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Source: *American Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2/3, Globalization, Transnationalism, and The End of the American Century (Summer/Fall, 2000), pp. 287-302

Published by: Mid-America American Studies Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40643240>

Accessed: 24-07-2016 15:56 UTC

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Honeymoon Nightgowns That A Black Woman Saved for a White Woman: A Perilous Journey into the Cuban Historical Imagination

Ruth Behar

Throughout the past decade I traveled incessantly to Cuba, the place of my birth and earliest childhood. As I now reflect back on this process, it seems that I needed to say goodbye to the century by returning over and over to the country I left before I knew what it meant to leave any place. At the age of four and a half, I was too young to realize we were leaving forever when my family and I left Cuba in 1961. I was a child, and so I never properly said farewell. Returning, and returning, and returning to Cuba during the 1990s allowed me to keep going back in order to say goodbye, but to say goodbye consciously, to say goodbye as an adult. I have lost count of the number of visits I made, but I believe I have now gone close to thirty times, back and forth from Ann Arbor to Havana, on brief, intense, lightening-flash trips of a few weeks duration. And nearly always I stop in Miami between my departure and return in order to see my ever frailer, but still lucid, Yiddish grandmother, whose own migration to Cuba from Poland in the 1920s was pivotal in saving her immediate family from extinction in Europe and making my own existence possible. The stopover at my grandmother's in each direction serves to remind me that my unbidden farewell to Cuba was preceded by my grandmother's thankful farewell to Poland and its legacy of anti-Jewish hatred. And since my grandmother never fails to ask why it is that I keep going back to Cuba, and begs me, each time, to promise her that this will be the last time I'll go back, my visit with her also serves to remind me that the Cuba to which I

return once had fifteen thousand Jewish citizens and now only has a thousand, and so that there is an absence, a Jewish absence, that I am marking and, oddly, at the same time repairing, by my efforts to insert myself into the island I can't remember leaving.

With every trip, I have re-enacted the primordial scene of my early flight from the island. Always, I am accompanied to the José Martí International Airport by Caridad Martínez, known by everyone as Caro, who is the Afro-Cuban woman who was my caretaker as a child. She came to the airport with us to say goodbye when we left and she insists on being with me now, as well, every time I leave Cuba to return to my work and my other life in the United States. During the course of so many trips to Cuba, I have established a relationship of trust and intimacy with Caro and her family. We have agreed to claim each other as kin. I am Caro's anchor to the past before the revolution and to her own younger self as an unmarried and childless domestic worker. In turn, Caro is my anchor in Cuba, and the keeper of my childhood that was left unfinished there. She is the reason I return. She embodies and preserves the story of my past life in Cuba, which I cannot consciously remember. Together with me, she is crafting the story of our shared present, in which we are forging a connection that cannot help but acknowledge the history of our race and class differences, while we try at the same time to move into the future in a way that defies the cliché that brought us together in the first place. There is no question that we enact a sublime illusion, for even as we seek an emancipatory twist to this re-encounter of black nanny and white girl-woman, we recognize that it is always I who am coming and going, and it is always Caro who stays behind. It is to Caro that I say goodbye when I say goodbye to Cuba.

Returning to Cuba in search of Caro, in search of my childhood, in search of something ineffable, has had a profound impact on my life and work. For me, returning to Cuba and returning to poetry have been synonymous with one another (Or in Spanish: *volver a Cuba y volver a la poesía, en mi caso, fueron la misma cosa*). I mean poetry here in a very broad sense: I did, literally, after fifteen years of restricting myself to academic prose, start writing poems again when I went back to Cuba, but I returned to poetry in a deeper way, by returning to the argument of images, to the poetry of the imagination, its invocations and evocations. After returning to Cuba I wasn't able to do anthropology as I'd done it before. I wasn't sure I *could* do anthropology at all; or that I *wanted* to do anthropology at all. I needed another voice—and it took me years to know what that voice was, and even once I knew what that voice was, I wasn't sure I could dare to speak with and through that voice.

Cuba is the place that imagined a paradise in the future and enacted a revolution to try to make that future come faster. Yet Cuba, which has been compared to Pompeii, is also the place where old things, fragments and ruins of an exhausted past, are kept, and indeed, frozen in time. The palpability of things is so strong in Cuba. Even things that are not technically old, like the *libreta*, the

rationing card, comes to feel like an ancient document, even though it's just from 1998, because it gets handled so much from day to day when the daily ration of bread is checked off.

Cuba is the place where material things were supposed to stop mattering because socialism would abolish the pettiness of wanting the things of the world. But precisely because things were not supposed to matter anymore and yet were suddenly so scarce, in need of rationing, they took on a heightened meaning. When white upper-class and later white middle-class Cubans abandoned the island after the 1959 revolution, they had to part with their things, leaving behind their houses and apartments, with furniture intact, closets filled with clothes and shoes, porcelain knick-knacks on the windowsill, violet cologne in the bathroom. Those who stayed inherited the haunting memory of all the speechless things left by those who abandoned the island.

