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Masters of Return: Traveling Between Homelands in Contemporary Jewish American and Cuban American Fiction

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

MASTERS OF RETURN: TRAVELING BETWEEN HOMELANDS IN
CONTEMPORARY JEWISH AMERICAN AND CUBAN AMERICAN FICTION

By

Izabela Zieba

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

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Masters of Return: Traveling Between
Homelands in Contemporary Jewish American
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This project reverses the traditional directionality of ethnic studies by examining literary representations of ethnic returns – the returns of second-generation Americans of foreign descent to the land of their ancestors. It specifically focuses on Jewish American and Cuban American protagonists who travel between their natal and ancestral homelands, pointing to a counterintuitive affinity between their stories. Analyzing a wide variety of texts, from the highly controversial works by a prominent historian, Jan T. Gross, to literary accounts by Dara Horn, Tova Reich, and Ana Menéndez, I argue that Cuban American and Jewish American returns are based on rejection and ambivalence caused by the unresolved tension between *gusanos* and the islanders, and between American Jews and Poles respectively. The project attempts to be a work of “the scholarship of possibility,” as anthropologist Erica Lehrer calls it, in that it envisions literature as a source of reconciliation. This endeavor gains special significance months after the opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, Poland, and weeks after President’s Obama first attempts at normalizing the relations between the U.S. and Cuba.

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction – Ethnography of Possibility

What does it mean when the central organizing principle of your life is an absence or distance?
--Erica Lehrer¹

Masters of Return

The title of this dissertation has been inspired by Svatopluk – Steve Stern’s character in *The Angel of Forgetfulness*. As the Czech guide is showing Saul, an American tourist, the Jewish Prague, he explains:

Dissolute individual such as yourself brings to Prague his own trifling fears the way human target returns to knife thrower his knives. Every Jew comes to Prague is *baal tshuveh*, master of return. This is corollary to mystical notion of *tikkun*, repairing of universe, in which scattered sparks of righteousness are restored to celestial source. In century of Kafka, who shares Jewish legacy of fear with world, best one can do is carry fears back to place they are broadcast from. (303)

To Saul, this speech sounds a lot like “mumbo jumbo,” and not just because of Svatopluk’s shortcomings when it comes to the mastery of the English articles. The “half-baked erudition” seems to hint at something essential without ever elucidating it. What are the fears that every Jew brings to Prague? In what way are they comparable to the “sparks of righteousness”? What type of return does Svatopluk have in mind? The questions that arise from reading the passage align with the questions I ask in this

¹ Lehrer, Erica T. *Jewish Poland Revisited. Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. Print.

dissertation. I am interested in the hopes and fears that motivate second-generation Americans of Jewish and Cuban descent to visit their ancestral homelands, as well as in the question of return and whether it is even possible to call it this way if the visitors in question had never previously been to their homelands. I am also interested in the return's restorative potential mentioned by Svatopluk: the idea that visiting a certain relatively foreign space could result in *tikkum olam* – repairing the world, especially the private world of the traveler.²

In his interpretation of return, Svatopluk uses the concept of *baalei teshuvah* – a penitent who returns from evil ways to find the light of God, thus restoring the original state. The act of creation that explains the concept of *tikkum olam* suggests God placed the divine light in vessels called *kelim*, some of which shattered. The light that attached to the shards constitutes evil and powers it through its divine force, imprisoning human souls in the material world. The scattered sparks can rejoin the divine light, just like in Svatopluk's perspective Jews scattered all over the world return to the nest of all fears and bring their fears along. This version of the creational myth subverts the idea of return by directing it to Prague instead of Israel and by replacing sparks of light with fear.³ It also suggests that the returnees are necessarily sinful and decadent through the influence of the external world, more specifically their natal homeland. Indeed, after his visit to Prague, Saul becomes orthodox in his ways and restores his righteousness by studying Jewish religion and literature. Yet the subversive concept of return offered in *The Angel*

² In my comments on Hebrew expressions, I depend on Sol Steinmetz and his *Dictionary of Jewish Usage: A Guide to the Use of Jewish Terms*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. Print.

³ In her parody of misguided *baalei teshuvah*, titled *Master of the Return*, Tova Reich exposes the motivations behind the return of a group of Americans who decide to follow the teachings of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav and settle in Jerusalem.

of Forgetfulness works well with other examples of contemporary Jewish American literature. In Dara Horn's *In the Image*, Leora's trip to Europe results in a more careful and much deeper understanding of the Jewish tradition, achieved with the help of her new partner whom she meets in Amsterdam. The return to Europe, a more recent and differently fraught ancestral homeland than that of the land of Israel, has its own space in the process of *tikkum olam* and can be restorative despite its grim nature.

In my dissertation, I argue that there is potential for restoration and closure in trips to ancestral homelands for both Cuban and Jewish American travelers, but I also point out the reverse relationship between the ability to realize this potential and the traveler's expectations. In Cuban American fiction, the protagonists who usually live in the Cuban American enclave of Miami feel incredibly close yet unbearably remote from the island, building their expectations and hopes of what it is all their lives. Thus, when their return takes place, it is often "rife with an intangible disappointment" (Otero 55). Jewish American protagonists are conditioned, due to the efforts of the older members of their families, not to expect much more from Eastern Europe than a vast cemetery in the anti-Semitic heartland.⁴ Both groups find their expectations challenged. The resulting feelings of emptiness, disenchantment, and betrayal are related to the heightened level of

⁴ Erica Lehrer explains this phenomenon as she discusses her trip to Eastern Europe: "I went to Poland expecting to find nothing. Like the ninety-odd percent of American Jews who trace their roots to Eastern Europe, the 'old country' for me existed only as the vague and caricatured setting of family history; it was not a place to visit, because our Poland no longer existed. But expecting to find nothing is not the same as having no expectations. The Poland I anticipated was a gray and vaguely malevolent one, a product of Cold War propaganda made more sinister – and more significant – by references to it by my parents' prewar European-born Jewish acquaintances as 'blood-soaked ground' and 'the largest Jewish cemetery'" (49). Just like some of the protagonists I discuss in the following chapters, Lehrer expected to find nothing, but ended up discovering much more than that.

expectations that precede the trip, especially to the notion – common to many tourists and travelers – that the trip itself might turn into a defining, life-changing moment and that somehow the experience would fill out the incompleteness they have been sensing in their hyphenated lives. The most haphazard and seemingly inconclusive stays, on the other hand, might lead to more lasting and deeper results whose prime example is Saul – the model master of return who changes his sinful ways after the Prague episode.

Unlikely Match

My project examines the idea of return and the significance of Eastern Europe in the works of contemporary Jewish American writers, placing it in comparison and juxtaposition – at times uncannily fitting, at times rather unlikely – with Cuban American writers and their approaches to the native island. This pairing is not accidental, even if – at first – it might seem risky.⁵ There are corresponding traits in each of these literatures that defy easy categorizations along geographic or ethnic lines, which I explore in the body of my dissertation. Both groups refer to themselves as Diasporic, although Cubans

⁵ While writing this dissertation and presenting its parts at various conferences and panels, I frequently encountered opposition and surprise at the very idea of comparing Jewish and Cuban writing. Dean Franco's descriptions of the reactions he received while writing *Ethnic American Literature: Comparing Chicano, Jewish, and African American Writing* felt deeply familiar: "When I began working on this book . . . [my] landlord asked me about my work, and when I told him that I planned on comparing Jewish, Chicano, and African American literature, he proceeded to explain to me why that made no sense at all. He delivered a long and compelling lecture . . . he also made it clear that he had been around the block a bit and knew a thing or two about ethnicity – he knew a handful of Jews, Chicanos, and African Americans, in fact, as renters, and he wanted me to know that these cultures were quite different, hardly comparable" (ix). Franco's professional environment was not any less hostile to the idea: "Since then I have been on the receiving end of many similar lectures from friends, colleagues, mentors, relatives, and sometimes complete strangers." Franco admits, "At minimum, these encounters sharpened my own thinking, and they often helped alert me to my own presumptions and blind spots." I like to think that the feedback I received did the same for this project.

more frequently use the term exile to describe the forced nature of their departure from the island. In Takeyuki Tsuda's definition, Diasporas are "ethnic groups that have been territorially dispersed across different nations because of ethnopolitical persecution or for economic reasons and are united by a sense of attachment to and longing for their country of ethnic origin (the ethnic homeland)" (1). Although the two Diasporas of my interest, second-generation Jewish and Cuban people living in the United States, are vastly different, the necessity to acknowledge difficult pasts and manage inherited nostalgias towards spaces filled with painful memories makes the experience of these two groups similarly complicated.

Both Cuban and Jewish Americans' histories are complex systems of layers in terms of origins and memories. Numerous Cubans and Jews can name more than one ancestral homeland alongside the natal one; interestingly, for some of them the homelands intersect in Spain. In contemporary novels and short stories, however, Spain appears as a much older memory and is not actively pursued as a theme. Yet the awareness of the geographically multilayered past – Spain and Africa for many Cubans, Israel, Spain or Eastern Europe for Jews – forces the protagonists to question the concept of a homeland and to feel incomplete wherever they happen to be. Dara Goldman notices the similarities in her work on Cuban American Jews and Achy Obejas' work:

Certainly, for the Cuban-American 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).” (62)

There are a few less widely discussed points of connection between the two groups that do not make the comparison between their literatures any more valid (after all, the comparison is based on the experience of returning to the ancestral homeland), but that add interesting perspective to the discussion of the ways the protagonists handle the returns.

Both Jews and Cubans believe in their exceptional status, substantiated by their respective histories. Ruth Behar claims, “Our island is small, but ever since Jose Martí envisioned our independence in the nineteenth century, we have thought of ourselves as a chosen people with a unique purpose in the world” (“After the Bridges” 7).⁶ Cuban literature is different both from the Latin American canon as well as the Caribbean one, “drift[ing] on the margins of the Latino mainstream” (Pérez Firmat 16). Historically, the paths of Jews and Cubans crossed multiple times and in most surprising ways, which Jewish Cuban writers and scholars based in the U.S., like Achy Obejas and Ruth Behar, explore in their work. Perhaps the most unsettling example of these intersections is SS St. Luis, a ship holding 937 Jewish passengers on its board, who in 1939 came so close to escaping the “final solution” that according to Robert M. Levine, “passengers standing on deck at night could see the lights of buildings and residences both in Miami Beach and in Havana” (129). The ship was prohibited from entering either Cuba or the U.S., and 667 of the 907 passengers who were forced back to Europe died by the time the war ended. SS St. Luis is a disgraceful space of intersection between Cuban and Jewish histories;

⁶ On the very same page, Behar calls the tendency humorously a “megalomaniac fantasy, what scholars politely call exceptionalism” (Behar “After the Bridges” 7).

Ruth Behar in *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* and Achy Obejas in *Days of Awe* both invoke the ship's image when discussing Cuban Jewishness. I am interested not only in Jewish American and Cuban American authors as separate entities, but also in Cuban Jews – not only because they nicely bring together the two threads of my project, concerning Jewish and Cuban Diasporas, but also because the seeming impossibility of this combination, commented on by both authors, describes the nature of ethnicity as “the collision of identities that the transnational writer confronts” (Israel 3).

Not coincidentally are Cubans known in the Latin world as “the Jews of the Caribbean” (Obejas 103, Duany in Pedraza 242). The experience of exile and the nostalgia for the homeland, typical of diasporic people, are common denominators for the groups. Obejas, however, notices the negative connotation of the phrase – “playing off negative stereotypes about Jews” – for example “greed and covetousness” involved in the takeover of Miami Beach by the Cubans (104). According to Silvia Pedraza, “ethnic enterprise” constitutes the basis for the saying as it is known in the Caribbean, especially when relating to Cubans in Puerto Rico, who became known as the owners of small businesses and “middlemen” (242). I see the expression as a source of a more profound affinity between these two “people[s] in diaspora . . . concerned with questions and answers and the temperament of a god that could make [them] suffer so inexplicably and capriciously” (Obejas 104). My understanding of how their returns differ from other ethnic returns is based on this affinity.

Because exile and historical turmoil prevent Jews and Cubans from living in their ancestral homelands, they frequently envision Promised Lands. The fact that these Promised Lands are rather unexpected is another point they have in common: more

contemporary fiction and non-fiction explores rather unobvious visions of these places. This is how Ruth Behar describes Cuban Jews who leave the island for Israel with the help of the Jewish Agency: “Only a handful of the Cuban immigrants stay in Israel, acquire an Israeli identity, and send their children to the Israeli army. Israel is too radically different a society for them to feel at home there as Cubans, and so inevitably the Jewish promised land becomes a stepping-stone to reach Miami, the Cuban promised land” (237). Obejas plays with this idea when she makes Paulina shout to her grandfather: “Next year in Miami, Abuelo, next year in Miami!” (316). In turn, the characters in Menéndez undermine this American dreamland, finding oftentimes that “Miami is too much” (*In Cuba* 193). The intensity of the city is both alluring and strenuous, and its permanent focus on the remote spaces of one secluded island affects its ability to cope with the everyday. And yet, for Alejandra’s father in *Days of Awe*, “the word ‘Cuba’ has become ‘his Zion’ – troubling and once again deconstructing the previous meaning of the word” (Sokolovsky, “Deconstructing a Secret History” 247). As Ale scatters his ashes into the ocean from the Malecón, reciting a poetic kaddish for his soul, she is certain that despite the relatively short time her father spent on the island (he came to Cuba to sell merchandise as an adult and left it as the revolution started), he is “at rest” in his Zion (357). The unobvious nature of the Promised Land, which seems hardly related to the length of the stay or political situation and more to the emotions it inspires, is a signature trait of contemporary Jewish and Cuban American fiction, whose authors discover the multiplicity and ambiguity of relations between motherland, homeland, place of birth, and citizenship.

The main point of intersection I notice and argue in this dissertation is that Jewish and Cuban American quests to ancestral homelands are intensely political (even if not perceived this way by the protagonist) and framed around rejection. Gustavo Pérez Firmat observes, “Along with remembered or received memories of Cuba comes ideological baggage – this too is an inheritance. Although the politics of the Cuban-American community are more complex than is usually recognized, it’s nonetheless true that sympathy for the Cuban Revolution among Cuban-Americans is – understandably, I hope – as rare as snow in Little Havana” (16). Thus, returns to the island – understandably, as Pérez Firmat seems to emphasize – are charged actions that everybody in the community judges and interprets, not always positively. Eastern Europe is an equally loaded space for Jewish Americans, as Erica Lehrer observes in her anthropological works: “Narratives of Jewish ‘return’ to post-communist Poland, written by Jews who have never been there before, invoke remnants, shadows, silences and voids. Published on websites, in community newsletters, and in college newspapers, they detail angry, tearful trips ‘back,’ filled with trepidation and ironic asides about grey skies, bleeding Jesus statues, Poles picnicking on sites of wartime destruction” (Lehrer 52). Both spaces, the island and the Eastern European region, were under communist rule for a long time, and now that the trips are made possible again – due to the fall of communism in countries like Poland and the former Soviet Union members, as well as the more open politics of Cuban leaders – second-generation tourists “return” (inverted commas and quotation marks are often used in this context to show the dubious character of the concept) with mixed feelings at best and inherited rejection at worst.

Coincidentally, both Eastern Europe and Cuba share a communist history, not entirely eliminated from East Europeans' mentality and still present in Cubans' life. This seemingly insignificant element adds an air of anxiety to the visit – the awareness of crossing an Iron Curtain of sorts, behind which anything goes. In his photographic memoir, Tony Mendoza describes a feeling of intense dread accompanying unexpected occurrences in politically unstable countries:

As I walked toward the gate, I suddenly froze. Over the main entrance, a very large electronic sign displayed this message:

Flight #12457

A Mendoza

Report Immediately to Gate #4

A Mendoza. Antonio Mendoza. That was me. How many A Mendozas could there be? Report Immediately to Gate 4. Was Gate 4 where the secret police had their offices? My heart immediately started pounding. Did somebody I had talked to report me? Was I going to be arrested just as I stepped onto the plane? I quickly decided I wasn't going in . . . What could it be? I thought of the many Cubans I had talked to, and to whom I had expressed my various antigovernment sentiments; maybe they were all agents of the Cuban regime and had tracked me all along. I thought of the suggestion I had made to the taxi driver, to create a traffic jam in El Malecón to protest the tax increase. Maybe that driver was an agent and I was being accused of counterrevolutionary activities.

Counterrevolutionary activities in Cuba can land you in jail for thirty years. (152-3)

It does not take long for the traveler to realize that the electronic sign displays information about the flight to an Argentinian city of Mendoza (“a” in Spanish can translate as “to”). Yet this bizarre and only partially humorous event well depicts the paranoia surrounding communist and post-communist countries, which look different and whose citizens behave according to different rules. The following chapters will present travelers who portray going east (in one case, to a still-communist Czechoslovakia), experiencing signs of a similar paranoia caused by the weight of history, the feeling that everyone is watching and judging, and the disturbing combination of familiarity and foreignness.

The return to the ancestral homeland, whether actual or through inherited memories and props, is an issue that the members of every diaspora’s second generation (and forward) must in some way address. While thinking about the fruitful ways in which Cuban and Jewish stories intersect and ways in which they sometimes run parallel, I spent time imagining more extensive and more varied intersections, including more (or different) diasporas and stories. The fact that I chose to focus on two specific communities does not leave me oblivious to the abundance of stories I left behind, and I anticipate more research that would cover the issues surrounding returns to various ancestral homelands. When deciding not to include, for instance, the necessarily painful returns of African Americans to the land they had been forcefully displaced from, I wanted to emphasize that Cubans and Jews left their homelands (or were forced to leave) because of the problematic situation within, as opposed to the problematic nature of something external to their homeland (the slave trade). Failing to include other ethnicities whose first generations left because of the problems inside the homeland was motivated

solely by my desire not to blur the discussion excessively by trying to address every potential return in ethnic literature. I look forward to reading other studies that will make different intersections meaningful.

Methodology

Transnational studies constitute the theoretical framework for this discussion of international returns, as they redefine the ambit of the humanities, highlighting the significance of an approach that transcends national boundaries to arrive at a better understanding of complex historical and social phenomena.⁷ Although predominantly literary in its scope, this study necessitates a multi-disciplinary perspective and promises to explore sensitive and thus rarely examined spaces of cultural intersection, which could contribute not only to American literary history, but also Cuban, Judaic, and Slavic studies. The definition of literary studies has long been based on a repressive “container” model, with “evident edges” enclosing “uniform contents,” which assumed predominantly territorial criteria of belonging (Dimock “War in Several Tongues” 270). Current theory challenges this paradigm, opting for an “open network . . . its circumference being continually negotiated.” Transatlantic studies challenge the national lens used to define the humanities: instead of focusing on American history and literature, it acknowledges the existence of the Atlantic world, tied closely with a net of cultural and

⁷ It is true for the project even though ethnic returnees’ relationship to the idea of transnationalism is counter-intuitive and unobvious: “Ethnic return migrants also live in transnational communities that link both immigrant-receiving and migrant-sending countries, but unlike ordinary migrants, their cross-border tours are constructed between two homelands (the ethnic and natal homelands). Although they may therefore be seen as prime candidates for developing transnational identities based on an affiliation to multiple nation-states (homelands), diasporic return often weakens previous attachment to ethnic homelands and can strengthen parochial nationalist sentiments” (Tsuda 9).

business relations, including but not limited to the infamous Middle Passage. I propose to widen the range of possible connections and include in the realm of transnational theory such geohistorical spaces as Eastern Europe, described in *Shades of the Planet* as “a locality whose deep entanglement with American literature is just beginning to be recognized” (Dimock 10). Wai-chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell’s volume includes a section entitled “Eastern Europe as Test Case,” in which Eric J. Sundquist and Ross Posnock successfully pave the way for this new type of scholarship, recognizing in Eastern Europe facts that according to the editors “have a bearing on American literature, facts that Americanists need to know” (Dimock 10). The significance of projects like this one for literary and historical studies, understood as a network of connections rather than rigidly delineated national narratives, is in reshaping disciplines to include localities that are frequently excluded from the discussion on the territorial basis, but which can illuminate old critical conversations and suggest new avenues for scholarship.

In one of the essays serving as test cases for Eastern Europe, Sundquist explores the “sinister zone of likeness” between Poland and the American South, found in the writings of William Styron (105). Problematic as this specific analogy might seem, the critic opens up a new line of comparative inquiry, especially suited for cross-referencing multi-ethnic texts. Jewish American literature is not unique in its simultaneous interest in numerous localities. Stories like “In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd” by Ana Menéndez or *The Agüero Sisters* by Cristina García create transnational spaces of Havana and Miami, similar to the ones forever connecting Eastern Europe, America and Israel. The immigrant experience necessarily produces half-imaginary localities based at actual geographical spaces, but filled with memory and conjecture, often anachronistic and no

longer recognized by its current inhabitants. “Singer’s Warsaw” in the title of the annual summer festival in Poland’s capital no longer exists in the traditional sense; it can only be explored through Singer’s “Varshavsky-stories.” Although many of the Jewish writers who immigrated to America were Polish citizens, the Polish canon certainly does not follow their literature to the U.S. These same writers may or may not be seen as part of the American canon, yet the Eastern European experience is not subject to a serious inquiry within American literary tradition. The neglected in-between space is left out of nationalistically constructed canons.

Ironically, the same principle governs the ethnic canon. Novels that constitute the basis of ethnic studies syllabi represent rigidly divided nations or ethnicities: Native American, Asian American, Arab American. This very project is constructed around the categories of Jewish and Cuban American; the only complexity here is the hyphen, much discussed and infamously criticized by Theodore Roosevelt.⁸ For the President, it is not foreign birth that threatens the stability and coherence of the country, but the conflict of allegiances. The prospect of including more than one option, as in Ruth Behar’s Cuban Jewishness, is still a source of cultural confusion and a seeming impossibility. In *Mona in the Promised Land*, Gish Jen presents the unlikely concept of a Chinese convert to

⁸ One of the first usages of the term “hyphenated American” is to be found in President Roosevelt’s speech on americanism: “There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism. When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans. Some of the very best Americans I have ever known were naturalized Americans, Americans born abroad. But a hyphenated American is not an American at all. This is just as true of the man who puts ‘native’ before the hyphen as of the man who puts German or Irish or English or French before the hyphen. Americanism is a matter of the spirit and of the soul. Our allegiance must be purely to the United States. We must unsparingly condemn any man who holds any other allegiance. But if he is heartily and singly loyal to this Republic, then no matter where he was born, he is just as good an American as any one else” (“Roosevelt Bars the Hyphenated”).

Judaism partly for the comic effect, which in itself is a commentary on ethnicity and stereotype, and partly to question this method of division. Interestingly, Behar explains in *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* that in reality, divisions are not always so easy to determine. Jews who came to the island in the early twentieth century were called *polacos* (5); since so many Jewish immigrants arrived from Poland, Cubans understood that they were Poles (which they were, although admittedly treated as second-class citizens at the time). For some of them, Cuba became a significant halfway point on their way to Israel, from where, in the end, many emigrated to the U.S., further blurring ethnic and religious distinctions. Their language, Yiddish, is still referred to in Cuba as *el idioma polaco*, the Polish language, and to this day Jews are generally known as *polacos* in Cuba, even when they are of Sephardic background.

My choice of scholarly works that constitute the theoretical base for this project reflects its multinational and multidisciplinary approach. Besides relying on literary critics – like Isabel Alvarez Borland and Jonathan Freedman – to deepen my analysis of primary works, I also apply the works of various scholars from other branches of science and humanities to understand the process of migration and tourism. The first out of a few important scholars who add the necessary anthropological perspective to this study is Takeyuki Tsuda. I follow his definitions of natal and ancestral (ethnic) homelands, and appreciate his interest and research in what he calls “the reverse directionality of the migrant flow,” which “introduces interesting new dynamics to previous studies of immigration (5-8). Tsuda provides an interesting perspective on the feeling of incompleteness emphasized by ethnic American writers and their desire to visit their ancestral homelands, as well as on the problems that such visits may generate:

“*Homeland* is a place of origin to which one feels emotionally attached, whereas *home* is a stable place of residence that feels secure, comfortable, and familiar . . . diasporic return can create a disconnect between home and homeland” (343). The scholar introduces the idea of disappointment that seems inextricably related to diasporic homecomings: “When migrants and hosts are ethnically related through common descent, does it produce unrealistic cultural and social expectations that are bound to be disappointed?” (4). I explore the idea of disappointment by closely reading chosen passages from the novels I am interested in, attempting to pinpoint both the motivation and emotions behind it.

In the novels I discuss in the following chapters, the returns are not only to homelands but to spaces imbued with meaning either through a specific commemorative design, as in Auschwitz, through propaganda explaining away the problematic aspects of Cuba’s political regime, or through silencing of the past, as in the Rijksmuseum of Dara Horn’s *In the Image*. The clashing expectations of visitors who encounter these frequently imagined spaces might result in disappointment or dismay. Thus, I envision the protagonists I discuss at the borderland between homeland tourism and dark tourism: the former describes travels to ancestral homelands; the latter focuses on destinations where death and suffering took place. To explain how they both work, I quote the work of Edward Linenthal, Joy Sather-Wagstaff, and Marco Garrido. In Chapter 3, where I discuss Jewish American novels – among others Tova Reich’s *My Holocaust* – I quote these authors to depict the depth of controversy surrounding commemorative sites, which does not help returning second-generation to face their expectations and manage

disappointment.⁹ The expectations of tourists who are somehow connected with the history of the place, but also of the ones that are not, create incongruences and disappointments of the tourist experience, especially if the concept of homeland is involved. Tracing the incompatibilities between expectations and what is offered to tourists can help in understanding how the literary returns function and what phenomena are heightened in the fictional lens.

Perhaps the most important scholar for this project – whose work inspired not only Chapter 3, devoted to Jewish American protagonists returning to Eastern Europe, but also saturated the spirit of my entire endeavor with the hopeful tones of “ethnography of possibility” – is Erica Lehrer. It is from her work that I borrow the idea of so many a Jewish and Cuban return as a “generally a one-time, pre-scripted, and self-consciously negative ritual” (x). Lehrer describes herself, with her “inquisitive relationship” to Poland and scholarly requirement of objectivity, as “something of an anomaly among the masses of Jewish visitors.” Her work *Jewish Poland Revisited* announces her project proudly as a work of “ethnography of possibility”: “My notion is informed by glimmers in the work of a few intra- and extra-disciplinary predecessors who have dared to talk about love, hope, generosity, or praise in their critical scholarship” (17). This dissertation, just like Lehrer’s work, touches upon sensitive topics of history, remembrance, and reconciliation, and my aim has been to keep it in the “the realm of possibility”; according to the author, it

⁹ Tim Cole labels the Auschwitz museum and the reconstructed concentration camp site as “Holocaust theme park” – “an Auschwitz-land rather than a site of mass death” (Sather-Wagstaff 79). The site is criticized for its shops, toilets, and restaurants despite the obvious fact that to be able to see it, tourists need such amenities. Miller (1994) uses an even more inventive term when he talks about “an emotional abusement park” (qtd. in Sinner 7). On the other hand, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. is criticized as being too “experiential” (placing too much emphasis on entertainment instead of cognitive knowledge) (Sather-Wagstaff 81).

“means having patience and openness toward unfamiliar perspectives and foreign approaches . . . but possibility also calls for a kind of critical optimism” (20-21), which she finds in the Jewish Poland that she revisits. Working on this dissertation has been a challenging process for me, as it involves discussing the problems and the anti-Semitism of my own community, and in Lehrer’s work, I find the necessary dose of “critical optimism” that allows me to hope her attitude is the one that will prevail (even though the literary works I analyze are often examples of ethnography of impossibility in the way they present the inherited attitudes of their protagonists).

All the primary works that I choose to discuss in my project are novels and short stories. Even though they might read as memoirs or autobiographies (as is, for example, the case with Achy Obejas’ *Days of Awe*), they are firmly works of fiction. I do, however, use non-fictional works as lenses to help me contextualize these primary sources. Frequently, the two are very difficult to distinguish. Since I had decided to make this dissertation a work of purely literary criticism, I draw the line between the two worlds, showing perhaps that the fictional stories reflect actual reactions of the returnees, yet I would be really interested to delve more deeply into the question of the blurred lines between fiction and non-fiction. I also anticipate more research, both my own and that of other scholars, which would attempt to apply literary criticism to anthropological works.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation begins with a predominantly theoretical chapter, devoted to the concepts of dark and homeland tourism, which is followed by two chapters of close readings: one in contemporary Jewish American novel and the other in Cuban American novel and short story. Chapter 2 explains the idea of ethnic return and how “returning” to

a place one has never seen before is even possible. I demonstrate that, to a large extent, the protagonists of ethnic fiction who visit their ancestral homelands are tourists, and I use dark tourism and homeland tourism theories to discuss the specific intersection of interests that they represent. Before delving into more specific readings in further chapters, I discuss the protagonists' motivations behind the homeland trips and describe their desire to move from the subjunctive mode into a more definite realm of the indicative. The chapter closes with an attempt to fit Jewish American and Cuban American writers into the ethnic canon. I underline how, in many ways, Jewish American and Cuban American writing about the ancestral homeland and about returns shares certain qualities with widely understood ethnic writing (for example, the trope of blood so frequently seen in ethnic fiction). However, I also point to how it significantly differs, creating a category of its own when it comes to descriptions of returns. Though I do not claim that only Jewish and Cuban writers belong to this specific category, for I do not believe it is necessarily exclusive, I highlight the similarities between the two that place them apart from many other works of ethnic fiction.

The two chapters that follow, Chapters 3 and 4, are organized to mirror each other's content: one is devoted to Jewish American works, and the other to Cuban American works. The fact that I follow the same structure in these two chapters helps me highlight both connections and disparities in these two literatures without forcing parallels, as it might happen when comparing them side by side. The first sections in both chapters present short historical overviews of the two ethnicities' presence in their respective countries and in the United States, and they are followed by sections explaining how return is understood among the members of these ethnicities. This leads

the way to my discussion of the two ways ethnic writers insert their ancestral homelands into their writing: by using artifacts (discussed in section three of both Chapter 3 and 4) and descriptions of actual, physical returns to the homeland.

Due to the highly theatrical character of the artifacts I discuss in detail, I tend to call them props, suggesting an artificial aspect involved in their insertion into the bodies of the novels I am interested in. For example, Dara Horn in one of her novels, titled significantly *In the Image*, frequently uses photographs, slides, and images as a way to access the past. Paintings in a European museum become links to her ancestors, and an antique shop that sells tefillin thrown in the New York Bay by the immigrants from Europe gives her a chance to touch the past she hardly knew existed. Horn employs one more prop in her fictional account, providing the reader with an intricate family tree going back to mid-nineteenth century. The tefillin that Dara Horn turns into an important part of her novel *In the Image* are, of course, highly symbolic and reminiscent of Jewish history and religion, yet they are not used in accordance with their purpose, making their presence little more than figurative.¹⁰ The tefillin in question come to be an essential plot device after Leora, the protagonist, finds them in an antique store – by definition, a place filled with artifacts no longer in use, whose function is limited to becoming emblems of past lives and traditions. In all three novels of my interest, museums, antiques, and

¹⁰ Not that much different from the way those who are left with the remnants of Jewish culture in Poland treat them, according to Erica Lehrer: “I am reminded of my very first trip to Poland in early 1990. For an American Jew – abruptly confronting her nationally and culturally cultivated blind spots – it was astounding in every way. First of all, it existed in color. There were young people, happy people. Flowers grew. But most of all, I recall discovering a menorah – one of the few Jewish ritual objects my family still used – on display in a Polish Catholic home. I ask its owner what it was and why he had it, and received a one-word response: ‘Artifact’” (Lehrer x). Tefillin for Leora are imbued with significance, but serve as little more than an artifact both in her life and in the novel.

genizahs play an important role in representing these traditions and inserting the ancestral homeland into the lives of the new generation. Breathing new life into the Prague Golem figure, as Stern does in *The Angel of Forgetfulness*, is a fitting metaphor for the plotlines of some contemporary Jewish American novels, which tend to close with the protagonist having experienced a spiritual awakening that leads to a better understanding of Jewish culture.

