

# Next Year in the Diaspora: The Uneasy Articulation of Transcultural Positionality in Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe*<sup>1</sup>

*Dara E. Goldman is Assistant Professor of Spanish at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign specializing in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hispanic Caribbean and Latin American literatures and cultures, gender and sexuality studies and cultural studies. She is completing a book, Out of Bounds: Charting the Rhetoric of Hispanic Caribbean Insularity, and is the author of several recent and forthcoming articles on the construction of spatiality in contemporary Hispanic Caribbean literary and cultural production. Her current work focuses on the transcultural narrativity of queer Latina literature.*

Heaven has always been a reflection of humanity, populated by images that are serene, joyful, or vengeful, depending on whether their creators live in peace, in the fullness of our senses, or in slavery and torment; each shake-up of history alters the nation's Olympus.

—José Martí (translation by Achy Obejas), quoted from the epigraph to *Days of Awe*

## A Diaspora by Any Other Name

I have often been asked how or why I first chose to work on Caribbean literatures and cultures. Given the relatively common tendency to choose an area of specialization based on a personal connection with the subject matter, the question sometimes take a form such as, “So how did a Jewish girl from New York become a Caribbeanist?” To such inquiries, I have been known to respond, “Well, I suppose I just took a wrong turn at diaspora.” Along with its intended playful humor, this response calls attention to a fundamental question within comparative ethnic studies: to what extent are migratory patterns among diverse socio-cultural groups homologous or even equivalent? More specifically, the idea of a “wrong turn at diaspora” alludes to a particular trajectory or cultural pattern in which the progress of one community is being substituted for another. It inevitably points to the absence of a proper turn, a progressive teleology within which this cross-cultural identification constitutes a detour or digression. The idea of diaspora itself, and

its deployment with ethnic and cultural studies, reinforces this presumption.

I would like to suggest, therefore, that this anecdote gestures towards a larger critical trend. Ruth Behar's film, *Adio kerida*, includes several moments in which she explores the relationship between her own position as both Cuban and Jewish and larger queries (and, in some cases, conclusions) about the Jewish communities in Cuba. Of course, this interweaving of the personal and the professional is hardly surprising. After all, Behar is an anthropologist and has published metacritical reflections on the discipline in works such as *The Vulnerable Observer*. Moreover, *Adio kerida* is explicitly framed as a Cuban-Sephardic journey that emerges from Behar's personal and family history. Consequently, the intercalation of auto-ethnography in her analysis is almost inevitable.

Yet the questions Behar poses about her own subjectivity and its theoretical implications are not limited to works that are overtly (auto)ethnographic. In the introduction to her book, *Proceed with Caution*, Doris Sommer comments on her personal experiences growing up in New York and how these might inform practices of (multicultural) reading:

During my own childhood in New York, we had a bad name for Jews who were so embarrassed by ethnicity that they chose not to claim it. They were 'white Jews,' troubled and untrustworthy. Whatever utopian or democratizing ideals may have tempted us all toward assimilation, 'whitening' was, to many of us, a hasty price for a distant prize. So instead, like Garcilaso and like the Jewish philosopher of love whom he chose to translate, we preferred to

weave back and forth, glad to fit into universal culture when we could, but loath to give up the anchor of a 'native' condition. [...] My 'mosaic' New York sometimes showed volatile cultural conditions that demanded acknowledgment and negotiation.  
(xiv)

On the one hand, of course, these comments point to the rhetorical project of *Proceed with Caution*. Sommer is commenting on the complex combination of desire and resistance toward universalism in minority writing. That is, although complexity and irreducibility have often been valued in canonical literature, she underscores a paradoxical (and problematic) expectation of transparency imposed on contemporary multicultural literature. Hence, the anecdote serves as a useful and appropriate introduction (or *advertencia*/warning, to use Sommer's term).

Yet, on the other hand, this intercalation of references also points to a larger question in the current configuration of ethnic studies in U.S. academia. Of course, gender and ethnic studies have often valued—even insisted on, in some cases—a self-reflective critical positionality. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the particular juxtaposition of cultural identifications deployed here is especially significant. Behar and Sommer are both drawing on their own personal and family history in their project. In doing so, however, they place the ontological question of ethnicity in stark relief. Because "Jewish" both does and does not fit conventional definitions of ethnicity, it can offer a valuable contribution to the continuing development of more established areas of ethnic studies: questions of *latinidad* and Jewishness can thus be brought into dialogue with one another in

a manner that puts critical pressure on these terms and their concomitant assumptions.

