, as Kenneth Kemble, an Argentine painter, once noted, "They say of Linnaeus that when he found an insect which resisted classification, he would crush it immediately" (qtd. in Noe 146). A Jew is not expected to have Spanish as a mother tongue, or to be from Latin America. But in the Cuban-Jewish milieu that I have known firsthand, these uncommon expectations exist in a common reality, a Cuban-Jewish sense of identity, of being-in-the-world. It is essential, Sosnowski feels, to "protect the hyphen" in the Latin American-Jewish sense of identity. The hyphen highlights the unease produced by the importation, even smuggling, of the Jew into the monolithic territory of Latin America. It also signals "the inability of language to produce a composite word

and of beings to give birth to a gay, melted self" (Sosnowski 307). And yet, in the Cuban-Jewish case, there's a composite word, "Juban," that gets at a sense of *mestizaje* rooted in a creative amalgam that is different from assimilation. Such an amalgam is possible because of the criollism at the center of Cuban culture.

In Latin America, where the traces of the great Nahua and Inca civilizations are in permanent tension with the struggles for survival of post-Conquest indigenous people, the "other" as well as the "native" has always been the Indian. Cuba, like the other islands of the Caribbean, has only a vague "prehistoric" connection to the indigenous substratum because its smaller native populations were quickly destroyed by the Spanish conquest, leaving hardly any traces. Positioned at the entrance to the New World much more prominently than the other Caribbean islands, Cuba became a unique crossroads, bustling with the movement of people and goods, but also vulnerable over the centuries to "invasion, depredations, and harassment," which have not yet stopped (Pérez 12). Cuban culture was shaped by the exogenous, the foreign. The absence of "aboriginality," as Gustavo Pérez-Firmat has pointed out so insightfully, has given to Cuban culture an "originality" that "subsists in and through translation" (4-12). Like an *ajiaco*, a hearty stew of heterogeneous ingredients, Cuban culture has been concocted from diverse migrant displacements and resettlements.

At the beginning of *The Cuban Condition*, Pérez-Firmat gives an example, which touches directly upon the theme of this essay, of what he calls the Cuban "translation sensibility." His example is a Cuban-Jewish wedding that took place in Miami, where the Cuban singer Willie Chirino performed a version of the Jewish song "Hava-Nagilah" in *guaguacó* rhythm, creating a "Havana-gilah" to which people danced "a *horah* with *salsa* steps." For Pérez-Firmat, there was something peculiarly Cuban in that irreverent, creole translation of this Hebrew

son" (1). And I agree with him. But there was also, I would add, something peculiarly Juban in that irreverent, creole acceptance of Willie Chirino's "Havana-gilah" as something to which you could dance a *horah con salsa*. If only a Cuban could have done the kind of translation that Chirino did, only a Juban would have had the bicultural fluency to make sense of that creole language—and invent a way to dance to it. Jubans have outdone the *ajiacó* sense of identity. They don't just have a translation sensibility; they are themselves translated people.

Sometime after I began writing this piece, I came across Salman Rushdie's essay "Imaginary Homelands," which also begins with an account of an old family photograph. Rushdie's photograph is of the house where he was born in Bombay, which he visited again after living in London for most of his life. Seeing the red roof tiles, the cactuses, and the bougainvillea creepers made him vividly aware of the home and the homeland he had lost. (Yet none of these things is "native" to Bombay: the red tiles come from Portugal, the cactuses and bougainvillea from Mexico.) Writers who are exiles, emigrants, and expatriates are haunted by the desire to "reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt," notes Rushdie. Yet the real distance from the places left behind "almost inevitably means," Rushdie is careful to add, "that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands" (9–10).

