

Fiction, Biography, Autobiography, and Postmodern Nostalgia in (Con)Texts of Return

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Volume 1 Issue 4 (December 1999) Article 2**Patricia D. Fox,****"Fiction, Biography, Autobiography, and Postmodern Nostalgia in (Con)Texts of Return"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/2>>

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Abstract: Patricia D. Fox discusses in her article, "Fiction, Biography, Autobiography, and Postmodern Nostalgia in (Con)Texts of Return," the meditations, in novel and essay, of variously positioned writers and protagonists as each contemplates return to a never glimpsed or long-lost geographical and cultural center. Attempting to decipher the grounding in place and time, by heritage or tradition, Fox's analysis juxtaposes selected texts: *Hungarian Rhapsodies: Essays on Ethnicity, Identity and Culture* (Richard Teleky, 1997); *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (Keith B. Richburg, 1998); *Dreaming in Cuban: A Novel* (Cristina García, 1992); *The Hundred Secret Senses* (Amy Tan, 1995); *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America* (Gustavo Pirez Firmat, 1995); and *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter* (J. Nozipo Maraire, 1996). The discussion compares the at once postmodern and nostalgic negotiation of the enunciated perception of displacement, on the one hand, and, on the other, a truncated sense of belonging, be it circumstantial, constructed, or assumed. Thus, the study suggests that, coupling imagination and substitution in the search of tangible ties (e.g., language), essayist, novelist, and protagonist transform themselves into architects of a unique transcultural history and diversely place themselves within a desired territorial context by the studied reconciliation of polarities.

Patricia D. FOX

Fiction, Biography, Autobiography, and Postmodern Nostalgia in (Con)Texts of Return

In *Hungarian Rhapsodies: Essays on Ethnicity, Identity and Culture*, Richard Teleky explains "Exploring my ethnicity became a way of exploring the arbitrary nature of my own life. It was not so much a search for roots as for a way of understanding rootlessness -- how I stacked up against another way of being" (175). In the bitterly less rhapsodic tone of *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*, Keith B. Richburg proclaims "Thank G-d my nameless ancestors brought across the ocean in chains and leg irons, made it our alive. Thank G-d I am an American" (vi). In the wonderfully complicated distance between these two assertions, the perception of rootlessness or displacement impacts, and ultimately defines, the invention of personal identity. More importantly, the pronounced polarity evinced here lays bare the often masked tension between individual confrontations of racial/ethnic heritage on the one hand and the construction of an imaginary melded cultural -- national or continental -- identity on the other. The resulting balancing act -- the overt or tacit strain between two worlds, between past and present -- represents a reiterated focus in a number of recent novels and essays, including Teleky's *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, Richburg's *Out of America*, *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina García; *The Hundred Secret Senses* by Amy Tan; *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America* by Gustavo Pérez Firmat; and, *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter* by J. Nozipo Maraire. Taken as a whole, this rhapsodic sampling of seemingly "miscellaneous or disconnected pieces" (xii), to use Teleky's definition of rhapsody, surveys the uses of nostalgia -- imagination and displacement -- in the studied reconciliation or transformation of polarities and the attendant invention of a neither arbitrary nor serendipitous "post-modern" self.

As each patchwork narrative attempts to bridge the resulting identificatory gulfs or gaps/caesarea, their end of the millennium rootlessness ironically remains "intimately bound within the structure and investments of nostalgia" (Sobchack 93). Tied up in the business of newly envisioning the sepia edges of borrowed photos, real or imagined, the observations of the not quite tourist-outsider, seen through a culturally filtered lens, then "function ... to fix a being-that-has-been (a presence in the present that is always past)" (93). Therefore, following this Vivian Sobchack definition, the present project defines nostalgia as a three-tiered, converging relationship: 1) with or to place or space -- the fixity of being and place; 2) with or in time and history, similar to past present/presence verb tense which assumes a temporal continuity with a present tense experience; and 3) weighted by in-betweenness amid oppositions, challenging the fit (fixity or continuity) of identity (see also Jamison, the basis of Sobchack's argument). For his part, Teleky suggests that, in the post-modern moment of simultaneity and excess, these interconnected relationships represent the incongruous effort to streamline a complex series of fissures: "'Nostalgia and the search for roots belong to our fin-de-siecle mood; they can be a [n over-] simplification of other historical moments, times we would probably never want to belong to. Often, too, our nostalgia is coupled with irony -- an irony that critiques what we feel. This irony is a central feature of the postmodern narrator, someone usually left alone with self-awareness, fragmented and supposedly beyond illusions" (167; see also Lyotard). This paradox makes itself felt in a variety of ways, from the cutting tone and a discomfiting celebration of ideological bias in the essays of Richburg and Pérez Firmat through the juxtaposition of simple mindedness and cerebralness in Tan's effort and the sometimes jarring didactic interruptions to the motherly musings in Maraire's text. Even the gentler tones of Teleky and García still wrestle to encounter a balance between the innocent eyed explorer and filtering gaze of the practiced analyst.