I have returned to the apartment my parents rented in Havana, the apartment I am told I lived in as a small child but cannot remember. The family who lives there now, an Afro-Cuban family, conserves the furniture my parents left: the dining room table and chairs, the sofa, the coffee table, the master bedroom set with its dresser, down to the rippled bedspread my mother received as a wedding gift. The woman of the family, showing me around, says, "We've taken good care of everything. Tell your parents that everything is exactly as they left it." Those words trouble and move me. I am struck by the pride with which she takes care of things that belonged to white Cubans who left the country, white Cubans who happen to be my parents. She feels an immense responsibility to the past, as if the material things in her house were museum pieces entrusted to her for safekeeping. I have no memory of those things and have no claim on them, but in returning to look at what once belonged to my parents I have become an inspector for History's tribunal.

This old rental apartment of ours was to have become Caro's home. My parents had turned over the apartment, with their lease and with all their possessions, to Caro. But four months after our departure, the government decided that Caro should not be the beneficiary of the apartment. She suspects that the building manager, a fervent revolutionary with whom she did not get along, was probably behind the plot to remove her. Caro refused to leave, claiming her right as a former maid to inherit the apartment of her employers. The authorities chopped the door down with an ax and she was given minutes to pack her essential belongings and get out.

Caro does not like to speak of this loss of the house that by right of her labor and the redistributive ethics of the revolution should have been hers. Her disillusionment and trauma run deep and it is only recently that she has been willing to go back with me to the street where she and I lived once, but she refuses to set foot in the building and go upstairs to the top floor, to apartment number 18, a number that in the Jewish tradition is terribly resonant with meaning, a lucky number that stands for life.

From that apartment she salvaged something that was not hers, but that she deemed worthy of saving: two nightgowns of nylon and lace, haunting items of intimate, erotic, and profound feminine longing, as transparent as mantles of nakedness, two honeymoon nightgowns that belonged to my mother and which had been made from the nylon and lace that my grandparents sold in their tiny fabric shop in Old Havana. Two years ago Caro pulled the nightgowns out of a double-wrapped plastic bag and said she had been meaning to give them to me for a long time. She said she had hoped to give them to my mother herself, but she no longer believed my mother would return to visit Cuba or that she, Caro, now 72, would ever have a chance to see my mother in New York. "Here, you take them," she said. "Tell your mother I saved them for her." Why did Caro keep my mother's delicate lingerie during so many tumultuous years of revolution and change? She won't say, so she asks me to imagine instead.

In introducing *Persuasions and Performances*, James Fernandez wrote that "anthropology begins with 'revelatory incidents' . . . those especially charged moments in human relationships which are pregnant with meaning" (xi). When Caro gave me those gowns, I knew my anthropology, my poetry, had begun. I knew I was entering into that realm which Fernandez has called the inchoate, a realm whose realness he had to defend on various occasions. Being, as he described himself, "at incipient moments of thought a visualizer rather than a verbalizer," he represented the inchoate as "the dark at the bottom of the stairs." And he added, "After its being that, whatever that is, it is all the other images and contexts that are swung into association with that central and organizing image to cast light upon it." He concluded that the "images we generate to solve problems are always a function of our primordial experiences" (*Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture*, Bloomington 1986, 215).

For me, the inchoate are those honeymoon nightgowns, that now hang from plump satin hangers on the door to the room where I write. Unlike the dark at the bottom of the stairs, they are palpable things, and yet every bit as elusive. They are relics, ruins, fragments salvaged from that prehistory which is the prerevolutionary Cuban past and my childhood. Like pieces of a broken ceramic pot uncovered by an archaeologist, the nightgowns are silent, they must be made to speak, to tell their story.

I showed one of the nightgowns in public for the first time in the early weeks of my undergraduate class last fall on "Cuba and Its Diaspora." I trembled as I held it up. I said to the students, "I brought in this nightgown because I want you to understand what diaspora means, and what an imaginary homeland means; I also want you to understand the kinds of bridges that are possible between women, even when separated by race and class. My mother, a white Jewish woman, left Cuba in a hurry. This nightgown stayed behind, but another woman, a black Cuban woman, kept it, saved it for her, another woman who had no need to do so, returned it to her, because she had faith that their paths were meant to cross again."

From the moment I first began to travel to the island, I knew I was going to Cuba in search of memory, because I had none. Or more accurately, I did not

remember anything in articulate spoken language. There was memory encoded in the unspeakable—in the panic attacks that plagued me on the first few return trips, and in the incredible sense of safety I felt around Caro, in hearing her voice, her laugh. I realized I didn't have any memories of my family's life in Cuba, but she did, and those memories were meshed with her own life story. I had no memoir to write of Cuba, but Caro did, and I had to imagine what that memoir would be if she were to write it.

I thought at first that perhaps I could tape her story and transcribe and translate and shape it into a book as I had done with Esperanza Hernández's story in *Translated Woman*. But Caro didn't fill my tape recorder with words. Not that she objected to the tape recorder. It is just that Caro doesn't tell long stories; and many of her stories, like the nightgowns, are embedded in actions and gifts. I, in turn, to be honest, was tired of the tape recorder, tired of the tyranny it imposed in forcing one to stick only to the stories it captured, to believe that only those stories, and not those retained in memory and feeling, were truly true.