Similarly, questions of ethnicity and sexuality can significantly elucidate one another. In fact, recent deployments of the term diaspora offer a key example of this critical intersection and the insights it engenders. Given its principal association with the Jewish population—whether the Hellenistic Jewish population specifically or a more general characterization of Jewish history—the term diaspora is inexorably linked to the loss of a sacred homeland and subsequent dispersion, and these circumstances are generally attributable to a significant change in the political environment. Based on this definition, the extension of the term to describe purportedly similar experiences and circumstances in the African and Latino communities—to cite two relatively common examples—should prove less than astounding. Nevertheless, the term has also been applied to describe situations with less obvious connections to its original context. Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez Eppler's edited volume, *Queer Diasporas* (2000), draws this comparison between queer subjectivity and ethnic migratory experiences, calling attention to the apparent discrepancies that emerge from the pairing of "diaspora" and "queer." If indeed diaspora is traditionally associated with the loss of a sacred homeland—for example—how would such a loss apply in this case? On the one hand, one might argue that the diasporic and queer experiences are quite distinct since queer subjectivity is often associated with the gathering and building of a community rather than the reconstitution of a community in exile. Nevertheless, as Patton and Sánchez Eppler explain in their introduction, the use of the term underscores the inevitable displacement that is an inherent

characteristic of queer subjectivity. In addition to the original loss of Eden and the foundational Adam and Eve paradigm of the Judeo-Christian tradition, they argue, queer subjectivity is fundamentally displaced by the centrality of the hetero-normative narrative of self-formation and fulfillment. That is, the queer diaspora is produced by the loss of the archetypal home itself.

In his contribution to *Queer Diaspora*, "Outing Freud's Zionism, or the Bitextuality of the Diaspora Jew," Daniel Boyarin argues that Freud's writing posits the queer femininity of the diaspora against the hegemonic restoration of masculinity of the recovered homeland. That is, the cultural identity of the diasporic Jew is marked as foreign and inherently lacking, a deficiency that could only be overcome through the normativity promised by the telluric narrative of Zionism. In fact, I would like to suggest that it is this vision of "diaspora and its discontents" that is best suited to a reading of Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe* (2001). As I will argue here, *Days* presents a narrative of personal fragmentation and loss that incites a pilgrimage to an ancestral homeland. Through the complexities of plot and the paradoxical narrative strategies employed by the author, however, the loss is never fully eradicated. Although the protagonist does successfully realize a journey of discovery that leads to more satisfying self-expression, the novel ultimately presents a vision of increased equilibrium and authority within a situation of irrevocable displacement. That is, her journey initially offers a compensatory solution that will ameliorate the inherent lack of exile. In the end, however, the trajectory produces a bitextual economy of desire in which the purported loss of homeland is reproduced through its translation or transference to another category of lack.

## Next Year in the Diaspora: Cuban (American) Jews

To some extent, *Days of Awe* is a novel about diaspora and the question of its translatability. Obejas's earlier works, in particular, *Memory Mambo*, present complex and multi-faceted intersections of sexuality and *latinidad*. In her latest novel, the Cuban American author tells the story of Alejandra, a young woman who gradually discovers and accepts the complexities of her cultural background. Ale's story follows the pattern of a typical Cuban American bildungsroman. She is born in Cuba but is raised predominantly in the United States. Her family flees to Miami less than two years after the Cuban Revolution when Ale is still relatively young. Ale's struggle to come to terms with her own identity leads her back to Cuba, to her childhood home and to the relatives who had remained there.<sup>2</sup> Unlike most comparable examples, however, Ale's journey of self-discovery ultimately proves much more multicultural than she had initially anticipated. Although the protagonist was aware that she had Jewish ancestors on both sides of her family, she believed that Judaism was a remote legacy that had not been practiced or even embraced by her relatives for several generations. Even as she is aware that Jewishness constitutes part of their ethnicity, she does not view Judaism as a significant component of the family's contemporary history or current belief system. Over the course of the novel, however, she learns that her father and his relatives both practiced and identified themselves as Jews throughout their lives (albeit secretly, in many cases).

The double bildungsroman of the novel calls attention to the complexities of diaspora. Certainly, for the Cuban-Ameri-

can community, Cuba is the lost ancestral homeland and is almost irrefutably the destination of a return pilgrimage—even if this pilgrimage is merely performative: many Cuban-Americans toast the New Year, marking both the passage of time and the anniversary of their exile by saying, “El año que viene en Cuba.” Similarly, Jews throughout the world toast the New Year (and other seasonal holidays as well, such as Passover) with the phrase, “L-shana habah byerushalayim (next year in Jerusalem).” For Cuban-American Jews, therefore, there is a potential conflation or confusion of the return pilgrimages to the lost holy land. In other words, whether or not an individual Cuban-American Jew ever intends to undertake either journey, this individual forms part of a community that performs the ritual of imagining itself in two distinct locations—Cuba and Jerusalem—at the completion of the following cycle of the Roman and Jewish calendars respectively.

Early-mid twentieth-century Jewish immigrants fled to Cuba (as to other destinations) in order to escape the persecution and discrimination they had faced in Europe but often found that they had simply exchanged one version of racism for another.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, political leaders in the Caribbean viewed European Jews as an asset within their own ethnic cleansing projects. In *Adio kerida*, Behar expresses her own personal disappointment upon learning that her family's asylum in Cuba was based on an alternative prejudice that favored their purported whiteness.<sup>4</sup> As Robert M. Levine explains in *Tropical Diaspora*, when the St. Louis—a ship carrying Jewish refugees seeking asylum from Nazi persecution—was denied entry and returned to Europe, the incident confirmed the suspicions of many Cuban Jews that their presence was

tolerated but not embraced. Hence, given this already tenuous relationship, many members of the community immigrated to the United States both before and immediately following the Cuban Revolution. For many Cuban Jews therefore, despite significant personal and cultural connections, Cuba has never fully functioned as a homeland. Consequently, its status as the lost or sacred homeland that a return migration would eventually recover is always already problematic.