All of the texts share a peculiar post-modern self-reflexivity and an anachronistic nostalgia replete with constructed identities which directly or indirectly privilege an imaginary past and place, thoughtfully penned by professional writers: academics, journalists, novelists. In consequence, whether thinly or unabashedly autobiographical, the writing of self in-between spaces and places invariably insinuates an ambivalence inspired by shifting fixities, continuities and fits. While the essays by Teleky, Richburg, and Pérez Firmat clearly announce their first person-al stance, the novels too possess something of the autobiographical. Thus, the blurry distance between creative author,

character, text, expression and experience gives voices to first persons plural, proffering a figurative veracity eerily echoed in the non-fictive efforts of the essayists.

The titling further contributes to this post-modern self-reflexivity and nostalgia. *Out of America* deliberately recalls and reverses/transposes Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*. Centered on individual African experiences, these interloper narratives nevertheless diverge sharply in their perception of the newly discovered, rejected in one instance, embraced in the other. For its part, *Next Year in Cuba* echoes the plaint of Jewish peoples, "Next year in Jerusalem," pronounced during the Passover Seder, evoking a nostalgia for place and tradition. *Hungarian Rhapsodies* conjures the heights of Central European cultural production and Teleky inserts himself into this tradition, mode of being and system of knowledge (see also Hankiss; Konrád). *Dreaming, Secrets* -- word choices pointedly reminiscent of Freudian psychoanalytic focuses -- and the letter format of *Zenzele* unearth formerly hidden or overlooked histories and ways of story-telling. This multiplication of narratives and the un-silencing of a series of others challenge and fulfill those discourses once considered mainstream and dominant. In that spirit, Zenzele's mother reasons: "History is simply the events as seen by a particular group, usually the ones with the mightiest pens and the most indelible ink. Certainly the dates can be objective, but the events never are. All things are relative, even in science. ... Until the ivory tower turns to a rainbow with all countries represented, you would do well to be suspicious of the so-called facts. History, your father says, is determined by its authors, just as the building is defined by its architect, not its inhabitants. Until we put pen to paper, historically, we do not exist" (Maraire 79; see also Foucault on history and Latin American *testimonios* of Erasmo; Barnet; Menchú).

More than a clever intertextual interplay, the overt referentiality of this titling uncovers an urge to rewrite history and to enable a nostalgic embrace of the past, redefined by a new corps of writer-architects. However not all points of comparability render themselves so easily. While all of the texts under scrutiny deal with displacement, each approaches from a different angle -- emigration, immigration, exile, the diaspora/dispersal of descendants of the Middle Passage. Hence, the narrations of the various displaced persons, related in essay, memoir, recollection, fictive recreation, seemingly have all the comparability of apples and oranges, proffering a dizzying cacophony of racial, ethnic, cultural identities and political designations. Teleky, a third generation Hungarian American, describes his text as "a combination of essay, lament, celebration, and scholarship that takes its shape from my own exploration of a range of subjects" (xii). Foreign correspondent for the *Washington Post*, Black American Richburg, despite an introduction which sees this postmodern narrator "left alone with self-awareness, fragmented and supposedly beyond illusion (Teleky 167), invites the reader on a journey, advising, it is "my own personal journey, much of it taking place inside my head. ... Let me be your guide, and try to follow along as I lay out for you here why I feel the way I do -- about Africa, about America, and mainly about myself and where it is I now know I belong" (xvii).