This essay has been a first effort on my part to begin to imagine Juba, a Juba that I want to build, salt pillar by salt pillar, from both family stories and my own struggle to reclaim all the little forgotten villages of my mestiza identity. Villages, *pueblos*, mean a good deal to me. I went into anthropology because I thought that a discipline rooted in the foreignness of other worlds would help me to solve the puzzle of my identity. Instead, I ended up spending years of my life in

two forgotten villages, one in northern Spain and one in northern Mexico. The village in Spain, called Santa María del Monte after the Holy Mother, lived up to its name, and everyone went to church, without fail, for Sunday Mass. In Santa María I learned to say the rosary and recite the Apostles' Creed, to get down on my knees at the appropriate parts of the service, and to cross myself. Yet I never forgot that I was a Jew. In the village in Mexico, just 500 miles from the U.S.-Mexican border, everyone needed something from *el otro lado*, "the other side." Could we bring back a tape recorder, a television, basketball sneakers, a stethoscope? Could we line up some work, any sort of work, over there? I wasn't allowed to forget that I was in Mexico as a gringa with gringa privileges and gringa money. But neither could I forget that I had wormed my way into Gringolandia as a *cubana*. When I refused a *compadre's* request that I claim him as my next of kin to help him get across the border, he said to me in a pained voice, "But didn't you tell me that you and your family aren't from there, that you also had to fight to get in?" I was prohibited from forgetting that to become a gringa I would have to be legally alienated by the United States.

In addition to these villages, whose dust I have eaten, there is, of course, my grandfather's Linka, the village where he was born, a village that is beyond tasting, beyond remembering. And then there is Agramonte, where I imagine no one any longer remembers *los polacos viejos* that had the general store, but where my grandfather's *guayabas* are still fragrant nonetheless and people continue to wait for the train from Havana that comes through once a day. Then there are the cities—Havana, New York, Miami Beach, Ann Arbor. In my Juba, there is room for all these villages and cities, and many other places for which I do not yet have names. In Juba there are no aliens. Only people like Lot's wife, who just won't listen.

POSTSCRIPT

I had the Cuban passport, but as 1991 drew to a close I wasn't sure I would make it to Cuba. In the weeks before my trip I became ill with what appeared to be a mysterious flu. I was beside myself with exhaustion and yet I couldn't sleep. I became jittery, my heart raced constantly, I was dizzy and could barely eat. I cried, I was overcome with fear. My entire life had curled up into a ball that stuck in my throat. Classic anxiety symptoms, I later learned. All I wanted to do was retire to my bed and forget everything. Why was I so concerned about going to Cuba, anyway? Me, this inauthentic Jubana who had been unhinged from Cuba at the age of five, what did I think I would find?

Sure, it didn't help much that I would be leaving Gabriel behind with my parents in New York. They had told me that in case I didn't come back I should leave them all the *papeles* (papers). My mother said, "*Me dejas todo lo del niño, Ruty, por si acaso Fidel Castro no te deja salir*" (Leave me everything pertaining to your child, Ruty, in case Fidel Castro doesn't let you leave). Castro himself, she felt certain, had a vested interest in my not returning to the United States. And my father: "*Ruty, no hables nada nada de política con nadie. Ni una palabra.*" Don't talk politics—yes, I had grown up hearing that, had learned early on that talking politics led to arguments, to veins throbbing in the neck, and finally to those two words, "case closed," and silence. I tried to let this paranoia wash over me, but scenarios kept unfolding in my imagination of dear Gabriel being raised by my parents, watching cartoons on television all day, being served breakfast, lunch, and dinner in bed, surrounded by a complete set of Ninja Turtles and Swamp Things. Me, his mother, I'd be stuck in Cuba, maybe in jail for talking about politics, or maybe in an insane asylum for doing something crazy like screaming in the street, saying the unsayable. And his father, the *griguito* from Texas, he'd be running

around Cuba, wondering how to save me—that is, if he didn't just get on a plane and leave me there alone, turned into a pillar of salt for daring to look back.

My body turned into a boulder that I dragged all the way to Miami. And then the next day, when we were supposed to leave for Cuba, I learned that my visa had not arrived. I felt a touch of disappointment, wondering whether the Cubans had somehow looked into their crystal ball and learned I was too neurotic to deserve to be let in. But mostly I felt great relief, I thought to myself, oh, well, it wasn't my *destino* to go to Cuba, after all. Now I could relax, take a vacation. Yet we kept our suitcases by the door. Just in case. And four days later, just after we had given up hope and unpacked our bags, word arrived from Cuba that the visa was ready and I could leave the next morning. I had been warned to adopt a Zen attitude if I wanted to work in Cuba, and I now understood why. Arriving at the airport at the crack of dawn, there was already *la cola* of people waiting to check in for the daily flight to Havana. There was a man with sad eyes who said in a sad voice that he was going to visit his dying mother whom he hadn't seen in years; there was a woman carrying an oversized shopping bag stuffed with a frilly pink parasol and matching lace basket who was begging the clerk to let her take it on board; there was a man wearing three hats on his head; there was a woman stuffing beans and sausages under her clothes because, this time, she was going to get these things through Cuban Customs; and some people were carrying portable pharmacies, stocked with enough aspirin for several lifetimes of headaches. In the midst of this mixture of tenderness and zaniness, I lost all fear of crossing the border into Cuba. Waiting in the airport to board the plane, I knew I was already inside the belly of the beast when I found myself forced to listen four times, twice in English and twice in Spanish, to a U.S. government statement reminding us of the trade embargo against Cuba and restrictions on the number of dollars that could be given to the enemy.