In Obejas's narrative, the protagonist struggles to come to terms with the complex migratory history of her family. In the process, she also struggles to redefine the personal significance of the multiple cultural loci of her heritage. In the spirit of the New Year's toasts, the narrative ultimately points to a vision of a community that imagines itself "next year in the diaspora." That is, it presents the formation of a subjectivity and cultural practices that are based on a perpetual state of displacement. *Days of Awe* constructs a narrative of self-discovery in which the protagonist progressively embraces her own alterity. At the same time, however, the process never fully erases the loss and contradictions that the protagonist faces: that is, displacement and diaspora take the place of more conventional structures of subject-formation and—in doing so—palimpsestically mask an absence that they can never fully eradicate.

## Days of Awe

The exact relationship between the traditional components of identity and the consequences of itinerancy become the focus of Obejas's novel. Ale's search for identity—and the narration of this process—are persistently complicated by issues of

translation, displacement and chiasmus. That is, the traditional tropes of self-definition are negotiated through continual metonymy: one loss is supplanted by another. In the end, this concatenation does not impede resolution; instead, it underscores the search for an alternative paradigm of subjectivity.

As with many Cuban-American novels, the Cuban Revolution figures prominently in *Days of Awe* and in Ale's life. She is born on New Year's Day just as Fidel Castro is advancing towards Havana, and thus becomes—both literally and symbolically—the child of a new era. The beginning of her life is inextricably bound to this moment of transition, a moment that leads to her family's departure from Cuba soon thereafter. In addition to this paradoxical relationship with time and history, Ale's first days are also marked by another source of internal conflict: shortly after her birth, her survival is threatened by an incompatibility between the RH factors of her mother's and father's blood. As the doctors treat Ale's condition, moreover, her mother performs the rituals of Afro-Cuban *santería* while her father quietly prays in Hebrew. In this way, Ale is also the child of disparate and contradictory legacies; in order to survive, she must somehow reconcile this amalgam of competing systems.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Ale becomes an interpreter as an adult. Not only does this role facilitate significant connections with other characters and her initial return to Cuba in the plot of the novel, but it also leads to salient observations about self-expression and identity. In one instance, appropriately enough, the protagonist reflects on the idiosyncratic meaning of the word *destierro* and the lack of a suitable counterpart in English; although

it is usually expressed as exile, Ale avers that this rendering belies its more literal meaning of “unearthing” or of a violent separation of a people from their (home)land. This linguistic tension is clearly connected to the geographic trajectory of the protagonist, yet it also symbolizes the principal struggle in the novel: the attempt to appropriately overcome the violent rupture engendered by displacement or alienation through the construction of a more fluid synthesis of the idiosyncratic cultural differences that do not easily lend themselves to translation or substitution. In this sense, translation constitutes a bridge that attempts to negotiate the distance between linguistic and cultural specificity.

The protagonist also compares her own relationship with language and bilingualism with her father’s. While Ale works principally as a practical interpreter, her father is known as a leading translator of master works of Latin American fiction:

I’m an interpreter, an oral translator, my father’s daughter but I’m nowhere near his rank and order. I’m not sought after by Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes. I’m not really trained in literature nor do I teach language to eager graduate students the way my father did, deciphering not only the corresponding grammatical structures but also the layers underneath, the histories of the cultures. I don’t have his patience, so I rarely do written work. (51)

In this manner, Ale juxtaposes her own simple rendering of messages in an alternate language to her father’s more mystical manipulation of the function and power of language. Translation itself is part of her heritage. At the same time, however, this common interest does not foster an inti-

mate bond between father and daughter; instead, Ale feels fundamentally disconnected from her father and his relationship with language, culture and knowledge.

This tension, moreover, mirrors the project of the novel. Ale envies her father’s manipulation of the discursive code and views it as superior to her own more practical endeavors in which she facilitates communication among monolingual speakers. Her father preserves both the meaning and the poetry of the original while Ale believes that she merely manipulates and transfers meaning in a manner that privileges pragmatics over aesthetics. Over the course of the novel, however, the protagonist learns to value her own ability to negotiate meaning. In fact, Obejas’s text repeatedly explores this very movement between the singularity of a sign that defies substitution and the fluidity of meaning. Ale’s father can provide access to established literary traditions, an “archive” that allows him to reconstruct his displaced cultural legacy in a new context. Nevertheless, neither Ale nor *Days* can be neatly inserted into this archival tradition of cultural particularism and preservation; both the protagonist and the novel depend on processes of transculturation that produce meaning through innovative syntheses. The character and the novel progressively move away from established literary and linguistic values and embrace instead a system of codification that cannot be fully accommodated within conventional structures of expression.