Of Chinese descent on her father's side, Tan's protagonist, born and raised in the States, knows China only from the tales of her older, slightly loony Chinese half sister. For its part, García's novel intersperses the voices of three generations, variously rooted in a shifting Cuban identity: native, exile then immigrant, and the first generation daughter/granddaughter of these. Similarly, academic Pérez Firmat, referring to himself as "a member of the 'one and a half' generation ... Cubans who were born on the island and [who] came to the United States as children or adolescents" (1), feels uniquely formed and sometimes deformed by his North American sojourn. In Maraire, the African mother anticipates her daughter's departure to university in the United States and so attempts to create in her offspring a preventative nostalgia: a desire to return to family, place, tradition. Nevertheless, while the angle of approach and form of expression vary, a commonality based in the experience of estrangement, sometimes mild, others stinging, holds sway. Thus, these "disconnected pieces" merge thematically and what they say about place, time and identity provides intriguing juxtapositions.

Displaced Nostalgia

For the fictional figures created by Tan, Maraire and García and for the real-life Teleky and Pérez Firmat -- in fact, all save Richburg -- spatial nostalgia has a name, a specific geographical location. Cuban born Pérez Firmat is first tied to Havana in general and particularly to the "almacen" [food warehouse] which the family owned and to the house where the family lived in the Kohly neighborhood. Later, as he moves to graduate school in Ann Arbor and then to a teaching post in Chapel Hill, his spatial point of reference centers on Little Havana, Miami. For Hungarian descended

Teleky, the letters saved by his immigrant grandmother represent the most material ties which locate his inherited space in Hungary, in general, and in the city of Győr, in particular. Similar to fellow academic and creative writer Pérez Firmat, even in the new world, Teleky enjoys the "spatial continuity" (Pérez Firmat's terminology) of St. Elizabeth's, a Hungarian Church in Cleveland, Ohio and the butcher shops and bookstore on Bloor Street West in Toronto, Canada, even when the glorious moments for these landmarks belong to a by-gone era. Tan's protagonist has Changmian, the unglimped ancestral village in China which represents the stuff of her sister's fantastic stories. At one point, García's most central figure can imagine her Grandmother Celia's porch, overlooking the Caribbean Sea and, at another, delight in the remembered olfactory stimuli of her mother's New York bakery. Zenzele can rely on the ancestral village Chakowa and the modern Zimbabwean metropolis, Harare, lovingly reconstructed in her mother's extensive missive. Such directness of spatial referentiality provides a ready, if at times illusive, anchor.

Nostalgically, Pérez Firmat calls this "match of person and place" (*bienestar*; 250). Postmodernly and self-consciously, he will later warn: "Even if places brand people, one cannot reduce a person to his place" (258). Teleky echoes this sentiment, asserting "The only way to lose a sense of place is to lock into the sadness or desperation of not finding it in the externals; a place rarely corresponds to externals anyway" (167). Those observations probably ring true if one is about postmodernly deconstructing the fixity of person and place. However, that critique ultimately -- and studiously -- remains at odds with their exercise of nostalgia which indeed relies on reduction and locking onto externals in order to gauge the "authenticity," veracity and depth of identity. Perhaps the outward invisibility of their ethnic or national roots to the untrained eye or ear stands in stark contrast to Zenzele's mother's reproach to a "lost-African" cousin desperately striving to erase the link between place and externals: "Chakowa is in your hair, the flare of your nostrils, and the curves of your muscles, whether you like it or not. You cannot bury your roots no matter how many layers of London tweed you wear" (Maraire 63). While Telekey and Pérez Firmat complicate personal choice to belong by marking difference -- insistence on Cubanness, the search for Hungarianness -- longer lost African Richburg attempts to reduce his Black and American identities to externals constructing as artificial a sameness of person and place-by-default as the fictive disappeared cousin.

Consequently, between heart-felt and head-thought, the absence of that terrestrial fixity reveals other lacks and exacerbates already conflicted dualities. A secondary player in Amy Tan's novel comments: "I was born to a dead mother, so I was born to no one. I have been both Chinese and foreign, this makes me neither. I belonged to everyone, so I belong to no one. I had a father to whom I am not even one half his son. Now I have a master who considers me a debt. Tell me, whom do I belong to? What country? What people? What family?" (165). Within the Chinese imaginary he describes and lives, this questioner feels himself marooned, outcast, and therefore i would suggest, eager to be branded by a place and to correspond to a people.