Caro knew, from the start, that I am a snatcher of stories of women less privileged than me. She had been present years ago when I presented *Translated Woman* at the Havana Book Fair. Her daughter-in-law, a lawyer, had immediately said I should do a similar book about Caro, but both she and I resisted. Caro knew, from the start, that I would write about her. She told me stories, she shared secrets with me, but slowly, in the midst of everyday life. She told me stories of the times we went to places together in La Habana, or when she stood cooking over her two kerosene burners in her sky blue kitchen, or when she brushed out her long beautiful wavy hair in the morning and then braided it back into two neat buns on either side of her head. Most important, she told me stories in the midst of accompanying me on my path of healing and knowledge, which has involved my entering as an initiate and a student into the Afro-Cuban world of ritual and remembering known by the shorthand of Santería. Caro knew, from the start, that what I most wanted from Cuba and from its African *orishas*, the dieties that came on the slave ships, was language, a language I'd lost and needed to find, or I would never be fulfilled. And this language was the language of poetry and, ultimately, as I later discovered, the language of reality transmogrified, the language that for lack of a better word we call fiction. Whenever I was told to pray, to ask for something of the *orishas*, I asked for good health and I asked to be given the courage to dare to write as I had longed always to write, from the darkness at the bottom of the stairs.

And so I have embarked on a journey of the imagination, telling the story of my Jewish family in Cuba as seen from Caro's perspective. Caro, I have come to realize, is the witness to our abandoned Jewish existence in Cuba; the memory of our presence there resides with her. I descend from Jews who found a welcome and tolerant home in Cuba—and only because of this did not perish. But sadly the terms of our survival depended on the ugly logic of race and racism. Fearing that the growth of the black population during the final years of slavery and the

prominent role played by Afro-Cubans in the wars for independence would lead them to take over the island, the Cuban government encouraged massive immigration of European workers and their families, Jews included. Even Jews like my family, not welcome in the United States early in this century, were white enough to dilute “the black peril” and forestall the possibility of Cuba becoming a black nation. And so there is terrible irony but also poetic justice in Caro telling the story of how her consciousness as an Afro-Cuban woman has been marked by Jewish memory.

In the novel, Caro becomes Regla or Yeya, a name that is fairly common in Cuba. Regla is the name of the town where the Virgin of Regla, or Yemayá, is housed, and in the *orisha* pantheon she is a strong female diety associated with the ocean. Regla is the uncredentialed but nonetheless ever-vigilant anthropologist, as domestic workers typically must be, observing the Jewish family to which she is connected through her domestic work, and trying to understand their beliefs and practices through her vision of the world as an Afro-Cuban woman who grew up in a humble household in the countryside where Santería was practiced. Regla is struck, for example, by the similarity between the Jewish practice of not consuming the blood of any animal that is slaughtered for human consumption because its blood is its life force and the Santería practice of giving the blood of animal sacrifices to the *orishas* to maintain their vital energy. She observes, too, as the girl whom she once took care of, now a professional anthropologist, returns to the island to restore contact with her and turn her into a “research subject.”

Inevitably, even as I create this fiction, I stay grounded in the commitment of anthropology to tell a thick story of real presence. My efforts to engage imaginatively with this Afro-Cuban religion, forged in the fire of slavery and the hope of freedom, draw from my ethnographic fieldwork on Santería practices both in Havana and in the town of Agramonte, where my mother’s Jewish family settled, a region known as “little Africa,” because of the strong and vital presence of African cultural and religious roots left by the many slaves brought there to work the cane. I am writing a novel that I think of as an ethnography of the religious imagination, a *Bwiti* that is different from Jim Fernandez’s richly layered account of African belief and ritual, and yet not a total stranger to that important legacy.

I want the material on Santería to be ethnographically accurate, so the religion is presented in its fullness and not exoticized or demeaned. The imaginative web of fiction, I believe, needs to be spun from respectful ethnography and critical consciousness. My desire to write fiction is not without its didactic edge. I seek a way to position my creative writing in a way that will challenge many of the invisible assumptions of both Cuban-American and Jewish-American fiction and permit a dialogue with African-American fiction. I am distressed by the self-orientalism I often perceive in Cuban-American fiction, which is largely the product of white writers, where members of my own immigrant community exoticize our stories and, too frequently, portray Santería in ways that are facile,

distorted, and uninformed. In turn, I find that Jewish-American fiction is relentlessly Jewish in perspective, characters, and setting, and lacks trust in the possibility that non-Jews might also care about Jewish memory and Jewish survival. I want to try to see Jewishness from an Afro-Cuban working woman's position, an outsider's position, because I want to envision a world in which Jews are not solely responsible for Jewish diasporic remembering, a world in which African-Americans (of both our Americas) are not solely responsible for African diasporic remembering.