The juxtaposition of conventional literary translation and innovative interpreting (or interpretation) can also be traced in other aspects of the novel. Throughout the work, Ale strives for an increased understanding of both her heritage and her own cultural subjectivity. Each discovery or resolution that the protagonist achieves,

however, points to the possibility of additional layers of identity. One of the principal structures of palimpsestic reconciliation in the novel is the chiasmus of Judaism and sexuality that is enacted in Ale's relationships: she experiences her ethnicity through episodes that are introduced as moments of sexual self-discovery and—conversely—narrates her most intensely sexual encounter during her explorations of her family heritage in Cuba.<sup>5</sup>

The narrative of her life in Chicago focuses on two principal relationships: one relationship with a man and another with a woman. At the end of both relationships, her partner suggests that Ale does not fully understand her own feelings or position. The disintegration of the romantic relationship is attributed to a lack of strong sentiment or deep commitment:

I'd like to say that at some point before we separated I fell in love with Seth, that my heart burst, that it overflowed its borders with passion, that we consumed each other. But it never came, that intensity, that painful yearning. At least not with him. (177)

Ale juxtaposes the cool comfort she experiences with Seth with the more volatile and passionate emotions she experiences with Leni:

If I've ever been absolutely naked, numb from the absolute need of another person, it was when I met Leni Bergman, with her spiky hair and dirty green vest, standing in the cavernous front hall of the Art Institute of Chicago. (177)

Ale's attraction towards this woman is consistently tied to the idea of difference. Yet

this difference also produces significant tension in the relationship, which—in turn—is experienced in terms of the two women's positions and attitudes regarding their own cultural heritage and ethnicity. At their first encounter, Ale observes that Leni is Jewish based on her surname, an assertion that Leni immediately challenges:

'Ah, Jewish,' I noted when she told me again. 'I'm not Jewish,' she said, rolling her intense amber eyes in disgust. 'My parents are.' 'Oh,' I said sarcastically, 'you're one of *those*.' (177)

The protagonist repeatedly describes her admiration for Leni's self-confidence and the freedom with which she apparently reterritorializes her ethnicity. Paradoxically, however, Leni proves less and less able to mask or control her ethnicity when it comes to the perception of her identity. On the one hand, she revels in the misreadings of her cultural heritage:

Ironically, Leni—who, like Seth, insists there's no Jewish 'race' Jewish type, only stereotypes—had a harder time finding that no-ethnic-fly-zone. With her big dark eyes, full lips, and cinnamon skin, she was always mistaken for Moroccan or Greek, sometime Brazilian or even Cuban. In a way, she loved the confusion, the way the stereotypes worked to cast her as beautiful and exotic. She loved to defend herself against any latent racism by telling me how flattered she was by these mistakes. But I was militant in my response, always reminding her how easy it was to bask in such flattery when she could give her good Jewish name for restaurant reservations that were always available and

affordable to her, or when car rentals always hinged on her less than exemplary credit over my own immaculate records. (179-80)

On the other hand, Leni takes offense when her Jewishness is readily identified or rigidly ascribed to her. In a particular incident when the two women are together on the bus, Leni is upset when she is “outed” or clearly identified as a Jew and is distressed when Ale doesn’t appear to share or truly understand her response. One of the passengers on the bus begins to sing carols and wish her fellow passengers a merry Christmas as they depart. After offering the Christmas greeting to Ale, the woman offers a slightly different message to Leni, “And happy Hanukkah to you, little sister! [...] Jesus loves you, too!” (181). Leni is quite taken aback by the incident and visibly flustered, but she rejects Ale’s attempts to comfort her or discuss the event:

We didn’t talk about what happened, not then, not ever. But what I realized was that, for all the mistaken ethnicities with which Leni gets tagged, she also gets pegged right a lot of times. It makes her uncomfortable because Leni wants to disappear into the storm, into the dusting of clean, fuzzy stuff. Leni wants to be anonymously American, unfettered and free. What I can’t tell her, even to this day—what I can barely admit to myself—is how much I secretly envy the inevitability of her Jewishness. (182)

In the end, Ale discovers that her own subjectivity is more complicated than she had expected (albeit perhaps not as fluid as Leni’s more utopian fantasy). Nevertheless, it is this fundamental difference in their attitudes

towards and feelings about identity politics that compromises their intimacy.

This pair of relationships and Ale’s response to them becomes even more poignant when juxtaposed with her experiences in Cuba. While staying in Cuba, she encounters Orlando and his lover. Her strong attraction for these two individuals closely parallels the relationships described above, although now it is articulated in more overtly sexual terms. She first observes the young girl sitting behind the house in which she is staying and is immediately drawn to her. Later that evening, she witnesses an encounter that ultimately leads to the most significant sexual interaction between the two women in the novel. As she peers into the small courtyard behind the house, she sees Orlando pour milk onto an empty chair—an action that is not only bizarre but truly astounding given the relative scarcity of milk in Cuba. The justification of this use of the commodity quickly becomes apparent when the young woman re-enters the courtyard:

Then the girl [...] parted the greenery and stepped in beside him. Her dark curls floated in the air. She lifted her white dress. Her underwear was missing and a plush patch of black appeared between her legs. Then slowly, regally, looking Orlando in the eye the entire time, the girl lowered herself into the milk, her pubic hairs catching drips of white. [...] Once the girl looked up, as if to the star-filled sky, and found my blue-gray eyes instead, glistening, no doubt, like a wild animal’s. She smiled with quiet surprise but did nothing more than stroke Orlando’s hair. (86)