In other instances, not belonging is constructed. Pérez Firmat's Cuban mother "time after time said, 'Remember, we are exiles, not immigrants.' Unlike the immigrants, we did not come to this country to start all over -- we came to wait" (121). As a result, he confesses "I saw myself as a transient, not a settler, as just a man passing through" (254). That stance proves costly: "My brothers and I grew up distrusting and blaming each other as much as we distrusted and blamed our parents. ... Instead of sticking together and helping each other cope, we flew off in separate directions" (174). Even so, in contrast to the aforementioned fatherless child, the exile still possesses a space, albeit precarious: "The exile knows his place, and that place is the imagination" or more precisely, "memory enhanced by imagination" (82), and one need add, no small amount of "substitution" (82). In *Dreaming*, another Cuban mother -- this one fictional -- advises her pampered son, "Imagination, like memory, can transform lies to truth" (García 88).

Intriguingly, imagination and substitution recall the workings of metaphor and metonymy and suggest a serviceable indication of what nostalgia makes happen. Indeed, just as Pérez Firmat metaphorically observes that "Exile is a hall of mirrors, a house of spirits" (82), South Florida embodies substitution: "Miami is a city of mirrors and mirages. ... Barely touching the earth, the city floats in a sea of images, a swelter of illusions" (77). Accordingly, one "comforting delusion" involves the desire to retain fixity. In consequence, the Cuban-American community invents, on the one hand, sameness despite difference: "while we have remained the same, it's our homeland that has changed"

(84) and, on the other, contiguity despite interruption: "The true Havana is a movable city; its foundations slide on shifting grounds" (86). However, not-belonging --circumstantial, as seen earlier, or constructed, as described here -- inevitably leads to "a kind of motion sickness" induced by "too much displacement" (249).

The Black Diaspora represents a dramatic example of "too much displacement," the exacerbated sense of not belonging -- be it to immigrant narratives, first class citizenship scenarios or Africa-centric discourses. In Richburg's acerbic memoir, imagination fails to bridge the distance, perhaps because the war correspondent daily deals in starker realities, perhaps because, for him, not-belonging is assumed rather than constructed. Reporter Richburg laments: "I sometimes tried to speak with them [the native Somali and Kenyan drivers and aides with whom he worked] but found that few had more than a superficial grasp of English ... and I had even less idea what language they spoke when I heard them laughing together in the darkness on the rooftop" (72). When, unable to decipher the language, he is later mistaken for an African and nearly killed at gunpoint until onlookers come to his aid, he reasons, not without irony, "All because I was a black man in the wrong place, a black man in Africa" (Richburg 88). Neither does his hyphenated African-American identity allow him to belong in more intimate ways: "If there was one thing I learned traveling around Africa, it was that the tribe remains the defining feature of almost every African society" (Richburg 104). In *Zenzele*, the daughter expresses a similar sentiment, despairing: "But Mama, is there anyone in this city whom I am not related to? Each time I meet someone, they turn out to be Grandfather's uncle's niece's cousin or something!" to which her mother responds later in the letter: "The extended family is your community, your own emotional, financial, and cultural safety net. It is Africa's most powerful resource" (Maraire 31). Consequently, echoing Tan's marooned character, Richburg might inquire "Tell me, whom do I belong to? What country? What people? What tribe? What language?" (paraphrased Tan 167). The young reporter's title emphatically answers those queries as does his concluding epiphany: "while in America I may sometimes feel alien, it is here in this place, the land of my distant ancestors, that I truly am the alien. This was another world for me.... I knew I didn't belong here" (Richburg 223).