The hugest risk I take is in trying to write in the voice of an Afro-Cuban woman modeled on the domestic worker and caretaker who my parents employed and who, now, so many years later, welcomes me into her home. As I write, I feel the heat of the imaginary accusations of appropriation, inauthenticity, ventriloquism that I expect will be directed at me if and when I do finish and publish my text. There is a burden of representations so heavy that I have called this story an "untellable story." At my keyboard is a postcard reproduction of Manet's famous painting, "Olympia," with the naked white woman, flower in her hair, staring straight at the viewer, and the clothed black woman, bouquet of flowers in hand, waiting patiently to serve her mistress. Not only do I gaze at this image constantly as I write, addressing the contradiction of my process at every step, but I have also steeped myself in the extensive literature on African-American mammies and domestic workers, everything from Alice Childress's wickedly funny, bitter memoir, *Like One of the Family*, to the historical and sociological accounts that stress again and again that the most exploitative labor extracted from domestic workers has always been the emotional service they are expected to render as part of the personalized relationship they enter into with the women whose houses they must keep tidy and whose children they must keep happy. And yet I stay with this writing because I believe that the question of women "serving" other women, and I use the word "serving" in all its possible meanings, from providing a service to providing a subject of study, is one of the most fundamental dilemmas of feminist thought.

Can I write across the boundaries of my own racial and class position without taped transcripts to affirm that the voice I'm presenting is the really real voice of the "other woman"? Perhaps, in the end, I will do no better than Jean Rhys, whose *Wide Sargasso Sea* I have very much in mind as I write. Rhys wrote her novel to give Bertha Mason, the West Indian creole lunatic of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a subjectivity and a history that Brontë failed to imagine. But in doing so, Rhys, in turn, created another unfinished female protagonist, Christophine, the black mammy and *obeah* woman who tries unsuccessfully to save her white mistress from becoming a madwoman in an English attic. Still, there is a scene in the novel in which Rhys allows us, for a brief moment, to imagine a different, impossibly romantic scenario—the two women, the wise old black woman and the naive white girl-child, forgetting the past and making a new life on a different island, where only the sky would limit them. "I like to see the world before I die,"

says Christophine, and there Rhys leaves us hanging. I wonder: What would it mean to rethink the legacy of Caribbean colonial history from the eyes of a woman like Christophine? This is the question I want to put to myself in my writing by serving as a spirit medium for the voice an Afro-Cuban woman who has never left the island of Cuba, who has not yet seen the world.

Male novelists have written women's lives since time immemorial while women rarely write from the perspective of men. Crossing racial, ethnic, and class borders presents a different challenge. Increasingly, it seems that novelists are writing against the grain of their own point of view in order to delve more deeply into questions of identity and otherness. The novel *The Remains of the Day*, written by the British-Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro, is so effective because it presents the English class system and ideal of empire from the point of view of a perfect English butler who once unquestioningly bought into the idea of their righteous sense of hierarchy. Gradually, he comes to see that the world on which he based his entire sense of self and society was morally corrupt and emotionally frigid, but it is too late for him to do anything but continue to hold on to the shards of a defunct worldview. The brilliance of this work lies in the author's deliberate choice of a distinctly different voice and ethnic persona from his own to offer a cultural critique of the British social system; at the same time, the account manages to offer compassion for its narrator.

I had always thought that you had to do some very difficult magic tricks to write fiction. That was why I was so terrified of the genre, even though I longed desperately to try my hand at it. Then one day I began to write in a memoir voice that I imagined as Caro's voice, Caro's voice as I heard it in my head, Caro's voice as I had come to internalize it from being with her so frequently during an entire decade of interactions. It dawned on me that I needed to start the story on May 4, 1961, the day we left Cuba, the day that Caro waved goodbye to us and then returned to the apartment that she expected would become her home. This is what I imagined she saw when she stepped back into that apartment: *Everything was as they'd left it—the dining room chairs wrapped around the table in a broken embrace; the aluminum pots waiting dutifully on the stove; the oregano, cumin, pepper, basil, and bay leaves, each stuffed into its miniature glass bottle; the sofa desperately fondling the wall; the beds covered with their ribbed spreads and embroidered pillows; the scent of old perfume on Raquel's dresser; and the bathroom floor tiles pink as tender watermelon.*

Only a few days before we left Caro had gotten married, so that my parents could be witnesses at her wedding. She planned, after we left, to live as a wife in the apartment where she'd been the maid. What did it feel like for Caro to shift from being the maid on the morning of May 4, 1961, to being the lady of the house on the afternoon of May 4, 1961? What did it feel like to know that the house she'd been cleaning for others was now her own house? What did it feel like to hope that she would raise her own children in this house, not those of another woman?

In the opening scene of the emerging fiction, Regla pulls out from under her cot, as soon the Jewish-Cuban family she worked for has gone, a Santería ritual

object, a tureen for the ocean diety of Olokún that she'd kept hidden, and proudly puts it in the living room. Olokún is the diety who represents the profoundest depths of the sea and cannot be figuratively represented like other *orishas*; he is associated with mystery and with the painful loss of so many enslaved Africans who drowned in the passage from Africa to the Americas. Bringing Olokún out into the open is Regla's first act of resistance as an Afro-Cuban woman who will no longer be anyone's maid. But later, when she is forced out of the apartment, she remembers to take the honeymoon nightgowns for the Jewish-Cuban woman who once employed her, for even in the moment of her worst despair, she can feel compassion for what another woman, so unlike her, has lost. Every day I see those nightgowns as I write and every day I gain strength from the determination with which Caro held on to those gowns as she descended the four flights of stairs from apartment number 18, seeing the dark at the bottom, and yet having faith that she'd salvaged for my mother something of transparent beauty, of innocence, from the wreck of oblivion and the home that neither of them would see again.