Though the artifacts inserted by Cuban American writers, which I discuss in Chapter 4, have similar emblematic rather than utilitarian function in the novels (for example, the figures of Santería are decorations more than spiritual guides), their insertion into the novels rarely produces the same effects of reinvigoration as the ones I observe and point out in Jewish American novels. The props that are present in the former have a rather confusing effect on the protagonists, as they are frequently of dubious authenticity; they invent more than they relate, of which the best and most famous example is *Loving Che* by Ana Menéndez.¹¹ The unnamed protagonist of the novel bases all her knowledge of her mother on a package of letters and photographs, interlaced in the narrative for the reader to experience first hand. Although she later visits Cuba, she is not able to determine anything for certain, making the package the closest she ever gets to revealing the truth. In the last significant chapter, when the sadness of the ending trip to Paris takes over, she visits an antique shop where she finds an old image of

¹¹ In “Memories of Others,” Isabel Alvarez Borland explains this phenomenon by pointing to the political situation in Cuba, which supports my claim that the political situation influences the way second generation writers and protagonists think of returns and ancestral homelands: “Discomfort with official renditions of history leads the younger writers to invent rather than to recollect the tales passed down by their elders. Because the political squabbles are alienating, because the fights are not theirs, today’s Cuban-American writers turn in and away from the facts of history” (12).

Che Guevara, the central figure of the narrative. The unexpected discovery generates contemplation of photography as an “agent of death,” based on Roland Barthes’s famous claim. Cristina García uses the same genealogical technique as Dara Horn, and although other authors of interest in this section reconstruct their family histories without the need for a drawing, they carefully list the protagonist’s family members within the narrative. Examining genealogies, images, and religious artifacts, these sections of Chapter 3 and 4 collect all the wistful props in the theater of nostalgia, demonstrating a common thread in the Diasporic narrative.

The last sections of both Chapters 3 and 4 are close readings of physical returns to Europe and Cuba. I underline the way these trips are quests in Lehrer’s definition by focusing on their spontaneous character, the mixture of familiarity and foreignness that the trips offer, as well as the unobvious changes that the protagonists go through as a result of their quests. The important part of this section is showing how much and how consistently the first generation is opposed to their descendants’ trips, and how the obstacles and toils of the journey (jet lag, adjusting to the new political system, thorough border checks, and finally smuggling American products) are indicative of a peculiar rite of passage that has to be done on one’s own in absence – and sometimes against the direct wishes of – one’s family. The chapters close with the descriptions of the effects the journeys have on my protagonists.

It is, of course, possible that the readers will be able to isolate a chapter of this dissertation devoted to either Cuban American or Jewish American returns and to learn something new about the topic of their interest. However, it is my greatest hope that they will be intrigued enough to follow the structure of my work and reveal fascinating

parallels between ethnic returns in these two veins of contemporary American literature. I do not wish to claim that there exist similarities that make these two unique in some way; Jewish and Cuban American literatures are definitely special in how they treat ethnic returns, but by no means exclusive – more comparisons can be made along the same or quite different lines. What I intend to achieve in my comparative study is to destabilize certain established assumptions about the nature of ethnic returns and, perhaps, ethnic fiction itself. One of these assumptions is the uniformity of ethnic experience, another the idea that first-generation migrants hold their homelands dear, whereas their second- and third-generation descendants easily forget about it under the overwhelming influence of the American Dream. This dissertation demonstrates how complex the relationships of young Americans are with their various ancestral homelands and how these half-imagined, half-experienced spaces influence their relationship with their natal homeland. In the vein of the ethnography of possibility, it also attempts to show that return – no matter how painful or disappointing – is a vital part of the process of personal as well as social reconciliation.

CHAPTER 2 Heritage that Hurts

I had memories of the newly revived Jewish Cuba I had returned to and come to know firsthand. These images became the album of my return to the forbidden home, the place where the hurt of immigration is felt so deeply that if you leave they stamp your passport with the words *salida definitiva* – no return.

--Ruth Behar¹²

If This Is My First Time Here, How Could I Return?

In my project, I focus on second-generation American protagonists, predominantly (but not exclusively) American-born, who take trips to their ancestral homelands. At times, I expand my close readings to include first-generation travelers because – as some of my readings demonstrate – their experiences might serve to illuminate those of their children. Anthropologist Takeyuki Tsuda explains that the two types of diasporic returns are, in fact, different: “The first [type] is the return migration of first-generation diasporic peoples who move back to their homeland (country of birth) . . . The second is *ethnic* return migration, which refers to later-generation descendants of diasporic peoples who ‘return’ to their countries of ancestral origin after living outside their ethnic homelands for generations” (1). According to the scholar, recently the phenomenon of ethnic returns has increased. Tsuda explains it by listing not only economic factors, but also “ethnic ties to ancestral homelands” and “a nostalgic desire to rediscover ethnic roots” (3). It is this second category of reasons that most frequently causes disappointment of the returnees: “Although many return migrants feel a nostalgic ethnic affiliation to their countries of ancestral origin, because they have been living outside their ethnic homeland for generations, they are essentially returning to a foreign country from which their ancestors came. As a result, diasporic homecomings are often

¹² Behar, Ruth. *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007. Print.

ambivalent, if not negative experiences for many ethnic return migrants” (Tsuda 3).¹³ Despite the fact that the migrants of the second and third generations (and further) had never seen their ancestral homeland before their first trip back, this first trip is uniformly called a “return,” which preserves the continuity of particular diasporas despite the generational lapse. The phenomenon of ambivalent homecoming can be clearly distinguished in the works of ethnic writers, even if virtually every one of them writes about short stays rather than migration. Because the experiences that Tsuda describes in his book explain some of the feelings and challenges my protagonists are faced with, in using his scholarship for my purposes I overlook the obvious differences between return migrants and returning tourists, focusing solely on common denominators for the two groups, like ambivalence and high expectations.

Tsuda’s work on ethnic returns demonstrates one dimension of a multidimensional and paradoxical issue. The only certain thing is that ethnic return will not turn out to be what one expected. For Cuban American writers, the anticipated beginning to their life story, the ultimate destination, proves to be anticlimactic. To Jewish Americans, conditioned to loathe central Europe, it might prove to be surprisingly rich and familiar. I discuss the way returns subvert anticipated outcomes in Jewish American and Cuban American fiction in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, but before I do this I would like to present ethnic return as the multidimensional, complex phenomenon that I found it to be. It is as much a tourist experience as it is not; on the one hand, the

¹³ The first category of reasons for return, tied closely to financial and economic situation of ancestral and natal homelands, also sometimes causes disappointment, as ethnic migrants tend to be treated as regular migrants, lending them basic job positions: “Perhaps the most unexpected outcome, however, is that the privileged status of ethnic return migrants as co-ethnics does not lead to the expected social payoff” (Tsuda 325).

visit is shaped by the visitors' preconceptions about their destinations and shaped by their American perspective just like any other tourist trip. On the other, it is a peculiar type of a quest, which is driven by much more than a wish to experience new cultures, to learn about the histories of different places or to taste new foods. It is a journey into the new regions of the self as much as a journey into a new land. Finally, the ethnic return I discuss in this project is a subsection of homeland tourism that is unique to Cuban and Jewish visitors in that the desire to return is undermined by the hatred of what the land represents.

It is, among others, the ambivalent combination of bitterness and nostalgia that produces a certain sense of dissatisfaction and futility involved in going back. The land of return is neither what the travelers hope for nor what they fear: it is a present-day version of what they only knew from stories, which means that it resembles little to nothing the country they imagined (frequently already distorted by both first-generation silences and second-generation inferences). The dissatisfaction literary characters experience is not a unique phenomenon among ethnic returnees. Indeed, Tsuda asserts that ambivalence is the most common sensation among the migrants who return to their ancestral homeland. Tsuda's research is helpful in recognizing the complex reaction patterns of returnees, even despite the fact that the scholar is interested in migration and not tourism. The way he defines "return" differs from the concept that I apply here, which is that of "masters of return": the titular term I define in my introduction, borrowed from Steve Stern's novel and, more broadly, from Jewish tradition, by which I mean later-generation Americans arriving to their ethnic homelands in search of their ancestral roots, sometimes despite seeming reluctance to discover the past, and always accompanied by philosophical

reflection about the nature of homeland. And yet, the writers I explore seem to concur with Tsuda's painful dynamic, which I present below, by portraying similar ambivalences in their works. The short fictional trips reflect all the problems that Tsuda's real-life return migrants encounter: ambivalence, cultural foreignness, and disillusionment chief among them. Shorter visits foreshadow the problems a longer stay is bound to produce, and Tsuda's impressive work in editing a volume whose scope is truly transnational allows me to support my observations with anthropological data.

One of the most disillusioning expectations that the returnee can hold is that of their "presumed ethnic affinity with the host society," which Tsuda understands as "com-ethnicity" (3).¹⁴ Instead of accelerating and smoothing the process of integration in the host society, the affinity is most frequently disregarded, and ethnic migrants are "often excluded as foreigners in their ancestral homelands because of the alien cultural differences they have acquired while living abroad for generations" (4). The high expectations enhance the feeling of cultural foreignness and marginalization ethnic returnees experience:

Because diasporic return migrants have prior expectations of ethnic belonging in their country of ancestral origin, most of them are surprised, if not shocked, by their ethnic rejection and social exclusion. Because their previous idealized and nostalgic images of their ancestral country are seriously disrupted, they become culturally alienated immigrant minorities who are strangers in their ethnic

¹⁴ Powers observes, "Homeland tours present quintessential representations of the other as consumable moments of similarity and solidarity" (1365). The travelers expect to feel that they, at long last, have a place they belong to and people they can share this feeling with. However, the organized form of homeland tourism tends to package this sensation and sell it without looking into the nature of the affinity.

homeland. Although they were often minorities in their countries of birth because of their foreign racial descent, they again become ethnic minorities when they return to their country of ancestral origin, this time because of their cultural foreignness. (329)

Tsuda touches upon an essential theme in ethnic literature – that of feeling foreign in the natal homeland, which generates anticipation for the “true” ancestral homeland and conjectures of the feeling of belonging that it can offer. Surely, one hopes to feel at home somewhere. However, it turns out that it is possible not to feel at home in either homeland: in the country of one’s birth, it is due to the racial component, and in the country of one’s ancestors, it is because of the cultural component of ethnicity. It is through returns that nostalgia of the second generation is undermined rather than fulfilled.

One of the most revealing results of studying ethnic returns (the “returns” of members of the second or third generation) is the capacity of such returns for challenging ethnic affinities and invalidating the transnational potential of migration. As Tsuda asserts, “The sense of shared descent and bloodline that initially created transnational ethnic attachments across borders between diasporic descendants and their homeland populaces is overridden by the stark national cultural differences that emerge when these co-ethnics actually meet in the ancestral homeland . . . mobility ironically creates a renewal of nationalist attachments instead of producing transnational hybrid identifications across national borders” (336). Returning “home” from another home is already a difficult concept to process – when faced with the foreignness of the ancestral

homeland, returnees might develop a stronger attachment to their natal homeland.¹⁵

Tsuda's point is especially valid for Cuban American returnees, who have a chance to meet their co-ethnics and realize their actual foreignness. In the case of Jewish American travelers, Eastern Europe no longer offers many opportunities for a co-ethnic experience, but, as I explain in further chapters, the travelers frequently find a sense of familiarity in the region nonetheless. The paradox described by Tsuda highlights the partially touristic nature of ethnic returns, especially the short ones, where the full curve of culture shock does not have a chance to run its course.

Ethnic returnees are special types of tourists, to whom an entire field of study has recently been devoted. Their paradoxical position is portrayed well in one of Ana Menéndez' short stories. When the protagonist meets the new inhabitants of her parents' old house, they greet her with fear: "We're just here taking care of the house. If you ever wanted to return—" Lisette answers in the following manner, encapsulating her precarious and bizarre return: "First time . . . What I mean is, if this is my first time here, how could I return?" (*In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* 222). Homeland tourism is a well-researched section of tourism studies that attempts to answer Lisette's question as well as questions about the motivation behind visiting foreign lands deemed as homelands. Jillian Powers, who in her research deals mainly with organized trips, defines homeland tours in a deceptively simple statement as "group travel packages that take individuals to destinations that they believe is their land of origin" (1362). The interesting

¹⁵ Garrido observes a similar tendency in homeland tourists rather than migrants: "Land trips to China and Korea initially stake their claims of national belonging on the basis of primordial ties, but once it becomes clear what national belonging normally entails—for example, attachment to distinctly Chinese or Korean conceptions of cultural homogeneity—primordialist claims weaken" (179).

part of this definition is the word “believe” that Powers uses instead of simply referring to destinations that are “their land of origin.” *Origin* is a contested term, and whether a person considers their origin to be God, his or her parents’ place of birth, or the hospital in which they were welcomed is largely subjective. However, what seems to be the focus in homeland tourism studies is the second case I mentioned: visiting places inhabited some time ago by direct antecedents of the person in question. In this rather unusual type of travel, visitors move between two separately conceptualized homelands, one probably more tangible but in a way less authentic than the other. John Urry observes that “migration and tourism are complexly folded into each other” (72). Despite Behar’s clear distinction between travelers, “those who go elsewhere because they want to, because they can afford to displace themselves,” and immigrants, “those who go elsewhere because they have to” (*Traveling Heavy* 5), both groups tend to overlap, especially when it comes to their returns.

“The migration process appears to require a return, a journey back to the point of departure,” sociologist Harry Goulborne points out (qtd. in Urry 72). This is especially true for representatives of diasporas, who yearn for a permanent return yet for various reasons have to satisfy the “compulsion to proximity with their homeland “ with short visits (72). Thus, a large part of tourist activity in such countries as Cuba or the Dominican Republic is generated by travelers who are also immigrants – those who left because they had to, but come back because they want to. This, of course, does not cover the motivation of all the returnees, but it well represents the way my protagonists feel. In Marco Garrido’s definition, “Homeland tourism (or ethnic pilgrimage) is perhaps the quintessential ethnic activity because it involves actually returning to the country of one’s

parents in search of what being ethnic means” (178). The desire to understand and define the ethnic self better is either directly stated or at least implied in the literary returns of contemporary literature.

In the works I am interested in, the touristic aspect of the return complicates the definition process of the ethnic self in more than one way. Tourism as an industry and cultural force is a source of myth, stereotype, and prejudice; it is also one of the most outwardly consumerist industries, which is designed to shape the experiences of travelers and discourage quests – independent trips with little to no mediation. The language of homeland tourism is frequently that of consumer culture. As Susan Trollinger observes, “Consumption is important, not only because it represents 70 percent of the gross domestic product, but because it serves as one of the primary ways that Americans express their identities” (34). It is not surprising, then, that the mode of homeland traveling involves consumption, since it provides uniquely American ways of manifesting dual identities and reasserting the space of belonging. Powers similarly understands the process of traveling from her sociological point of view: “Tourist attractions are commodities consumed and witnessed by all travelers. Yet the homeland tourist has a special claim to these places; he or she represents the ingenuity of the entire community, giving the homeland tourist a sense of pride and a symbol for the boundaries of belonging” (1373). It seems that the special significance of homeland visits tends to add a distinctive, exceptional layer to the plain consumption of regular tourists due to the “special claim” to the visited places, whether it is genuine or just imagined. The mode of experience for homeland tourists is that of “consuming these brief homeland encounters” (1363). The fact that Powers makes a point of calling the encounters with the homeland

“brief” is important when considering the weight of the expectations linked to a homeland visit. According to the author, “[Tourists] desire the quintessential, confirming and affirming their preconceived notions” (1364). Within the duration of the trip, they hope to see the true homeland, the essence of the land, at the same time expecting it to be exactly as they imagine and expect. My further discussion proves that the desire for the quintessential might be shared by the majority of tourists, yet depending on the form their trips take (mission tours or quests), they might not “affirm” it in the end.

Sociologists seem to be wary that the problematic nature of the definitions of homeland might outweigh potential benefits. According to Jillian Powers, “Homeland tourism provides opportunities to narrate collective identities that allow participants to remain American yet accept and incorporate their ethnic heritage through consuming these brief homeland encounters” (1363). The author acknowledges the need to balance the numerous identities each American of foreign descent possesses and highlights the fact that the “ethnic” identity can be more easily managed through these visits. Garrido, however, sees this balancing act as problematic; “homeland tourism foregrounds ethnic identification as a problem,” he points out, as it enables “pursuing to its limit the conceit that an ethnic identity indicates belonging in the two places on either side of the hyphen” (178). Garrido questions the very core of immigrant returns: the desire to find the “real” identity, which must have been hidden from view while the traveler lived on one side of the hyphen.¹⁶

¹⁶ The endless play with words that the hyphen offers is perhaps most fruitfully utilized by Gustavo Pérez Firmat in the titles of his numerous works, among others “The Spell of the Hyphen” and *Life on the Hyphen*.

Ethnic identification is a problem, most apparently, in the sense that it needs to be worked on in order to be “solved” (with the work going into it – symbolic and emotional labor – popularly mischaracterized in terms of “discovering,” or in an even more polemic rendition, “uncovering,” what one is already supposed to be). It is a problem in a deeper sense insofar as it effects a displacement, particularly for Americans whose ethnic cum racial identity is, to a significant extent, ascribed. (179)

Garrido seems rightfully bothered by the essentialist thread surfacing in this type of discourse. When he proposes that homeland tourism reveals the problematic nature of identification with those that remain in the homeland, he spells out what ethnic authors hint at in their accounts of returns that are far from conclusive and far from satisfying.¹⁷ Whereas Cuban American fiction subverts the essentialism by providing little to no definitive answers to identity questions posed by the returnees, Jewish authors like Tova Reich in *My Holocaust* mock the very motivation behind the trips or the method of finding the Jewishness abroad (Steve Stern in his descriptions of inhaling the dust of the Prague golem). Thus, my own approach in this study is closer to that of Garrido; I tend to highlight the unrealistic level of expectation that homeland tourism inspires, though I also

¹⁷ The disillusionment of foreignness is so intense that Garrido’s informants attempt to preserve their connection to the “homeland”: “During the homeland encounter my informants engaged in strategies to enhance their claims to connection with the Philippines. They staked both essentialist and constructivist positions, redefining Filipino identity to include them or elaborating a distinctive space for Filipino American identity, although the former tended to yield to the latter over time. Under the constructivist strategy, informants demarcated grounds for connection by assuming positions of knowing what being Filipino really meant (and hence being free to criticize it) and of being able to help the Philippines by virtue of their place in the US. Informants mainly from LFS grounded their belonging in a radical political identity; through this identity the Philippines is recovered as a site of past and present struggle and Filipino Americans revealed as connected to both threads as victims and vanguard” (197).

acknowledge its power to address ethnic Americans' yearnings to know the land of their ancestors.

The problematic nature of homeland tourism is especially pronounced in Jewish American fiction, which presents the visit to the land of the protagonist's ancestors as – necessarily – a death tour.¹⁸ In this sense, I propose that the return of a Jewish American protagonist is less an example of straightforward homeland tourism and more what is known among sociologists and anthropologists as thanatourism or dark tourism. As all the authors quoted in this part of my study ascertain, the concept is not new, yet it has been recently gaining new attention. Osbaldiston observes, “Travel to and experience of places associated with death is not a new phenomenon. People have long been drawn, purposefully or otherwise, towards sites, attractions or events linked in one way or another with death, suffering, violence or disaster” (176).¹⁹ Joy Sather-Wagstaff in her book *Heritage that Hurts*, which inspires the title of this section, provides examples of dark tourism destinations quoting medieval trips to see relics, pyramids, and cemeteries, asserting, “the educational, cultural, and historical dimensions of tourism and tourist

¹⁸ Lehrer addresses this (necessary to an extent) focus on the death in an endnote: “In 2012, Krakow’s local Jews spoke explicitly back at the March of the Living, in a form of a large banner that was hung between the gateposts of Krakow’s Jewish Community Center when the March was in town, which read, in all capital letters, ‘HEY MARCH OF THE LIVING! COME INSIDE AND SEE SOME JEWISH LIFE.’ The word ‘life’ was in larger letters, presumably to contrast with the March’s focus on death” (228).

¹⁹ The author provides colorful examples to support his argument: “The Roman gladiatorial games, pilgrimages or attendance at medieval public executions were, for example, early forms of such death-related tourism whilst. . . the first guided tour in England was a train trip to witness the hanging of two murderers. Similarly . . . visits to the morgue were a regular feature of nineteenth century tours of Paris, perhaps a forerunner to the ‘Bodyworlds’ exhibitions in London, Tokyo and elsewhere that, since the late 1990s, have attracted visitors in their tens of thousands” (176). It proves that the phenomenon is, in fact, not as recent as the newly found interest in researching dark tourism.

destinations are overwhelmingly centered on the dead” (70). I abandon the focus on the dead in thanatourism and focus on the dark side that can be related to disasters, poverty, and terror.²⁰ Even though the awareness of death accompanies my protagonists in Central Europe and in Cuba, it is the sense of certain endangerment resulting from the countries’ differences from the U.S. as well as their peculiar pasts that create the “dark” part in my protagonists’ dark tourism.

The peculiar intersection I am interested in is the meeting point for two kinds of contemporary extreme modes of traveling. Despite the early examples of tourists interested in the morbid, both dark tourism and – in my analysis – heritage tourism are “product[s] of the circumstances of the late modern world and a significant influence upon these circumstances” (Lennon and Foley 3). The most prominent scholars of the field, whose definition of the term is most widely used, are John Lennon and Malcolm Foley. They treat dark tourism as “an intimation of post-modernity” (11), observing its growth especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (3). The trend matches homeland tourism in their shared affinity for extremes. Tourists who return to their ancestral home expect to find strong, even overwhelming emotions, a sense of belonging and recognition, which feed off their inherited, second-hand nostalgia. Dark tourists, on the other hand, expect a similarly powerful, overwhelming experience that can be found in the proximity of death. Skinner asserts that dark tourism and

²⁰ As a *dziecko stanu wojennego* (“martial law child”) born in Poland not long after the State Council declared martial law (December of 1981), I reserve the right to consider travelling to communist countries as an example of dark tourism. For those romanticizing the simple and uncomplicated life in contemporary Cuba, I recommend Tony Mendoza’s photographic account *Cuba – Going Back*. The mile-long lines in empty grocery stores are eerily similar to the ones my mother had to stand on to get the assigned 2 kilograms (approx. 4.5 pounds) of meat per month.

thanatourism “reflect a nostalgic authenticity by way of endangerment” (9), and he detects that “extreme travel writing,” which is the focus of his book, strongly involves two types of sensations: Schadenfreude and catharsis (9). Returning to an ancestral home that is simultaneously a dark site of past or present suffering creates a powerful cathartic cocktail of emotions, which can provide perverse pleasure as long as the tourist never abandons his privileged position as a Western observer rather than the true co-ethnic as defined by Tsuda.

The authors of Jewish American fiction have an awareness of participating in some sort of “dark” type of traveling, as it is impossible to escape the implication while visiting Central Europe. They are also more attuned to the “sacred aura” of these heritage sites, a component necessary to understand dark tourism according to Osbaldiston (176). Sather-Wagstaff, on the other hand, suggests that “commemorative sites are not automatically sacred or otherwise historically important simply because a disastrous event occurred” (20), thus questioning and complicating Osbaldiston’s claim of an aura that surrounds places where disaster occurred. Though the Prague from Svatopluk’s guided tour in Steve Stern’s *The Angel of Forgetfulness* seems to be imbued with deeper meanings, it is really the guide’s complex and unique narration that produces Prague’s significance and steers Saul towards a better understanding not only of the place, but also himself. Tova Reich’s reading of both the reconstructed camp of Auschwitz and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. is an exercise in interpretation rather than instinctual perception of the “aura” in these places. The presence in contemporary ethnic fiction of the issues raised by the study of homeland and

dark tourism proves that the returns described therein are to a large extent tourist experiences.

Ethnic Return as a Tourist Experience

The sentiment behind the words that mark the passports of Cuban emigres, *salida definitiva*, infuses Cuban American fiction as well as ethnic fiction in general. From its early examples at the end of the nineteenth century, the immigrant novel focused, as the name suggests, on immigration to the United States, finding the way in the new country, and all but forgetting the old one, which created both intergenerational and internal problems. For ethnic writers to take interest in the return to the land abandoned for political or economical reasons – however short the return might be – is to alter the traditional direction of ethnic reading and writing; it is to show that the leaving is rarely so definitive as the first generation would sometimes like it to be. An increasing number of scholars of ethnicity (anthropologists and sociologists) study returns, underscoring that their research reverses the “directionality of the migrant flow” (Tsuda 7-8). In ethnic literature, the shift has taken place as the new generation of writers – children of the first-generation immigrants – started imagining the land their parents had left. As Americans of foreign descent, they tend to combine two approaches to their homeland: that of insiders, a perspective inherited from their parents, and that of outsiders – mere tourists visiting foreign lands. While the tourist aspect highlights the feeling of foreignness and dissatisfaction if the results are not as advertised, the inherited perspective makes the trips necessarily political and emotional.

For the second and third generations, the symbolic stamp in a passport may work as the reluctance to visit Castro’s Cuba or contemporary Poland imagined as a network of

death camps. And yet, as Achy Obejas puts it in one of her novels, “there is no blockade of emotions” (63): curiosity and a peculiar type of nostalgia make young American Cubans and Jews travel to these controversial destinations despite the “no return” stamp that history placed on their parents’ and grandparents’ histories. The anthropologists whose work inspires this project, Erica Lehrer and Ruth Behar, both see possibilities in the act of travel, which can facilitate the process of historical reconciliation and understanding.²¹ According to the former scholar, “Travel is a potential site of critical, progressive memory work due to its capacity for broadening horizons, forging transnational connections, and expanding ‘imagined communities’” (Lehrer 60). Even if the returns motivated by emotions are rarely conclusive or successful – at least not in the ways the protagonists discussed here expect – they open up a conversation about history, remembrance, and also about the future. Thus, what is on the surface a tourist experience provokes a conversation that barely exists at the governmental level between the nations in question.²²

To explore the tourist experience further, I am using the concepts of Dean ManCannell, who defines the tourist as an essentially modern person trying to negotiate his or her modern condition by searching for authenticity in other cultures and places. Tourists’ struggle to reach this elusive state is doomed to failure, and it eventually proves

²¹ Behar supervised Lehrer’s dissertation and took a trip with her to Poland (*Traveling Heavy* 144), one among many trips discussed in Lehrer’s book *Jewish Poland Revisited. Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places*.

²² Though, admittedly, things seem to be changing as I am writing this dissertation. POLIN, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, opened in the fall of 2014, and in the winter of that year, President Barack Obama took the first step to normalizing relations between Cuba and the U.S. by proposing to lift the half-a-century-long embargo.

their own limitations.²³ The protagonists of the novels I discuss attempt to find the authentic homeland, yet the level to which they are removed from it even during the visit testifies to MacCannell's theory. To encompass the complexity and diversity of literary returns, often concealed under superficial similarities, I propose the same intersection of heritage and dark tourism as anthropologist Anita Waters offers in her book *Planning the Past: Jamaica's Port Royal*: "For those seeking . . . 'dark tourism,' that is, travel to modern pilgrimage sites associated with 'death, disaster and atrocity,' Port Royal's great earthquake of 1692 has few rivals. For the nostalgic, who prefer that history be 'past, dead, and safe' . . . the long ago days of old Port Royal offer a forgiving canvas on which to paint whatever one wishes to see there" (Waters 17). Both of these types of tourisms offer different insights into the tourist experience of my protagonists and tourist locales they visit.

Poland, the Jewish cemetery of Europe, is an obvious dark tourism destination, yet there also is a peculiar darkness written into visiting Cuba. American tourists, whose voices I analyze in the following section, see the island as a poverty-stricken country devastated by communism, noting with horror or superiority (or both) the persistence of beggars and tricksters, the crumbling buildings, and the lack of conveniences that American tourists have learned to expect in tourist resorts. Combined with the atmosphere of terror, Cuba creates an unsettling tourist locale, though frequently visited

²³ Indeed, MacCannell suggests in his much later essay, "tourists are always already aware of the false promises that are routinely made in the name of the transparency of the inner workings of Being" ("Tourist Agency" 31). It would be an interesting expansion of this project to think about ways in which this Lacanian idea of "the second gaze" changes the way we read the protagonists' disappointment after their visits. "Tourists know that looks deceive . . . They may not know it in precisely these terms, but they know it" (31) adds MacCannell. To what extent is the disappointment expected?

despite its darkness rather than for it, as it is the case in Eastern Europe. The heritage/homeland part of the intersection, on the other hand, is much more controversial when it comes to Europe. To imagine this place as the homeland rather than the cemetery it came to be known as is potentially upsetting, if not outright unacceptable. And yet, the analysis of anthropological and literary evidence suggests that despite strong opposition from within and without, young people long for the histories left behind and attempt to recover their heritage in the graveyard. After all, as Behar demonstrates in her book *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba*, visiting cemeteries is an essential part of anthropological fieldwork and a crucial element of remembrance projects. Cuban Americans' relationship to the island is more straightforward in that the status of Cuba as their homeland is rarely questioned; however, this affinity generates different challenges, as visitors expect to find more than they actually have a chance to do.

The two destinations I discuss in this work fit into the tourist experience of contemporary American travelers in many unexpected ways, as both are related to specific forms of tourism that are rather narrow in their understanding of the tourist experience. With its long history as the ultimate pleasure island and almost equally long history as a communist republic, Cuba inspires thoughts of forbidden pleasure in luscious settings, only made more exciting by the shadow of the ever-lurking government. The mythology of central Europe, on the other hand, stems from the mode of traveling most popular among American and Israeli Jews. Organized trips, focused on specific sections of European geography and history, are just as myopic in the representations of their destination as advertisements and the film industry tended to be in the case of Cuba. The protagonists who visit these charged spaces are Americans and represent the same

cultural sensitivity and knowledge (enhanced, of course, by their “hyphen,” but not so dramatically that it should change their outlook entirely); the baggage of common knowledge based on stereotypes and simplifications is something they have to carry with them as they travel. The traditional tourist vision of these two places is, to an extent, already a product of the American imagery stemming from advertisements, historical accounts, and myths – well summarized in the works of Erica Lehrer and Amalia Cabezas that I discuss further in the chapter – so the work of the writers I discuss in this dissertation begins with challenging these representations.