Subsequently, Ale has a sexual encounter with Orlando, and this encounter is inextricably linked to the earlier episode:



I closed my eyes when Orlando touched my lips with his fingers. [...] His lips fell on mine and there, in the slightly sour after-taste in his mouth, I savored the richness of the beautiful girl. (87-88)

As with Leni, Ale expresses her attraction in terms of an identification or a desire to be more like the young girl she observes. At the same time, however, the descriptions of her body are highly detailed and sexually charged. In fact, the sexuality and concomitant desire in this case are even more explicit than those of her lover Leni's body or of their sex life. Although this discrepancy could certainly be interpreted as a classic exoticization or orientalizing of the mysterious Cuban beauty, it also reproduces the pattern of displacement and chiasmus: while Ale characterizes her relationship with Leni in terms of ethnic identification and negotiation, she experiences unmitigated desire and sexuality during her voyage of (self)-discovery and the recuperation of her lost ethnic heritage.

In both cases, the episodes are paradigmatic of Ale's evolution. As she travels to Cuba, Ale not only learns about her family's history but she becomes increasingly able to understand episodes in her own life. After learning more about her father's past and his history as a practicing Jew, she is able to more accurately interpret a mysterious episode that had taken place in the Chicago neighborhood of Rogers Park: she had once accidentally stumbled upon her father laying tephillin and praying in the basement of their house.<sup>6</sup> As with the Freudian primal scene, she was not able to fully understand what she witnessed as a child, but she can revisit and reinterpret this foundational (and illicit) encounter in light of the new knowledge that she acquires in Cuba.

The intersection of Jewish, Cuban and bi-sexual identification in the novel problematizes episodes and characterizations that might otherwise seem simplistic (or, one might even argue, stereotypical). Obejas deploys many of the classic tropes of multicultural narratives. In doing so, she represents characters, places and cultures in a manner that—to a certain degree—appears reductionist, orientalizing and fetishistic.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the intercalation of multiple categories of difference disrupts the logic of (dis)identification that would reify subjectivity and spatiality. Cuba cannot function as the sacred space of cultural recuperation because Ale's experience of discovery is necessarily inflected through her sexuality and her bisexuality is complicated by its intersection with questions of ethnicity.

This interweaving of aspects of her heritage is reinforced by structural elements of the novel itself. The title of the novel underscores the process of self-examination and awareness that the protagonist realizes. "Days of Awe" refers to the period in the Jewish calendar from Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) to Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement). It is a time of year dedicated to formal rituals of self-examination, contrition and spiritual cleansing. In fact, the activities of these holidays and the intervening period (commonly referred to as the Ten Days of Repentance) foster the assessment of prior acts of both individuals and the community as a whole. All those celebrating the holidays repent for their own individual transgressions as well as those of their fellow Jews and hope to be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year. The "days of awe," therefore, constitute a sacred period in the cycle of personal and collective self-knowledge, renewal and growth. What is inscribed in this case, however, is

not a renewal of religious faith since Ale never expresses an affinity for Judaism or the concomitant practices per se. Instead, the ritual invokes the spatio-temporal structure that frames the process of reconciliation. That is, *Days* traces the process of inscription and renewal that is traditionally associated with the celebration of the Jewish New Year; in this case, however, that process is mobilized as part of a (trans)cultural self-affirmation.

### Quotation Marks: The Politics of Displaced Citations

Along with the character's process of self-affirmation, the novel negotiates a complex relationship with literary conventions and precursors. In fact, Obejas utilizes a rather paradoxical system of intertextual citation in the novel. Throughout the work, the author incorporates episodes, fragments or sections of other texts and fully integrates them into the narrative structure of her text. That is, the other work is either paraphrased or reproduced as if it were the thoughts or artistic creation of one of the characters in Obejas's novel. In one case, for example, the character Barbarita purportedly translates Bei Dao's "The Answer" into Spanish at the behest of a group of Chinese Cubans (42). As the narrative explains parenthetically, Barbarita's translation was subsequently published by these individuals in their underground newspaper in Havana. In a footnote, the author identifies the source of the poem, offers specific bibliographic information and also clarifies her own role in the translation:

From Bei Dao's 'The Answer,' translated into English from the original Chinese by Bonnie S. McDougall

in *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, edited by Carolyn Forché (New York: W.W. Norton, 1954). Subsequent Spanish translation by A.O. (42)

More significantly, perhaps, several texts from a Judeo-Hispanic tradition are cited similarly. Ale reads to her father from a copy of Judah Halevi's verses. Again, in a footnote, the author identifies the specific bibliographic information for an edited anthology entitled, *Poetas Hebreos de Al-Andalus* (285). In both cases, the citation is doubly marked: the relationship between the character and the quoted text is expressed within the narrative itself, and—similarly—the author renders visible her own relationship with the "borrowed" text by including bibliographic information and explanations.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, not all the intertextual reproductions in the novel are explicitly marked or identified. In several instances, Obejas narrates a specific episode from Cuban literature but does not acknowledge or attribute it to its original source. At one point, for example, the protagonist recounts an anecdote about a young boy who used to compose poetry by inscribing words on trees near his childhood home and who was severely punished for being overly effeminate when his family learned of the custom. The anecdote is taken from the work of Reinaldo Arenas and was subsequently also re-enacted in Julian Schnabel's adaptation of Arenas's autobiographical work, *Before Night Falls*. In this case, however, Obejas does not include a footnote or mark this section of the text as having been borrowed or adapted from an external source.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the liberal incorporation of textual precursors is a common literary practice and is not always accompanied by explicit acknowledgement, framing or attribution.