For North American Black Richburg, there exists no welcoming Bloor Street West, no relatives in Győr, no Little Havana, no house in the Kohly district of Habana, no village in China which beckons, no grandmother's porch in the country of inherited origin which awaits or invites, no ever-present and welcoming clan in Chatow. Africa is the dark continent: amorphous, unintelligible, with thousands of anonymous, ugly and agonizing deaths. Maraire's narrator, the Zimbabwean mother writing to her daughter, provides a welcoming counterbalance to Richburg's generally harsh and negative commentaries about the African continent and peoples, although she acknowledges "Western propaganda" and "anti-African jargon," here voiced by a secondary character: "Just look at Africa! The only landmass populated largely by blacks and the world's most miserable excuse for a continent! There is not a single viable nation from Libya to Swaziland! They are all corrupt, poor beggars. ... Where are our Einsteins? Where are our Picassos? Who shall be our Churchill? Africa is an economic wastebasket! A cultural desert and a political swamp! It is a wasteland! Absolutely pathetic!" (63). Perhaps for her, Europe and America are the dark continents, swallowing, shaming and stripping from errant African wanderers their language, culture and being. Notwithstanding, that simplistic inversion fails to decipher her own peculiar experience of displacement and not belonging: the imposition of Europe in/on Africa: "To outsiders, Zimbabwe is just a name signifying some random geographical boundaries. It is a noun like *mango*, *pen* or *car*. But for me, it is different. Rhodesia was a forbidden country for me, a white man's playground. ... I shall never forget the day I stood on the sidewalk in town, transfixed as they took down the dreadful, prohibiting letters spelling Rhodesia down from city hall and put up, one by one, the name that gave me the keys to the kingdom of my country. I had inhabited Rhodesia, but in Zimbabwe, I lived" (52). Here, then, a psychic proximity rather than physical distance shapes her particular understanding of the evolving referentiality implicit in *bienestar*, the "match of person to place."

Timing Nostalgia

On one level, nostalgia seems to indicate an obsessive engagement with the past. However, as Sobchack's definition suggests, nostalgia more amply colludes with various temporalities to assume -- or to construct -- continuity. One manner in which this happens suspends the forward linear

movement of past, present and future as in the case of Abuela Celia in *Dreaming*: "All summer ... she has lived on memories. ... Her past, she fears, is eclipsing her present" (García 92). Another manner evokes the fluid, yet stable, characteristic of the perception of history and personal events. The longing for place, always already implicated within such conceptions, further serves to erase or to freeze the passage of time. Thus, in New York, her granddaughter worries "Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be" (138). Her mother, ever the adapter, welcomes the new temporal sense that the new space engenders, reasoning, "I was meant to live in this colder world, a world that preserved history. In Cuba, everything seemed temporal, distorted by the sun." (146) [N.B. Spanish uses the same word, *tiempo*, for time, the concept, and weather, linguistically bolstering the conceptual confusion.] That kind of fluidity frustrates her offspring: "This is a constant struggle around my mother, who systematically rewrites history to suit her views of the world. This reshaping of events happens in a dozen ways every day, contesting reality. It's not a matter of premeditated deception. Mom truly believes that her version of events is correct, down to details that I know, for a fact, are wrong" (176). Understandably, "postmodern" realities such as the compression of time and "nostalgia coupled with irony" evident in such simultaneity represent a bone of contention.

Notwithstanding, traditional cultures seem to have much less difficulty with fluidity, temporal or spatial. Old world Changmian, Chatowa, Habana, and Györ resolve and complement rather than exacerbate identificatory frictions so often evinced in modern new world neighborhoods such as Bloor Street, Little Havana, San Francisco's Chinatown, New York's Spanish Harlem or "Westernized" Harare, sites which inspire longing, and sometimes melancholy. Such conflicted sentiments compel narrators and essayists to nostalgically simplify or to re-write the relation between space and time. Again Richburg serves as the exception, or at the least, the expected inversion. Accordingly, the insistence on his present, his individuality, self possession and reporter-like objectivity must needs lead from and explain his rejection of all but the most phenotypical -- which is to imply, esoteric -- African roots, past, nostalgia. Accordingly, the sense of not belonging to the moment, temporal displacement, represents a recurrent thematic. By extension, whether a fixing or a freezing of "a being-that-has-been" or the "[over]simplification of other historical moments we would probably never want to belong to," timelessness ties the post-modern narrator to the workings of nostalgia. In China, Tan's protagonist confesses, "I feel as though we've stumbled on a fabled misty land, half memory, half illusion. Are we in Chinese Nirvana? Changmian looks like the carefully cropped photos found in travel brochures advertising 'a charmed world of the distant past, where visitors can step back in time.' It conveys all the sentimental quaintness that tourists crave but never actually see. There must be something wrong, I keep warning myself. Around the corner we'll stumble on reality: the fast-food market, the tire junkyard, the signs indicating this village is really a Chinese fantasyland for tourists: Buy your tickets here! See the China of your dreams! Unspoiled by progress, mired in the past" (229-30).