The protagonists whose motivations and yearnings I later describe in great detail feel that they are special types of tourists, yet tourists nevertheless. This creates a certain type of a dichotomy in their traveling experience: on the one hand, these tourists have connections to the lands they visit that could potentially give them greater insight; on the other, they have to work against their American sensibilities, which are frequently subconscious ways of understanding the surrounding world. Tova Reich’s *My Holocaust* novel revolves around Holocaust Connections, Inc., a dark homeland tourism company organizing death camp tours in Poland. In Steve Stern’s *The Angel of Forgetfulness*, Saul’s status as a tourist in the Soviet Bloc is emphasized by his encounter with Svatopluk, who offers his tour guide services in broken English: “I show to you . . . Jewish Prague . . . Seven hundred fifty crown the individual, but for you special off-season rate – five hundred, no problem, take or leave. Also special group discount if you got group...” (297). In Achy Obejas’ account from *Days of Awe*, Alejandra reminisces:

I clung to every privilege and habit that separated me from the islanders. I didn’t claim to be American; I understood that to be impossible, and I didn’t want it

anyway. But I took taxis everywhere, standing defiantly on any sun-drenched street corner holding my arm out in the air to get their attention. Cubans couldn't afford taxis then – still can't, really – and I was haughty, impatient about the entire transaction . . . I'd wave one of my singularly illegal dollars if I had to, soaking in their envy; they glared at me with just a little bit of hatred . . . Even though I ignored the island Cubans, my message was for them: I have nothing in common with you. (75)

Despite her conviction that she cannot honestly call herself American, as she was born in Cuba, Alejandra still acts like one partially because of necessity and partially because she does not know how to act any differently. Garrido's essay reveals an important part of homeland tourism performed by hyphenated American citizens: informants "make sense" of their homeland "with reference to peculiarly American categories of race, politics, gender, poverty, and authenticity" (197). This fallacy disrupts the expected connection and leaves homeland tourists even more perplexed. The protagonists I am interested in are, despite the hyphen, undeniably American in that their understanding of what they encounter in their ancestral homeland is filtered through the American lens they acquired while living in the U.S.

The myths and stereotypes surrounding specific tourist destinations are all essential parts of this cultural lens, and they were shaped to a large extent by the developing tourist industry. The Cuban tourist boom began as early as the 1920s. Amalia Cabezas quotes a popular travel poster from the era, whose slogan seems very fitting in the case of American tourists as well as homeland tourists, especially from Miami: the island was seen (or at least advertised) as "so near, yet so foreign" (43). Every tourist

folder of the era linked Cuba to “entertainment, excitement, recreation, romance, and indulgence” (Schwartz 15). Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Cabezas observes,

Cuba has revived tourism and made the industry central to its economic viability. More tourists visit Cuba now than in the 1950s, their experience disconnected from the reality of Cuban daily existence. Housed in well-appointed – even luxurious – hotels and fed from well-stocked larders, they are conveyed from place to place in air-conditioned buses, while citizens endure the hardships of an extended economic crisis. The drama plays to a worldwide audience eager to know the fate of Cuba’s socialist and tourist experiments. (xv)

The disconnect is a byproduct of Cuba’s ongoing effort to advertise itself as “an island of pleasure”; by sending out “invitations to consumers of filmed fantasy to realize their dreams of romance and adventure” (Schwartz 14), Cubans created an idealized haven far from the reality of its inhabitants. What this reality truly is seems to still escape the young protagonists of contemporary Cuban American novels, as they describe their confusing encounters on the island. Even though their trips are much more quests than those of a typical American tourist, what they know about Cuba is contradictory and frequently influenced by the image that the country itself tends to promote.

What the tourists receive in Cuba is a carefully crafted representation of the glamorous 1920s. According to Rosalie Schwartz in her 1997 book *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba*, the tourism machine of the island stages an elaborate performance to satisfy the visitors; where necessary, “Cubans modified traditional culture, altered customary behavior, and when necessary, invented new experiences, such as sun worship ceremonials” (75). The unbelievable disconnect between how the island is

promoted abroad and presented in “sun worship ceremonials” and the living conditions of people whom the travelers can see from their air-conditioned buses testifies to the power of marketing: “Cubans stitched together a marketable cultural identity from bits and pieces of island life . . . They encouraged tourists to enjoy Holy Week in Matanzas, to watch the monthly religious processions in Regla, and to join carnival celebrations that mixed pagan Afro-Cuban rituals and Cuban frivolity” (Schwartz 76). Indeed, Cabezas maintains that even though the Cuban upper class seems to view Santería with disfavor, the state advertises it as “an integral part of Cuban culture” (114). Even though performance and staging is a strong component of tourism in general and not only visits to Cuba, the perverse relationship between the two layers, the imaginary and the factual, combined with the Cuban people’s desire to attract visitors in order to earn money they cannot earn through other means, makes for an ambivalent experience.

The protagonist of Obejas’ *Days of Awe* portrays this ambivalence by expressing the confusion of an American tourist combined with the desire to understand the island stemming from her Cuban descent. Her inability to guess whether what she sees has any deeper meaning or whether it is just a haphazard proof of the everyday testifies to the overall perplexity she is experiencing. This is how Alejandra remembers one of her first visits to Cuba:

I strolled through the city breathing something like burning sulfur in the air.

Whether on the majestic boulevards of Miramar or the tight alleys of the historic district, I would run into discarded animal parts: an empty crab shell, chicken bones with the marrow sucked out of them, a fish skeleton so complete and white

it looked like an ivory comb. At first I considered these might be offerings to gods I didn't know, but they seemed much too random, too ordinary and blunt. (60)

The hopeless effort to read meaning into the pattern of bones in the street demonstrates at least two veins of thought: initially, Ale sees what she recognizes as relatively familiar symbols of Santería, what she can safely link to her knowledge about the island and its culture; on second thought, however, the woman is not so sure. Perhaps she read too much into what is merely garbage in a country less focused on hygiene than the one she knows. Perhaps it is arrogant and presumptuous of her to claim this knowledge of a country she is visiting for the first time. At the very least, Ale seems like a self-conscious tourist who recognizes her own limitations.

This self-awareness and the willingness to avoid over-generalizations of the tourist space are characteristic of the recently published ethnic fiction. Daniel Mendelsohn in *The Lost* (2006) describes his own literary task as an act of escaping the obvious, monolithic interpretations that the tourist space of Auschwitz inspires. A fusion of literary genres, *The Lost* is an attempt to provide new ways of remembering the Shoah; the narrator uncovers the story of his relative, Schmiel, whom he physically resembles, as well as his family who were killed in the Holocaust. The detailed, meticulous narrative of one family stands in opposition to how the victims tend to be remembered: Mendelsohn recognizes that “Auschwitz, by now, has become the gigantic, one-word symbol, the gross generalization, the shorthand, for what happened to Europe’s Jews” (112). His decision to visit this charged location is dictated by his fear that what it means – so much on the one hand, but so little on the other when it is reduced to a “one-word symbol” – silences and overlooks particular stories. Once Auschwitz has been diminished to a mere

symbol, the freedom to read this symbol depends on the reader's cultural awareness and skill, as well as the burden of ancestral stereotypes and myths: "It had been to rescue my relatives from generalities, symbols, abbreviations, to restore to them their particularity and distinctiveness, that I had come on this strange and arduous trip" (112). To encompass their dark destination, second-generation returnees have to manage a different set of generalities and abbreviations offered by their parents and grandparents. Barbara Finkelstein thus reminisces the reactions she encountered before and after her visit to Poland, "One of my acquaintances . . . told me that she loathes Poland so much that she asked me not to discuss my trip with her. Her parents, Polish Jews, had been in Auschwitz, and as far as she was concerned, Poland did not exist any more" (39). This was the burden that Finkelstein, and many Jewish travelers like her, had to take on their journeys east. To protect the stereotype that many visitors are deeply attached to, tourism (and in some cases homeland tourism) offers special forms of traveling organized around the idea of preserving the myth. One could argue that resort vacations in third-world countries are just that: protecting the concept of pleasure islands without the need to look into the poverty and difficulties of life under a political regime. Some types of organized trips serve the same role for those who are not interested in how their destination changes and evolves, but only in confirming their story.

To differentiate between the two modes of traveling and reacting to difficult pasts, Erica Lehrer distinguishes two types of Jewish travels to Poland: one involves participation in an organized tour and the other a quest (93). Lehrer calls the former type of tourism a "mission": "a term used in Jewish communal circles for a wide range of organized Jewish group travel experiences, almost always advertised as an opportunity to

enhance one's Jewishness" (57). Israel is the first-most-visited destination of such tours, with Poland as close second (58). In theory, such effort seems worthwhile and even honorable: "Mission tours are advertised as much more than a normal trip. They offer a chance to make a difference, have a spiritual awakening, or undergo a life-changing experience. They attempt to transform communal ideology into embodied reality. They create group memory" (57). This type of discourse is especially appealing to younger people who might be seeking experiences that would help them define their budding sense of who they are. However, Alex Danzig, a consultant to Yad Vashem and the Israeli Ministry of Education on group travel to Poland, tells Lehrer that "while the motivation for students to go on such trips is *szlachetna* (Polish for noble), structural flaws inhibit the tours' potential from being realized" (63).²⁴ Danzig lists bodyguards and tour guides, among others, as elements causing the obstruction of potential dialogue between the local Poles and young Jewish visitors.²⁵ The heavy mediation of the tour organizer provides representation of the place that does, indeed, please the tourists in that it confirms their long-held beliefs about the difficult place and conveniently brushes over

²⁴ Yad Vashem is the official Holocaust remembrance institution in Israel.

²⁵ Lehrer shares her reflections on reading the two lists provided by MOTL to all its participants (March of the Living, "an annual educational program, which brings students from all over the world to Poland, in order to study the history of the Holocaust and to examine the roots of prejudice, intolerance and hate" [March of the Living International]): "The list for Israel, where the threat of bombs in public places is part of everyday reality, comprised four items. The first and second of these addressed the need to keep cool and hydrated in the hot climate; the other two points required being aware of strange, unattended items and asking permission from the group leader before going off on one's own. The instructions for Poland – a comparatively uneventful country – consisted of eighteen points of detailed admonition, including 'draw all window curtains so that the room cannot be surveilled from the outside,' 'do not wander into stores and other areas,' 'do not reveal information pertaining to the delegation's plans or timetable,' and 'avoid joining strange people, especially at their invitation.' No rationales were given" (65).

anything that does not quite match the anticipation of anti-Semitism and overwhelming hopelessness.²⁶

In this sense, mission travel is a pursuit of “a pre-determined outcome” (Lehrer 59) and offers little new to the traveler other than the physical markers of the already interpreted world of the Holocaust. If the visitors arrive with little knowledge of the events, the guides are there to interpret the events for them. Thus, the conflicts that inspire the fears on both sides never come close to the possibility of being resolved, and the stereotypes keep circulating without a chance at correction:

Jewish heritage tourism in Poland today is a major form of cultural activism, implied in struggles much larger and more significant than they might at first appear – struggles for the very souls of the Jewish and Polish nations. On the Jewish side, Poland has been taken up as a symbol and employed as a space by competing projects: Poland as a touchstone for antisemitism, or Poland as a renewable resource for working through the past and imagining possible futures. On the Polish side, Jews are seen variously as essential, irrelevant, or even threatening to a new Polish national project. (Lehrer 18)

Instead of creating space for the “possible futures” to happen, the encounters serve to reaffirm previously held beliefs about the other, and it seems true for both sides alike: travelers and inhabitants of the charged space. In mission tourism, Lehrer argues, there is no opportunity for acquiring new knowledge that usually takes place in genuine encounters between people, as a specific agenda is pushed before the desire to learn has a

²⁶ Eli Rubenstein, the founding director of the Canadian national branch of the MOTL, tried to suggest that young Canadian Jews try to meet local students during their trips: “When it was over, I was almost lynched” (Lehrer 81).

chance to evolve. Taking a trip to Poland, just like taking a trip to Cuba, is a political statement, and it is expected that the statement fit within the larger political context or atmosphere of the moment. This and the fact that mission tourism has become an essential component of what Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, scholars of Jewish studies, call the “diaspora business” (12), make the concept of homeland or heritage tourism an intersection of business and politics.

In her book on “the tourism of nostalgia,” depicting the motivation behind the undiminished interest in visiting the Amish country in Pennsylvania and Ohio, Trollinger points out, “Tourism is the heritage center that interprets, the tour guide who describes a people in a certain way, or the restaurant that offers a certain ‘unusual’ style of food. It is never actually that other mode of being in the world. It is, at best, a representation of it. Moreover, tourism is a particular kind of representation, one that aims to please tourists” (Trollinger 36). It is virtually impossible to experience “the other mode of being in the world” with the constant mediation of the heritage center. Organized trips to Poland, whose purpose is to see the “blood-soaked soil” of Lehrer’s description, are the “key mode of Jewish travel to Poland today,” and their heavily mediated form impede, if not entirely preclude, their participants from independent encounters with the country and its locals (57). Even if the genuine unmediated encounter with the locals is a myth in itself, as many anthropologists point out, a complete separation from them produces unfounded fears and perpetuates prejudice.

The literary encounters that I explore in the two following chapters are far from this rigid form of tourism; their participants are challenging their own mythologies by the way of quests rather than missions. A quest, according to Lehrer, is “motivated and

informed by travelers' struggles with absence, fragmentation, cultural displacement, and longings for a living connection to the intimate past, a sense of being at home in the world" (93). While mission tours are forcefully advertised as life changing, quests are "often experienced and sometimes planned as radical, connective, even 'ethnographic,' sometimes opening out into deeper explorations over time." I argue that the homeland trips undertaken by the protagonists in contemporary Cuban American and Jewish American fiction may be defined as quests in Lehrer's understanding of the word in that "they do not follow prescribed paths, and thus are often subversive, even if accidentally" (93). The accidental nature of what turns out to be a subversive trip is especially visible in Jewish American novels of Dara Horn and Steve Stern that I discuss in the following chapter. The protagonists are not consciously looking for any connection with the past, but their spontaneous, unexplained decision to go to Europe results in better understanding of their Jewish identities. In case of Cuban American writers, the quests are definitely planned as connective, and they "make efforts to work through the difficulties, to question prescribed memory, to consider its consequences" (96).²⁷ Ana Menéndez' and Achy Obejas' protagonists set out for their trips to find traces of their family histories, and the fact that this result proves much more elusive than initially planned serves as a reminder that national history and family histories are imperfect. The mother/daughter plot in Cuban American fiction reflects Lehrer's argument that "for

²⁷ Ruth Behar in *The Portable Island* thus describes the connection she expects to find: "I was returning to the country left behind in childhood . . . I wanted bridges with the island and was determined to keep returning to Cuba to understand the sensibilities of those who had stayed, those who kept waving goodbye to the ones who were leaving" (Behar and Suárez xiii). In Behar's reflections, the intention to "understand" and connect to the "sensibilities" of her own people who chose a different path than her parents did is very clear. Achy Obejas and Ana Menéndez make this intention equally clear for their protagonists, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

many travelers, quests are about reestablishing what anthropologist Jack Kugelmass calls ‘genealogical memory,’ or more simply, ‘the desire to know who [one’s] grandparents were and how they lived’” (Lehrer 96). This deceptively simple motivation for the visit leads to trips that reveal much more complex relationships between the nature of truth and remembrance, often subverting initial assumptions of the travelers.

The quest, as it is described not only in contemporary fiction but also in Lehrer’s informants’ accounts, is in a way a compulsive action, even if it is planned.²⁸ Ruth Behar, for example, admits she had no interest in Poland before her first visit, mostly due to the fact that her grandmother never expressed willingness to return. This is how the anthropologist describes the moment of making a decision to go: “[I]t was three o’clock in the morning, and being an insomniac who makes unexpected decisions at an hour when most people are sleeping soundly as babies, I decided to travel to Poland” (144). The short passage demonstrates the compulsion to go – booking the tickets right that moment – and also serves as an explanation of sorts, the justification of the decision to visit the cursed land in case someone questions it.²⁹ The compulsive nature of the trip – when the travelers feel they *have to go* – is combined with the inability to pinpoint why. Lehrer mentions Szifra, an informant whose parents survived the Holocaust, “Although Szifra admitted she couldn’t quite pin down why she wanted to visit Poland, she said, ‘I feel like I *have to go*’” (106, Lehrer’s emphasis), and this despite the fact that, in Szifra’s

²⁸ The compulsive nature of my protagonists’ departures is described in detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

²⁹ Lehrer tellingly titles one of the sections in Chapter 1 “Doing Ethnography (or What’s a Nice Jewish Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?)” (37). She also mentions people’s reactions to her plans of spending a year in Poland: “Poland! . . . What a horrible country! Why would you *ever* want to go there?” (48). Clearly, to justify the decision of going to Poland for any amount of time is a necessary step for Jewish visitors.

words, “Poland sucks.” Luis in Jennine Capó Cruet’s short story “The Next Move” seems overwhelmed and betrayed by the same feelings his wife exhibits – all of a sudden, after many years – towards Cuba: “It’s not that I thought she wouldn’t come back – who defects in that direction? – but that she needed to go back so badly, with or without me” (52). Lehrer argues that quests are “undertaken out of sense of lack, in pursuit of what can only be fulfilled through an expedition into the unknown” (93). Szifra’s comment, “This vacuum feels bizarre. I have to fill it in some way,” testifies to this sentiment (Lehrer 106).

Sather-Wagstaff argues that Jewish travelers think of Central Europe as a cemetery, yet its inhabitants are able to move on and build life on the ashes of war as a testament to an interestingly malleable notion of spaces of disaster; the anthropologist asserts that “they are spaces that are constantly negotiated, constructed, and reconstructed into meaningful places through ongoing human action” (Sather-Wagstaff 20).³⁰ The narratives surrounding Central Europe and Cuba, especially in the respective communities of second-generation returnees, influence the way their personal negotiation of the spaces takes place. Organized tours and the tourism industry complex generate stories and interpretations that travelers on a quest have a chance to dismantle or complement, depending on their case. Cuban American protagonists tend to expect too

³⁰ The differences in the way a site is understood or embraced also stem from various interpretation of history: “Public memory also mediates between dominant, official (and usually national) narratives and local or individual narratives, and it is also a means of accepting, resisting, informing, or even significantly altering these official histories and memory” (Sather-Wagstaff 20). Additionally, especially in the case of typical commemorative sites like the Holocaust museum or Auschwitz, the sites “play key roles in the construction and maintenance of nationalism, national or ethnic identities, lessons-to-be-learned, and political ideologies (40).

much from their ancestral homeland, which leads to exhaustion and a sense of defeat, as well as relatively little familiarity that they experience. Jewish travelers, on the other hand, frequently expect nothing – or, alternately, expect the worst – and find relief and familiarity. That this tendency holds true is further proved by Jewish American travelers of Cuban descent, who usually only travel to Cuba – with expected results – but whose families prepare them for the worst when it comes to Eastern Europe. (A good example here is Ruth Behar.) Jewish, Cuban, and Jewish Cuban travelers, however, understand that once they enter the mythical homeland, their lives have a chance to be written in the indicative.

Escaping the Subjunctive

In an interview, Steve Stern quotes the following traditional tale about the Baal Shem Tov (translated as the “Master of the Name”), the founder of Hasidic Judaism:

When the Baal Shem Tov needed enlightenment, he went to a place in the forest, lit a fire, said a prayer, and *mirabile dictu*: enlightenment was granted him. His nephew would go to the same place in the forest and light the fire, only to find he'd forgotten the prayer. Still it was sufficient; it was enough to be in the forest and light the fire. Then the nephew's nephew would go to the forest, only to discover that he was unable to light the fire or remember the prayer. But that was also sufficient; he was in the forest and that was enough. Then you arrive at the generation of the nephew's nephew's nephew, who can't find his way into the forest, never mind build a fire or recall the prayer. But he at least remembers the story of the forest, the fire, and the prayer, and that must be sufficient for him. (Stern, “Tugging at Jewish Weeds” 157)

Contemporary ethnic writers are, arguably, in the position of the nephew's nephew's nephew: they remember the stories but find it impossible to find their way back into the forest. Even though less than three generations elapsed, physical remoteness increases the metaphorical distance from tradition and culture. What they have left are stories. Because the memory of the forest is vivid despite the inability to light the fire and say a prayer, the stories are frequently concerned with the “what ifs” of the generation: wondering how life would have been if they had access to their ancestors’ lives and spaces.

Both Erica Lehrer and Achy Obejas are interested in the concept of “what if,” and both think of it in terms of grammar, emphasizing the textual nature of the inherited nostalgia – one that is not based on actual memories and so it only has stories, words, to thrive on. Lehrer thus explains the concept of subjunctive identity, “The subjunctive is a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities. The use of the subjunctive in memory work, then, suggests a relationship with identity in which one considers the possibility that things might have been different – or proposes that they might yet be so” (102). In the majority of works I am familiar with, the first generation, due to painful memories of either Eastern Europe or difficult escapes from Cuba, is reluctant if not straightforwardly hostile to the idea of return.³¹ They are also generally opposed to any identification with Poland or Cuba. Yet the second generation yearns for the experience, producing the grammar of longing in subjunctive. One of Lehrer’s

³¹ Ruth Behar reminisces about her grandmother, affectionately called Baba (“grandma” in Polish), who was equally loath to return to Poland as to Cuba: “Poland has never interested me,” recalls Behar, in large part because Baba had always said she had no desire to return there” (*Traveling Heavy* 144). On the other hand, Baba always asked the same question when Behar visited her in Miami Beach en route to Cuba: “¿*Qué se te perdió en Cuba?*” Behar translates, “What did I lose in Cuba? She wanted me to forget Cuba, move on” (193).

informants explains his feelings upon seeing Kraków: “I see people on the street, going into fruit shops just like my grandmother did. I see their faces and think it’s amazing, all these people who look just like grandmother *would have* looked here” (102, Lehrer’s emphasis). Despite also describing more negative feelings Poland inspires, like constant fear of anti-Semitism, the young man cannot help but imagine what might have been, and it makes the trip worthwhile.

The “classic nostalgia” that Lehrer recognizes in the subjunctive descriptions (things might have been different – better) is complicated by the fact that it relates to places never before visited. Psychiatrist Aaron Hass, for example, thus describes his own life in the subjunctive:

When asked ‘Fin vanit bist du?’ [Where are you from?] by someone from the old country, I would respond “Ich bin a Lubliner” [I am a Lubliner]. Even though before 1978 I had never been to Lublin, Poland, where my parents and grandparents lived before the war, I felt *as though that were* my home. Through a series of circumstances beyond my control, my life was displaced from where *it should have* taken place, from where, I believed, I *would have* led a far more contented existence. (qtd. in Lehrer 103).

This subjunctive identity, delineated by “should haves” and “would haves,” is the source of a particular appeal to younger generations and perhaps even a source of comfort despite no tangible recollection of its origin. As Hass’ example suggests, the most prominent place among the subjunctive statements in second- and third-generation speech patterns belongs to the counterfactual conditional: a part of the subjunctive where the if-clause counters facts. Even if Hass does not explicitly state, “I *would have* led a far more

contented existence *if the war had not happened,*” the if-clause is always there between the lines. In the preface to *The Portable Island*, Ruth Behar uses the subjunctive to talk about her imagined adulthood in Cuba, and in this case, the if-clause is more explicit: “We discovered a shared passion to understand what home *might have* meant to us if we’d grown up in Cuba rather than the United States” (Behar and Suárez xiv, my emphasis). Everything about the second generation seems to reflect the subjunctive mood, and based on my literary research, its members do not share the peculiar desire to imagine alternative scenarios with their parents, who – even if they have their own subjunctive in the new country – experienced at least part of their lives in the indicative and whose need to leave the country was frequently communicated to them in the imperative. The second generation does not have the factual, indicative basis from which to draw their layer of wishes and “might-have-beens.”

One of the authors whom I focus on in the following chapters, Achy Obejas, sees the subjunctive as a distinctly Spanish phenomenon in terms of linguistics, emphasizing (wrongly to an extent) its lack in the English language:

This is one of the inescapable things about being born in Cuba: the life that was somehow denied by revolution and exile, our lives in the subjunctive – contingent, emotionally conjured lives of doubt and passion. Everything is measured by what might have been, everything is wishful – if Fidel hadn’t triumphed, if the exiles had won at Bay of Pigs, if we hadn’t left. I have never questioned why the subjunctive exists in Spanish, with its cultures of yearning,

but neither have I had reservations about its absence in English, with its cool confidence. (76)³²

I argue that the cultures of yearning are not limited to Spanish-speaking immigrants but are typical of second-generation American citizens, who express it well both in their parents' languages as well as in the "cool" English. Subjunctive is a way to gain access to the stories and perhaps even approach the forest of the old tradition, and it is the "what if" that leads many of them to return despite the first generation's admonitions.

The subjunctive features prominently in the language used by the authors in discussing the motivation behind their writing, as well as the motivation behind trips to ancestral homelands. Sarah Wildman, the author of *Paper Love: Searching for the Girl My Grandfather Left Behind*, declares she researched and recorded her grandfather's story of prewar Vienna lovers to preserve what was meant to be obliterated: "I think that what I realized at the very beginning of this project was that the Nazi experiment was not just to exterminate, but to erase — to render people literally unmemorable" ("Box of Love Letters Reveals Grandfather Didn't Escape WWII with 'Everyone'"). Wildman jumps into subjunctive while attempting to determine why she is so dedicated to uncovering the story of Scheftel, the girl her grandfather left behind in Vienna: "And I thought that this was an opportunity to tell one person's story — a regular person, someone

³² Michael Swan proves that the subjunctive is, indeed, present in English: "The subjunctive is a special kind of present tense . . . It is sometimes used in *that*-clauses in a formal style, especially in American English, after words which express the idea that something is important or desirable (e.g. *suggest, recommend, ask, insist, vital, essential, important, advice*)." Obejas is right to note that *subjuntivo* in Spanish is used in a slightly different manner, much like the subjunctive of older English, which "had more subjunctive forms, and used them in many kinds of 'unreal' sense to talk about possible, desirable or imaginary situations," replaced now with "should," "would," and "special uses of past tenses" (Swan 566-7).

who didn't have big art, someone who you wouldn't have heard of – but someone who might have been someone you knew.” The appeal of the subjunctive is in its potential: rather than presenting faceless figures with no history, it allows the imagination to connect with whoever is described by the virtue of possibility as “someone who might have been someone you knew.” This realization brings the reader closer to the past in some ways, yet simultaneously the usage of the unfulfilled hypothetical statement highlights the fact that the potential is forever unrealized.

Due to its unmistakable relation to the past, the subjunctive can become a tool of self-torture and blaming. In “Return to Poland,” Finkelstein utilizes subjunctive in an agonizing and exhausting manner, looking for someone – anyone – to condemn: “I fell prey to my old habit of suspecting people of the worst. How would these guys have acted during the war? What would have motivated them, fury or pity?” (73). Subjunctive is a way, even if tenuous, to connect with the past and try to understand it, yet it can become obsessive and unhealthy. As Finkelstein is walking through Polish streets, she cannot help but keep guessing:

I spent part of my time surreptitiously eyeing the middle-aged lovers in front of us. The woman had bleached blonde hair piled high on her head and black eyeliner wings. Both wore inexpensive leather jackets. Descendants, I thought, just as I am. What did their families do during the war? I was glad that my parents had spared me the trial of living in a country where I would ask myself this question about everyone I met. (49)³³

³³ Of course, as Sather-Wagstaff explains and as contemporary Polish Jews would confirm, the locals seem to move on much faster than those forced to leave, and they renegotiate their space as a living one with each new generation.

Finkelstein demonstrates the perils of the subjunctive, far from its more dreamy and romantic connotations that the concept could inspire. Whereas Wildman uses her yearning to investigate the “what ifs” in a productive manner – somewhat close to Mendelsohn’s wish to “rescue” his dead family members from being forgotten or, worse, remembered as unified symbols of the Holocaust under the all-encompassing banner of Auschwitz – Finkelstein has to control the power of her imagination to revive the past in the most unexpected and menacing ways.

The subjunctive mode of writing is closer to the “unreal” than the “real,” as it talks about possibilities and wishes. It is no wonder then that it frequently strays from what critics come to think of as reality in favor of imaginary locations or imaginary events in actual locations – hybrids morphed from memory, stories, and half-truths. Some critics seem keen to accuse contemporary authors of historical and cultural inaccuracies if the work in question is inspired by the writer’s heritage. The logic of such accusation dictates that the works of literature should present the world as it is or was, including historical and linguistic details, despite the very problematic nature of such truth and as if any single novel was in fact able to present the entirety of experience in a way resembling historical accounts. A famous example is Sau-ling Wong’s essay “‘Sugar Sisterhood.’ Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon,” which painstakingly addresses errors committed by Amy Tan in her successful novel *The Joy Luck Club*. Certain “egregious mistranslation[s]” demonstrate Tan’s “profound ignorance” of Chinese culture (180). Wong’s main issue with the novel is that it tries to attract white, middle-class female readership by simplifying and bastardizing the richness of Chinese culture, which is a valid point. Literature manufactures longings, just like, according to Dalia Kandiyoti,

tourism does: “[T]ourism ‘manufactures’ nostalgia for past times that exist in no one’s memory or heritage. Further, tourism creates vicarious nostalgia: that is, the enjoyment of other people’s longing for homelands from which they have been displaced” (93). It is indeed possible to experience white “vicarious nostalgia” through Tan’s books, and to this extent, Wong is justified in resenting them.

However, the implication of this argument, namely, that it would be possible to create a text representing China in all its sophistication and complexity, accurate in each detail, is rather problematic. Comments like these frequently assume the existence of an objective historical-cultural constant that does not depend on the viewer or participant. Such attachment to what is believed to be historically and culturally accurate is rather understandable. Very few people can truly manage ambiguity; for the rest, it produces anxiety at best and emphasizes sensitivities and resentments. Thus, most readers treat novels as reflecting the “worse” kind of truth, whereas historical accounts as the only real source of knowledge. Yet writers who attempt to record these accounts know how fickle and unreliable memory can be, not only because of the brain’s neurological limitations, but also – perhaps predominantly – because of psychological barriers and silences. Finkelstein, for example, reflects on her father’s peculiar manner of telling his story: “Getting a coherent picture of the war from my father is not easy. He will tell me about hiding with his father in 1942, jump to a story about a Nazi on a bus after the war, and continue with an entirely different story about his father. In Jakob’s mind, all of these stories have one emotional point of intersection, but the absence of a unifying story line leaves me confused” (34). The author desires a unified story line much as readers and critics tend to expect unified visions of the world (despite declaring otherwise). In this

section, I do not try to dismiss any historical truths or argue that novels, in fact, present a more truthful option. I wish to suggest that when it comes to the delicate, difficult pasts, like the past of the two groups discussed in this dissertation, historical accounts are not free from bias, and literature has an important role in building equally valid versions of the past. In this version, ambivalence is the key to understanding how traumatic past is still a past and how it creates a certain type of impossible nostalgia.