What I find striking in this case, however, is the discrepancy between the two practices of citation that Obejas employs. In the examples that I have described here, the poetry is explicitly identified and cited yet the Cuban novel is implicitly borrowed and seamlessly incorporated into the text. Hence, Obejas seems to maintain a clear distinction between cultural property and foreign territory; the Cuban episodes and anecdotes can be legitimately utilized as hers, but the fragments from other world literatures must be clearly presented as belonging to someone else. Hence, while the novel narrates the process of self-discovery through which Ale increasingly comes to terms with her own multiculturalism, Obejas's system of citation delimits the terrain of that process of self-assertion and transculturation.

More importantly, perhaps, this discrepancy underscores a parallel between the content of the novel and its form since it highlights the need to negotiate alienation and distance between a speaking subject and the ever-elusive expressive mode that subject utilizes. The act of citation enacts the displacement that is at the core of any semantic system; it is a mechanism that negotiates the very interstice that inevitably exists between the sign and the signified. Marjorie Garber argues that citation and—to an even greater degree—"scare quotes" mark the requisite distance of linguistic correctness (whether political or historical): they constitute an act of disidentification between the code and the speaking subject that simultaneously unites and divides them:

Always 'in quotation,' whether its quotation marks are showing or not, the quotation often blends, apparently seamlessly but with its seams

and its seams showing, into the parent text of the quoter. As in the philosophical brainteaser, 'This statement is false' is true, the location and comprehension of a quotation's limits, and the degree to which *its* voice is marked as different from the speaker's, can radically alter both our sense of its truth value and our interpretation of its meaning. (32)

In fact, according to Garber, the politics of citation merely reinforces an underlying semantic circumstance in which there is a fixed and fundamentally insurmountable distance between the speaking subject and what is being said. This distance, nevertheless, is often the locus of semantic production, the space in which meaning can be productively negotiated and renegotiated.

In this way, Obejas's system of citation can be seen as directly connected to the project of the novel. It acts as a counterbalance to Ale's assimilation of her own multiculturalism. It establishes a communal terrain in which Cuban cultural production constitutes a common or shared corpus of referentiality that is available to the author as well as her protagonist. This same practice, however, cannot be extended to all cultural production or even to a paradigm of "world literatures" that might group a Chinese protest poem with Judeo-Hispanic lyrical verse and the work of a persecuted gay Cuban author. Instead, it clearly delimits a distinction between the expanding domain of the protagonist and a more over-arching paradigm through which both the protagonist and the author could gain immediate and unmitigated access to a vast array of cultural experiences. In this sense, distinct experiences of exile, alienation and diaspora may inform one another but they are not necessarily readily interchangeable.

Throughout the novel, Obejas repeatedly relies on explicit negotiations between temporal, cultural and narrative terrain rather than seamlessly integrating them. Although the novel certainly presents a voyage of self-discovery and a clear progression towards reconciliation, it is not entirely linear. Instead, the narration of Ale's history is presented through episodes that intercalate Cuba and the United States along with distinct temporal and generational layers. Even on the level of sentences and grammatical structure, moreover, Obejas frequently utilizes dashes or parentheses through which additional information and clauses are embedded within the sentence. In this way, the novel conjoins several personal narratives, sources of information and cultural contexts. At the same time, however, the process of conjoining these components remains visually and grammatically explicit. Hence, the multi-layered, female and queer bildungsroman navigates the tensions of this complexity but does not fully resolve or eliminate them.

### A Poetics of Uneasy Combinations and Limits

Through this combination of content and form, *Days* narrates a journey of self-discovery that leads to further complexity rather than to resolution through reduction or simplification. On the one hand, the novel celebrates the tension of multiculturalism: Ale becomes increasingly comfortable with her own non-conformity and embraces her differences. On the other, however, the narrative structure of the novel constructs a complex negotiation of diasporic subjectivity that brings together an array of experiences while also insisting on a system of territoriality that refuses to universally

equate or blend all cultural differences. Ale is able to recuperate her own lost cultural legacy, yet the narrative system distinguishes between the heritage that can be absorbed and seamlessly integrated into the semantic code and a cultural history that can be apprehended but not fully co-opted by the speaking subject. Hence, *Days* constitutes a narrative of personal reconciliation that nonetheless insists on multiple (and even excessive) differences, almost to the point of hyperbole or redundancy.