Teleky's intended return to Hungary prompts a similar pre-negotiation between past and present: "While my mind was filled with pictures of the 'old country' courtesy of Grandma's memories and André Kertész's photographs, another world would confront me at every turn. Baroque stucco churches and fin-de-siècle architecture seemed only a backdrop, and I grew more curious each day about the way people faced the change from communism to 'a market economy'" (143). He too will worry about what might be glimpsed around the corner: "Caught in my desire to recreate a past known only secondhand while even acknowledging the futility of that desire, of course I dreaded what I would find in Hungary. Everywhere, I read of changes in Budapest -- franchises of Pizza Hut, Burger King, and Dunkin' Donuts ... -- as if Hungary had come to the end of its own unique history ... Even though I knew that 'Hungary' existed mainly in my mind -- and that my real relation was with these images, and not a place -- I wanted to hold on to the images. Could I find what I wanted?" (167). In Richburg and Maraire, timing nostalgia evokes a longing, not so much for the past, but more so for the present and the future, respectively. Their texts concern the attempt to situate the central figure in a specifically chosen temporal context. Although Zenzele's mother writes of history and roots -- "at least you can somehow be a part of my past -- of our past, which lives on in Chakowa. Things are still as they were there, and they are so different than this [present urbanity]" (Maraire 27) -- it is the future of her daughter that she wants to assure by enabling the young woman to "hold on to the images" of

her African reality in order to survive an alien environment. For his part, Richburg rejects the futile desire "to recreate a past known only secondhand" and consequently measures time in present -- and apparent -- outcomes.

Whether as a recourse to deal with cosmic musings or harsh realities, timing nostalgia allows the central figures of the various texts to locate themselves within a context. Accordingly, while the "fin-de-siècle mood" of sensory and emotional bombardment exacerbates the feeling of displacement, the simultaneity of jet travel and globalization -- not to mention cutting edge technologies such as cellular phones, fax machines, and the internet -- makes continuity all but impossible to decipher. Thus the efforts to control time -- and one's placement within it -- provides the necessary basis to the erasure, re-writing and the selection of temporalities and the consequent reduction to more predictable or promising historical externals. These juxtapositions set up a series of oppositions, a slippery trails of signifiers couched behind postmodernity and nostalgia: bombardment-reduction; displacement-belonging; fragmentation-self-awareness; and, metonymy-metaphor.

In between Postmodernity and Nostalgia

For some writers, displacement represents a call to home: a cathartic return to a world never glimpsed, vaguely remembered from childish imaginings or filtered through the misty unconnected anecdotes of family members. For others, the call to place reveals a conflicted reassessment, a truncated longing or a half-hearted resignation. This stance recalls Teleky's assertion regarding the fruit of postmodern nostalgia: "This irony is a central feature of the postmodern narrator, someone usually left alone with self-awareness, fragmented and supposedly beyond illusions" (167). In consequence, nostalgia weighted by postmodern oppositions challenges the need for fixity and continuity, profoundly implicating the transformative details of identity. The challenge resides in bridging the gap, negotiating an estranged, dis-integrated self, diffused by spatial and temporal distance, and the longing to somehow fit into an abstracted identity. In that context, Pérez Firmat's focus on duality, the baptism into another where of the exile, underscores discomfitted relations between the there and the here, the past and the present: "My present was my future, my future was my past, and my past was Cuba" (254). These conflicted territories tear, chafe, frustrate. While for García's protagonist return and temporal fluidity heal estrangement, for Pérez Firmat, the closing declaration that "This must be the place" reveals a tone of unconvincing resignation. Consequently Pérez Firmat concludes, "Rather than merging Cuba and America, I oscillate ceaselessly, sometimes wildly, between the two. My like is less a synthesis than a seesaw" (274). That spatial schizophrenia finds its echo in the following observation made by Richburg: "Two worlds ... This gap was too wide between the Africans and myself, and I found that no matter how hard I tried, I could never cross it" (Richburg 72-73). In each case, the apparent resistance to continuity produces strange bedfellows. Black Middle class faith in promises of upward mobility glibly applauds the enslavement of kidnaped African ancestors. In both *Next Year* and *Dreaming*, embodied by the one and a halfer mother, the Cuban-American imaginary blithely ignores Cuban national sovereignty under the call for democratic rubric of Cold War economic and political binary oppositions. For Pérez Firmat and Richburg, ethnicity, race, citizenship, and nationality represent identificatory elements that slowly eat away at the displaced, resulting in resentment, wasted lives, blame, and bitterness. In consequence, for differing reasons, both feel they lack *bienestar* and this perhaps accounts for the often defensive tone -- at turns bitter, at others resentful -- of their essays.