The authors of some of the novels I am interested in seem to be already making the same point in their writing. *Loving Che*, for instance, is one of the books that “debunk the idea that historical and fictional writing are all that different” (Borland, “Figures” 32). Others, however, make a distinction between the “right” and “wrong” way of engaging with tradition. Just as Maxine Hong Kingston is perceived as the “right” path as opposed to the ignorant manner of Tan, Michael Chabon is considered a less valuable transmitter of Jewishness than Dara Horn. Steve Stern creates a ranking of authors in accordance with their manner of engaging with Jewish tradition: “There's a strain that disturbs me, as represented in the work of writers like Nicole Krauss, Jonathan Safran Foer, Michael Chabon, and others – immensely virtuosic writers who nevertheless play fast and loose with Jewish sources in what amounts to a Yiddishkeit lite. They know just enough of the traditional lore and literature to infuse their narratives with the flavor of ‘the turbulent saga’ without taking responsibility for a confrontation with its essence” (Stern, “Tugging” 158).³⁴ The accusations Stern is making resemble Wong’s: both point to the

³⁴ Yet again, the “theme” or “amusement” park’s imagery is used to describe the trivialization of Jewish past: “This is to my mind a kind of theme park mentality, wherein the Jewish past is presented in language and settings that evoke a sepia sentimentality, that defang a ferocious experience until it's safe for nostalgia. I prefer the gloves-off method of less cozy writers, who perhaps are not so reader-friendly, but then I'm getting

high readability of the lesser works, which compromises their accuracy and their “essence.”³⁵ The question of remembrance and longing generates interest insofar as authenticity is concerned. To think of the process that led to this and other mistranslations is much more interesting to me, as it reveals that certain distortions are unavoidable – whether motivated by the desire for profit or not – and that to “feel” one’s old country does not necessarily mean to “know” it well.³⁶

The fictitious character of second-generation writing about the homeland is not a new phenomenon. Living in the United States, ethnic writers create fiction on multiple levels: first, by taking necessary liberties that go with the writing of novels, and second, by convincing their reader that their account is somehow more authentic. However, in the case of ABCs – American Born Cubans, the level of fictitiousness is higher: similarly to Jewish writers, who recreate the worlds that no longer exist, Cuban Americans describe a world geographically close, yet one that has been isolated and sometimes even inaccessible, especially to ABC tourists. The fabric of fiction thus created contains

old and curmudge only and dyspeptic from sour grapes. Still, there's a quantum difference between telling the story of forgetting and suffering from amnesia. The angel of forgetfulness tweaks us all under the nose at birth, erasing our memories of the paradise we inhabited before our souls were so rudely stuffed into mortal coils. The writers I admire tend to begin with a glimmer of remembrance, a spark if you will, and fan it like crazy in the hope of starting a conflagration. Others seem content to borrow a light” (“Tugging” 158-9).

³⁵ Stern presents the essence in an arresting analogy as a weed: “If you tug at a Jewish weed in a Jewish story, it shouldn't come out of the ground like an artificial plant from a cube of styrofoam; instead, you pull the weed and the earth erupts, and up comes an immensely elaborate root system with the culture, history, and myths of the Jews attached” (“Tugging” 159).

³⁶ R. Radhakrishnan suggests that “the rhetoric of authenticity tends to degenerate into essentialism” (127). He gives more credit to “emotional investment” than the first-hand knowledge of a country; citizens living within its borders might not bother to explore it, whereas members of the Diaspora can obtain “a nuanced historical appreciation of the home country” (126).

nostalgia, inherited memories, and ghost chasing. Tony Mendoza creates his photographic memoir *Cuba – Going Back* after almost forty years of living in exile, and he admits that before his first trip back he had “increasingly remembered Cuba as paradise” (7). What he finds is that on his old block, the buildings “looked as if they had been bombed” and “the wonderful gardens [he] remembered . . . now wildly overgrown and barren” (13). He takes note of people’s disheartenment, when instead of hostility he expected towards Americans, he hears Cubans asking: “Why doesn’t the U.S. invade? This is shit. Why doesn’t the U.S. invade?” (20). Mendoza admits his paradisiacal visions were far from reality, and duly notes his surprise.

Distortions in immigrant stories do not, however, start with the second generation represented by Amy Tan and the Jewish American and Cuban American authors I am interested in. Socolovsky notices the vicious cycle in the Cuban American pursuit of stable memory: “Cuba’s presence is unsteady and marks continual loss of center and origin, even – and especially – in those who attempt to relocate that center. Ultimately, Cuba is a fiction that is both acquired and absorbed in the narrative not only for the characters who are too young to remember it directly but also for those who left as adults” (237). Because it is relatively easy and very tempting to create identity anew after moving (escaping, being forced out), the actual immigrants, who are the only link to the old worlds they leave behind, tend to modify their stories, their personalities, and, inadvertently, their homelands. Cynthia Ozick populated the world of her novel *The Messiah of Stockholm* with imaginary professors, suspicious intelligentsia, and even a Princess from the old country; Mrs. Eklund of the novel complains, “Half my customers have made themselves up. Fabricators. Every Pole of a certain age who walks in here,

male or female, used to be a famous professor in Warsaw. Every Hungarian was once ambassador to Argentina. The French are the worst. I've never had one of those in my shop who didn't turn out to be just the one who got Sartre started on the Talmud" (26). Even though their identities might well be genuine, in the unstable, precarious space of a new location there is no way to validate these claims to royalty and education. In the short story "Her Mother's House" by Ana Menéndez, a young woman travels to Cuba only to find out that the house described by her mother as a glamorous plantation is in fact a small cottage. The frailty of memory, the tendency to idealize the past, and the eternal nostalgia make stories of direct witnesses to Cuba's/Eastern Europe's events no more than a fairy tale. Many second-generation writers depend solely on this inherited knowledge, supported by research and, when they are lucky, short visits. Numerous Cuban Americans face difficulties when traveling to the island. In the case of Jewish American writers, visiting the geographical location does not mean learning anything about what it was a century ago. Whatever is left of that world has been annihilated and survives only in Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*, festivals of Jewish culture organized each summer in major Polish cities, and stories of those who remember. It also survives in contemporary Jewish American fiction, written by Americans about something in the past that haunts them although it does no longer exist.

Dara Horn's most recent novel, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, offers an astute commentary on the problematic nature of memory. It relates three simultaneous stories, two of them based on historical figures: Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides and Solomon Schechter, a nineteenth-century rabbi and scholar, famous for his work on the collection of Cairo Genizah papers. The main narrative, however, is that of Josie

Ashkenazi and her sister Judith. The former is a program developer in the United States, whose application called Genizah gains her fame and an invitation to work for the museum in Cairo. Genizah's purpose is to record even the most inconsequential moments of everyday life in order to facilitate its course (by looking at previous night's recording to find lost keys), to celebrate family and friends (by gathering intelligence about their habits), or to obsessively analyze one's own existence. When accused of "cultivating the trivial" by Nasreen, the employee of the museum, Josie counters, "What seems trivial now may become important later" (Horn, *Guide* 74). The introduction of the unsurprisingly popular application initially seems to be a tool of discrediting certain modes of remembrance. Horn first juxtaposes the program's mechanical way of cataloging life with the more relaxed way memory works without external aids, leading the reader to believe the issue with the program is its unrelenting truthfulness and unbearable completeness. As the novel progresses, however, Horn highlights the software's highly user-led construction as causing numerous abuses of truth.

Horn both celebrates the power of memory by allowing her protagonist to survive isolation only through remembering her daughter and husband, and questions the seeming superiority of different modes of remembrance by undermining their basic premises. In the case of Genizah-type of documenting reality, the first problem is, ironically, its totality. The programmer's daughter is disappointed with being robbed of the opportunity to create her own memories, explaining to her mother how lucky she is: "[Y]ou get to remember everything the way you want, instead of how it really happened" (Horn, *Guide* 5). The program itself is highly suspicious in its objectivity; despite its capacity to record everything, it can have its content modified at will by the user. Thus, another writer

questions the supposed benefits of “historical” documentation, pointing to its flawed nature. Like Menéndez, Horn is blurring the distinction between the actual Genizahs and the genizahs of our lives.

The lack of definite, accurate material for building remembrance and sustaining it reinforces the yearning of the second or third generation to “return” and compare the stories to reality, whatever this reality might mean. This return tends to mean different things in different novels, but a few veins, like disappointment in Cuban American fiction or a sense of familiarity in Jewish American novels, can be easily distinguished by careful readers. “What Ale finds, in short, is that there is no *place* of origin but rather that the persistent expression of a yearning for origination, a yearning that . . . can become a source of meaning, beauty, value in its own right” (Freedman 246). Postmodern fiction tends to undermine its own premises, and thus the concept of return is deconstructed by the time the protagonist reaches his or her destination. As Rosemary Marangoly George observes, “Home in the immigrant genre is a fiction that one can move beyond or recreate at will. The association between an adequate self and a place to call home is held up to scrutiny and then let go” (qtd. in Nyman 25). Especially in Cuban American novels and short stories, predominantly female protagonists go on search to find their mothers, metaphors for the essence of the motherland. What they find, however, is nowhere near any solid knowledge about it; it is rather a reflection of the authors’ own doubts.

It Is in Your Blood, Waiting to Be Let Go

Multiethnic writers’ answer to various attempts at invalidating their version of the homeland is to place their protagonists at the heart of the issue, in the “Old Country.” Presumably following the steps of their creators, the heroes and heroines of these

contemporary odysseys “return” to places they have never before visited to make sense of who they are and what they have become in the new world. Lisette in one of Menéndez short stories goes to Cuba not to find any type of closure but to look for a starting point to her life: “She wasn’t going to explain to her mother things she could barely explain to herself. How every story needed a beginning. How her past had come to seem like a blank page, waiting for the truth to darken it” (210). In a similar fashion, Mendelsohn in his narrative *The Lost* marks the beginning not only of his narrative but also of his changed life:

And so, eighty-one years after my grandfather left his home in a bustling town nestled among pine and spruce forests in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, and twenty-one years after he dies in a swimming pool surrounded by palm trees; three-hundred and eighty-nine years after the Jägers arrived in Bolechow, and sixty years after they finally disappeared from it, I went back. This was the beginning. (74)

The precision with which Mendelsohn calculates elapsed time testifies to the fact that the second generation cares; it keeps count of the life in the subjunctive, which can only end (and begin in the indicative) with the return to Over There, a phrase used by David Grossman, one of the most popular Israeli writers, in *See Under: Love*. At the beach near the city Polish Gdańsk, Momik Neuman, the protagonist of the novel, talks to the ghosts from his past: “And I spoke about fear. And about Grandfather, whom I can’t seem to bring back to life, not even in the story. And about being unable to understand my life

until I learn about my unlived life Over There” (109).³⁷ To really comprehend the “what ifs” of the subjunctive, one needs to, it seems, take a physical trip – become a tourist on the way to one’s homeland – and turn the “unlived life” into an experience, no matter how disappointing or painful.³⁸

The darkening of the truth Lisette mentions is what ethnic fiction requires to fend off accusations of “sugar sisterhood”; the physical return is meant to authenticate the experience, giving weight to the author’s ethos, and it is the *sine qua non* condition of every respectful second-generation novel about coming-of-age. In her essay on Achy Obejas, Dara Goldman observes, “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*” (72). In this section, I will use passages from Álvarez to demonstrate that the wider trend Goldman discerns, notably in the U.S. Caribbean literature, is not entirely compatible with Cuban American fiction. Traditionally, ethnic

³⁷ David Grossman remembers his own childhood through its perpetual reference to external localities: “It was a peculiar tunnel. One end was in Jerusalem, in the young State of Israel, which believed that its strength depended partly on its ability to forget so that it could cobble together a new identity for itself. And the other end was in the land of Over There” (*Writing in the Dark* 6).

³⁸ Jonathan Skinner views the phenomenon of such high expectations placed on a visit to a foreign place as problematic, “There are a number of problems with the view of tourism as a kind of transition ritual, including the difficulties in trying to pin down the meanings of its concepts, as well as the problem of identifying an alleged need for alternation or inversion of experience which is assumed to underlie tourist and other leisure experiences” (43). The protagonists of ethnic fiction tend to view their own returns as potentially life changing to a much greater extent than tourists not related with a specific place, and their potential for disappointment is even greater.

fiction presents returns as desirable avenues to self-discovery, encouraged especially by older generations who miss and revere the old country past. In Cuban American fiction, however, similarly to Jewish American writings, it is the new generation that attempts to break the silence cast over the old world by their unwilling and resentful parents, and it is often against the family's wishes that the protagonist decides to return. This challenge frequently heightens expectations, promising to reveal truths and offering completeness to what feels like an incomplete life in the natal homeland.

In this sense, the protagonists' expectations of life-changing experiences are not much different from those of any other tourists. Homeland tourism, however, differs from its regular version in that it calls for performances of the past rather than the usual "performances of the here-and-now," which is how Urry perceives tourist services (50). According to the sociologist, since "'going away' is normally endowed with significance," tourists expect the "extraordinary" (49). In the case of homeland tourists, the expectation is to see the homeland as they know it from their parents' and grandparents' stories; in other words, such tourists demand a performance of their homeland's past. The encounter with the changed and essentially foreign land leads to predictable disappointment. Finkelstein, for example, thus describes Poland she encountered on her return: "In visiting this place for eight days in April 1998, my parents and I were witnessing a nation of phantoms. Signs of World War II and Soviet domination were as little in evidence in this Poland as overt signs of slavery are in the United States" (41). By comparing contemporary Poland with its utter – and understandable – lack of any attachment to the relatively recent yet painful past to the United States, Finkelstein demonstrates the universality of the urge to "move on," which

is conveniently forgotten in the U.S. It is, on the other hand, also a comment on how quickly it happens; one generation seems to be enough time to erase the signs of tragedies and revolutions. The case of Cuban travelers reveals one more truth about the passage of time: although the island seems to be living as it was when the traveler's ancestors left, without their presence and mediation it is just a foreign country that has moved on after their leaving just as the history moved on after its revolutions.

The authors of diasporic narratives usually offer at least one version of return. The least literal ones are made through memories and writing, most notably through photographs. John Urry observes how “photographs enhance, frame and substitute for physical travel in complex and contingent ways” (Urry and Larsen 155). For the descendants of those who left the old country, this journey is necessarily not only spatial but also temporal. Teresa de la Landre's nameless daughter in Menéndez's novel *Loving Che* reserves her right to feel homesick at home when she states: “I was reminded that nostalgia is not the exclusive province of exiles; or perhaps that one can be in exile without ever having left, can be an exile, so to speak, from time” (200). It is the concept of yearning for *aquellos tiempos*, “those times,” that she notices in her Cuban friends, but also experiences as a representative of second-generation immigrants. In diasporic fiction, the homeland and *aquellos tiempos* invade American spaces with artifacts and symbols as substitutes for travel. Stern observes that Yiddishkeit enters Jewish stories in this manner by analyzing the way “the ordinary world exhibits elements of the extraordinary and time partakes of the properties of eternity”; according to the author, this mode of existence is typically Yiddish: “It's the realm in which much of classic Yiddish literature exists, as well as the stories of the inheritors of that tradition – e.g.,

Malamud's shadkns [professional matchmakers] and jewbirds, Ozick's golem, Nathan Englander's acrobats from Chelm” (“Tugging” 148). Whereas for Stern the acrobats and golems function as the elements of Jewish magical realism, they are also strong connectors to the Yiddish culture and the signifiers of the times long gone.³⁹ Due to their overstated representation, they become theatrical in nature and operate as props in the world of the novel.

Travel and tourism are, according to sociologists and anthropologists, in their very nature closely related to performance arts. Rosalie Schwartz asserts, “The concept of drama, or theater piece, suits the study of tourism” (xi). Despite travelers’ conviction that they are entering an authentic and spontaneous site of culture other than their own, “Most contemporary tourist scenes are staged, scripted experiences. A ship docks, or an airplane lands. The ‘players’ make their entrances onto a set filled with local color, native artifacts . . . At the scheduled time, the players exit the scene and reboard the bus, ship, or plane” (Schwartz xi-xii). Schwartz’s research focuses on Cuba and how its image has been, from the 1920s onwards, that of a pleasure island. The scholar sees Cuba as a “scripted scene of glamour, romance, and rumba,” underscoring that “[i]llusion plays a significant role in tourism” (xii). In 1999, Pine and Gilmore coined the term “experience economy,” which corresponds to Schwartz’s understanding of touristic experience: it involves “staging and enacting memorable . . . experiences” (Urry 53). These frequently used metaphors of a tourist place as a stage of sorts and tourists as actors in a theater make my discussion of

³⁹ When I discuss the Yiddish culture as “long gone,” I am mostly referring to the European tradition that has been annihilated during World War II. I am, however, aware of the fact that American Hasidim continue to use the language daily.

both literary props and literary returns to the homeland based more on correlation than contrast.

With the world getting proverbially smaller every day, it is increasingly a physical journey undertaken by protagonists that counts as return. Interestingly, whether the protagonist treats it as a journey back or away is neither straightforward nor uniform throughout the novel. Urry notices the ambiguity in the concept of diasporic homeland tourism: “Unlike conventional tourism that is based upon a clear distinction of periods of ‘home’ and ‘away,’ the diasporic traveler often has no clear temporal boundaries as one activity tends to flow into the other” (72). Even if the trip is undertaken for reasons other than visiting the homeland, as in the case of Dara Horn’s Leora from the novel *In the Image*, it turns into a daydream suffused with memories or an investigation of the past. Maja Mikula attempts to explain the urge to visit foreign homelands in her article about Finnish homeland tourism:

Following the waning of the forward-looking utopian narratives of the post-war period, people found solace and inspiration in their collective pasts At the same time, the ever-increasing population displacement around the globe meant that, for many, the past was quite literally a foreign country, as searching for roots involved crossing geo-political boundaries. Even though the original displacement may have occurred several generations ago, descendants of migrants now flock to their “original homelands”, hoping to experience a sense of belonging through immersion in locales that figure prominently in their personal or family histories. Their itineraries are eclectic and often unpredictable. They follow a logic dictated

by hybrid family narratives, in which elements of collective and personal memories co-exist and feed off each other. They resist easy classification. (21)

The “eclectic itineraries” Mikula invokes signal that quests like the ones my protagonists take are, indeed, characteristic of homeland tourism if the visitors allow themselves the freedom from mission tours that offer highly scripted experiences. However, the unpredictable nature of such undertaking frequently leads to some type of disillusionment, for the protagonists in the works I discuss look not so much for the space as for the past as a foreign country. This is mainly why their quests are necessarily futile, for the spaces they visit are acutely located in the present that is even more foreign, since it is not featured in family histories. The visitors expect to arrive at a location from the past, and their expectations clash with what they find due this incompatibility.⁴⁰ The eclecticism and unpredictability of their itineraries stem from the fact that the second-generation returnees are both deeply attached and wholly foreign to their ancestral homelands. Their writing combines both aspects, creating narratives imbued with tension and ambiguity.

To reconcile these contradictory veins in second-generation writing about the homeland, members of the generation frequently use blood as a trope reflecting their

⁴⁰ This is how Garrido describes his informants’ feelings upon the discovery that the homeland they had been dreaming of is, in fact, just a “foreign country”: “Finding the Philippines to be a foreign country inspired in my informants an amalgam of contradictory emotions: feelings of repulsion in having moved from the first to the third world and finding much of what one had taken for granted to be conspicuously missing or malfunctioning; feelings of disillusionment at finding one’s ‘significant Other,’ in Mead’s felicitous phrase, unfaithful to the vision with which one has identified; and feelings of exclusion, of being foreign in one’s supposed homeland, of feeling one’s ethnic identity suddenly open to question at the very moment when one had expected it to be confirmed. While my informants recognized that, of course, this ‘discovery’ only stands to reason, their feelings of dejection speak to the power of the conceit of reconnection and, ultimately, to the problem of ethnic identification” (196-7).

mode of belonging to Mikula's "original" homeland. Though by no means unique to ethnic literature, the trope is very pronounced in this type of fiction, and it is a common feature in homeland return narratives. On the one hand, it expresses the intimacy of the connection; blood is, after all, intrinsic and life sustaining. On the other hand, the metaphor suggests a certain lack of agency: whatever is contained in blood has been transmitted without one's will or consent, like a contagion of nostalgia that is both internal and external. In one of the stories from Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, titled "A Pair of Tickets," Jin-mei Woo's mother repeatedly tells her, "Someday you will see . . . It is in your blood, waiting to be let go" (267). This rather essentialistic argument relies on the belief that the part of her daughter which is Chinese will forever remain so, in spite of the years spent in America, because the core of ethnicity is inherited and transmitted rather than learned. Lehrer records a corresponding usage of blood imagery as she conducts her fieldwork in Kraków's Jewish quarter of Kazimierz. When Max Rogers, a Hasidic Londoner on his business trip to Poland hears Lehrer's Polish, he says, "I should speak such good Polish! You're so lucky!" (92). Lehrer questions his comment and asks why he thinks he should speak the language, which annoys him to an extent, and after a while he responds, "I don't know! . . . It's in the blood." Classic nostalgia combined with annoyance at having admitted the possibility of nostalgia seems to be the mode of second-generation's being in the complicated worlds old and new. Such ambivalence, according to Lehrer, is a first step towards a better understanding of the relations between the past and present – resentments and wishes of the subjunctive identity; the ambivalence stands in opposition to the predetermined denial inspired, for example, by organized tours.

Although some of the typical second-generation attitudes can be observed in the fiction of other ethnic authors, I argue they tend to frame the return differently from either Cuban American or Jewish American writers. Hyphenated citizens tend to grow nostalgic towards the country they have never seen, and this nostalgia is a shared feature of contemporary ethnic literature of the U.S. For instance, Chinese American author Lisa See confesses, “All my life I had been homesick for China even though I had never been there” (196), expressing the same sentiment in almost exactly the same words as, for example, Ana Menéndez. In one of the stories from Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, Jin-mei Woo describes a corresponding sensation on entering China: “The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, I feel different. I can feel the skin on my forehead tingling, my blood rushing through a new course, my bones aching with a familiar pain. And I think, My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese” (267). It is as if the “bizarre vacuum” from Szifra’s description started filling up: what Jin-mei’s mother suggests is waiting in the blood now speaks and aches in her bones with a familiar voice. Though the mother’s words indicate a certain essentialistic vein in ethnic literature, the moment of arrival to China complicates this interpretation to an extent by implying the power of environment in becoming fully ethnic. Magically, the act of crossing the border complements the Chinese component in the blood and creates a complete citizen. In one of the interviews for *The New York Times*, Amy Tan herself admits to experiencing what Jin-mei does in her novel: “When my feet touched China, I became Chinese. I knew I was not totally Chinese, but I felt the connection nevertheless. It was a sense of completeness, like having a mother and a father. I had China and America, and everything was all coming together finally” (nytimes.com). Whether what immigrants

and their children experience when they see their homeland again is a genuine, profound revelation or simply a projection of their parents' expectations as well as the effect of impatience after years of waiting, is hard to determine; however, the ethnic component "in their blood," or at least the illusion thereof that binds them to their land and people overseas, is certainly strong enough to excite feelings and inspire literary accounts of return.

In other works of ethnic fiction, returns might be more disappointing than what Chinese American fiction would like the readers to believe, but the very desire to return is equally strong. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, a popular novel by a Dominican American author Julia Álvarez, demonstrates the compulsion to return through one of the four sister-protagonists, Yolanda. When she has to make a birthday wish before she blows the candle, she imagines a permanent return to the Dominican Republic: "There is so much she wants, it is hard to single out one wish. There have been too many stops on the road of the last twenty-nine years since her family left this island behind. She and her sisters have led such turbulent lives – so many husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns among them. But look at her cousins, women with households and authority in their voices. Let this turn out to be my home" (11).⁴¹ She is envious of the old ways she sees in the household, where women know what they want and seem to be avoiding the dilemmas of American life. Later that same day, in one of the most telling scenes of the novel, Yolanda takes a drive to the countryside to enjoy fresh guavas.

⁴¹ How different from Cuban American writers who, despite deep connections to the island, dread the prospect of staying there forever: "I would literally become a commuter to Cuba, traveling back and forth from Michigan as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. Yet I always feared I might be trapped inside the island. I went knowing I could leave. I had a ticket out" (Behar, "The Woman Who Wanted Bridges" 133).

Before she is faced with her powerlessness at being stranded in the guava field, which symbolizes her incompatibility with what is essentially a foreign land, Yoyo feels, for a short time, finally at home: “Standing here in the quiet, she believes she has never felt at home in the United States, never” (12). Yolanda is expressing a similar sentiment to the one Lisette does when she expects Cuba to help her fill the page of her life, and she experiences a similar disappointment.

The desire to return is equally overwhelming for the authors of my choice; however, there is one important difference. Lehrer underscores that “while ‘quest’ travel may be immensely personal, it is also political” (Lehrer 98). Jin-mei or the García girls do not have to justify their decision to visit China or the Dominican Republic to their parents the way Lisette in Menéndez’s “Her Mother’s House” or Alejandra in Obejas’ *Days of Awe* does. They do not fear comments that Lehrer heard when she announced her trip at a party (“Find what you are looking for, and then get out” [48]). In fact, Chinese American mothers are typically disappointed in their children’s lack of desire to visit the old country, and the father in the García family is more than encouraging when it comes to visiting the Island:

By the end of a couple of years away from home, we had *more* than adjusted. And, of course, as soon as we had, Mami and Papi got all worried they were going to lose their girls to America. Things had calmed down on the Island and Papi had started making real money in his office up in the Bronx. The next decision was obvious: we four girls would be sent summers to the Island so we wouldn’t lose touch with *la familia*. The hidden agenda was marriage to homeland boys, since everyone knew that once a girl married an American, those

grandbabies came out jabbering in English and thinking of the Island as a place to go get a suntan. (109)

To immigrants like Yolanda's father or Jin-mei's mother, the greatest danger is in forgetting the homeland, in assimilating slightly too much, the metaphorical act of losing the accent of one's heart. Their children's trips are welcomed, encouraged and expected by the families, making the returns less charged, less feverishly desired, and diminishing their appeal as forbidden fruit.

Cuban and Jewish first generations stress the opposite – moving on. Szifra talks about her parents' "pathological or adaptive need to just go forward" (Lehrer 106). Behar's grandmother exhibits the same traits when she asks what the granddaughter had lost that she keeps returning to the island; her granddaughter comments, "She wanted me to forget Cuba, to move on" (*Traveling* 193). While they might not be as obvious as in the case of Eastern Europe, whose status as a cemetery successfully discourages Jewish people who managed to escape it from returning, the moral dilemmas of the first generation Cuban Americans are equally serious: "The consensus among Cuban exiles was that they didn't want to return to Cuba because of Fidel Castro. Much as they despised him, his name was constantly on their tongues" (Behar, "The Woman Who Wanted Bridges" 132). It brings relief to not think about the land of atrocity or to think about it in the worst possible light. In fact, Finkelstein admits in her narrative that "[I]f life was a lot simpler when I thought Poland was only a country of killing field and ugly Soviet-style architecture" (59). Perhaps, this realization – that what one expected is both much more and disappointingly less than that – is what the older generation expects and fears. Just like in other ethnic fiction homeland return is a way to safeguard the heritage,

in Cuban and Jewish writing the way to safeguard the memory of what the country used to be is to avoid encountering its current reality.

* * *

Just like mission tours to Poland are not typical heritage tours because they are “constructed largely around rejection” (Lehrer 58), independent quests to Cuba and Europe are perhaps not entirely unique, but certainly different from many other returns in ethnic fiction: they are constructed around conflicting desires, denials, wishes, and admonitions. Heightened expectations to achieve completeness or definite expectations to encounter mere cemeteries, enhanced by direct and indirect prohibitions against returning offered by well-meaning relatives, lead to surprising outcomes. Curiously, the expectation to arrive at a clearer understanding of history and the individual is usually futile, as presented in Cuban American fiction (and discussed in Chapter 4), yet the ostensible lack of purpose for the visit or its incidental nature in Jewish American fiction typically results in a more coherent perception of Jewishness (discussed in Chapter 3). The following chapters of this project detail the ways chosen literary protagonists frame their trips as, sometimes accidental, quests, how they move beyond the language of the subjunctive, and how their trips are, to some extent, similar in the way they challenge ethnic literature stereotypes about return.

The ancestral homeland is the core of ethnic writing, whether it is revealed in the actual story line or only hinted at. When Stern tries to explain how it happens that his novels keep returning to the motifs of Yiddishkeit, he says:

And while I can relate the story of my affair with Yiddishkeit with a certain narrative logic, in the end it's like any other infatuation: a mystery. The friends of

my youth still ask me, When are you going to drop the Jewish masquerade? But when I try to imagine writing fiction with no connection at all to the live currents I've hotwired from North Main Street or Orchard Street or Slutsk or Jerusalem, the engine just won't start. There's a Malamud story called 'Man in the Drawer' in which a Russian writer with no real access to his Jewish heritage writes exclusively about Jews. His explanation: 'When I write about Jews comes out stories.' I guess I would have to say, me too. ("Tugging" 151).

The same seems to be true for many other ethnic writers: they almost compulsively write not only about their ethnic homelands, but also the way they fit in the natal homelands, and their protagonists seem to express this same compulsion in their returns, talking about the inexplicable necessity to go back and see their ancestral origins. This is where their stories begin.

For many, encountering their ancestral history is immensely painful; many find death and suffering as the beginning to their stories. In his book *Writing the Dark Side of Travel*, Jonathan Skinner suggests that "[w]riting, narrating, storytelling that darkness, suffering, pain, brings it into relief and into some intersubjective shared light" (15). Not only do family histories make for better stories, they also help to relieve the pain. The same is expected of returns: if nothing more, they should at least bring some relief, provide answers to questions never really asked directly, or inspire change in the traveler – both homeland tourism and dark tourism seem to offer these outcomes. And yet, the very act of traveling to dark homelands or dark places in general is not necessarily revelatory or conclusive, and the hopes the travelers hold are sometimes frustrated. According to Skinner, some disappointment is written into traveling and travel writing,

“One assumption here is that journeying and writing is a way of finding oneself, of becoming congruent. This is not necessarily a given . . . the identity of the journeying subject can be sent into flux and become as unsettled as the mobile body” (15). This is why the stories presented in the following chapters are not obviously parallel: they differ both in their plotlines and protagonists, some of whom perhaps expect to become more “congruent,” but not that the process will lead through sometimes extreme uncertainty and ambiguities.

Difficult spaces inspire ambivalence even without the added burden of trying to conceptualize them as homelands. But as Tsuda’s work on ethnic returns suggests, there is a deeper underlying problem that prevents homeland tourists specifically from experiencing satisfactory returns to their ancestral homelands. The expectation of people who never quite felt they belonged in their natal homeland to find deeper connections and a sense of belonging in their ancestral one make the trip necessarily disappointing if no connection is made, and the sense of alienation that the traveler experiences is even higher than the outsider status back in the United States. In this sense, Cuban American tourists, who seem to expect more than their Jewish American counterparts, tend to be more disappointed. Jewish travelers, if they allow themselves the freedom of pursuing a quest-type kind of travel, gain a sense of recognition combined with fear that in a way is simultaneously more and less than they expected. Both groups are markedly different from other ethnic returnees in that their returns are political statements, taken against strong discouraging voices of their first-generation parents. As the following chapters demonstrate, “Border crossings, and wavering between home and away worlds, can

precipitate a loss of self” (Skinner 15), which proves even more acute when the wavering happens between two homes.