This poetics of territoriality demarcates the specificity of multiculturalism. At the same time the interweaving of structures of irreducible distance and themes of reconciliation also produces a fundamental contradiction in the novel. Through the chiasmic intersections of Ale's subjectivity, one category of difference repeatedly stands in for another. The narrative, however, also points to the very limits of substitution or translation of difference. It suggests that homologous cultural experiences may inform one another, yet each retains a specificity that is not readily transferred to its cross-cultural counter-part.

This contradiction ultimately points to the emergence of an alternative narrative of self-definition. Obejas presents a journey of self-discovery that questions the conventional parameters of identity, yet the journey is narrated in the form of a highly traditional literary paradigm. Hence, the novel produces an uneasy combination of cultures in which the non-normative twists must be mediated through narrative and authorial conventions. Traditional identity paradigms favor a hierarchical ordering of difference. Within typical narratives of self-definition, different aspects of alterity must be subordinated to a principal label or marker of identity. A novel, therefore, might narrate the process through which the protagonist

increasingly comes to terms with her/his own sexuality, but issues of ethnicity, race and class tend to become secondary factors.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, multicultural identification can have an impact on the trajectory of self-discovery, but the insistence on simultaneous an equally significant categories of self-definition disrupt the typical evolution of such narratives.

Recent scholarship in both Queer and Ethnic Studies has increasingly demonstrated the importance and—to some extent—the inevitability of intersections among categories that historically have been viewed as separate, parallel or hierarchically organized in relationship to one another.<sup>11</sup> As I have argued here, Obejas's novel traces the uneasy negotiation that attempts to reconcile the contradiction between conventional paradigms of self-definition and contemporary narratives of multicultural (and multifaceted) positionality that resist the traditional ordering of identity. In her novel, these categories are posited against one another in a competitive struggle for centrality within the canonical master narrative of subjectivity, which—in fact—leads to their repeated reorganization through devices such as palimpsest, chiasmus and metonymy.

In this sense, Obejas's novel constitutes the literary equivalent of the phrase, "next year in the diaspora." The text engenders a reconfiguration that questions the traditional trajectory of cultural identity. It underscores a shift away from exile and loss and toward the embracing of diaspora as a productive space of subject formation. At the same time, however, this shift is articulated in terms of a discursive pattern that is inexorably tied to structures of displacement. The "home" of self definition is therefore located in a proleptic elsewhere: by pointing to a recuperation that will be en-

acted at the completion of the calendar year, the phrase still implies that the principal locus of identity is situated in the spatial and temporal distance of exile. In the end, *Days of Awe* strives to negotiate the paradox that I underscore in my title. The female, queer, Cuban, Jewish bildungsroman is inevitably (and excessively) a tale of the struggle to construct a subjectivity that will never be fully accommodated by the discursive parameters of that tale. In this sense, Obejas's novel documents both the possibilities and limits of non-normative self-fashioning.

In the end, the principal themes and conflicts that are narrativized in *Days* can be found in numerous works of fiction that address questions of ethnicity and/or sexuality. That is, to a large extent, Obejas's novel presents a conventional tale of alterity. Nevertheless, as I have argued here, the novel does not merely reproduce the established traditions of ethnic literature(s). Instead, it dialogues with its precursors in a manner that is both productive and disruptive. That is, the processes of transcultural narration are not only made explicit but—to a large extent—remain exposed and uneasy in the novel.<sup>12</sup> *Days of Awe* underscores the paradoxical relationship between non-normative subjectivity and traditional narrative structures of subject formation, and it must repeatedly construct mechanisms that negotiate this underlying contradiction between its content and form. Consequently, a fundamental tension emerges between the celebratory embracing of difference—on the one hand—and the adherence to traditional narrative forms on the other. In this manner, *Days* presents a transcultural narrative that is both recognizable and intelligible and—at the same time—also strives to remain fundamentally unsettling in its discursive and textual practices.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Versions of this essay were presented at the Latin American Studies Association Conference, at the Jewish Studies Workshop and Feminist Scholarship Series at the University of Illinois, and at Tetatúd: Queering Latina Cultures held at Cornell University. I am grateful to my colleagues who attended for their insightful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> This pattern can be found in many examples of the immigrant bildungsroman. More specifically, in the U.S. Caribbean tradition, the protagonist often realizes a trip back to the island of their youth (or of their ancestors if they were not born there) as part of their voyage of self-discovery—i.e. Julia Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, Paule Marshall's *Daughters* and Edward Rivera's *Family Installments*. Nevertheless, although return migration had constituted a theme in *Memory Mambo*, the novel did not explicitly focus on this pilgrimage as a requisite component of the process of self-discovery (at the conclusion of the novel, the main character plans to travel to Cuba, but this voyage is not represented in the text itself). Hence, the narration of the trip—or, in this case, the trips—as a key source of self-awareness breaks with the pattern established in Obejas's previous work.

<sup>3</sup> Jewish immigration to Cuba is not limited to this period. As in the United States, however, it increases significantly during this time. Moreover, the Jews who arrive during this period often have no personal or familiar attachment to Cuba specifically. They relocate there solely because it is purportedly a location that offers greater freedom and opportunity than their current homelands.