Tellingly, Richburg and Pérez Firmat relentlessly reference the self even when speaking about family, colleagues, or community. Even as they attempt to mark themselves as other, they embody North American-ness in its less attractive forms: individualistic, arrogant, tending to rush to judgement. Because of this, I imagine that the reader difficultly continues reading or shares sympathy with the writers. Their combative tone rejects the concern which the not yet already converted reader might bring to the theme or the text, requiring only that their audiences shut up and read. Nevertheless, that kind of single minded ardor, aggressiveness and "hormone-driven machismo" only thinly cloaks an obvious wounding for which they have not yet found a name and for which their texts, striving towards "a doctrine of responses and responsibilities" (Pérez Firmat 238), seem to be the first step towards trying to heal. Therefore, the virulently male posturing discloses the costly constrictiveness of masculine gender roles.

Conversely, *Dreaming*, *Secrets* and *Zenzele* also employ the self as conduit to relate the stories of others. In Tan, the quirky life of her half sister and ever present and real family ghosts share the stage with the sometimes intellectually distanced observations of the central figure. In García, multiple individual voices unite to recount tales of exile, one and half lives and second generation travails. These novels then proffer a rhapsodic pastiche reaching towards an overly simplified wholeness. The distinct tones might represent the differing formulaic demands of the genres: the essay form necessarily more unabashedly didactic than the novel. The disparity might be gender related -- to my readerly tastes or authorial styles -- since in this grouping, the women writers tend towards tellings that resemble a gathering around kitchen tables much more than in front of soap boxes. However, no less self referential than his male colleagues, Teleky, in capturing the details of the Hungarian immigrant community, becomes a guide who invites exploration and discovery rather than a zealot given to forced conversions. While Teleky also broaches the issue of duality, his essays more often highlight the recurrent theme of centrality. Tapping a history of Hungary's Central European in-betweenness, he nourishes, similar to comfort foods, a less angst filled response to otherness. New found or newly re-discovered ethnicity -- Hungarian, Cuban (in *Dreaming*), Chinese, Shona tribal identity or Zimbabwean national identity -- is landed, tied to the specific context of a motherland or a native space. Conversely, racial identity, here Blackness, ultimately remains without territory, even though Africa has long been discussed as though it were a country rather than a continent. The dependencies created by these circumstances in one case the emphasis on externals: details, in the other the stress on reduction, adaption. Thus, Richburg can admire the African for one characteristic: "They also survived by adapting. I discovered not only in Somalia but elsewhere across the continent that human beings possess inside an uncanny survival instinct and an ability to transform themselves to meet their circumstances" (49). The reporter has so well improvised his American-ness precisely because he profoundly lacks the externals on which to pin his African-ness, a gap woefully abridged by the arbitrary term African-American.