CHAPTER 3 Journey to a World That Wasn't

We treasure that tiny discovery of a world that was.
Even if it was a world that wasn't.
--Dara Horn⁴²

A Huge Cemetery Called Poland

Chapters 3 and 4 provide examples of the “waving between home and away,” or, depending on interpretation, between two homelands in Jewish American and Cuban American fiction, respectively. The structure of these two chapters is nearly identical, allowing my readers for a slow immersion into the world of these two sets of writers and protagonists. I begin with a necessarily brief yet sufficiently detailed historical introduction, which helps explain the challenges of returning to Eastern Europe and the island of Cuba. In Chapter 3, the historical section goes back by several centuries to illustrate not only how Jewish inhabitants of Eastern Europe disappeared from the region – the details of this process seem generally known to the public – but also when and how they settled there in the first place and how the tensions around their presence fluctuated. I follow this section with one that discusses return as a concept – what does it mean for Jewish/ Cuban Americans to return to the island? What are the moods surrounding the process? Finally, the last two sections focus on close readings of the metaphorical ways Eastern Europe/ Cuba is inserted into the bodies of the novels and of the actual returns that happen in the novels and short stories of my choice.

Reading some of the chosen passages closely demonstrates the special intersection I discuss in Chapter 2: one between homeland tourism and dark tourism. The historical section that this chapter begins with helps my readers understand how dark the

⁴² Horn, Dara. *A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013. Print.

trips to the ancestral homeland of Eastern Europe can be, and the reactions of singular characters before, during, and after their trips show what complex laws govern the quests they undertake. Despite their frequently low expectations, what Jewish American protagonists find in their ancestral homeland is often simultaneously more quotidian and more profound than anticipated. On the one hand, there are people in Europe living their ordinary lives on what could only be described as the largest Jewish cemetery; on the other, seeing this everyday life and the very act of challenging the protagonists' prejudices and fears results in a relief of sorts and a more intense interest in Jewishness – as if the trip released a mental blockade that the incredibly difficult past had thrust in place years before.

When the authors of Jewish fiction decide to send their characters to the never quite healed wound of Eastern and Central Europe in their works, they have to approach the space with the burden of difficult history. Current controversies surrounding the relations between Jews and people on whose land the difficult history played out do not help in making the trips any easier.⁴³ A good example of the existent tensions is the ongoing discussion concerning the works of a Polish historian, Jan Tomasz Gross. After its publication in Polish in 2011, his second book *Golden Harvest* cost approximately \$1000 – the value of an ounce of gold at the time. In an unprecedented event of Polish publishing culture, online bookstores set this symbolically excessive price to shield their customers from the book's potentially upsetting content, which the bookstores

⁴³ Erica Lehrer adds that this “symbol of condensed evil” does not share the same treatment with other countries”: “Jews today do not cast the same kind of aspersions on France (whose Vichy regime officially collaborated with the Nazis), Lithuania (where local institutions and populations participated zealously in murdering Jews), or even Germany itself, the architect of the destruction” (3).

understood as including accusations against Poles for *schadenfreude* at best and collaboration with Nazis in the act of the Holocaust at worst.⁴⁴ The controversy sparked by Gross is a telling example of current relations between Poles and Jews, as it showcases all the most problematic issues: imbalanced remembrance, the inability to forget the past, as well as the inability to admit guilt. “Since we cannot withdraw the book from our offer, yet we do not want our customers to think that Mr. Gross’ views and conclusions are our views, we decided to slightly increase the book’s price. Enjoy your purchase” was the message Selkar.pl, among many others, issued to its customers when Gross, a prominent historian at Princeton University, became one of the most vehemently criticized public figures in Poland. The telling front cover photograph of his most recent book initiated a heated discussion in the Polish media, which continues until this day. In the picture, Polish peasants equipped with shovels gaze at the lens with human bones at their feet; numerous groups of such “diggers” plowed the fields in the vicinity of a Nazi death camp in Treblinka in hopes of finding gold among the ashes – dental crowns or gold fillings, jewelry missed by the Germans. Although the prices of Gross’ books in Poland have long since dropped to their regular level, it is still seen as patriotic in a peculiar sense to discuss *Golden Harvest* based on the front cover photograph solely.

⁴⁴ Because so many people voiced strong opinions on the book’s content without having read it, the whole enterprise to block readers from accessing the book was based on little more than hearsay. Those who did read the book attempted to dismiss the examples it uses, arguing that what a few degenerates perpetrated did not say anything about the society. Gross’ methodology, however, is based on the belief that every society is internally cohesive, at least to an extent; he likens societies to texts or organized systems. Using the thick description method popularized by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Gross presents in detail a few isolated cases where local inhabitants persecuted (killed, hunted, raped, set afire) their Jewish neighbors and asserts that the actions of these few locals must have been transparent and comprehensible beyond their small communities (96). Thus, deriving general knowledge from specific events, Gross insists that the limited number of cases he analyzes reflects an accepted social practice.

Hardly anyone dares to admit they scrutinized Gross' "satanic verses" by actually reading the book.

This controversy mirrors the initial response to Gross' first book, *Neighbors*, published a decade earlier. Examining the Jedwabne pogrom of 1941, the author argues that it was perpetrated by the Polish locals, not, as was assumed, by Germans. The investigation of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance confirmed the historian's findings, and the President of Poland at the time, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, officially apologized for the crime at the 60th anniversary of the event in 2001. It did not influence the frequently offensive rhetoric of American Jewry, labeling Poles as "dogs" and "swine," which matches the deeply anti-Semitic insults uttered by Poles, if American and Polish online comments are to be trusted.⁴⁵ People who tend to use this incendiary

⁴⁵ An example of a heated debate follows the online article titled "In Poland, a New National Debate on Hate" in *The Jewish Week* from May 14, 2014. One of the commenters, Jonathan E. Grant, claims, "Contrary to the weak responses, Poles are just as anti-Semitic as when they cooperated with the Nazis in turning Jews over to the SS. A few years ago, The Wall Street Journal had an article about Poland entitled, 'Anti-Semitism without Jews.' I would curse this miserable country, but it already is. It is filled with Poles." The only answers countering this generalizing view are submitted by commenters who define as Poles. Many comments touch upon the wooden figures of Jews sold especially in the old Jewish quarter in Kraków called Kazimierz. Erica Lehrer explains the history and nuances behind the figures as she interviews their sellers, makers, and finally buyers (some of whom are American Jews) in her excellent chapter "Traveling Tschotchkes and 'Post-Jewish' Culture." "When will we Jews finally turn our backs on this poisonous little land?" asks another commenter, NS. On the Polish side, an equally interesting debate follows a *Gazeta Wyborcza* article from February 7, 2014s titled "Serdecznie witamy w Auschwitz" ("Welcome to Auschwitz") about Israeli death camp tours. Tyberium1111 claims, "Pogarda Izraelczyków dla Polaków (tak jak pogarda młodych Niemców dla Polaków) jest jak najbardziej współczesna i jest pogardą bogatego dla biednego" ("The contempt of Israelis toward Poles [like the contempt of young Germans toward Poles] is very much contemporary and is the contempt of the rich toward the poor." Pawl68 says that it is Israel's loss if it does not appreciate Poland, and that Poland will not despair because "jakiś mały peryferyjny kraik" ("some little peripheral country") turned its back on Polish culture. There are voices that the trips are organized by Mossad, and that if Poland is depressing and grey, Tel-Aviv is dirty,

language are, for the most part, children and grandchildren of the Holocaust survivors, children and grandchildren of the perpetrators. It is part of my project to define how memory is inherited, which parts undergo erasure, and why it acts so selectively. Two most controversial Polish books of the last decade exposed the bilateral thinking within both communities: Jewish Americans tend to remember Jedwabne and the gold diggers; Poles tend to see themselves as the ultimate Righteous among the Nations, hardly ever admitting in public debates the weight of the onlooker's (and at times also active participant's) guilt that they share with perpetrators.⁴⁶ Tenuous political compromises that have been reached over the years did not stop the offensive propaganda of the mass media, suggesting things can only be black or white, with little space for historical paradox, for penumbra of meaning, for admitting the unstable relations of truth and memory.

The Jewish protagonists who are the masters of return in Svatopluk's definition, as they return not to Israel but to the Europe of their ancestors, are all descendants of the Eastern and Central European Jewry, whose story began as early as the late Middle Ages. The heart of this new settlement became, for centuries to come, Poland and later Polish

claustrophobic, provincial, and neglected. J3-9 incorporates the persistent trope of Jewish reparations: "Izraelowi potrzebny jest wróg jeden arabski to za mało i już za dużo krwi stracił. Co innego Polacy nie dość, że głupi to jeszcze nie chcą płacić za te zrabowane kamienice. Wszak sami mówią, że przed wojną Żydzi do Polaków mówili 'wasze ulice, nasze kamienice'. I tu jest pies pogrzebany" ("Israel needs an enemy, one Arab enemy is too little and it lost too much blood already. Poles are a different case, not only stupid, but they also don't want to pay for those stolen tenement houses. After all, they say that before the war Jews were telling Poles 'your streets, our tenement houses. And here is the dog buried [this is the real issue here])."

⁴⁶ The honorific title of "Righteous among the Nations" is granted by the state of Israel to non-Jews from all over the world who helped Jews to escape the Holocaust during World War II. Yad Vashem Institute records the total number of the Righteous as 24,356, out of which 6339 are Poles (constituting the highest percentage so far).

territories under foreign rule.⁴⁷ Michael Brenner, the author of – exhaustive despite its title – *A Short History of the Jews*, presents “the founding myth” of Polish Jewry in the words of an Israeli writer born in Poland – Shmuel Yosef Agnon:

Israel saw how the suffering was constantly renewed, how the impositions multiplied, how the persecutions grew, how the bondage became great, how the rule of evil brought to pass one disaster after another and piled on expulsion after expulsion, so that Israel could no longer stand up to its haters – and so it set out on the roadways and looked and inquired after the paths of the world as to which might be the right road it should take in order to find rest for itself. Then a note fell down from Heaven: Go to Poland! . . . And there are some who believe that even the name of the country issues from a holy source: the language of Israel. For so spoke Israel when it arrived there: *po-lin*, that is to say: Here pass the night! And they meant: Here is where we want to pass the night until God gathers together again the dispersed of Israel. (S. Y. Agnon qtd. in Brenner 151).

As rulers of more and more European states, ranging from as far as Portugal to as close as Germany, decided to expel their Jewish population, the kings of Poland encouraged Jewish settlements in hope of stimulating trade and increasing the state’s income by building a larger population. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Polish and Lithuanian law protected Jews to a degree – despite the protests of the Catholic Church – ensuring a safer and more prosperous existence than in any western European country.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Harold Seger writes poetically, “History entwined the fates of the Poles and the Jews to such an extent that the two peoples have become dimensions of each other” (1). Erica Lehrer calls them in the title of her introduction “significant others” (1).

⁴⁸ “Jews were exempted from the jurisdiction of all but the crown courts and were allowed to have their own courts. Synagogues and cemeteries were protected from

It is, perhaps, a good indication of what safe and prosperous meant for Jews in the early modern period that a sixteenth-century rabbi, Moses Isserles of Cracow, thus summed up the situation in Poland: “In this country there is not such a ferocious hatred of Jews as in Germany. May it remain this way until the arrival of the Messiah!” (qtd. in Brenner 152). Lack of hatred or hatred not as ferocious equaled a safe haven.

As the position of the nobility became more precarious due to the strengthening of the bourgeoisie, the moods became more anti-Semitic. At the end of the fifteenth century, Polish cities started expelling Jews outside their limits and the state pushed them out of commerce and trade. In the following century, the kings attempted to maintain a relatively safe position for the Jewish population, forced to fight against local nobility. Still, the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth tempted immigrants of various denominations to settle within its limits, and all of them enjoyed relative freedom of religion. There was no larger Jewish population in Europe in the seventeenth century than the estimated 300,000 living predominantly in the cities of the Commonwealth (154). Brenner claims, “In many respects . . . Polish Jews were part of Poland,” following this statement immediately with a warning against idealizing the affinity (157). Despite the exceptional “countrywide representation of Jewish interests” at both local and state level, and despite the numerable similarities between Christians and Jews in terms of superstitions, cuisine, and clothing, the relations between the two communities were frequently tense.

desecration, and intra-Jewish autonomy was preserved to the greatest extent possible. Disseminating slander about Jewish involvement in ritual murder was made a punishable offense” (Brenner 152).

The revolt of Bogdan Chmielnicki marked an especially difficult time for both Poles and Jews living in the Commonwealth. The bloodbath of 1648, however, was relatively quickly forgotten, and many Jews returned to their towns or settled in the western parts of Poland (Brenner 158). The next great change came in 1772, when Russia, Austria, and Prussia began partitioning the country. The process ended with the third and final partition in 1795, when Poland ceased to exist as an independent state; the Czarist Empire “incorporated the largest Jewish community in the world, numbering around three quarters of a million people” (Brenner 224). The nineteenth century saw a gradual decline in how Russia treated its Jewish population (227), reaching its tipping point in March 1881, when Czar Alexander II was assassinated, and the moods turned threateningly anti-Semitic, mainly due to the fact that a Jewish woman was among the revolutionaries responsible for the assassination. The new Czars considered Jews “a kind of social cancer” as opposed to “corrigible” evil that could be educated and Russified (238), so they did not oppose the anti-Jewish violence that followed (known commonly as pogroms).⁴⁹ In 1903, the publication of the most infamous and enduring conspiracy theory titled “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and the wide circulation of the ritual murder legend only exacerbated existing tensions of the early twentieth century. The economic polarization within the Jewish community and worsening material as well as legal conditions of living led to the first wave of emigration to the United States in the 1880s (243).⁵⁰ At the turn of the century, Czarist Russia had a Jewish population of five

⁴⁹ It is nine months after a pogrom like this that Leah, Naomi’s great-great-grandmother, is born. Her blue eyes are called by the community “Cossack eyes” (*In the Image* 135).

⁵⁰ Dara Horn’s family got to the United States with this first wave: “I am a fourth-generation American,” says Horn in a non-paginated addendum to her novel *In the*

million; in certain Polish cities, like Warsaw, Jews constituted as much as 40 percent of the population, and almost 90 percent of the population in some shtetls (Berdichev, Plinsk) (243).⁵¹⁵² In the interwar period, the hostility toward Jews became unprecedented, with Germany, Austria, and France leading the way in anti-Jewish sentiments (Brenner 256-7). Theodor Herzl responded to the new mood in his 1896 book *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question*, advocating for the foundation of a Jewish state, its location still undecided (Palestine or Argentina).⁵³ The philosophy of Zionism motivated some Jews to immigrate to Palestine, yet the American immigration was much larger and more popular (268).

The last chapter of the Jewish history in eastern and Central Europe is the story of annihilation. Despite centuries of tensions, the six-year period between 1939 and 1945 constitutes the most hurtful page in the history of Jewish-Gentile relations in the region. The truth that the Christian communities in Eastern and Central Europe find especially hard to accept is that although there exist impressive examples of life-risking actions to

Image, “My ancestors came to America from Eastern Europe at the turn of the last century.”

⁵¹ Overall, in the pale of the Settlement, Jews constituted 11.5 percent of the total population.

⁵² It is essential to understand the difference between Jewish life in Poland and in Western Europe at the time. According to Seger, “The *shtetl*, the small provincial community usually no larger than a village that was wholly, or nearly wholly, Jewish, had no counterpart in Western Europe. German Jews not only did not live in their own districts in cities, in ghettos, if you will, or cluster together in their own little towns and villages scattered throughout the countryside, they were – with few exceptions – thoroughly secularized and culturally assimilated. Their everyday language was German, and they took pride in German culture and their ability to participate in it. The Yiddish language was rare and mocked, and German Jews, like their Viennese brethren, regarded the masses of Yiddish-speaking Polish Jews with as much a sense of alienation as most Poles” (2).

⁵³ Six years later, Herzl “imagined an idealized society in which Jews and Arabs lived peacefully with each other and there were hardly any political conflicts” (Brenner 266).

help the Jewish neighbors, the common reaction to the horrors was apathy at best and active help in The Final Solution at worst:

The collaboration of large sections of the population in the areas controlled by the Germans was an essential part of the annihilation process. Like the Dutch police, the French police too moved vigorously to help the Germans arrest Jews in the occupied and unoccupied zones of France. In the countries of Eastern Europe, the SS often found local auxiliary troops willing to take an active part in the process of extermination. In some cases Poles, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians even murdered their Jewish neighbors without needing any encouragement from the Germans. (339)

Though in certain instances these acts may have been motivated by fear, in many more, as Brenner suggests, the Nazis did not even have to offer “encouragement,” let alone threaten anyone to help; the inhabitants of the villages where shtetls had been in existence for ages before the war simply jumped at the opportunity to solve century-long disputes and resentments. Whereas the actions of the Nazi Germany were heartlessly methodical and meticulously executed, the looting and random killings perpetrated by the neighboring Christians were shocking precisely because of the intimate familiarity between perpetrators and victims.⁵⁴ It is no wonder then that Jewish “masters of return”

⁵⁴ “The moral perversion that had become widespread was perhaps most clearly expressed in the speech Heinrich Himmler delivered to SS generals in Posen on October 4, 1943, when he justified the murder of the Jewish people, including women and children, as a biological necessity. ‘. . . we don’t want. . . to get sick and die from the same bacillus that we have exterminated,’ Himmler declared. It was his way of trying to assuage any moral scruples associated with the killings. One could, according to Himmler, kill thousands of people and remain ‘decent.’ On the other hand, he regarded personal enrichment ‘with even one fur . . . with one cigarette, with one watch’ taken from the dead as a wrong requiring harsh punishment” (Brenner 338). The double

feel ambivalent at the very least about the prospect of setting foot in the land of betrayal, a “huge cemetery” where they had once wanted to pass the night in peace.⁵⁵

Not Just a Trip

In this subsection, I outline what it means for Jewish travelers of both first and second generation to return to Eastern Europe and what historical counterparts my fictional returnees follow. Because this part of the chapter presents material that goes beyond the novels of my choice to provide a wider perspective for my readers, I close it with a brief description of the three authors of my interest and the rationale behind the choice of their works before delving into close readings in the subsequent parts of the chapter. Before presenting these very detailed and rather selective passages for analysis, I wish to contemplate the concept of return as it pertains to Jewish Americans and what used to be their ancestral homeland in Tsuda’s understanding. The previous subsection provided enough material to demonstrate the fraught nature of Jewish relationships with Eastern Europe, it is no wonder then that the return represents much more than just a trip back home. Alex Danzig, a consultant to Yad Vashem and the Israeli Ministry of Education on group travel to Poland, once confessed to anthropologist Erica Lehrer: “The trip to Poland, it’s not just a trip to Poland. It’s your [perspective on] life. How to [do it]

standard well reflects two different approaches Germans and the inhabitants of the occupied territories assumed toward the extermination of the Jewish population.

⁵⁵ In a rather paradoxical turn of events, today’s Poland displays both signs of virulent anti-Semitism as well as “the almost scary philo-Semitism” (Spiegelman 124): “There are still strains of it [virulent anti-Semitism] today, with almost no Jews to be virulent toward; though I hear that now Polish attitudes have begun shifting toward a kind of nostalgia, something like Americans’ attitude toward Indians as somehow exotic and admirable” (121). It is worth noting, however, that Seger points to much longer, more established, and less sinister “Judeophilic” traditions of Polish literature: “It is time to consider these ‘Judeophilic,’ or ‘philo-Semitic,’ traditions of Polish literature since they were impressive and have no parallels elsewhere in Europe” (8).

depends what you think about life at all, about history, about your future” (22). The fictional accounts I present have an impressive history of post-war returns both in literature as in real life, and their method of return does indeed reflect the attitude of travelers toward reconciliation, homeland, and heritage.

In Edward Linenthal’s description, one of the first organized “returns” of Jewish Americans to the charged space took place in the summer of 1979. Members of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, whose most prominent achievement was the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., organized a “fact-finding mission” to Eastern Europe. It started in Warsaw, included a tour of death camps in Poland and Ukraine (then part of the Soviet Union), and ended in Israel. Linenthal describes particular power plays that took place during the trip, including continuous fights about who to honor first. The act of wreath-laying took on a metaphorical significance when the members of the delegation resisted the pressure to lay the flowers on the monument honoring Polish resistance fighters before commemorating Jewish victims. Right after landing on Polish soil, the chair of the Commission, Elie Wiesel, threatened to cancel the trip unless it started on Miła 18 (the headquarters of Jewish Fighting Organization) (30). In an act of delusion and denial, Polish newspapers still claimed that the delegation honored Polish fighters first. Even though the historical climate and the related strict censorship of the late 1970s explain this outright lie, it is still indicative of the relationships between the two nations, and it provides perspective to and foreshadowing of the returns that young Jewish American writers describe in their novels.

Linenthal's narrative points out that the members of the delegation were aware of the million-dollar tourism industry that Poland acquired in the aftermath of World War II (31). Death camps are, however, very specific historic sites, where tourists are faced with absence rather than presence. Even in the most flagship tourist destination, Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps, which present the onlooker with multiple artifacts like shoes, suitcases, and even artificial limbs, the experience is mostly that of absence, and what tourists come to recognize is the efficient machinery that led to the perceived emptiness. Artificial limbs are parts of humans that are no more; suitcases hold belongings of people whose presence has been forcefully eliminated. The travelers of Jewish fiction know ahead of time that the world they will be searching for is long gone. Linenthal quotes Dr. Hadassah Rosensaft, who visited Warsaw's memorial sites in 1979, as saying, "Since much of the city had been destroyed and then rebuilt, I did not recognize it... I sensed a painful silence and emptiness. There were no more Jews in Warsaw. The streets that had once teemed with Jewishness now seemed barren. Generations of Jewish life had disappeared" (qtd. in Linenthal 29). The barren quality of Eastern Europe makes for difficult returns, especially for Jews who still remember their towns and villages in the pre-war state. It is not the ruins or traces of bullets in buildings that surprise them, but the absence of people.

Fictional returns reflect both the emptiness and the resentment writers feel toward not only the perpetrators, but also – sometimes in a more intense manner – toward the bystanders. In the fiction of the older generation of writers, who do not focus on the pre-war Jewish life but are still interested in Eastern Europe, there is nevertheless a sense of recognition and purpose to the visit. Zuckerman in Philip Roth's *The Prague Orgy*

confesses, “By the time I reach the museum this seems to me a city I’ve known all my life” (491). For Michael in Elie Wiesel’s *The Town Beyond the Wall* returning to the place where he was born is meant to be a confrontation with his neighbors, who looked on as the Jews of the town were deported, “Since the end of the war . . . all I’ve done is search for Szerencseváros. I thought it might be anywhere except where geography said it was. I told myself that the city too had been deported, transplanted, to Germany or to heaven. Now I’d like to go back. To see if it exists, if it’s still what it was” (119). Both Roth and Cynthia Ozick return to Central Europe through the figure of Bruno Schulz, a Polish writer shot by a German officer in the street of his hometown, Drohobycz, whose work is becoming popular in American Jewish studies, as he constitutes the literary past that Jewish American writers can hardly find in Walt Whitman or Henry James.⁵⁶ Lars in *The Messiah of Stockholm* is convinced that he is the famous author’s son, yet his obsession with Polish and Central Europe in general has a more metaphorical meaning; his boss tells him, “Just don’t relapse. No more Broch, no more Canetti; a little Kundera goes a long way. I imagine you had to get Central Europe out of your system” (86). The perverse, historically based allure of the region still attracts the younger generation of writers. Their heads, just like Lars’, seem to be “full of Europe – all those obscure languages in all those shadowy places where there had been all those shootings – in the streets, in the forests. He had attached himself to the leavings of tyranny, tragedy, confusion” (98). Eastern and Central Europe, specifically the “huge cemetery called

⁵⁶ An Israeli writer David Grossman also resurrects Schulz in his 1989 novel *See Under: Love*. The protagonist of the novel – Momik Neuman, the son of Holocaust survivors – investigates Schulz’s death to learn that he “hadn’t been murdered . . . he had escaped” by jumping off to the sea and joining a school of fish (107). To Momik, Schulz is “the key: an invitation and a warning” (109), a way of approaching the history in the land of Over There, where his grandfather was murdered.

Poland,” have a peculiar charm based on the combination of historical events, impenetrable culture, and their subsequent closure behind the Iron Curtain (Reich 24).

The region seems to have gained a special, if very complicated, status in the process – its history charged with meaning, its soil filled with blood and ashes, and parts of its history preserved solely in stories. Steve Stern, in discussing his novel *The Angel of Forgetfulness*, recognizes the value of storytelling and replicates both the European and the immigrant experience of the Lower East Side by reviving their folklore: “I like to write about the kind of communities that largely vanished in the Americas well as Europe after the Second World War. They vanished along with the kind of folklore that attaches to tribal societies, and those old Jewish communities qualified as such” (*Interview* 156). Because the people who constituted the core of the communities are gone, the stories attach strongly to the location; the tales of dybbuks and golems are inseparably connected with the shtetl, even if the shtetl itself has disappeared completely.

For many of the writers who have never experienced the pre-war Jewishness of the land, Europe becomes the locus of an annihilated culture: the nightmare of remembrance, but also a paradoxical Promised Land, akin to *po-lin* – the haven their ancestors sought and found. In a most unexpected admission, Zuckerman in Roth’s *The Prague Orgy* reveals “the sentiments stirred up by [his] circuitous escape route, or the association it’s inspired between [his] ancestors’ Poland, his Prague tenement, and the Jewish Atlantis of an American childhood dream” (492). As a young boy, collecting funds for the Jewish National Fund, this is how Zuckerman claims to have imagined the Promised Land:

This is the city I imagined the Jews would buy when they had accumulated enough money for a homeland. I . . . recalled, from our vague family chronicle, shadowy, cramped streets where the innkeepers and distillery workers who were our Old World forebears had dwelled apart, as strangers, from the notorious Poles – and so, what I privately pictured the Jews able to afford with the nickels and dimes I collected was a used city, a broken city, a city so worn and grim that nobody else would even put in a bid. (491)

In this short passage, all the interesting threads of this chapter come together. Roth reflects on the transnational aspect of the Jewish experience (Palestine, Prague, Poland) with a combination of resentment for the “notorious Poles,” the imaginary nature of homeland and the Promised Land (“this is the city I imagined”), even the dichotomy between “hearty Jewish teenagers” in Palestine and the “broken,” “used,” “worn,” and “grim” Old World. What Roth finds most fascinating in the old city of Prague is the possibility of endless storytelling: “Second were the stories, all the telling and listening to be done . . . the mining and refining of *tons* of these stories” (491). The chance of participating in the immediate ancestral history seems more tangible in Prague than in the centuries’ old Israel, despite the fact that the European Jewish history has been partially erased. The process of excavation and refining suggests not only certain difficulties in obtaining the stories, but also the necessity to purify them, to separate the valuable part from the decades’ worth of additions and distortions. Longing for a beginning to their own story, the writers of the second and third generation fall into the inherited nostalgia for the unknown, the homesickness of a person who never left.

Israel in this equation becomes a very different type of experience; some writers mention it almost in passing, as if the core of the Jewish experience was elsewhere. Roth admits in the above quoted passage from *The Prague Orgy*, “I knew about Palestine and the hearty Jewish teenagers there reclaiming the desert and draining the swamps” (491). The positivistic image of “hearty” youth working hard to transform the ancient land seems far from Roth’s sensibilities. Steve Stern admits that he used to feel the same way as Roth; he suggests in an interview with Derek Parker Royal that before he visited the Middle East, he considered “the Eastern European experience and its American extension,” rather than Israel and Palestine, as “the essential story of the Jews” (*Interview* 155):

Israel had been for me a kind of afterthought, a messy epilogue to a story that had effectively ended with the Holocaust and New World assimilation. It was much easier for the purposes of a symmetrical literary narrative to declare the story over and mourn the loss of the culture of Yiddishkeit than to complicate the tale with the inclusion of yet another chapter – especially one with elements as irresolvable as those that define the current state of Israel. (155)

Hence, the location for pogroms and the horrors of the Holocaust becomes a paradoxical, even perverse Promised Land, while Israel is the elusive region that only makes the question of homeland even more difficult. Perhaps what makes this paradox possible is that the history of the former location is “past, dead, and safe” (Urry 110), allowing for relatively unrestricted creation or excavation of stories, of as opposed to the relatively fresh wound of Israel, whose history is in the making with all its unanswered questions and ethical conundrums.

Steve Stern, though closer in age to Philip Roth than Dara Horn or Tova Reich, represents the latter generation, writers who metaphorically return to Eastern Europe and attempt to recover the lost Yiddishkeit in their stories. “There's been a spate of young writers using folkloric materials to inject a note of timelessness into contemporary tales,” he observes, “With hindsight it seems rather predictable that, after the generation of Bellow and Roth in their very public divorces from tradition, their spiritual children would return to the scenes of various domestic crimes to fetch whatever was worth salvaging. Turns out there was a lot worth salvaging” (*Interview* 158). I focus on two representatives of this “spate of young writers” because they employ two modes of returns that I am interested in: one is a metaphorical journey back to their Yiddish past in the form of literary references to the folklore, and the other is an actual trip taken by the protagonist to the Old World.

In this chapter, I present the works of Dara Horn and Steve Stern, adding to them, almost as a commentary of sorts, a work by Tova Reich for a touch of satire and a counterbalance to the folkloristic interests of the former two. Her novel is less interested in Yiddishkeit and the pre-war Jewish life in Poland, and more in the contemporary business of remembrance, presenting a much less sentimental view of how memory, especially inherited memory, works. All these authors, whose novels were published within a four-year period – in 2003, 2005, and 2007 respectively, send their protagonists to Europe as a way of recovering a lost sense of Jewishness. I start with Leora from Horn's *In the Image* as she strolls through the streets of Amsterdam, pondering the philosophy of Spinoza and the way memory and culture are transmitted. Horn continues the topic in *A Guide for the Perplexed*, whose pages reveal a more solidified theory about

remembrance. Saul Bozoff in Stern's *The Angel of Forgetfulness* adds a touch of the atmosphere of Soviet-influenced Prague and a pinch of Golem dust to the mixture to reveal the magical side of visiting Europe. Death camp tour participants in Tova Reich's *My Holocaust* visit Eastern Europe in a very different way; they come closest to the definition of tourists that Chapter 2 proposes. Dark undertones and the satirical nature of the novel ensure that *My Holocaust* delivers the most skeptical approach to the topic of return among this literary generation.

“We control the way we remember the past, and that’s what matters in the present,” suggests Mosheh in *A Guide for the Perplexed*, “We choose what is worthy of our memory. We should probably be grateful that we can’t remember everything as God does, because if we did, we would find it impossible to forgive anyone. The limit of human memory encourages humility” (*Guide* 254). Mosheh’s acerbic remark is an especially fitting rubric for considering the Jewish experience and its expression in literature. It is of highest importance to keep documenting the wrongs, yet it is also essential to come to terms with the limits of remembrance and choose wisely. Just as in every Holocaust museum the records of the Shoah are preceded by the “before” images of a relatively happy and immensely rich life before the war, Dara Horn’s novels hint at the tragedy that Jewish people went through in Europe, but they also, perhaps predominantly, focus on the minutiae of the life “before.” In Stern’s words, Horn is “fluent in the tradition yet able to translate the past into urgent contemporary designs” (*Interview* 158); Stern opposes this type of fluency to the peculiar game of “play[ing] fast

and loose with Jewish sources,” which results in “Yiddishkeit lite.”⁵⁷ There is, however, enough essence in Horn’s books to make them heavy with meaning.