Between the bringing of Olokún out into the open and the honeymoon nightgowns that a black Cuban woman salvages for a white Cuban woman, the entire story must transpire. Among the stories that must be told is the story of Regla's short-lived marriage, which essentially ends after she loses the apartment and goes to live with a white woman friend, who persuades Regla to abandon her alcoholic husband. But even before that story, I needed to imagine what it would have been like to inherit the bed of one's employers:

Paquito was scavenging through the apartment, opening drawers and closets.

"Leave things where they are," I told him.

"Why?" he said. "It's ours now."

He kissed me and I could smell the rum on his breath.

"You let your hair down, Regla, I like it," he said.

He took me in his arms and rested his cheek on my head. He was tall and leggy and had a laugh that could seduce a nun. How I wished he weren't drunk. "Not now," I said and pushed him away.

"Oh, excuse me, my African princess. So you're the lady of the house now, is that right? What did they leave you, Yeya, for all the work you did for them? Old furniture and the clothes that didn't fit in their suitcases?"

"Shut your mouth. Do you have your head on backwards? They didn't have to leave me anything. They didn't own this apartment, they rented it, and they were kind enough to sign the lease over to me with the rent paid for an entire year. They paid me a decent salary for my work. Because I knew how to work, that's true. But they owe me nothing."

"You have a lot to learn from the Revolution."

"And you too. Maybe they'll teach you how to depend less on rum and more on your own hard work to get things done."

"Look, Yeyita, it's our first night together here. Let's not fight. Just cook me a little dinner and then maybe we can both get some rest."

"All right. But you take a shower and see if you can wash that rum off your skin."

I made a huge pot of white rice and fried some eggs to serve over it and there was still one tomato and a can of sardines for a salad and half a loaf of bread. I set the table with the pale green plastic dishes Raquel had used for afternoon picnics at the Casino Deportivo and with the silverware that was not really silver that she had left me. I had never eaten at the dining table with them, even though they were always inviting me to. I liked to eat in the kitchen, standing up, alone. But on this night I sat at the table next to Paquito and we ate side by side like decent married people, all scrubbed and clean, with nothing but the silence and our beating hearts to accompany us.

And on this night Paquito wanted us to sleep in the big bed that had belonged to Raquel and Rubén but I told him I couldn't, not yet, please. He started to yell at me and he repeated his line about how the Revolution still had a lot to teach me. He said that a great man named Carlos Marx had told the workers of the world to fight because they had nothing to lose but their chains and that the era of slavery was over and that was why a brave little island like Cuba had been able to defeat the American Goliaths at Playa Girón and that I should open my eyes and see that the new world belonged to those who had broken free of their servitude. I really didn't want to sleep in their bed, it was too soon, but Paquito wouldn't stop his harangue and then he suddenly stopped talking and took me in his arms and pushed me onto the bed. "Oye, así no," I said and jabbed him in the belly with my knee. "Así sí," he said and took hold of my wrist with one hand and with the other hand he grabbed my ass. "I don't want it like this!" I screamed. "You're not going to force me." I looked him straight in the eye and Paquito released me. He looked like he might cry and he fell to his knees and spoke in a beseeching voice, "My dear Yeyita, I know I don't deserve your forgiveness. Pero entiéndeme, we've only been married for five days and all I want is to make love to you on the bed that now belongs to us by right." And with that humility he soon had me pulling down my panties. I thought of Raquel getting into this very bed with Rubén just last night and for so many other nights and I thought about how she, too, like me, would first have removed the ribbed spread and the embroidered pillows to keep them from getting stained with the slush of lovemaking. I sat on the edge of the bed and he stayed on his knees and I let his hands float from my toes to my thighs to my belly to my breasts to my center which was brimming like a cool fountain in the hills and I asked him would he like to come into me and he said he wanted to more than anything else in the world. I left the windows wide open that night and our pleasure overflowed into the streets.

Regla becomes pregnant and Paquito forbids her to do any work outside their home. He wants her to be a lady of the house. And Regla observes, I served Paquito breakfast, lunch, and dinner with a smile on my face. I washed and ironed his clothes and left them spread out on a chair for him each day. I dusted the lamps, I swept under the beds, I made the mirror gleam. I polished the dresser,

I waxed the floors, I scraped the mold from the tub. I aired the sheets in the sun, I folded the towels. My work done, I took long showers, oiled my hair, and sprayed perfume on my wrists. I sat on the balcony, gazing at the arch of the Patronato Synagogue and drinking pineapple-rind water from a glass goblet. I slept with my husband in the bed that its owners had abandoned and never had a nightmare. The baby grew inside me quietly and caused me no indigestion or nausea. While I did not move any of the furniture, I brought out of hiding the Olokún that had been my mother's and was passed on to me. Olokún, safe in his blue and gold tureen, now had a place in the living room, and every week I brought new water from the ocean to refresh the nine sacred sea stones. Each day this life became mine. Each day the things that I touched became mine. I broke a flowerpot and was not ashamed. The flowerpot now was mine and I loved it badly mended more than I'd loved it whole.