In contrast, what essayist Pérez Firmat, in particular, and "the one and a half generation," in general, who refuse or fail to adapt, lack are not so much a place, but an intervening history and its attendant "spatial continuity" (53): "Although my memories of Cuba may seem firm and clear, in fact i remember very little. ... Soon after our arrival in the States, I stopped thinking about the details and routines of our lives in Havana. Cuba quickly became abstract, a topic of obsessive discussion and debate rather than a place I would lovingly or morbidly reconstruct in memory" (33). In that vain, Teleky observes "My 'ethnicity' is made up of details, endless details, which make me think of the old adage, often attributed to Flaubert, that 'G-d is in the details.' So is ethnicity" (172-73). The abstraction of time and space then begs for concreteness -- imagined or substituted. Thus, other factors contribute to the creation of a psychic sense of *bienestar*. As the quotation from Richburg about the communication gap between he and his African fellows insinuates, language -- conduit of culture and identity -- provides a tie to place. More precisely, as the quotation from Maraire indicates, the ownership of the word allows one to significantly partake in the reality of place within a specific temporal context. Tellingly then, Teleky devotes more than half of his book to the relationship between being and language, opening the text with a chapter on his choice to study Hungarian as an adult. He returns to the theme with "A Short Dictionary of Hungarian Stereotypes and Kitsch"; a call to a Hungarian language book store, "Visiting Pannonia"; a reading of the visual language of photography and film; essays on translations and translators; and, a meditation on wordlessness in which he deciphers representations of Hungarians in North American (US and Canadian) literature.

This evolving exercise in identificatory re-vindication repeats strategies of recuperation familiar to me from Black and later Chicano nationalisms which, as a first step towards difference and definition, sought to decipher, reevaluate and revalue imposed or assumed knowledges about personal and communal identities (see e.g., Malcolm X, Gloria Anzaldúa). Often, an important part of that reexamination included the element of language ownership, be it inherited or improvised, be it a newly acquired mother tongue, Black English or Spanglish (see Baldwin and Chicano poets). García's fictive text likewise examines the workings of language on being. The relationship sometimes disables: "I envy my mother her Spanish curses sometimes. They make my English collapse in a heat" (59), as is also the case with a colonizer's language in *Zenzele*: "Needless to say, we always spoke in Shona. English was awkward for us, when we spoke it, it felt like a fizzy drink had gone down funny

and all the bubbles were popping up your nose" (Maraire 47). In other instances in García, that relationship sometimes frees: "Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for re-invention" (73). At still other times, language provides the key to transformation. In Cuba with her grandmother, the young adventuresome protagonist realizes: "I've started dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. There's a magic working its way through my veins. ... wishing to remain forever, she catches herself admitting] sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong -- not *instead* of here, but *more* than here" (236). Dreaming in Spanish, having the place within her, allows the young woman to make peace between the once confusing, paralyzing feeling of not belonging and wordlessness just as speaking Shona and *living* in Zimbabwe work a similar magic in Zenzele's mother.

In Tan's lyrical meditation on being and culture, the Chinese-American author insinuates that something invariably gets lost in translation. At one point the China-born protagonist's sister chides her younger half-sibling: "Tst! This American thinking" and an inner voice seemingly concurs "Wise up gringa, this is China, your American ideas don't work here" (223). The unwilling returnee later wonders "Will Chinese thinking ever take root in my brain?" (268). Part tourist, part reflected native, she looks through her camera's viewfinder attempting to frame her version of Chinese reality: "I should be 'previsualizing' the moment I want, willing spontaneity to coincide with what's given. But all I see in my head are well-heeled readers flipping through a chic travel magazine that specializes in bucolic images of third world countries. I know what people want to see. That's why my work usually feels unsatisfying, pre-edited into safe dullness. ... I hate myself for being American enough to make these judgements. Why do I always edit the real world? For whose sake?" (293).

For García's dreaming and Tan's pre-editing protagonists, bi-lingualism initiates a subtle shift in the perception -- and appreciation -- of the known and the foreign. Additionally, as Teleky comes to realize in his tardy acquisition of Hungarian, being in language allows one to be in culture and, by extension, to be in place. Thus, language, as just one example of other factors pushing toward *bienestar*, holds within itself the intangible rules of culture and by extension forces a focus on details. While any of the perspectives examined here would move one to adapt, the change can result transformative rather than reductive, as in the case of Richburg. In consequence, the intersection of nostalgic fluidity within a postmodern embrace does indeed characterize a fin-de-siecle mood. Thus, the generalized perception of lack -- displacement, timelessness, wordlessness -- colludes in the search for those grounding details which might afford a continuity of ownership of a place and a history by an ever-growing cast of architect-writers.

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