In her 2003 novel, *In the Image*, Horn uses multiple pictographs as signifiers of the essence Stern finds in her prose. The layered nature of this play with images results in a nuanced narrative, where paintings in a museum, slides in an elderly man’s house, and finally multidimensional images of life enclosed in intricate dollhouses become commentaries on history, life, and memory. The novel tells the story of a New Jersey native Leora, whose best friend Naomi dies in a car accident when both are just seventeen. After the event, Naomi’s grandfather, Bill Landsmann, invites Leora into his life. During their unusual encounters, Bill takes Leora on a virtual “tour around the world.” The slides he shows the young woman represent locations of events in the Hebrew Bible, making for a fascinating yet not entirely appreciated lesson. When Leora and her parents learn that Bill was born in Vienna, they exchange puzzled looks: “Being as old as Bill Landsmann was, being a Jew, and being born in Vienna seemed to demand an explanation. Here was a man . . . who shouldn’t be alive” (*In the Image* 22). This significant comment introduces a new thread to the multi-layered novel: readers follow not only Leora’s story, but also the story of Bill’s family before the war. Glimpses of their life are intertwined with Leora’s as she goes on a trip to Amsterdam, where Bill Landsmann once lived, and she falls in love with a scholar studying the life and teachings of Spinoza. Helene Meyers defines this preoccupation with images as “the novel’s

⁵⁷ One of the authors Stern describes thusly is Michael Chabon, one of a select group of “immensely virtuosic writers” who “know just enough of the traditional ore and literature to infuse their narratives with the flavor of ‘the turbulent saga’ without taking responsibility for a confrontation with its essence” (Stern “Tugging” 158).

thematic of choosing one's image in order to reconstruct seemingly lost worlds in a post-Holocaust, postassimilationist age” (328). Each page of the novel presents a new image or a new artifact that encapsulates the characters’ common denominator – Jewishness.

Even though the author sends her protagonist further West, Leora’s family history starts, predictably, in Eastern Europe. After a pogrom, in which Leah, Naomi Landsmann’s great-great-grandmother, is conceived in rape, the family moves to the United States, where, “immediately after reciting the blessing over bread, Leah’s mother would add, ‘And thank God we’re out of that horrible place’” (137). After Leah’s two failed marriages (one ends in a quick divorce due to the violent nature of her European, scholarly husband; the other leaves her a widow after the second husband dies in a fire), her family decides that she should return to Kiev, unaware of the fact that her grandmother’s house had burned down and that she died in the aftermath. Leah settles in Galicia in Austro-Hungary, which is a territory that comprised parts of current Poland and Ukraine; her son, Nadav, lives in Vienna, from where he moves to Amsterdam, when the former city becomes threateningly anti-Semitic.

The movement of Horn’s novel between time and space is representative of contemporary Jewish novel and of multicultural, hyphenated novel in general.⁵⁸⁵⁹ Steve

⁵⁸ One of the first usages of the term “hyphenated American” is to be found in President Roosevelt’s speech on Americanism: “There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism. When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans. Some of the very best Americans I have ever known were naturalized Americans, Americans born abroad. But a hyphenated American is not an American at all. This is just as true of the man who puts ‘native’ before the hyphen as of the man who puts German or Irish or English or French before the hyphen. Americanism is a matter of the spirit and of the soul. Our allegiance must be purely to the United States. We must unsparingly condemn any man who holds any other allegiance. But if he is heartily and singly loyal to this Republic, then no matter where he was born, he is just as good an American as any one else” (“Roosevelt Bars the Hyphenated”). I attempt to give the term

Stern in 2005 *The Angel of Forgetfulness* adds one more dimension to the already multifaceted paradigm by including a manuscript written by Aunt Keni's lover, Nathan Hart, on top of the story of the manuscript's author and the leading story of Saul Bozoff, whose aunt first introduces him to the rich life of the Jewish New York. It is not until Saul receives his part of the inheritance – money from the sale of Aunt Keni's paintings depicting the life in the Lower East Side – that he decides to go to Europe. Prague is not his first destination, yet slowly but surely his steps lead him to Altneushul (Staranová Synagoga), where the legend locates the creation of Golem. Having inhaled the creature's remains on an eccentric tour guide's recommendation, Saul returns to the U.S. and becomes a scholar of Jewish texts. Stern presents this intense journey – only one among Saul's many sojourns in life, which include living in a hippie commune and a brief period in a mental institution – as a mirror to his own life, but it is also one of the stops many contemporary Jews will take in search of their roots.⁶⁰

a more positive connotation, as there is nothing inherently wrong with a hyphenated identity. However, The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) tends to use compound adjectives without the hyphen (Jewish American, Cuban American), perhaps to escape the association. I do the same in this project.

⁵⁹ In analogous ways, the Cuban American authors discussed in the next chapter center their own texts on multiple trips to and from Cuba, and they tend to move between decades and even centuries as smoothly as Dara Horn does.

⁶⁰ In an interview, Stern explains, "I wanted to use Saul Bozoff in *The Angel of Forgetfulness* as a kind of gauge against which to measure the distance I had personally traveled from the mid-South to Vilna and Jerusalem. I wanted to use him the way an architect might put a figure in a blueprint to provide a sense of human scale. In Saul's case the ratio involved the way lived experience relates to imaginative landscape. Yeah, Saul does things I did and goes places I went – the commune in the Arkansas Ozarks, the London street theater: I did all that back in the day. I also spent time in Prague, though long after the fall of the old regime; but rather than a drug-addled hippie, I was a middle-aged bourgeois professor teaching a seminar in Kafka and Jewish folklore" (*Interview* 147).

Jewish Americans travelling to Eastern Europe rarely perceive those visits as merely touristic. Their trips are more “pilgrimages,” like the one undertaken by the President’s Commission on the Holocaust, and meant to “touch the Holocaust” (Linenthal 35). Eastern Europe is an ambiguous place in Jewish tradition and thus a fitting location for tours of death camps, an increasingly popular heritage destination. The controversial thread is visible in the fiction of the younger generation of Jewish American writers, especially those perturbed by the tourism machine developed around the Shoah. Tova Reich’s provocative novel *My Holocaust*, published in 2007, suggests that the second Holocaust generation, descendants of the actual victims, have “all the benefits of Auschwitz without having to actually live through that nastiness” – what she calls “Holocaust lite” (10). This type of return to Central Europe generates much attention both in Jewish American fiction, which tries to look at the organized death camp tours critically, and in Polish press, suggesting that visitors who limit themselves to Auschwitz do not get a chance to see the changes Central Europe underwent after Solidarity and the Round Table Agreement.⁶¹ Reich reveals the problematic nature of such returns by presenting Holocaust as a type of entertainment business rather than remembrance.

⁶¹ I decided to tackle the topic, careful not to “academicize the Holocaust” the way Reich defines it: “Another problematic arena is academia. There, the Holocaust has, too often, become grist for the ever-churning mill of academic trends. It has been deconstructed, reconstructed, genderized, multiculturalized, and in other ways intellectually sacrificed on the altar of academic fashion. In the halls of academe the experience has become, sometimes, just another object of jargonized analysis . . . It is to such distorting nonsense that even those students who are *serious* about studying the Holocaust are all too often exposed” (W. Reich).

A Wistful Toy Theater

In a postscript to his novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, Michael Chabon shares his bewilderment at the sight of an otherwise inconspicuous book from the *Say It* series titled *Say It in Yiddish*. What he calls the “saddest” and “heartbreakingly implausible” book is “an entirely futile effort on the part of its authors, a gesture of embittered hope, of valedictory daydreaming, of a utopian impulse turned cruel and ironic” (P.S.19). The authors of the book, Uriel and Beatrice Weinreich, create, according to Chabon, a “wistful toy theater,” which takes the reader “home, to the ‘old country,’” “to a Europe that might have been” (22). I see the contemporary Jewish American novel and short story as another means to recreate the old country, the land of “Over There.”⁶² The effort to sustain an illusion, a theater of a past that the authors are hardly familiar with, results in Rebecca Goldstein’s *Mazel* and Dara Horn’s *The World to Come*, both attempting to reconstruct Eastern and Central Europe – a world that cannot be reconstructed, so young authors create it anew. This section, just like the one that follows it, relies on the three novels of the authors whose silhouettes I outlined above, but unlike the closing segment of this chapter, it does not focus on physical returns but on references to the old worlds, inserted into the bodies of the novels to signify connections with ancestral homelands. The protagonists’ returns to Cuba and Europe are physical, yet necessarily unsatisfying; since what can be visited is not really a good representation of

⁶² David Grossman, a popular Israeli writer, remembers his childhood through its perpetual reference to external localities: “It was a peculiar tunnel. One end was in Jerusalem, in the young State of Israel, which believed that its strength depended partly on its ability to forget so that it could cobble together a new identity for itself. And the other end was in the land of Over There” (*Writing in the Dark* 6).

what used to be, all the authors I discuss in this project depend on props, thus creating the wistful theater from Chabon's haunting description.

Dara Horn's *A Guide for the Perplexed* presents a corresponding concept in its portrayal of the Egyptian museum, full of artifacts and texts, and its equivalent, the personal Genizah – computer software that stores private images and texts for the owner. Both of these depend on a certain level of artificiality: the toy theater is far removed from reality if its actors are toys which depend on props, and the personal Genizah, Horn implies, is a perfected version of life, which only includes the memories that people want to keep. Indeed, it is the opposite of an archive. She offers a warning that should probably come with the software if it is ever really introduced to contemporary markets: Josie Ashkenazi realizes that the materials she collected through Genizah about her daughter are cherry-picked to avoid unpleasantness, which was an essential part of their life, and that “the Tali she created in her program was false” (*Guide* 187).

Many contemporary Jewish American fiction writers increasingly include myriad references to the Jewish past in Europe, effectively creating a peculiar genizah in their works. Dara Horn's entire novel is a repository of images, but the author also includes intricate genealogies and a two-page genealogical tree to help readers follow the stories, as well as religious artifacts like tefillin. Steve Stern's main prop, whose level of theatricality is unquestionable, is the Golem of Prague or rather its remains; Saul Bozoff smokes the Golem dust as he would a cigarette. The manuscript written by Nathan, Aunt Keni's lover, is another important prop that binds Saul to Jewishness. Finally, Tova Reich treats all elements of the Auschwitz concentration camp as props in a toy theater, or perhaps more fittingly attractions in a theme park; the cover of her novel seems to be

depicting them in a Disneyfied manner: “The cover of ‘My Holocaust’ resembles a child’s board game, like Chutes and Ladders but with sprigs of barbed wire and playful figurines in striped prisoner’s garb. A cattle car sits near an ice cream truck. Hanging from colorful striped poles are the words ‘Auschwitz’ and ‘Birkenau.’ The concentration camp gate, where the ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ always went, now says ‘A Novel’”

(Margolick). In America, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum plays the same role as the theme park of Auschwitz, condensing all the tensions and disagreements that current intra-Jewish relations, as well as Jewish-Gentile relations present. All authors create richly textured worlds, which serve as archives in their respective stories.

However, the stories make the reader painfully aware that the worlds are long gone, no matter how finely recreated for the purpose of the book. Each novel in this section is an archive similar to the one Horn discusses: “[i]n that kind of archive, one can find anything one wishes to find” (*Guide* 321).

By far the most striking prop that Horn uses in her novel *In the Image* is the phylactery, a black box made of leather with inscriptions from the Torah.⁶³ A set of two such boxes, one for the arm and one for the forehead, forms tefillin – an important

⁶³ “The phylactery worn upon the forehead is a small, black leather box, half an inch square, with four compartments, in each of which is a tony scroll. These scrolls are strips about four inches long and half an inch wide, rolled up, fastened by a minute band of parchment, and tied with the hair of a clean beast. Scroll No. 1 is inscribed with Exodus 13 : 1-10, relating to the sanctification of a first-born, the Passover Feast. Scroll No. 2 has verses 11-16 of the same chapter. Scroll No. 3 contains Deut. 6 : 4-9, the great Creed of the Jewish faith. Scroll No. 4 has Deut. 11 : 13-21. In all, then, the Phylactery contains thirty-one verses of the Pentateuch. To the lid of the box is attached a strap some two yards long, which is knotted to form a fillet for the head, and retain the phylactery in place upon the forehead. . . The phylactery for the arm has but one compartment and one roll, which, however, all four above passages. . . The wearing of the phylacteries grew out of a literal interpretation of a Deuteronomy text on Scroll No. 3, and was parallel to a religious practice already common in Egypt” (*The Old and New Testament Student* 77).

religious artifact for observant Jews, which survived virtually unchanged since the Biblical times.⁶⁴ When Leora sees a tefillin set at an antique store in New York City, it evokes a story her former boyfriend Jason told her about a Mr. Rosenthal, an elderly gentleman he was taking care of in a nursing home. Mr. Rosenthal was an immigrant from Europe, who managed to get on board of a ship sailing to America:

After two weeks in this pit, Mr. Rosenthal finally reached the promised Land, and he and all the other Jews on the ship crawled out of their steerage hellhole to go up on the deck and see New York Harbor, the place of their dreams. They crowded over to the side of the deck as the ship pulled in right under the Statue of Liberty, and Mr. Rosenthal was as awestruck as everyone else. But then Mr. Rosenthal noticed that the other Jews on the deck weren't just looking at the Statue of Liberty. Instead they were actually pushing up to the edge of the deck, as if they were looking at something on the water. Mr. Rosenthal pushed in a little closer, and then he saw why they were all gathered on the side. They were throwing their tefillin overboard. Because tefillin were something for the Old World, and here in the New World they didn't need them anymore. (*In the Image* 52)

This evocative description, which combines the hopeful new outlook of a recent immigrant with his arrogance and confusion, serves as a powerful reminder of just how much was lost in the overseas passage. The tefillin, which contain the essence of the Torah, stand for the old orthodox identity that can be, or so it seems, simply thrown in the

⁶⁴ Glover claims in 1901 that no other religious artifact “is more true to its ancient form than the phylactery” (10). He adds, “There may have been other and simpler kinds of phylacteries, but the present is the sole and popular survivor.”

water to ensure success in the new land; the precept that requires the phylacteries to be physically bound to the body no longer valid, though it might have been just that same morning. The in-between space of the ship encourages such acts of rebellion, which might initially prove liberating. Passengers of the ship have a unique opportunity to feel like sailors for the duration of the passage: “moving to and fro between nations, crossing borders in modern machines that were themselves micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity” (Gilroy 12). On encountering such diversity and in hope of beginning a brand new life, the immigrants let go of what might hold them back before they even touch American soil.

Many scholars of transatlantic studies devote special attention to the singularly in-between status of a ship, crossing no-man’s-waters and governed by its own rules, and see it as a space of potential transformation. Whether the transformation is for the better depends on the individual case. The new dynamic branch of postcolonial criticism does not focus on any specific period, but tends to look broadly at the literatures of the Atlantic region in search of connections and common themes. In Thomas Murphy’s account, from very early on the Middle Passage invoked in writers and travelers “profound emotions associated with the crossing of an expanse that some considered to be both an allegorical and actual hell” (9). The ocean, as the great space between Europe and America, has always been a “powerful image in its own right” (Murphy 8). As noted by Malcolm Bradbury, it could be seen as either linking or separating these two continents (1), depending on one’s condition or worldview. For the immigrants in Dara Horn’s novel, the ocean signified a complete demarcation between their old and new lives, sealed with the symbolical act of tossing the once beloved and essential tefillin.

Long before actual journeys, the ocean served as a space for the travels of imagination, generating myths and fictions. The New World was seen as the old world's lost Golden Age: to prove that, Bradbury quotes John Locke claiming, "In the beginning, all the world was America" (4). Countering the atavistic fear of oceanic vastness, the immigrants traveled to America in search of freedom, "a land of opportunity and the fresh start," the Promised Land of the Pilgrim Fathers (Bradbury 4). The hope of a fresh start led Mr. Rosenthal to discard his phylacteries, and so did everyone else onboard. The owner of the antique shop tells Leora that his supplier found "tons of them down there [at the bottom of the harbor]" (*In the Image* 114), and adds: "You'd figure they disintegrate, but he found a bunch of them that were caught under some kind of metal casing – that must've covered them up enough so you got what you see here. . . the place must've been like an underwater graveyard of thousands of these things. . . Weird, huh? The bottom of the ocean, it's like going back in time" (114). The image of the graveyard is all the more suggestive once the reader realizes it is a cemetery of identities rather than just artifacts.

Meyers underscores the importance of tefillin as a symbol when she notices, "Significantly, waterlogged *tefillin* initiate the courtship of Leora and Jake," who becomes a male "promise of Jewish continuity" when he purchases the phylacteries, guessing correctly which item in the antique store inspired Leora's interest (330). The story of discarded tefillin mirrors the one about discarded names that Leora briefly considered writing as a seven-year-old, when she found it puzzling that her mother's maiden name differed from the one she knew. "So if you aren't using that name anymore, then who is?" asks the little girl, "What had happened to all those names? Perhaps there was a place somewhere where all the unused names were gathered, a giant dried-out

desert valley where the names, shriveled and lifeless, lay at the bottom” (67). It is the same bottom that the divers see covered with tefillin. No one is using them anymore, for new identities took the place of the old ones:

As the years passed, Leora met more married women, more immigrants, went to more museums. Slowly there gathered in the Valley of Discarded Names hundreds, even thousands more: Rogarshevsky thrown away in favor of Rosenthal, Rosenthal thrown away in favor of Ross. Ross tossed out for Steinberg (a marriage), Steinberg cast away for O’Brien (a second marriage). Liu discarded for Lou. Anand Gupta for Andrew Gordon. Natalya for Natalie. Wilhelm for Bill. Jesus for Jeff. All those names discarded, only written, not spoken, like the name in the corner of her mother’s composition, sitting at the bottom of the valley like untouched bones. (67)

The memory is inspired by Leora meeting her former boyfriend, Jason, who changed his name to Yehudah in order to fit into his new Orthodox life. Yehudah sounds to her like a “dried-out” name, found in the Valley and resurrected to life. The purchase of a long-forgotten set of phylacteries and the revival of the name is an essential symbol in the novel, where “lost worlds are reconstructed and parallel universes unknowingly meet” (Meyers 329). As with the ocean, tefillin and names can be seen as separating or linking the old with the new, Europe and America, memory and forgetfulness.

Not unlike the way names are discarded and resurrected at will in Horn’s literary imagination, Steve Stern resurrects an old Jewish myth – that of the Golem of Prague. Though it is only mentioned in the latter part of the novel, which covers Saul’s European “lost year,” the idea of revival through text is pervasive throughout the novel thanks to

Nathan Hart's manuscript. The golem is an obvious theatrical prop, but the meaning behind it is the strong textuality of the Jewish religion and culture. The Hebrew meaning of the word is "matter without shape" or "a yet unformed thing" (Friedman 51). Hillel Kieval reminds us that the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin constitutes the textual basis for the legend (2), and provides a compact history of the motif from antiquity to modern times. According to Kieval, stories that followed the Sanhedrin paradigm – creation of a living creature not by god but by a sinless human – were, in the early modern times, most widespread in Poland and associated with rabbi Elijah of Chełm. In early seventeenth-century Poland, a new crucial element was introduced in the tales: "Now the creature of the rabbis was understood to be not only a servant who performs all sorts of physical labor for his master but also a source of *danger*" (3, Kieval's emphasis). It was only later that European Jews started associating the tale of the Golem with a specific town and a specific creator: Rabbi Judah Löw ben Bezalel (ca. 1520-1609), a prominent figure among Central European Jews and "Prague's most famous Jew after Franz Kafka" (3). Kieval does not find indication of any mystical attempts in Judah Löw's life, as he was not an enthusiast of *kabbalah* nor a *ba'al shem* (one who knows the "Holy Names" of god, master of the name) (4). Contrary to Stern's (or Svatopluk's) claim that "[i]t was in an effort to protect his people from the endless cycle of violence that the sixteenth-century rabbi Yehudah Loew, called the Maharal, had formed his creature, the golem, from the mud of the Vltava embankment" (307), Kieval recounts that the Maharal's life in Prague coincided with the reigns of two relatively open-minded Habsburg kings: Maximilian II and the more famous Rudolph II, "the Golden Age' of Czech Jewry,"

during which “Jewish cultural life flourished, and the Jewish population – particularly in Prague – grew significantly” due to the “remarkable tolerance” of the kings (5).

Stern is most probably basing his golem on “the story that *everyone* knows about the Maharal and the Golem (reproduced in film and in plays and even in contemporary Czech anthologies) . . . [a]n invention, indeed a literary forgery, of the early 20th century” as Kieval calls it (15). The author of that newest version was a Polish rabbi Yudel Rosenberg (“who emigrated to Montreal in 1913!” adds Kieval incredulously to highlight the multiple intersections of cultures and traditions in the creation of the legend), and his story is in line with Svatopluk’s rendition:

In Rosenberg’s version, the Golem is created in order to defend the Jewish community against the antisemitism of the outside world . . . The Golem does his job well, saving the Jews of Prague from the certain catastrophe that would have resulted from a false accusation of ritual murder. But the purpose of the new story was not to instill hope and confidence in its readers. It was a cautionary tale of a type quite different from the original legend. (Kieval 15)⁶⁵

The tension between perceived danger and the Golden Age, during which a population enjoys relative calm and prosperity, does not seem coincidental. Perhaps with hindsight or perhaps already well versed in the story of expulsions, the Jewish community created a legend in which danger is lurking precisely when least expected.

The court of Rudolph II, with its interest in the humanities, astronomy, and science, and

⁶⁵ Friedman relates another version, in which “Loew was forced to create the golem to protect his community from the nefarious plots of Father Thaddeus, a renegade priest dedicated to destroying all Jews” (52).

with its “remarkable tolerance,” constitutes merely a break, a period of brief and deceptive lull.

At least as far back as the 17th-century Polish rendition, the source of danger had always been understood to reside within – within confines of the community; in the very process of the creation of artificial life. Throughout the 20th century, the tale has been remembered as a distortion, as if it had always been concerned with the danger posed by the outside world. Much has been lost. . . in the translation; much can also be inferred with regard to the changing nature of the Jewish-Gentile relationship in East Central Europe. (Kieval 16)⁶⁶

The tradition of the Golem represents a traumatic historic conflict that further illuminates Stern’s story about the masters of return insofar as it records an intersection of Jewish and non-Jewish cultures located in Prague, the reflection of frictions and foreignness of the two. Kieval notices with barely concealed surprise, “The efforts . . . to retrieve – and ultimately recast Jewish Prague’s folk traditions into a literary language echoed beyond the confines of the Jewish community” and “the various literary codifications of Czech folklore that occurred in the 19th century. . . reserved an important place for the Jewish stories” (14):

What united these various endeavors was the desire to uncover and disseminate the “cultural memory” of the Czech nation, to put forward a “usable past” that could be employed in the construction of a collective identity. A cultural program of this type inevitably combined anthropological investigation and creative

⁶⁶ “Folk legends are not just accidental in their origin or fanciful fictions invented by the ‘childlike masses.’ They are a true record and mirror of the complicated historical and cultural experiences of a people” (Ausubel 1953, 605 qtd in Koven 219).

embellishment with equal importance ascribed to the oral traditions of the older generation and to the literary imagination. In adopting Weisel's "Legends" for their own rewritings of Czech culture, the modern authors of the Czech nation were, in effect, claiming "Jewish Prague" as part of their own inheritance. Why did they do this? Did non-Jewish Czechs have their own "memory" of Judah Löw and Prague's "Golden Age"? Did they "remember" the Golem tradition in the same way that the Jews of Prague did or differently? Did this adoption of Jewish lore as something that was simultaneously Jewish and Czech indicate the existence of a significant area of shared culture? (Kieval 14-15)

Kieval suggests that sharing "the same wise men, the same legends, and the same monsters" might have been a way for Czechs to reinforce their sovereignty against the German rule, emphasize the solidified position of the various cultures of the Bohemian area for fear of dissolution. In this regard, I am interested in the concept of "a significant area of shared culture" and its implications for the masters of return like Saul Bozoff.⁶⁷ The space he visits, or alternatively returns to, used to be a shared space, but turned into a uniform one after the war, making the dust of the Golem the last remnant of Jewish Prague and Jewish Central Europe.

The concept of a shared cultural space intrigues contemporary scholars of Jewish studies, as it represents and helps understand the relations between the Jewish and Gentile communities.⁶⁸ In a provocative essay by Mordechai Zalkin, "*Wilno/Vilnius/Vilne*:

⁶⁷ In a different essay, Kieval quotes the popular "proverbial assertion" about "Jews as the only 'true Czechoslovaks'" ("Negotiating Czechoslovakia" 103).

⁶⁸ One of the main anthropological works I use suggests a corresponding idea. Erica Lehrer is interested in and proud to create the "ethnography of possibility": "My notion is informed by glimmers in the work of a few intra- and extra-disciplinary predecessors

Whose City Is It Anyway?” the capital of Lithuania becomes a symbolic space of intersection, which is, however, barely represented in both contemporary as well as modern-day culture. The editors of albums and authors of books about the city only depict a certain facet of its rich and multilayered existence – one that reflects their nationality, ethnicity, and religion. Vilnius, like Prague, is a city where various combinations of these exist (or rather existed before the war, as Zalkin specifically refers to the inter-war period). Despite the perceived commonness of at least certain spaces, Zalkin provides examples of historians and thinkers, all “true Vilners,” who imagined their “Jerusalem in Lithuania” as one-dimensional (226): “[Hillel Noah Maggid-Steinschneider] perceived himself as a son of the city . . . as well as its historian. His Vilne, however, was solely Jewish. Anything beyond the boundaries of the Jewish ethnic and cultural area, whether geographical or social, was irrelevant to him, and his works reflect the perception of the traditional Vilner Jew, for whom the boundaries of the world were identical with those of the local Jewish community” (226). For Poles, “the entire concept of a Polish Wilno was based on religious and cultural perceptions, on an unrealistic image, a dream” (222). The situation was even more complex for Lithuanians, whose population in the city at the turn of the nineteenth century was only 2.1 percent. Their perception of the city as a “symbol of continuity” is more imaginary than based on numbers, much like the idea of Jerusalem was for the Jewish population before the Second World War (222). Despite a short-lived attempt at a “new social order,” brought

who have dared to talk about love, hope, generosity, or praise in their critical scholarship” (17). “The realm of possibility,” she admits, “means having patience and openness toward unfamiliar perspectives and foreign approaches . . . But possibility also calls for a kind of critical optimism” (20-21), which she finds in Jewish Poland that she revisits.

by the hope and optimism of a recently ended conflict and expressed in common movements and intellectual undertakings, the city preserved its multi-dimensional yet very divided character until the next conflict erupted.

A similar one-dimensionality is visible in Stern's treatment of Prague. Saul's guided tour is a tour of the Jewish Prague, and it results in the protagonist's intoxication with Jewishness. He finds it just to become immediately lost in it. There seems to be no in-between space, Stern suggests: either a modern Jew is entirely separated from his heritage like Saul is during the period of experimentation with the hippie commune, or he abandons all else to pursue ancient texts and situates his life on the concepts of memory and language. Not only is the Golem a representation of shared cultural spaces, but also, perhaps more importantly, of the predominantly textual nature of Jewish history in an aftermath of the annihilation. In his article on what he calls grammars of transgression (which discusses golems, cyborgs and mutants from a linguistic perspective), William Covino interprets the golem as "a creature who is, from first to last, written through a series of utterances; as a testament to its written nature as well as its spiritual purpose, the corporealized golem wears the inscription *emet*, or truth, on its forehead" (359).⁶⁹ The golem lives because of the inscription, which constitutes "God's seal"; to disable the creature, the creator has to either detach the words from its forehead or at least detach the letter "e," which leaves out the word *met* (dead) and thus, "in this connection writing

⁶⁹ Covino's argument draws direct analogies between the creation of golems and cyborgs. The process of bringing both to "life" involves creating a "language," and can be quite arduous yet sophisticated: "To create a golem," Covino writes after Kaplan, "pronunciation of the 231 gates is combined with the letters of the 'one Name,' or Tetragrammaton (YHVH), and the five primary vowels (*u, a, i, e, o*), in an exhaustive series of permutations. In sum, the creation of a golem entails an extraordinarily long, rigidly disciplined series of utterances, and the completion of the ritual could take as long as thirty-five hours, requiring tremendous memory and physical endurance" (358-9).

becomes a vehicle for creating a giant self who must be – along with his creator – punished by being unwritten” (Covino 359). Consuming the golem like Bozoff does signifies the consumption of Jewish textual history, yet with the act comes the dangerous possibility of invalidating its grammar by a simple erasure of a letter. Thus, Jewish history itself is prone to unwriting; the transformation from *emet* to *met* a matter of a misguided, random, or, at times, deliberately malicious gesture.

The act of unwriting resonates in the story of Saul Bozoff, who unwrites his own self by writing the story of Jewishness. Despite a brief romantic episode with Miranda Pratt, which Saul describes in the beginning of a chapter as a return to the world, the text – Covino would say the grammar of Jewishness – pulls him back when he discovers a long forgotten manuscript of Nathan Hart. “I was thirty-five years old when the world caught my attention again,” narrates Saul after years of solitary studies in Hebrew texts (*Angel* 354). And yet, after a romance that had not quite blossomed before it ended, Saul is alone again, or rather alone in his focus on a new text: “When Miranda was gone, I realized that she must have actually loved me . . . But even as I felt my heart starting to rupture, I turned back to Nathan’s narrative, whose translation was what I’d been working toward all these years; I’d been preparing for it my whole life in fact, though I hadn’t known it till now” (395). At the end of the chapter, and at the same time the end of his story, Saul is transported to the Hester Street of Aunt Keni’s times, as he focuses on nothing but the manuscript. The epigraph to the novel – a short aphorism by Abraham Abulafia, the medieval scholar of Kabbalah – becomes both a prescription and a warning: “The end of forgetfulness is the beginning of remembrance” (1). It is possible to lose oneself in both. What Saul obtains through the consumption of golem dust is direction

and focus that he lacked before his visit to Prague. However, he becomes a slave to the monster he created, and instead of removing the letter from its forehead, Saul is balancing of the verge of *emet* and *met* himself, becoming increasingly dead to world.