As Regla sits on the balcony drinking pineapple-rind water, an uncertain future unfolding before her, she reflects on her past, which is tied up with the story of the Jewish-Cuban family she worked for. Although in real life Caro was only employed by my parents for three years, in the novel the character of Regla has a longer history of connection to the family, being employed first by Naomi, a character based on my maternal grandmother, and then by Raquelita, a character based on my mother.

My grandmother in Miami, who now requires around-the-clock care by a live-in caretaker, has told me many times that she is incapable of telling maids what they have to do. In the novel, Naomi initially doesn't want to hire Regla and her sister Tere to do domestic work in her household; it is her husband who insists: *I never wanted to be a maid and Naomi never wanted to have a maid. When Máximo Gliniński brought us inside the house the first day, Naomi smiled wanly and told him to let us go. "It's not necessary, Máximo," she said, anger in her voice. "It was a kind thought, but it's not necessary."*

Máximo pleaded with her. "But this way you'll have more time to read, Naomi, which you so much like to do. And to rest. Doctor Pablito says you need to rest. After the experience you just passed through. The blood you lost."

"Máximo, enough!" Naomi nearly shouted. She had grown irritated at the mention of what was clearly an experience she did not wish to make known. She turned to us, and asked us to please come in and sit down. The four of us had been standing awkwardly at the entrance to their bedroom. She pointed to the two wicker chairs on either side of a small writing desk and she took a seat facing us on the edge of the bed.

"Forgive me, señoritas, but my husband didn't consult with me about hiring you. And, you see, I am accustomed to doing my own housework and looking after my daughters by myself. In Poland I was a socialist, and here I no longer know what I am, but I believe in the socialist ideal that no person should have to be a servant to any other person. I won't know how to train you, señoritas. I am incapable of telling others what to do."

As the relationship between Regla and Naomi develops, Regla not only learns Naomi's life story, but develops her own interpretation of the limitations of Jewish identity: *Even though I didn't want to be a maid, I became a maid. And Naomi, who didn't want to have a maid, acquired a maid. I worked hard. I did not know how to work any other way. Yet I moved slowly. I never rushed. I gave the clock no respect. And everything got done. What didn't get done today got done tomorrow. I believe that time only exists for those who fear it.*

Naomi took notice of my hard work and, true to her word, she never once gave me a command or even so much as made suggestions about what I needed to do. But it was not my work alone that won her favor. I listened to her stories, I gave her my fullest attention. She said that in her religion there was no such thing as confession; you simply had to pile up the hurts and the mistakes and the ugly thoughts and the unspeakable desires and when your heart got too heavy from all that weight you got into bed and you wept, noiselessly, after everyone had fallen asleep. In the old days, she said, when the Hebrew people lived in the desert, long before they settled in Poland, their priests offered the blood of bulls and rams to their god and they smoked the flesh of these animals for many hours in the fire until their ashes rendered a sweet incense. In this way, her people released themselves of their sins. But the practice of sacrificing animals had been left behind, she said, always with a pride that was incomprehensible to me, once her people became modern and civilized. Many times I was on the verge of telling her that her god must be very lonely and very hungry. For in her faith there was only one god, as she told me many times, again with a pride I found strange, for I would think, pobrecito, one poor godforsaken god, and this god had not been given anything to eat for hundreds of years. No wonder her god couldn't dance! With what strength? With what desire? With what joy? What god can intercede for us without tasting the blood that pulses through all living things? What god will listen to our cries in the night who has not been fed the trembling flesh of chickens and goats, the warm honey dripping from the hive, the cool rum that teaches the hips how to move to the call of the drums, the call of the rumba? When Naomi could no longer bear to offer her lamentations to the silent darkness, to the exhausted and ravenous god whom she and her people had decided no longer had need of the breath, flesh, blood, and honey of the material world, she unburdened herself in my presence. After a few months I think it became inconceivable to her to imagine maintaining her life and her house without me.

Later in the novel, Regla observes as Jewishness comes apart as a system of communal religiosity when Naomi's daughter Raquelita begins to be courted by a Sephardic Jew: *Raquelita's quinceañera came on the sixth of February of 1951 and the dress Naomi and Máximo had made for her in pink satin and pink lace from Casa Máximo was so stunning it would have put Cinderella to shame at the prince's ball. I have never seen dresses again like the ones our seamstresses made in those years. Dresses made from layers and layers of lace, dresses shaped into the most beautiful womanly bodies you can imagine, dresses that seemed determined to promise happiness. Raquelita had grown up. She had cut off her*

braids. She had begun to wear heels and a touch of lipstick. But it was the sight of her hands that most moved me when I saw her in her pink satin and lace dress. Her hands were no longer those of a child. As she delicately arranged each of her small breasts into the bodice and smoothed the dress to the curves of her thin waist, I saw how her hands now had the confidence of a woman's hands. I saw how her hands now had the desire to hold a man's hands, to stroke a man's body.