<sup>4</sup> A similar irony has also been more fully documented in the case of the Dominican Republic. Rafael Trujillo offered over 100,000 visas to German Jewish refugees at the Evian Conference in 1938. Not only did this policy help to improve the dictator's image but he presumably believed that the Jewish immigrants would advance his own ethnic cleansing project by "whitening" the Dominican population (Wucker).

Of course, a complete discussion of the racialization(s) of European Jews is beyond the scope of this essay. What I would like to emphasize here is the racialized and/or de-racializing role of the Jews in the Caribbean. In fact, the potential value of the Jewish population may reside precisely in their ambiguity. Their "whiteness" is a construct that belies a subtle and inherently unstable negotiation of the color line. They could serve as an effective mechanism for blurring the absolute binary and—by extension—rhetorically "whiten" otherwise ambiguous categories of racial identity in the Antillean context by reducing or erasing their clear identification as racially marked. Although I will not thoroughly investigate these perceptions or their consequences here, I would like to underscore the slippery alterity of Judaism in Obejas's novel and how it ultimately destabilizes other categories of self-definition and identification in the Cuban-American context the author presents.

<sup>5</sup> This relationship was brilliantly encapsulated in a conference paper that Linda Craft presented at a recent meeting of the Latin American Studies Association (March 2003). The title of her paper was, "Closeted Jews and Wandering Lesbians: Crypto-Identities and Fiction as Atonement in Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe*." In addition to this inspired title, I am extremely grateful for the lucid and provocative reading of the text she presented, which—along with other points of intersection—led me to reconsider the role of translation in the novel as I discuss it here.

<sup>6</sup> In the glossary that accompanies the novel, Obejas defines tefillin [sic] as:

[t]wo small black boxes, biblical in origin, containing prayers, which Orthodox Jewish men are required to wear each weekday morning. These are held in place by black leather straps. (366)

In accordance with the text contained in the boxes (which instructs Jews to bind the words of the prayer as a symbol between their eyes and around their hearts), one box is placed on the lower forehead and the other is placed on

the inner side of the arm. The leather straps of the latter are wrapped around the arm and hand symbolically (the number of times and shape in which the straps are wrapped both hold particular significance). The ritual of placing the boxes and straps in this manner and reciting the associated prayer is often referred to as laying or binding tephillin. Although Ale was presumably not able to recognize or understand this ritual as a child, she was able to recognize the practice as something sacred, both extraordinary and clandestine.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Licia Fiol Matta offers a subtle and complex reading of the novel in which she argues that Obejas's portrayal of Cuba reflects the reductionist nostalgia of her diasporic position. Fiol Matta astutely underscores the relative treatment of Cuban and U.S. spaces in the text and—in doing so—articulates an extremely insightful critique of the work. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that this dichotomy is complicated by other elements and registers in the novel.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, the choice of these particular authors and works is not insignificant. Both authors are poets who both experienced and wrote about exile from their respective homelands. Judah Halevi was an eleventh-twelfth century poet who lived and worked as a physician in Spain and wrote about the loss of the land of Israel and his hope for its future restoration. Bei Dao (the pseudonym of Zhao Zhenkai) is a twentieth-century Chinese writer who lived through the cultural revolution and was ostracized and eventually exiled for his writing. Although they are each dealing with different political and historical contexts, their poetry (and the readings of it) can thus be seen to reflect the themes of translation, transculturation and diaspora. The novel does not offer this information, but it does facilitate access to it by overtly naming them and citing the specific bibliographic information for their respective works.

<sup>9</sup> This textual borrowing is not entirely unprecedented in Obejas's work. Similarly, in *Memory Mambo* she integrates an episode from Arenas's work. As the author herself has ex-

plained in several interviews, the two writers were close friends and interlocutors. It is not my intention to discuss the legitimacy of this practice; my aim here is to focus on the discrepancy between the two systems of citation that the author uses and to analyze its implications.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, a novel can also document the impossibility of multicultural identity narratives. The novel may focus on the protagonist's struggle to reconcile competing categories of difference (i.e. to be Cuban, Jewish and queer at the same time). Nevertheless, in such cases, the centrality of this tension reinforces the contradiction that emerges when non-normative subjectivity does not fit neatly into traditional paradigms. That is, if the multiple aspects of difference can not be hierarchically ordered, the novel tends to become—above all else—the story of how the protagonist comes to terms with an identity that resists conventional definitions.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to the scholarship already cited in this essay, works published by Caren Kaplan, Lawrence LaFountain Stokes, Eithne Luibhéid, Martin Manalansan, Dwight McBride and Siobhan Somerville—to name a few prominent examples—have elucidated the complex intersections (and interplay of) racialization, transnational migration and sexuality.

<sup>12</sup> As Kate McCullough has cogently argued, similar processes of textual codification can be traced in *Memory Mambo*:

Underscoring the narrative means by which colonial legacies circulate, *Memory Mambo* demonstrates the impact of exile on both narrative structure and plot development. (600)

In this sense, I would argue that *Days* offers an even more explicit rendering of the processes of textual codification that McCullough has analyzed in Obejas's earlier work.

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