Entering Cuba with dollars in my purse, I immediately forget the rules of the embargo and rent a spanking new car, red as blood. And in that car I go to Agramonte—a village of one long street, just the way my Aunt Silvia described it, And I learn that they still call the store on one corner *la casa de los polacos nuevos* and the store on the other corner *la casa de los polacos viejos*. You see, there were two Jewish families in Agramonte; but my family got there first, so they became “los polacos viejos,” while the others were merely “nuevos.”

“Does anybody remember *los polacos viejos*?” I ask, and as we stand outside the mint green store entrance, a little circle forms around us, and older men begin to utter the names of my great-grandparents, my grandparents, my great-aunts and great-uncles: Abraham, Hannah, Esther, Máximo, Jaime, Dora, Irene . . . Just hearing the names coming from the lips of these men, I feel my lifeline extending, the ball in my throat uncurling. They pose for a photo, and a woman who’s been standing nearby yells to one of the men to roll down his pant legs, which are folded to the knee, and then she looks at me and says, “*Viniste a retratar los viejos más feos del pueblo!*” (You came to photograph the ugliest old men in town!). A man who says that he’s known as El Chiquito tells me to give his regards to my great-uncle Jaime and to ask if he doesn’t remember all the devilish things they did together. Doctor Pablito, the town doctor, who is now ninety, tells me that my great-aunt Dora fell in love with his brother, the lawyer, but the family quickly whisked her away to Havana, fearing she’d marry a gentile. Dora is dead, I tell him; and my brother too, he replies.

I forget to ask about the *guayabas* and the train from Havana, but expecting to return soon, I don’t worry about it. Having said my last good-bye for now, I am heading toward the car when a young man wearing a baker’s hat calls to me. At first I think he’s asking me for something, maybe to change dollars like the *jineteros* who now trail after tourists in the hotel zones of Havana, but no, I have gotten my guard up too quickly, It turns out that he simply wants to know if I’d

like some *dulces*. There’s nothing I desire more at that moment than a sweet ending to my story, so I say yes and he brings out, on a sheet of brown paper, several chunks of glittering rum cake. The drops of sugary rum meander down my chin and linger and onto the camera hanging from my neck that will die two days later while I am trying to photograph the tomb of a cousin in Havana’s Jewish cemetery. With the taste of that rum cake in my mouth, I begin to know why my family made Cuba their promised land. I begin to know, too, that I must keep reconnecting with the Cuba that my family refused, the Cuba they are afraid of and that I believed I also should fear, the Cuba that dawdled on my visa and almost didn’t let me in, but also the Cuba of the young baker in Agramonte who offered me rum cake because I *happened* to be walking by. To imagine it all is not enough. This Jubana will have to taste the salt of memory and of loss, but she will also have to make a *rinconcito*, a small place, for herself in the Cuba of the present.

NOTES

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1. His Spanish seems to be dressed in “a Harlequin costume in which very different functions of language and distinct centers of power are played out, blurring what can be said and what can’t be said” (Deleuze and Guattari 26). For a feminist rereading of Deleuze and Guattari that has informed my interpretation, see Caren Kaplan (1990).

2. Some Jews did remain members of the Communist party and later participated in the Cuban Revolution, staying on in Cuba even after the mass exodus of the Jewish community. There are now about 1,000 Jews left on the island. Most have intermarried, and those with high-ranking positions tend not to identify themselves as Jewish. During my visit to Cuba in 1991, I was told that there are currently only fourteen families in which both the husband and wife are of Jewish origin.

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