Only women were invited to Raquelita's quinceañera, as was proper at that time. How they enjoyed the *enrolladitos* I'd prepared. You can't get bread like that anymore, soft white buttery bread fresh from the bakery, that they'd cut at your request on the vertical rather than the horizontal plane, and that I'd fill with a paste made of tuna fish, ketchup and cream cheese, and wrap around a row of green olives with *pimientos* in their centers, so that when you cut the rolls they became perfect swirls. And there were the exquisite *panetelas borrachas*, the drunk little cakes dripping with rum and sugar that always left a sticky trail on the tables and chairs and tiled floors. The young women posed for photographs around the cake and then they listened to Beny Moré on the record player. While the other young women sat daintily in their chairs trying to eat their cake without spilling any crumbs on their dresses, Raquelita leapt from her seat and swayed her body to the music. I tell you, she knew how to dance! Raquelita could *guarachear* almost like a black woman. She swayed her hips with abandon and there was no hint of shame about her. The other young women looked on in shock, as if they'd suddenly landed in a brothel, and Leah blushed for her sister, her neck turning purple-red in the same way as Máximo when he was embarrassed. Where had Raquelita learned to dance like that, the way they did in *la calle*? Máximo was terrified of dancing and I'd never seen Naomi dance anything wilder than a waltz at the weddings of her sisters.

At the end of the party, all the young women went home and Rubén Maya Maya came to the door with a red rose for Raquelita. As soon as I saw him, I knew the answer to my question about where Raquelita had learned to dance. She learned in the arms of Rubén. How handsome and dashing he appeared, earnestly holding the rose out to Raquelita. She was still wearing her pink satin and lace dress, but her tired feet had mercifully been released from the clutches of the high heels and allowed to roam free in fluffy slippers. She took the rose from Rubén and clasped it in her woman's hands. I gasped fearing her hands would bleed, but Rubén had clipped off all the thorns. She smelled the rose as if she were smelling a rose for the first time in her life. The way her eyes searched for his eyes revealed to me how fervently Raquelita loved Rubén and this again made me afraid for her. Men get mean both when you don't love them enough and when you love them too much. Even then, before I met Paquito, I knew that you have to measure your love and give men just the right amount. Give it to them in neat, digestible rations. You can't go over or under by a single teaspoon.

That night was the first time Rubén came to the house at Calle Aguacate. Raquelita ushered him into the living room and I served him a piece of cake from

the party and returned to the kitchen to finish washing the dishes. A few minutes later, when I returned with coffee, Naomi was hard at work interrogating Rubén. Máximo sat speechless at her side. He suffered from corisa and had a handkerchief in his hand ready to wipe his itchy eyes and muzzle a sudden sneeze. He let out a heavy sigh and looked eager for the conversation to be over. Every now and then he glanced at the Yiddish paper on his lap.

"You don't speak Yiddish?" I heard Naomi say.

And Rubén replied, with his winning smile and a touch of impatience, "No, señora, we are turcos, so we don't speak Yiddish."

Naomi was adamant. "But you say that you and your family are Jews, how could you not speak Yiddish?"

Rubén, to everyone's surprise, laughed out loud. He took a last sip of coffee and put the cup and saucer on my tray, thanking me. "Señora Levi de Gliniensi, I beg your indulgence, but you Jews from Poland are not the only Jews in the world. We, the sefardí, are the Jews who chose exile from our beloved Spain rather than convert to Christianity during the barbaric years of the Inquisition. We speak Ladino rather than Yiddish. We speak the Spanish of Don Quijote and we aspire to the wisdom of Maimonides. And like you, we read the Torah in Hebrew. Or do you read it in Yiddish?"

I was very confused by Rubén's words. I had come to believe that being Yiddish, a Hebrew, a Jew, and a polaco were the exact same thing. Naomi seemed confused too. She immediately retorted, "Of course we read the Torah in Hebrew. It is the sacred language of our prayers and our tradition."

"And of ours too," replied Rubén. "We are Jews as much as you are. You are Jews as much as we are."

There was a silence, broken only by the fluttering of Raquelita's lashes, which were holding back tears. I wanted to comfort Raquelita, to yell at Naomi for being so mean and inquisitive, to slap Máximo in the face and force him to show some interest in this conversation. If Rubén didn't speak Yiddish, he could learn it, couldn't he? Wasn't that what schools were for? But why did Yiddish matter so much if they could all pray in Hebrew? And then I remembered that I was the maid and no one was asking me for my opinion. So I asked if I could bring more coffee. Naomi nodded her head yes, Máximo said no, thank you, Raquelita said no, thank you, and Rubén said he would be grateful for another buchito and if it wasn't too much trouble, for a glass of cold water as well. Until the day he left Cuba he never lost that habit of having coffee together with a glass of cold water.

As I carried the tray back to the kitchen I wondered if Naomi would have the nerve to ask Rubén if the foreskin of his penis had been removed as was expected of men of the Hebrew faith. If he didn't have that mark would she prevent Raquelita from continuing to see him? For it was clear that Rubén had already begun courting Raquelita and that this first visit to the house, which Naomi had permitted so she could inspect Rubén, was meant to formalize their courtship.