The awareness that memory overload is quite as detrimental as the lack thereof seems to be one of the common threads in contemporary Jewish American literature. Tova Reich's *My Holocaust* comments not only on commercialization of the Shoah but also addresses the role of memory itself. Reich criticizes both the organizers of death camp tours and their participants, understanding as Horn does that "the act of reliving the past could consume the future, that regret regularly ate people alive" (Horn, *Guide* 205). "Memory is the greatest revenge in the world, and the greatest victory," claims Bunny, a death camp tourist and a "Holocaust professional" (T. Reich 186), yet every page of Reich's novel proves that it is frequently anything but. Memory according to Reich can prove defeating and irritating, which the author reflects in her development of the plot. The extent to which she underscores her point is at times exhausting, at times deliberately annoying, which mirrors contemporary Holocaust discourse – overused and hackneyed, it becomes means for winning personal wars and making political arguments. Reich understands what it would mean for this kind of novel to be a good and easy read, and as she is criticizing the trivialization of the Holocaust, she manages to escape it in her own novel. The ethical conundrums in the business of remembrance constitute the core of Reich's satire, and the props in the toy theater of memory have already been built for her in the form of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

For a long time after the war, Jewish Americans were silent about the Shoah, and the creation of the museum was one of the first important steps in the United States

toward a greater awareness of its horrors. As Raul Hilberg observes: “In the beginning . . . there was no Holocaust” (qtd. in Linenthal 5). Linenthal explains, “The motivation to forget was too strong for survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders, the implications of what had happened were too threatening for public analysis, and the underlying guilt for not having done more was too great among some Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike” (7).⁷⁰ The will to simply move on – whose traces can be seen in the second-generation fiction, as they recount their parents’ and grandparents’ reluctance to speak about Poland – was overwhelming and understandable. In recent years, however, “America, like much of the Western world, has seen an explosion of Holocaust consciousness,” whose greatest monument is the museum (W. Reich). There are sources accessible to anyone who wishes to learn, and there exists a common awareness of the events that was lacking right after the war. It is, in large part, thanks to the new museum that the “explosion” Walter Reich mentions took place: the majority of the visitors who see the exhibitions each year are non-Jewish, and their total number to date is the overwhelming thirty-six million.⁷¹

The museum’s role in shaping Holocaust awareness is difficult to overestimate, and the way it represents the Shoah can facilitate or hinder the processes of education and

⁷⁰ Linenthal names Anne Frank as “the only widely available popular memory of the Holocaust . . . softened and universalized for wide acceptance” – readily accessible right after the war, but also designed to look like an Everyman’s story, “a triumphant story of Everyperson’s triumphant spirit soaring over a faceless evil” (8). In 1967, the so-called Six-Day War between Israel and Egypt brings back the memories of the annihilation of the Jewish people. A decade later, Linenthal relates, a rather controversial 1978 documentary miniseries about the Holocaust creates first of the many “strong disagreements among American Jews about institutionalizing Holocaust memory” that continue till today (15).

⁷¹ The museum’s website boasts, “Since its dedication in 1993, the Museum has welcomed more than 36 million visitors, including 96 heads of state and more than ten million school-age children. Our website, the world’s leading online authority on the Holocaust, is available in 15 languages and was visited in 2013 by more than 12 million people representing 226 countries and territories.”

reconciliation, especially that it is a challenging type of an exhibition in the first place. “It takes an immense measure of courage to enter a museum which is not about beauty but about grim and profound truths concerning the more appalling aspects of humankind. That so many millions of people are prepared to encounter this very different kind of museum is a clear testament of hope for our species,” writes Chaim Potok in the foreword to a commemorative album about the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (12). The Museum opened on April 22, 1993, which was, fittingly, a cold and rainy day despite the date (Weinberg 17), and with its opening, “the story [of the survivors] was presented and validated with the authoritative voice of a federal museum by the American people” (18). It took fifteen years from the moment the President’s Commission on the Holocaust was created till the opening date of this “narrative” museum: according to its creators, the concept of the space is based not on a “collection” but a “narrative”; it not only protects and displays items, but predominantly educates by telling the story of the Holocaust (49). Nevertheless, the Museum functions for survivors as “the appropriate repository of objects that linked them to [the] terrible period in their lives” (60). The “hunt for objects” resulted in humorous episodes, as when the Polish Commission for the Investigation of War Crimes painted the railway car red before sending in to Washington, D.C. due to an evident misunderstanding.

The album, however, does not mention less amusing episodes: the disagreements between the members of the Board, the difficulties in obtaining certain artifacts, fights over borrowed objects.⁷² According to Tova Reich and her husband Walter, the tense

⁷² The most recent example involves wooden barracks currently exhibited by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, whose immediate return is demanded by Poland. A former Polish foreign minister Władysław Bartoszewski told the *Rzeczpospolita* daily: “It

atmosphere surrounding the creation and existence of the Museum detract from its uniqueness, and the attempts to use it for political purposes are shameful and go against the declared educational mission of the place; this moral ambivalence reflects greater problems when it comes to the representation of the Holocaust in the Western world. Walter Reich was the director of the Museum from 1995-1998. He resigned “when the State Department and the White House, at the urging of the chairman of the museum’s board of trustees, sought to bring Yasser Arafat into the Holocaust Museum for a photo-op tour in order to make him appear to be someone who understood the pain of the Jews and who could therefore be trusted to make an honest deal with the Jewish state” (W. Reich). The former director argues:

[D]espite this international recognition, public education, commemoration and discussion, especially in America, not all is well in this revived landscape of Holocaust memory. Ironically – and some would even argue predictably – together with this torrent of information about the Holocaust has come, even in America, much misinformation about it – as well as distortion, trivialization, politicization, competition for victimization, resentment and ever-mounting kitsch. And, worst of all, this torrent of Holocaust memory has been accompanied by the hijacking of that memory in the service of ends other than memory itself.

My Holocaust presents a long, only partially fictitious version of Walter Reich’s claims, touching on every sensitive topic that surrounds the Holocaust, and absolutely no one is spared in Reich’s biting satire who “hijacks” the memory of Holocaust for his or her own

was not Washington where people were murdered – it is not Washington that is a vast cemetery” (The News).

ends: from cowardly survivors who claim to have led the resistance movement to political activists who are keen on using the powerful symbol of the Holocaust for their own purposes, to, finally, the Museum's board of trustees trying to negotiate the demands of survivors with the ones made by various political forces. Reich discusses all the issues related to the creation of the Museum and further tensions among the members of its board from the perspective of an insider. Thus, Monty who is only appeased with the position of the chief of staff when his salary reaches "the stratospheric six figures" (200) and Maurice, the "famous coward" who "passed himself off as a resistance fighter commander during the Holocaust" (257) represent the shameful threads of the Museum's narrative embodied in the cartoon-like characters.

The Museum of the novel is an actual toy theater of the past, with multiple exhibits and artifacts, and perhaps most interestingly with puppet-like actors. It is a counterpart to what some anthropologists of tourism call the "theme park" of Auschwitz and a piece of the Holocaust that tourists can experience in the United States.⁷³ Its literary existence in Reich's novel continues to be questioned by the organization called United Holocausts, as they try to convey a message of the universality of the Holocaust and its various versions. According to Linenthal's account of the real-life Museum's beginnings, "It was clear . . . that commissioners were divided about how to balance Jewish victims with others, whether their focus should be solely on the Holocaust, or whether that event should lead as well toward a focus on contemporary genocidal events" (Linenthal 24). The latter was motivated by the fact that, just like Krystyna does in her "Polack head,"

⁷³ Tim Cole describes the reconstruction of Auschwitz I as a "Holocaust theme park" – an Auschwitz-land rather than a site of mass death. The museum is often criticized for its on-site shops, toilets, and restaurants (Sather-Wagstaff 79).

the world frequently thinks of Jews in the following manner: “They were the world-class memorialists, they made their memories their religion, they worshipped their memories like an idol, they made their memories everyone else’s memories, they had the corner on the memory market” (Reich 166). The main point of contention was the educational mission of the Museum and the way the Holocaust should be universalized. The forces mentioned by Linenthal within the Commission pulled toward a broad representation of various genocides, prompting Reich to enumerate Tibetan Holocaust, Abortion Holocaust, and Women Holocaust among others. The novel mocks the inclusive language of “Really really remembering *all* of the eleven million victims, including the five million others,” politically correct only at the surface, “Roma and Sinti, formerly known as Gypsies. Political prisoners, formerly known as Soviets. And also, of course, our good friends and hosts, the Poles, formerly known as Polacks. And finally, gays, yes, we must never never forget gays” (186).⁷⁴ Reich represents the position of her husband as well as that of Elie Wiesel, who contributed to the debate by underscoring, “[t]he insistence upon

⁷⁴ “Where, in fact, does this eleven million number come from? Yes, it came from Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi hunter. But where did *he* get it? Yehuda Bauer, the Holocaust historian, was puzzled by this question. As he has written, ‘The total number of non-Jewish concentration camp victims is about half a million – which is half a million too many, but it is not five million. On the other hand, the total number of dead in World War II has been estimated at thirty-five million. Deduct the nearly six million Jews, and you have many more than Wiesenthal’s five million. Yet there was no premeditated plan to murder all these people – all the members of any group . . . To call what happened to the non-Jewish victims ‘the Holocaust’ is ‘simply false.’ So where did Wiesenthal get the number eleven million, including five million non-Jews? . . . Wiesenthal told Bauer . . . that he had ‘invented’ it. That’s right, he had made it up! And why had he invented it? He had invented it, Bauer wrote in 1989, ‘in order to make the non-Jews feel like they are part of us.’ . . . What Wiesenthal felt back in 1948 was that the non-Jewish world wouldn’t be interested in the Jewish tragedy unless they understood that non-Jews had been killed, too. So he pointed out that they were.” In Tova Reich’s book, Norman represents Wiesenthal: “It was kind of a victim inclusiveness gesture . . . sort of like sharing the Shoah wealth” (63).

the uniqueness of the Jewish experience”: “If you forget the Jews, you will eventually forget the others. One always starts with the Jews” (qtd. in Linenthal 30).⁷⁵ In her novel, the Holocaust inclusiveness reaches absurd proportions, which dilutes the significance of the word and the experience. Every faction represented by Reich desires to be included among the various holocausts of the world, without a hint of self-awareness and the realization that the member status in this specific organization is bought at the cost of unspeakable suffering. The watered down version of the Shoah brings only distaste and annoyance, and in this atmosphere, the Museum’s identity is created on a rather shaky foundation.

In concentrating on the board of trustees of the Museum, Reich is certainly missing an important point that Sather-Wagstaff underlines: the importance of tourists in how a memorial site works. It is their agency that negotiates the “meaningful place” in the “space” like that of the Museum (20), yet they seem to be completely brushed aside, left to their own devices in figuring out their response to the horrors of the Holocaust. Perhaps this omission is deliberate, signaling a similar lack of interest in the visitors displayed by the board – despite lofty assurances in Weinberg – in favor of winning personal feuds. The Museum in *My Holocaust* functions as an essential symbol, a locus of condensed meaning: it encompasses the inability to adequately represent the Holocaust to satisfy survivors and condemn perpetrators and bystanders; it questions what

⁷⁵ “A sociologist, recognized as a Jew, was challenged on the National Mall in 1995, during the Million Man March: “Which is worse,” he was asked, “what happened to six million Jews or what happened during slavery? Six million or 600 million?” Tragically, the experience of true victimization is widely shared. Sometimes, though, the mourners of one victimization feel threatened by the success of the mourners of another victimization, and feel the need to enlarge the victimization that they represent, or to diminish the victimization of what they see as a competing group, even to the point of dismissing its claims and its language” (W. Reich).

“adequately” means in the context of the Shoah; it also shows that even in the face of one of the greatest horrors in human history, people behave only and always as people (perhaps the lesson of the Holocaust if there even is one to draw). The Museum shows the political and historical ties between the Old and the New World, the eternal sensitivities and resentments, also within the Jewish community. Just like Horn’s tefillin, which symbolize the religious ties to the old culture severed already on the way to the New World, the Museum represents a bridge between the worlds, which can either be understood, like the ocean did in earlier days, to separate or connect. Just like Stern’s golem, the Museum is a testament to “Jewish continuity” of tradition despite tensions and problems that surround it.

Heading East

In this section, I switch the focus from the symbols of connection with Europe inserted in the bodies of the novels through such props as tefillin and the golem to the descriptions of actual, physical returns to ancestral homelands that the protagonists undertake. Even though previous sections highlighted the fraught nature of Eastern Europe as a homeland tourism destination, the fictional trips become true quests in Lehrer’s understanding of the word in that they do not follow any specific itinerary, and they help the travelers understand their Jewishness in a new, deeper manner. The seemingly random nature of their journeys and the fact that they decide to explore independently and delve into the unknown generates the meaning of their quests, providing a spiritual dimension to what might have seemed otherwise unremarkable and profane.

It is with hindsight that “the masters of return” understand that their trips were not accidental; initially, the idea of going away (not yet coming home) seems random and spontaneous.⁷⁶ For Leora, the impulse comes from a poster advertising a conference in the heart of the Netherlands, devoted to the life and philosophy of Spinoza. The poster and all the related possibilities seem to appear before her rather at random, but the fact that she is immediately “seized by a certain passion that she hadn’t experienced since she moved to New York” signals that there is much more behind the decision than just the excitement of travel: “The word ‘Amsterdam,’ italicized near the bottom of the page, seemed to waver back and forth, like a swaying finger beckoning her, asking her, If not now, when? And so she copied down the addresses and contact numbers at the bottom of the poster and decided to go to Amsterdam” (*In the Image* 117). Even though she is not quite sure what it is she has to do now for fear of losing an opportunity forever, the urgency of the wavering word is enough for her to buy the tickets. The “spontaneity” of the decision masks the “homeland” in homeland tourism that Leora is, in fact, performing. It is potentially dangerous and upsetting to think about the Europe that did not allow its Jewish citizens into museums, like the Rijksmuseum Leora would visit, as the homeland or even space worth visiting to excavate the stories Roth mentions. Hence,

⁷⁶ There are, of course, examples of the opposite in contemporary Jewish American writing; however, these are mainly non-fiction or fictionalized memoirs. Daniel Mendelsohn in *The Lost* describes his grand, well-planned return as an impossible banality: “[T]he return to the ancestral shtetl was by now so cliché that we half-mocked ourselves even as we made the elaborate plans necessary to get four adults with careers onto the same plane at the same time” (109). The weather and the family name on a cardboard in the arrivals hall seem to ridicule their endeavor – “the idea of the family return to its roots, the enforced family togetherness necessary to make it happen, and most of all the expectations of what we would find” (109).

Jewish protagonists hide behind signals and inexplicable compulsion, which, in fact, represent their internal processes concealed for fear of being misunderstood or ridiculed.

The protagonist of *The Angel of Forgetfulness* never really explains how the thought of heading east entered his mind; he presents it as a coincidence at best, surrendering to external forces that push him in this forbidding direction without consulting his own desires. Saul calls his European period “[t]he lost years of Saul Bozoff” and proceeds to explain, “there was really only one, which began, I guess, under a sycamore tree on a soft spring night in Arkansas and ended in the attic of an ancient synagogue in the old Bohemian capital of Prague” (Stern, *Angel* 277). Despite its undeniable importance in shaping the scholarly persona of Bozoff, the year is deemed lost, perhaps because of the constant drugged blur that affected the former hippie. The night in the genizah of the Altneushul proves to be a groundbreaking event in Saul’s life, which will keep influencing his development for the next decade at least, but he has a rather hard time determining what exactly brought him to the capital of then communist Czechoslovakia, and what inspired the motivation to overcome all the accompanying obstacles:

It hadn’t been easy to get there; in Amsterdam, they’d sent me from consulate to embassy back to consulate again to secure a visa.⁷⁷ I’d ridden dingy trains that, as

⁷⁷ The description resembles Art Spiegelman’s difficulties with securing a visa to Poland in the late 1980s: “I applied and all of a sudden I’m called down to the consulate and an ambassador from Washington, D.C., comes up to see me, and tries to be very nice. He’s explaining that it’s a really big insult to call Poles pigs and points out that Hitler called the Poles *schwein!* And I say, ‘Exactly! And he called us vermin.’ So we were getting along just fine for a minute. I said, ‘I’m just making a book that uses Hitler’s pejorative attitudes against themselves.’ And he’s nodding, and I continue, ‘And considering the bad relations between Poles and Jews for the last few hundred years in Poland, it seemed right to use a non-Kosher animal.’ Then we stopped getting along quite as well” (125).

if literally turning back time, changed from diesel engines to steam as they traveled farther east. I crossed border checkpoints where submachine-gun-toting police entered my sleeping compartment in the middle of the night to inspect my papers and solicit bribes. Whenever, during the journey, I recalled that I was a wanted man, a suitably straitened expression would lay hold of my features, but I knew perfectly well I was small fry . . . Nobody was in pursuit – so why was I traveling so unthinkably far afield? Far from what? Still I continued heading east, trying to will an unpremeditated impulse into a necessary quest. (299)

Even though the journeys are out of the ordinary for the protagonists, both Leora and Saul expect the readers of their narratives to take such spontaneous decisions for granted, as if they were only natural occurrences. The reader is led to believe that a “swaying finger” or the urge to “continue heading east” are reasons enough to take overseas trips. Only a post-factum analysis reveals that the beckoning, the urge, and the finger are all signs of an emerging interest in Jewishness and a budding desire to experience the Old World first hand despite prejudice and fear.

In Reich’s satirical work, the ideas only hinted at in Horn and Stern become explicit, if not exaggerated. Arlene Messer, whose daughter converted to Catholicism and disappeared in a Polish convent, decides to take a trip to Poland in her search. “She accepted the mission,” the reader is informed, “despite her frequently voiced resolve never to step foot in that ‘huge cemetery called Poland – it’s no place for a live Jew; this back-to-the-shtetl heritage nostalgia trip is obscene; these grand tours of the death camps are grotesque’” (24). Arlene is, by proxy, an expert in Holocaust tourism – her husband Norris with his brother Maurice own a company called Holocaust Connections, Inc.,

organizing Auschwitz tours for American Jews. Reich's novel is the darkest perspective on returns, and so the whole enterprise is ridiculed rather than embraced. Arlene's is the most skeptical voice in the novel, and she does not believe in the idea of a second-generation trauma or any special type of remembrance:

As far as Arlene was concerned, second generation was a made-up category, an indulgence for a bunch of whiners and self-pitiers with a terminal case of arrested development. The so-called survivors, they were the first-generation; they were the ones who had been there, they had experienced it all firsthand, and after them came their children, this bogus second generation, these Holocaust hangers-on . . . throwing a tantrum for a piece of Shoah action. So all of those tough, shrewd, paranoid refugees who came out of the war – you don't even want to begin to think about how they made it through – suddenly they get turned into a sacred, saintly survivors with unutterable knowledge, and then the second generation, born and reared in Brooklyn or somewhere, far, far from the gas chambers and crematoria, gets crowned as honorary survivors. Suddenly these lightweight descendants are endowed with gravitas, with importance, with all the seriousness and rewards that come from sucking up to suffering. What could be neater? All the benefits of Auschwitz without having to actually live through the nastiness – Holocaust lite. (10)

What Arlene criticizes are the insensitive attempts by people who have not gone through the Holocaust to obtain the public interest and sympathy that come with the status of a survivor – a shameful issue that frequently accompanies cases of death and disaster. At the same time, her dismissal of the entire category of “second generation” is indicative of

yet another issue: deeming problems as “made up” to avoid having to resolve them. Even though she disregards the entire category of a second generation and the right to their personal trauma of growing up in an already traumatized home, the strong trend in contemporary Jewish American literature I discuss in this study proves that remembrance goes deeper than the second generation and much further back than the horrific period of the Holocaust.⁷⁸

Perhaps precisely because the Jewish travelers do not wish to admit that they might feel any connection to the land of their immediate ancestors, as it would mean a certain affinity to the space of historical betrayal and torment, and thus they have no expectations of finding any, what awaits them in Europe is a disconcerting sense of familiarity. Saul remembers that his friend, Billy Boots, “had sometimes spoken of Prague in that way he had of sounding familiar with places he’d never been” (Stern, *Angel* 299), locating the city in the shared unconscious of perhaps not all of the humanity, but certainly of readers: “He pictured himself strolling arm in arm through crooked streets with Franz Kafka, whom he portrayed as a Charlie Chaplin figure oppressed by a city that traded in things for which he (Kafka) had no tolerance, such as magic and beauty” (299-300). When he meets Svatopluk Lifshin, who represents the Jewish Heritage Society, Saul has a chance to participate in a guided tour of the city, his agonizing path to Jewishness. The visiting card he receives from his guide advertises a “Magical Mysery Tour,” which initially strikes Saul as a rather “unfortunate typo” (297), but later turns into an accurate description of the experience: “he read me the riot act of local Jewish history, reciting the thousand-year cycle of expulsions, pogroms, accusations

⁷⁸ Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* is a good example proving that growing up in a survivor’s household has an immense influence on a child.

of ritual murder” (307). Though unwelcoming and offering no sense of belonging, the city constitutes the skeleton of the once living organism, exposing the remains of Jewish life and culture. The eccentric guide tells Saul, “The streets of Prague . . . correspond to configurations of human brain . . . To negotiate thoroughfares of Prague is, in manner of speaking, to explore brain of Franz Kafka, though many other strenuous Jewish brains also repeat map of city” (301-302). The sense of recognition is heightened by the analogy, and perhaps even mocked to an extent by Stern, as if the only way to really get to know the maze of the city was to imagine it as the mind of its best-known Jew.

While Saul detects familiarity through Prague’s lost Jewishness and its most prominent Jewish author, Leora finds it in Amsterdam because of her family’s as well as her people’s genealogy. Though on the professional level, Leora has to meet with the “potheads” of Amsterdam, as she calls them, we learn indirectly of the past that is locked in her shared unconscious; the reader sees the city predominantly through the eyes of protagonists that are long dead – Leora’s and Naomi’s ancestors. The most tangible sensation that Leora is experiencing during her stay in the city is that of recognition. As she walks through the galleries of the Rijksmuseum, a similar force to the one that made her consider attending an overseas conference makes her visit peculiar exhibitions:

“Inside, Leora stumbled about in a daze from room to room, until, as if carried off by a gentle, unexpected tide of rising waters, she wandered into a gallery filled with paintings by Rembrandt” (*In the Image* 121). The image that catches her attention is Rembrandt’s painting of *The Prophet Jeremiah Mourning over the Destruction of Jerusalem*.

Everything about it seems familiar, though she cannot locate the memories that cause this uncanny recognition: “There was something about this painting – and, in fact, many of

the others – that felt familiar to her, as if she were peering into a window she had peered into many times before, though she couldn't determine where or when" (122). The next painting inspires a similar response from her unconsciousness: "As she stared at the pregnant-looking woman, the image grew more and more familiar, and she struggled to remember where she had seen these paintings last" (122). The déjà vu experience does not seem to bother the protagonist; it is almost as if she half-expects Europe to be a familiar place.

Decades before her, young Willem Landsmann is simultaneously impressed and unsettled by the same paintings and artifacts, especially the "poppenhuizen" – dollhouses. He admires "outrageously beautiful miniature rooms," looking from the outside into perfect minuscule interiors; "Suddenly he wishes that he could shrink, shrink, shrink down until he was the right size to fit in one of those velvet-covered chairs" (89). The sentiment reflects Bill's family situation, but perhaps more so his unstable position in the city and the desire to literally and metaphorically fit in. Unfortunately, not only are the dollhouses too small, "The real problem with Willem's plan to shrink himself down into the tiny rooms, of course, is that they are already occupied. Each of the houses is populated by little dolls, dressed in strange costumes, as if they are going out to a masquerade" (89). The city Bill lives in is also already occupied; it had been this way even before Bill and his family arrived. It had, in fact, been that way even before Bill's ancestors decided to settle in Europe at all. With his youthful naiveté, Bill does not quite recognize the issue, arguing that there is enough space for everyone, "Yet there aren't quite enough dolls around. Each house seems occupied only by a few dolls each, perhaps four or five at most. But the bedrooms can accommodate more than that, and the banquet

tables are set for many more. There must be more people living in these houses, Willem thinks, who are simply off on a journey somewhere“ (89). The absence Bill observes is, on one level, a little boy’s wonder over the spaciousness of the wealthy life, but on another, a foreshadowing of the Amsterdam, and Europe in general, that Leora will come to see: a place once vibrant with both Jewish and Gentile cultures, now painfully empty, with just artifacts remaining that could accommodate more than whoever survived.

The “journey” Bill imagines did actually take place, as one of chapter titles in Brenner states, “from everywhere to Auschwitz.”⁷⁹ The Polish town of Oświęcim, “the anus of the world” as Reich calls it in the novel (107), is one of the darkest and most difficult destinations for dark tourism. So many tourists are interested in visiting the site, and so challenging is the task of negotiating their needs for entertainment, history, “realism,” and finally souvenirs with a proper honoring of the victims’ memory, that the place has become, according to some tourists and some scholars, a tacky theme park, to which ambivalent reactions are hardly surprising. Reich describes the actual issues that the Museum has been facing in the recent years: the convent of the Carmelites who took over a Zyklon B storehouse and initiated fights over the presence of a Christian cross on the premises, a mall built by a Polish entrepreneur at a close proximity to the camp, finally, the sellers of tourist souvenirs ranging from images of Catholic victims to Judaica. When Norman strolls outside the camp one day, he recognizes “that terrific old sick joke immortalized on top, ‘Arbeit Macht Frei,’ and its underlying meaning, *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate*, showing through like the sepia cartoon of the creator’s true intention and design” (101). Even though he locates particular elements that represent the

⁷⁹ “All roads lead to Auschwitz, as they say” (T. Reich 110), remarks Norman at the sight of his childhood friend working as a peddler in front of the camp.

death camp as it is known, the surroundings seem at odds with the atmosphere of death: “It was a beautiful day at Auschwitz, a mild spring breeze carrying the hopeful smell of abundant young grass, a few innocent clouds in an otherwise heartless blue sky” (99). As with Leora and Saul, Norman, too, traverses the territory that is supposed to be familiar – and in a way it is – but whose pronounced absence makes it foreign at the same time. Just like the night before in Cracow, when “Norman felt himself to be utterly disconnected and apart, dissociated from the reality of his companions, like a visitor from another planet who had been dropped on the ice sculpture at a bar mitzvah smorgasbord” (69), the visitor is in between the innocence of the clouds and the heartlessness of the sky – the same sky that simply looked on the horrors without taking action.

Svatopluk’s claim that Prague is akin to Kafka’s brain represents relatively frequent imagery associated both with European cities as well as Jewish ghettos; it imagines the city as a maze: enticing yet unwelcoming, where mysterious corners attract questionable characters and streets intersect at puzzling angles, creating an impassable labyrinth. Aziza Khazzoom, a sociologist examining Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism in light of contemporary ethnic tensions in Israel, traces the Orientalist discourse to pre-war Jewish Europe, adding filth, darkness, and crowd to the narrowness of the streets. “Friends and foes alike,” Khazzoom recounts, “were disgusted by Jewish poverty, by their dark disorderly ghettos with the ‘narrow streets, dirt, thongs of people, . . . and ceaseless haggling’ . . . The heder, the primary educational institution, was dismissed as crowded, unhygienic, and chaotic” (491). In her subsequent analysis, Khazzoom discusses the varying value judgment placed on an idea as seemingly trivial as the narrowness of streets; in reference to Jewish ghettos, it is considered a pejorative

characteristic, but it otherwise increases the picturesque qualities of European cities: “Of course it is empirically true that Jewish ghettos were small, crowded, and noisy . . . But the superficial accuracy of the constructions is misleading. For example, there is nothing inherently backward about narrow, twisting streets; today, many parts of Europe are popular precisely for their romantic, intimate sidelanes” (491). It is not the objective physical state of a given location that determines its judgment, but prejudicial associations in reference with the people who live there. The same quality can be positive and highly negative simultaneously depending on the context of the utterance; what is romantic in one instance can be deemed chaotic in another with no awareness of the underlying hypocrisy.

The European cities that Leora and Saul visit, Amsterdam and Vienna, are both examples of a reversal in the application of this rule. They seem forbidding and “cruel” precisely because of the absence of the once-existing ghetto (in Leora’s case) or the impending liquidation thereof (in the case of Willem/Bill).⁸⁰ As Bill walks through Amsterdam, he has to “negotiate [his] way through the tiny little streets, their corners, lampposts, and buildings” and “wander in circles around the city looking for a way out” (*In the Image* 73). When he describes “the most oppressive moment of the day . . . right after sunset” (74), he translates the oppression onto the entire area, perhaps even Europe caught in the wave of anti-Semitism: “the whole city is like some ridiculous maze designed by a cruel psychologist who waits, watching you, testing you to see if you might make a wrong turn and receive electric shock” (73). The anti-Semitic mood is not yet as

⁸⁰ It also always seems to rain. Daniel Mendelsohn recounts in *The Lost*: “[I]t had been raining from the start of our Eastern European trip – a cold, steady, wet drizzle, enough water to be irritating without ever providing the giddy relief of a downpour” (109).

pronounced as in Vienna, the city Bill and his family have just left, where newspapers were “not yet propaganda machines but getting there,” thus spinning the story of Bill’s father winning the city lottery: “RICH JEW TAKES VIENNA’S MONEY” (77). Yet it is in Amsterdam already that Willem discovers that underneath a proud sign stating “Welcome to the Rijksmuseum,” there is a short warning: “No dogs or Jews allowed” (83). The message of the board haunts him as he strolls through the galleries, creating memories that Leora will later recover.

Just as Amsterdam offers artifacts and exhibits relating to Jewish history and culture in its greatest gallery of Rijksmuseum, which once closed its doors to Jews, Prague in Svatopluk’s description becomes a macabre museum of Judaica. As the man guides Saul through the streets evoking Kafka’s brain, he brings his attention to the neighborhood of “Josefov, old Jewish quarter, named in honor Emperor Joseph Two, who opens ghetto gates in seventeen and eighty-four. He also outlaws Hebrew and forbids all but eldest son of Jewish family to wed” (Angel 306). The location is already charged with meaning as a Jewish quarter that is no longer Jewish, but Svatopluk adds one more layer to the place when he says, “It is Josefov that archfiend Hitler, ordering Jewish artifacts be brought here from all over Europe, designates site for Museum of Extinct Race, which is precisely . . . what ghetto has become” (306). The tour given by Svatopluk is a Mysery Tour focusing on an Extinct Race, with dead artifacts left by Kafka and rabbi Löw, as well as the nameless Jews of Prague.

As in the case of the “cruel” Amsterdam, Prague seems rather unwelcoming and ready to administer electric shock if one takes a wrong turn, and not only because it is

separated from the Western part of the continent with a thick layer of barbed wire. Saul recounts,

I suffered the indignities of the journey, passed through whorls of barbed wire and red tape to reach a city where everyone looked as scared as I felt. It did not give me a sense of belonging. A condition of my being in Prague was that my already limited visa might be revoked at any moment, and without ceremony I would be sent packing back to the West. I half hoped the time would come soon. (*Angel* 300)

Saul experiences the same ambiguity his ancestors did: despite the daily risk of expulsion, he renews the literal visa as the metaphorical one was renewed by the Jewish inhabitants of the city. This precarious position, warranting no shelter from fear and no “sense of belonging,” might make Saul want halfheartedly to leave, but in reality it keeps him strangely attached to the city, even despite its pernicious nature: “But in breathing the city’s toxic air, I had compounded my own private malaise; I’d reached an outpost in the middle of Europe that was neither East or West but stood at a threshold, or on a cusp if you like, of two worlds, and, wandering about it, I couldn’t tell if I were coming or going” (300). The toxicity and cruelty of European cities did not evaporate once the war ended; in the eyes of Jewish travelers, the thick unpleasant atmosphere hovers over Central Europe, both attracting and repelling them with its inbetweenness and historicity.