When I returned with the tray the four of them were still sitting in silence. Máximo had absentmindedly begun to sway back and forth in his rocking chair and the creaking sound was clearly giving Naomi one of her headaches because she was clasping her forehead in her hands in the way she usually did just before the dizzying lights in front of her eyes would cause her to run out of the room in search of the soothing solitude of darkness.

“Máximo, please stop!” she hissed, and there was so much anger in her voice that she frightened everyone in the room.

Máximo looked as if he’d been shot through the heart and brought the rocking of his chair to a screeching halt. He stood up and without uttering a word it was he who left the room, taking his Yiddish newspaper with him. I kept my tray steady and offered Rubén his coffee, who accepted it gratefully. As soon as he finished, I gave him the glass of water and he devoured it like a camel in the desert. Only a tremendous force of will, I believe, kept him from kissing the tears that were streaming down Raquelita’s cheeks.

Naomi rose and said that the basura in front of her eyes had become intolerable and she had to lie down. Rubén took his cue and announced it was time for him to leave. Raquelita walked him to the stair landing and when he was in the street, he whistled his unique high-pitched whistle, that no one could imitate, and Raquelita waved to him from the balcony, staring into the darkness long after he had left.

*As Regla predicts, Raquelita is married to Rubén before she reaches her twentieth birthday. Regla watches over the marriage, watches over Raquelita, yet she always knows that no matter how close the two of them might be, they are separated by borders of race and class: *But, oh, how contagious their excitement was, even knowing I couldn’t go with them. Rubén would jump into the shower, whistling so exultantly you could hear him from the kitchen, and as soon as he was done in the bathroom he’d call Raquelita, savoring the four syllables of her name, and then she would go in and emerge fresh in her silk kimono robe. They dusted themselves with talcum powder and left the fine dust of white footprints on the bathroom floor as a gift to me. From their bedroom they would emerge moments later, their dusted bodies wrapped in clean and freshly pressed clothes.**

By the time Saulito was born, their clothes would have been ironed by Francisca rather than by me, for Raquelita had relieved me of that chore as well as of washing the clothes when I threatened to leave after she became pregnant. “Another child? Oh, no, I can’t take care of Fanny and another one,” I’d exclaimed indignantly. And she’d hired Francisca immediately and given me a raise, but the truth was that even if she hadn’t I wouldn’t have left because Saulito won my heart the moment I gathered his ten-pound newborn butteryness in my arms and Fanny already had my heart and there was nothing I could do about that.

Raquelita and Rubén exuded the aroma of a hundred flowers, for they both loved cologne and perfume. They left a trail of scent in the apartment as they

prepared to go out into the street. At the door Raquelita would kiss me and tell me not to wait up and she would always dawdle and say a few words more as if she were hesitating to leave. Deep as our affection was for one another, she knew at that precise moment that she was the mistress and I the maid. Rubén would grow impatient, as always, but in a jovial way. "Why so many goodbyes, mi vida? You would think we were going to the end of the world! You'll see Regla again in the morning." And Raquelita would give me another hug and look to see that I gave her permission to go in the way my eyes met hers. At those moments I always made certain to soften my gaze and to wish her well. Consoled, persuaded that I accepted my maid's role without ill will, she would turn and go skipping down the five flights of stairs with all the reckless innocence of youth, for though she was married and already had two children by the age of twenty-three, Raquelita was girlish in a way I had never been girlish, could never have been girlish. I had been a girl but I had never been girlish.

The account of Regla's relationship with Naomi and Raquelita is told in the past tense, but the account of her relationship to Fanny is part of the unfolding present: *I try to explain to Fanny that on this island time does not exist. She lives in anguish about time. I swear she lives with a gun pointed at her temple. She's at the wall waiting to be executed. She trembles and is overwhelmed with last thoughts, not knowing the gun isn't loaded.*

Yes, Fanny has returned. She's a grown woman, but she is the same girl to whom I waved goodbye all those years ago. I knew she would return. That she would be the one to return. Because her mother told her they were not leaving for good, that they would be coming back, and a lie told to a child is a wound. It never heals. Never, never will she be able to tell the difference between truth and betrayal. All she can do is return to the source of the wound. And be wounded again. She came seeking my love. And I, what choice did I have but to give it to her? I have never been able to withhold anything of mine that is desired by someone else. I give her my love because I don't know how not to. She has taken it upon herself to keep returning, not once but more than two dozen times, to this island she cannot remember leaving, poor thing, begging me for memories of her family, for secrets she is certain have been withheld from her, those long-lashed black velvet eyes of hers always with a look of hurt in them, even before the blow has struck, and the helpless innocence that won't learn. Things come to Fanny, but with difficulty, too much suffering. . . . She dreams of etching words on paper as no one else, not even she, has done before, and these dreams make her sick with worry, make her afraid to write, which is what she says she most wants to do of anything in the world.

And Regla is right, which is why I keep striving, not knowing yet where this story will take me. The darkness at the bottom of the stairs is truly dark. But Caro's gift of my mother's honeymoon nightgowns is a beacon, guiding me, giving me the faith I need to claim the lost home of my imagination.