Part of the toxic cloud over Europe has to do with the remnants of fear. Depending on when a traveler visits Central Europe, he or she might encounter perpetrators, people who stood by watching, but hardly ever any survivors. That is true not only for the contemporary Europe Leora visits, but for any Jewish experience in

Europe. Even the Golden Age of Prague Jewry in the times of Rudolph II was already tainted by growing uneasiness. Fear is a sensation that Svatopluk highlights in his description of the Jewish Prague:

Kafka . . . was inventor of twentieth century, sounding theme which reverberates more loud with every year. The theme, as you . . . are aware, is fear, and Kafka, because he is afraid of everything, is fear's prophet. Fear is concept he is getting from Jews, who are cultivating it for ages: fear of capricious tyrants, of blood libel and mob that makes of ghetto a charnel house, fear of own *pipik*, of love, fear of horrors that often preview in Prague before they are exported to rest of Europe. World bequeaths to Jews raw material for manufacture of fear, which Jews are refining over centuries, until fear is rectified to perfection in person of Kafka.

(Angel 303)

The city's fear is now compounded by the communist regime that keeps it closed off from the world, which increases its deadness. For Saul, Prague is "a memory that refused to come alive" (301).

One aspect of the fear that the protagonists experience is related to their encounters with local inhabitants. To the American visitors, Europe seems to be the place where, unlike in America, being Jewish is an offense. "In America," ponders Bill Landsmann after years of living overseas, "people all look different, until you take off their clothes and discover that they are really all the same. In Europe, people all look the same until you take off their clothes and discover that they are different, irreparably different, differences scarred into their flesh" (*In the Image* 93). That is why when Saul Bozoff in Stern's novel hears the words "Jew?" asked in a hushed tone, his immediate

reaction is fear: “‘*Žid?*’ asked the spidery fellow in the transparent plastic rain slicker on Maiselov Street in the Old Town section of Prague . . . It was a face I’d seen many variations of (minus the eagle beak) in this somber city, which, although it was already April, seemed far from the outset of spring. On first hearing the charged syllable on the man’s lips, I stiffened, assuming an insult” (*Angel* 296). If one adds the problematic history to the communist regime, which controlled Czechoslovakia from Moscow at the time, the assumption Saul makes seems understandable: “The question would have been less loaded in the streets of New York, where he might have been hawking discount matzos or scalping tickets to Yom Kippur services, but here in a city where being Jewish had once been a capital offense (reduced now to only a felony?), to answer seemed a complex affair” (297). Interestingly, the awareness of his Jewishness in the face of an undefined threat brings Saul closer to his identity, which might be a more realistic explanation of his subsequent scholarly activity than smoking the dust of the golem.

In Reich’s satirical account of the second-generation death camp tourism, the portrayals of the local inhabitants – tour guide Krystyna and the nuns in the convent where Nechama is hiding – are stock figures with hardly any nuance, especially as seen through the eyes of Maurice and Norman:

Well, if by some miracle Krystyna wasn’t already an anti-Semite like every other single Pole he had ever met . . . and especially with her close personal contact with particularly obnoxious Jewish types in her job as the museum’s acquisitions agent in Warsaw and occasional VIP tour guide for fund-raising junkets such as this one, which enabled her to get to know the species intimately and, from her point of view, no doubt gave her open-and-shut grounds and justification to

despise them even more, she would definitely turn into a flaming Jew-hater now.

(39)

The assumption of Krystyna's anti-Semitism is not based on her actions but her nationality; it is the anticipated hatred that Lehrer discusses in her chapter on organized death camp tours to Poland.⁸¹ To an extent, the passage above exemplifies one more phenomenon the anthropologist notices, namely, "provoking anti-Semitism" (72). Since Jewish visitors are already fairly certain that every Pole is, in fact, an anti-Semite, they act "obnoxious" to protect themselves from being hurt. It leads to the "kind of circularity built into mission tourism," wherein anticipated anti-Semitism leads to more protection (for example, as Feldman writes, more security guards), which in turn provokes stronger reactions (74), like the exasperation Krystyna feels after spending time with Maurice and Norman.⁸² Her opinion of Jews is presented as another stereotype: "Why was all the attention focused only on the Jews? That's all anyone ever heard – Jews, Jews, Jews. In places like China with over a billion population, they must be stunned when they

⁸¹ Lehrer calls it, after Jackie Feldman, "itching for a fight" (66) to get even for the past hurts rather than any present-day grievances.

⁸² This circularity is strengthened by the fact that "[t]he Polish public is still in the early stages of reckoning its 'bill of conscience' regarding its historical record vis-à-vis the Jews, filling in blank spots and outright erasures in their historical narrative and struggling with strains of Polish nationalism in which Jewish claims on Polish history and culture – whether positive or negative – are viewed as occult, corrupt, or polluting" (Lehrer 21). The national narrative, underscoring the sense of hurt about the horrors Poland underwent under Nazi occupation with its mandatory religious angle, prompts Reich to mock the sentiment in Krystyna's words: "[T]he main point, as far as Krystyna was concerned, was the utter absence of any sympathy at all for the suffering and the besmirching of their good name that the Polish locals had endured as a result of the Nazi occupation and the proximity of the camps. Why didn't anyone consider their feelings? What kind of obscene blasphemy was it to insinuate that the Poles were worse even than the German barbarians, that the Poles hurled themselves upon their Jewish neighbors with pitchforks and scythes and flaming torches to do the Germans' dirty work, that the Poles were common collaborationists like your maniacal Croat killer, your debauched Ukrainian peasant? Jesus Christ, the Poles were victims too – martyrs, Christians" (166).

discover one fine morning that there are after all so few Jews in the world, given all the noise and trouble these Jews stir up and the landfills of verbiage they generate” (166). Despite Krystyna’s initial patience and willingness to help the visitors in her role as a guide, she is quickly annoyed by the discourse of suffering, and the blaming game she anticipates.⁸³ Reich is bold in demonstrating the decades’ long resentments in a series of exaggerated speeches and streams of consciousness, but she notices the same phenomena Lehrer does in her anthropological work. Her literary ethnography, however, is not the ethnography of possibility, but of conflict.

Linenthal points out in his book *Preserving Memory* that “[j]ust because an event is perceived as transformative, epochal, a watershed, a break in human history – all the sweeping phrases used to separate the Holocaust from the ongoing stream of history – *memory of that event is not necessarily equally transformative*” (267, author’s emphasis). In the case of death camp tour participants, this is certainly the case. Their visits inspire remembrance, but do not lead to a deeper understanding or a transformation of the people involved with the tour. The ordinariness of their experience resembles, at best, the trivial platitudes uttered by TripAdvisor’s members reviewing the experience of visiting Dachau Concentration Camp at five stars, and, at worst, the banal concerns the same members have about restrooms and the café when they decide to award the place with three stars.

Yet for the protagonists of the novels I presented, their quests are indeed transformative – sometimes against their expectations. For Leora, the visit to Europe initiates a sequence of events that leads her to find a life partner – whom Helene Meyers sees as promising in terms of Jewish continuity – and through him to get a better sense of

⁸³ “Poles are keenly aware of how . . . Jewish groups see them: ‘As murderers’” (Lehrer 72).

her Jewishness. Interestingly, Jake also turns out to be a distant cousin of Naomi Landsmann – the tragically deceased friend of Leora – and this peculiar genealogical revelation serves to highlight the potential for revival and continuity Meyers discusses. Jake substitutes the memory of Naomi the way new Jewishness has to substitute the old world that ceased existing.

After Saul tastes the “dust of golem,” according to Svatopluk “premium righteous shit” (Stern, *Angel* 310), he becomes an avid scholar of Jewishness with a professorial position at a fictitious Mermelman College. The power of the Golem drug gives him inspiration to study Jewish texts, seeking the original light hidden in the Torah: “I made it my business to gauge the volume and intensity of the light generated by the stories I read. For this project it was necessary to try to make of myself a sensitive instrument capable of registering Judaic photons broadcast over millennia – no mean task” (332). Saul gets so caught up with the task that he virtually forgets about the life beyond his studies. “Of course, by the time I’d stuffed the essentially empty vessel of Saul Bozoff with stories, years had passed, and the walls of the room I called home were buttressed with books” (333), he notices, quickly to add: “In short, I was never so content” (334). The Prague episode gives Saul more focus than the first encounter with his own Jewishness, the stories told to him by Aunt Keni. Even though the focus becomes absolute, not allowing any other duties, like teaching and writing, or pleasures, like food and sex, to really enter his life, the abnegated body of the scholar feels satisfaction.

The stories preserved by Aunt Keni in the manuscript, as well as the “myserious tour” of Prague, grant Saul access into the world of his past. They are perhaps problematic, just like the software in Horn’s *A Guide for the Perplexed*: without them,

there is no remembrance at all. In the dungeon where she is kept by her captors, the creator of the Genizah software “had no way of knowing whether or not any of her memories were true ones” (*Guide* 158). On the other hand, and this is also true for Saul, the fact that Josie is able to start writing down all her memories in an attempt to recreate the personal archive gives her strength and ultimately saves her from the numbness of a captive, as she can feel “the ancient human power stirring within her” (154). Solomon Schechter, too, sees possibilities in writing human history when he discovers the Egyptian Genizah and its riches: “[T]hat is how he saw the books and papers he collected now: as dead people, buried in the genizah the way that bodies are buried in a cemetery, until, miraculously, the act of reading brought them back to life . . . It was like watching dry bones come back to life, the reanimation of a world” (178). The lifeless bodies stored in the safety of the Egyptian genizah evoke the remains of the Golem Saul inhales in Altneushul in Prague.

* * *

In these literary texts, Jewish returns – which might initially seem like no returns at all – are undertaken under the guise of touristic endeavors or haphazard travels. The stigma surrounding the cursed land of central Europe, and Poland in particular, does not allow the travelers to admit they are in pursuit of their roots and identities, since it could be ridiculed as “back-to-the-shtetl heritage nostalgia” (Reich 24). The assumed indifference, the air of randomness and spontaneity, however, turn their journeys into quests as opposed to missions from Erica Lehrer’s useful definitions, leading to more profound revelations than expected. When the tourist experience has to be “life-changing” or when it has “a spiritual awakening” written into its itinerary (Lehrer 57), the

results tend to be predictable and short-lived. It is precisely the lack of expectations that illuminates the newfound sense of familiarity the literary travelers encounter in Amsterdam, Prague, and Cracow. There is value in exploring the borderlands of dark tourism and experiencing a heritage that hurts, even if the encounters and realizations these types of travels bring are far from the ones advertised by tourist folders.

Despite the fact that their destinations seem unwelcoming, if not straightforward hostile, what the travelers obtain as a result of the visit in the forbidding spaces of remembrance is a better sense of their Jewishness. Both Leora and Saul emerge from their European visits renewed, as if this necessary step had to be taken not to seek reconciliation or understanding of what happened – but simply to go and see, to breathe the same air, to touch the remains of the world that will never be again. The potential for the mental rejuvenation that happens not because of but despite the bloody history of the place is thwarted if the visit is organized as a mission, which Reich demonstrates in her novel about the Holocaust business. When the individuals are forced to experience something profound, the trivialities of the everyday make their efforts laughable, but when they explore the unknown, the trivial can lead to the profound, the profane to the sacred.

The two modes of returns, metaphorical ones undertaken through artifacts and theatrical props and actual journeys to Grossman's land of Over There, are not just complementary: the latter serves to elucidate the meaning of the symbolical travels through time and space. It can be argued that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum can only be fully appreciated after a visit to the Polish town of Oświęcim to see the infamous Auschwitz death camp, whether or not it turned into a theme park, as some

visitors and scholars rightly complain. The story of the tefillin Leora hears from Jason is but an embellishment of her narrative until the actual journey takes her overseas to the places where the phylacteries were created; perhaps a visit to the Rijksmuseum, whose doors were once closed for Jews, can help her grasp the unthinkable act of throwing the most cherished religious possessions in the depths of the New York Bay. Finally, the metaphorical act of tasting the golem dust gives Saul the taste of the Jewish tradition that he can now retrace in ancient texts.

Ultimately, even though their quests do not bring a sense of belonging or closure to the travelers, they find that a face-to-face encounter with their questions, resentments, and even actual fears is, to an extent, liberating. The authors do not devote any space to extolling the virtues of the “return”: how the trip will help you make sense of the familiar in the most foreign, how traversing the streets that resemble Kafka’s brain will lead you to a life of scholarly devotion. They do not need to do this, and they really cannot if they understand that articulating these benefits will only increase the popularity of mission tours. The grammar of their texts does the work for them, and careful readers will understand how groundbreaking the visits are in the scheme of the novels. They will also see that the real quest is undertaken when the traveler is ready and that it needs to be an exploration of the unknown – even if it eventually reveals hidden layers of familiarity – for it to attain any significance.

CHAPTER 4 Tourists of the Past

After a while his story began to come apart, jumping as it did from one subject to another, one time to another, one place to another according to a narrative that made sense only to him, as if the past and the present were only different countries that one might visit at will.

--Ana Menéndez⁸⁴

Sometimes We Become What We Try to Forget Most

Cuban American fiction tests the possibilities and limits of truth, and the returns I discuss in this section are only some of many attempts at determining what Cuba means for the second generation. The prevailing emotion that Cuban American protagonists feel after they return is disappointment, leading some to interrogate the idea of Cuba as a constant and to accept that ultimately all versions of the island are to an extent fictitious. Even though this outcome of the return process is much different from that demonstrated in Jewish American fiction, the link I offer between the two literatures is that of the importance of the process. Of course, the return to ancestral homelands is in some ways important to many, if not all, representatives of ethnic or diasporic peoples, but as I point out in Chapter 2, the specific circumstances of both Cuban and Jewish histories make their returns similarly complicated and accompanied by prejudice and fear of the first generation. While Jewish American authors tend to portray their protagonists as random or even unwilling travelers, pulled by Central Europe in a mysterious or seemingly accidental manner, Cuban Americans usually travel consciously, though also against their elder relatives' wishes. What is perhaps not always a planned trip, but a trip that is invariably filled with high expectations, turns into a rather bleak experience once the

⁸⁴ Menéndez, Ana. *Loving Che*. New York: Grove Press, 2003. Print.

travelers understand the gap between the inherited images of the island and the reality of what they find. Unlike Jewish Americans, who often expect the worst and are surprised by any evidence to the contrary, young American of Cuban descent expect way too much and end up disappointed. Both types of reactions are equally life changing for the protagonists who reach metaphorical maturity in terms of understanding their ancestral homelands. For Cuban Americans, the rite of passage that visiting the island might be perceived as can even result in long lasting bouts of depression; consciousness is in this case achieved in pain, resulting from the incompatibility between what was imagined and what the island represents.

When Cristina García sends one of her characters, Pilar, to Cuba, the young woman realizes: “Cuba is a peculiar exile, I think, an island-colony. We can reach it by a thirty-minute charter flight from Miami, yet never reach it at all” (219). Though similarly ambiguous and elusive, as well as highly controversial, Cuban returns differ from the Jewish American ones in many ways: they are meticulously planned, predominantly conscious and voluntary, and very much interactive, since the travelers go among the living and not the dead. Most importantly, though, due to the extremely high level of expectations on the part of the returnees, these visits can also be immensely disappointing. These expectations are not always positive – the difficult histories of many immigrants that I briefly describe in this first section of the chapter make it hardly possible – but, at least in contemporary Cuban American fiction, they are clearly defined: even if the country itself would prove a disappointment, the trip is bound to be life-changing or revelatory. Yet Ana Menéndez’s novel *Loving Che*, Achy Obejas’ *Days of Awe*, and Jennine Capó Crucet’s short stories seem to take Pilar’s statement as a starting

point and demonstrate the ultimate inaccessibility of Cuba, or at least the incompatibility between what was expected or imagined and what the return actually revealed about the island or, more specifically, about the protagonist's connection to it. The theatrical props I discussed in my previous chapter, which foreshadowed deeper connections to Jewishness in the forms of tefillin or the golem, also function in Cuban American fiction, but their role is more tentative. Although maps and photographs are representations of reality, they tend to mean what the observer wants them to mean; hence, instead of strengthening ties to the island, these props make the relationship with Cuba more provisional by heightening the imaginary. Maps and photographs, typical props of tourist endeavors that I discuss in Chapter 2, seem comfortingly tangible and capable of delivering facts instead of assumptions, but the narrative that surrounds them often makes the facts at least ambiguous, if not suspect.

Returning to Cuba from Miami is not only going from one homeland to another, as Tsuda understands it, it is first and foremost going from one Cuba to another. Thus, such a trip has to necessarily result in a feeling of detachment, and in contemporary Cuban American fiction, it undermines and questions the ties to the island instead of confirming them. The "reverse directionality" of the journey, largely ignored by critics as a field of exploration, tends to undermine Miami as a concept of as well – if it was built as a mirror and extension of Cuba, which is a common concept in Cuban American writing, proving that Cuba was just an erroneous representation results in proving its reflection as equally false. The traveler who knows Miami well, thus expecting to find a relatively familiar picture on the island, may feel betrayed by both places if his or her impressions of Cuba seem vastly unrelated to Miami. In this chapter, I start with a brief

discussion of Cuban immigration to the U.S., followed by an overview of how the image of Cuba changed in Cuban American literature between Cristina García's early works and those of Ana Menéndez. The last two sections, mirroring the chapter on Jewish American returns in its organization, are close readings of metaphorical returns ("props") and actual returns to the island, which is, according to a 1920's tourist brochure, "so near, yet so foreign" (Cabezas 43). Though clearly not all Cuban Americans live in Miami, the city seems to have a special status in Cuban American fiction. If protagonists do not live there, they sometimes feel doubly dislocated, and Florida is bound to be either a destination or at least a point of reference in contemporary Cuban American works – after all, roughly 70% of all Cuban Americans live in Florida.

The exceptional position of the Cuban Diaspora in the United States, especially in Miami, is caused among others by the spatial closeness pointed out by the brochure and by García's *Pilar*, which many Cuban authors see as paradoxical given the detachment between Cuba and the United States – the closeness that does not translate into closeness of any other kind. Miami, the physical locale and metaphorical point of reference in contemporary Cuban American fiction, has been a destination for Cubans since long before the revolution. Prior to 1959, the year "anti-Castro emigration" initiated, the exchange of tourists went in both directions: "Just as Americans journeyed to Cuba in the pursuit of profit and hedonism, so Cubans had travelled to the United States . . . for business, education or pleasure" (Lievesley 67). Those for whom the United States became the place of *destierro* (exile) had the liberty of speech in the absence of Spanish censorship, prevalent before the 1895-98 War of Independence, but, according to Lievesley, they also appropriated the language of racism, prevalent in the United States

of the day, and segregation laws for Afro-Cubans ensued (67). The class and ethnic divides between these early immigrants prevented them from unifying in the nationalist effort of the late nineteenth century; some of the workers supported independence, yet others were in favor of the annexation of Cuba to the United States. In the 1950s, Miami became the “centre of resistance” to the Batista regime, but after 1959, “the political nature of *destierro* had been irrevocably transformed” (68).⁸⁵ As the waves of anti-Castro emigration began, they overpowered the anti-Batista movement and created the multilayered fabric of the city.⁸⁶

The capital of Cuban America, as presented in its contemporary fiction, is far from the homogenous Cuban haven that the idea of an ethnic enclave might evoke.⁸⁷ Each wave of Cuban immigration brought different attitudes and expectations to the already divided city. Separated by class, social status, and the motivation behind their choice to escape Cuba, new immigrants represented conflicting interests and ideas. Silvia Pedraza, along with other scholars of the topic, recognizes three major immigrant waves (236-241). The first one (January 1959 – October 1962) consisted of “Cuba’s elite,” business owners and professionals of the upper-middle class, “pushed” to leave by nationalization and various reforms of the new system. It is estimated that about 200,000 people left Cuba for the United States during that time (Lievesley 68). The next wave

⁸⁵ Ironically, in 1955, Fidel Castro “spent five weeks travelling from one patriotic club to another in a fund-raising effort for the 26 July Movement” (Lievesley 68).

⁸⁶ Miami is multilayered in terms of its varied Cuban population, but it might seem like a monolith when observed from a different perspective. Richard Blanco, the inaugural poet for Barack Obama’s second inauguration, explains: “I grew up in a very un-diverse community. It’s diverse looking from the outside in, but from the inside out it’s... it was all Cubans.” Blanco reminisces that as a child, he thought America started north of Miami-Dade County.

⁸⁷ Another capital of the Cuban Diaspora is Union City, NJ, known as Havana on the Hudson (Lievesley 67).

(1965-1974) is described by sociologists as economically rather than politically motivated; it included working class and “petit bourgeois” (“the very people in whose name the revolution was made” [Pedraza 237]). This emigration wave coincided with Che Guevara’s death in 1967 and the failed sugar harvest of 1970. “As the heroic period of the Revolution ended,” comments Lievesley, “the Cuban political system and Cuban society became more institutionalized and, in many ways, more resistant to innovation and debate” (99). Both the political climate and the deteriorating economic situation led as many as a quarter million people to flee their native land. Famously, Everett Lee in his theory of migration distinguishes between two major influences that also shaped Cuban decisions to leave – one is “pushing” and the other “pulling” (236). Even though Pedraza suggests the first two waves can be to an extent accounted for by both of these factors – Castro “pushing” dissidents out, and America “pulling” them in – scholars agree that the first wave was more politically motivated in comparison to the second one, whose main component was economic. Thus, Pedraza quotes Amaro and Portes who see the second wave as more essentially immigrant than exilic; it generated “the classic immigrant” looking for a chance to improve his or her social status abroad (238).

The third wave, frequently referred to as “the Mariel exodus” (1980), was comprised of two distinct groups: blue-collar workers who wanted to leave Cuba and those whom Castro considered as potentially dangerous elements, sent as “bullets” against the U.S. (prison and mental hospital inmates, homosexuals). The crisis started on March 28 with a stolen bus crashing into the Peruvian embassy, which within the following days became occupied by at least 10,000 Cubans. As the situation became more serious, Castro allowed the port of Mariel to open and “invited relatives to collect

the *gusanos* ('worms')" (Lievesley 113). About 125,000 people took the invitation and left Cuba within half a year of the occupation, inspiring fears among non-Latinos and Cuban Americans alike, who understood *marielitos* to be a dangerous group of "scum," as Castro wanted everyone to believe (113-4). The early 1990s, Lievesley describes, "witnessed an increasingly palpable sense of disenchantment" among the young people yearning to participate in the Western-style consumer culture after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 (126). What some scholars call the fourth wave of emigration started in August 1994 and is known as the *balseros* (raft) crisis. Today, the emigration process continues and is mainly motivated by economic opportunities and by the desire to reunite with Cuban American families.

The new immigrants enter a community that is already divided; the differences in immigration modes and the rationale behind immigrants' lifestyle choices in America produce a space that is not only indicative of the political tumult in their country of origin, but also internal tensions. While these new migrants contribute to a new understanding of the political situation in Cuba among the Cuban community in Miami, as they are much less opposed to the Cuban government, the three main authors I focus on in this project are children of the "first wavers" – refugees who escaped Cuba for political reasons shortly after Fidel Castro took power.⁸⁸ Because they live in a community whose members come from various waves and represent different values, this short introduction aimed at highlighting their background, which is far from uniform. In this respect, their female protagonists seem to be their alter egos; Alejandra, the nameless

⁸⁸ Cristina García's family fled in 1961, Achy Obejas' in 1962, and Ana Menéndez's in 1964.

protagonist of *Loving Che*, and Pilar come from deeply politicized homes, and their decisions to visit Cuba are political statements.

In the worlds of these novels, moods marking the remembrance process are extremely heated due to the “fetish for the past,” interpreted by Menéndez as “another of the destructive traits of the Cuban” (*Loving Che 2*).⁸⁹ Nowhere is this fetish as visible and acute as in Miami Dade – a county whose southwestern neighborhoods are densely populated by first, second, and third generation Cuban Americans, sometimes reaching 60% of the overall population in communities like Sweetwater or Hialeah. According to sociologists like Alejandro Portes and Robert Bach, Cuban immigrants of the first wave, who constituted mainly professionals and “Cuba’s elite,” built what can be defined as an ethnic enclave in Miami (qtd. in Pedraza 246). Although Silvia Pedraza admits that the term ethnic enclave is highly contested and strongly disagrees with the idea that the Cuban enclave can be compared to the Jewish and Japanese pattern of immigration, she acknowledges the usefulness of this formulation as opposed to the “ghetto” and the “immigrant neighborhood.” In her definition, an ethnic enclave is “an area that is like a foreign territory surrounded by another country, where the economic and social infrastructure belonging to that ethnic group is so institutionally complete and diversified that the immigrants can receive better returns to their characteristics by working for co-ethnics in the enclave than by working in the outside, larger society” (248). Portes and Bach argue that it was the creation of Miami as an ethnic enclave in the 1960s that enabled Cubans to live and write their success stories (qtd. in Pedraza 246). Thus,

⁸⁹ James and Judith Olson claim, “The cold war continued to survive in South Florida. In fact, by the early 1990s the only place on earth where the cold war against communism continued unabated was in the homes of Cuban Americans in Miami, Tampa, West Miami, Hialeah, west New York, and Union City” (106).

Menéndez is rightly “under the impression that every Cuban exile, no matter where they may have eventually settled in the world, retained some roots in Miami” (*Loving Che* 161). Despite Ruth Behar’s assertion that “Cubans today can be found all over the map . . . no longer torn simply between the island in the sea and the mirror island Cuban exiles built in Miami” (Behar and Suárez xiii), the city still functions as a reference point in Cuban American writing I focus on. Even if the author decides to locate the plot in a different part of the U.S., like García does for the most part in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Miami is at the very least a layover on the way to Cuba and a location for numerous “Miami Relatives” from Menéndez’s short story. Even Capó Cruet – whose short story “How to Leave Hialeah” depicts the painful and inevitable process of alienation from the roots after the protagonist leaves South Florida to study in the North – locates many of her short stories in Miami. Often called the American Havana, the city functions in Cuban American fiction similarly to the actual Cuban capital: as a constant reminder and representation of the motherland.

As a mirror reflection of Cuba, the city is not only obsessed with examining its past, but also producing conflicting versions thereof. Miami-based authors write about the vices of the Diaspora with candor, accusing it of living in the past and modeling its lives on what has been rather than what is to be. After the “Mariel exodus,” Miami became the second city after Havana in terms of Cuban population (Domínguez 145), and Menéndez sees it as a peculiar extension of Cuba: “Havana’s pathologies and beauties came to splendor in Miami. Sometimes I think the exile has been little more than a brief

passage through a mirror” (*Loving Che* 167).⁹⁰ The immigrants to Miami do not directly experience the vexations and difficulties of living in Cuba, but are intensely reliving them by proxy. According to the author, Miami seems to “care” more than any other place or community in the world (*In Cuba* 214) – not in a constructive way, however, but by reliving past resentments, rekindling the old fire of hatred toward El Líder, planning paramilitary coups like the one Heberto, the husband of one the Agüero sisters, trains for in the Everglades.⁹¹ In her equally candid novels, Cristina García asks rhetorically, “What is it about this city that fosters such empty delusions?” (*Agüero Sisters* 288).

Contemporary Cuban American fiction attempts to answer this question by presenting the peculiar geographical location of Miami as a space of remembrance: “Miami seemed . . . to be living in reverse. They named even their stores after the ones they had lost; and the rabid radio stations carried the same names as the ones they had listened to in Cuba, as if they were the slightly crazed sons of a once prominent family” (*Loving Che* 2). The city has inherited all of Havana’s opulence and history, and if Cuban American fiction is to be believed, in the 1990s it was even ruled by a “counterrevolutionary Miami Mafia” (*Loving Che* 187). And yet, Miami authors are able to curb the inherited frustration, producing nostalgic accounts of Cuban life on the island, which might be far from the black-and-white rhetoric of the Mafia, but are equally far from truth.

⁹⁰ Andrea O’Reilly Herrera admits that although some of Cuban Americans think of Miami as “a pale mirage or ‘imitation’ of Havana and that its Calle Ocho *cubanía* is ‘hybridized’ and ‘false,’” yet most agree that “the Miami enclave has recaptured, and thereby preserved in their original forms, ‘authentic’ Cuban traditions, recipes, and cultural mores (some of which have actually ceased to exist on the Island)” (xxii-xxiii).

⁹¹ The failure of the Bay of Pigs Invasion of 1961 left Castro triumphant that his country is a “consolidated socialist revolution able to defeat its enemies within Cuba as well as the superpower to its north” (Dominguez 102), and the exiles frustrated that the one attempt to reverse the history was unsuccessful. Since 1961, no organized attempt at a coup has been made, but fiction writers present Miami as persistently preparing for one.

Tensions surface both between Cubans and Cuban Americans as within the Cuban American community. In the eyes of the second generation, “Cuba and Miami become in a sense interchangeable until eventually Miami replaces Cuba” (Sokolovsky, “Cuba Interrupted” 246). In her short story “The Next Move,” Jennine Capó Cruet demonstrates this concept in a scene which involves a first-generation grandfather in a conversation with his granddaughter: “My mom says Cuba is just like Miami . . . And there are *no* horses *here*,” claims the little girl, to which her grandfather fails to answer: “I didn’t even know where to start explaining how wrong she was – how there were horses in Miami, just not around where they lived . . . And of course, Miami is nothing like Cuba” (57). The little girl repeats the perspective inherited from her mother without any deeper reflection, which does not prompt any explanation from the grandfather; it seems too difficult to even attempt to define Cuba and show its complexity, especially that, as Cuban scholar Ambrosio Fornet, who is a literary critic and author working in Havana, claims, the *cubanidad* of Cuban Americans is different from the one of the islanders – a notion perhaps obvious on the surface but, as Capó Cruet’s short story proves, not equally clear to everyone. Fornet observes the improvement in the relations of the two groups in the 1990s, despite extremists on both sides:

[S]uccessive waves of emigrants from all social sectors, the renewal of the dialogue with them at the end of the 1970s, and the unequivocal economic support that they have provided their relatives in Cuba since the beginning of the crisis in the 1990s began to widen the margins of reciprocal tolerance until finally the antithetical and equally pejorative categories of *ñángaras* (“pinkos”) and *gusanos* (counterrevolutionaries; literally “worms”) virtually disappeared from the Creole

vocabulary on both sides of the Florida straits. We all became legitimate Cubans again, albeit with a few exceptions. On the one hand, more than a few exiles belonged to that aggressive nucleus known within the diaspora as the “historical exile” or the “intransigent Right” and within Cuba as the “stateless” or the “Miami mafia.” On the other, more than a few young Cuban communists—mockingly referred to as the Taliban— became extremists in response to the ideological crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. (256-7)

However, Fornet expresses the official view when he states later in his speech turned into an essay: “The Cuba that the first exiles left behind no longer exists, and to the Cuba that exists today they could only return as the civilian employees of an occupying army” (261). Cuban Americans returning to the island face an overwhelming wave of needs that they have to satisfy, both internal in terms of their identity and family ties, as well as external in terms of the bare necessities they have to secure for their relatives, simultaneously confronting barely hidden hostility of the regime and their own moral dilemmas about supporting it. The intersection of these, often contradictory, forces creates charged returns filled with contradictory emotions, which often exacerbate the travelers’ yearnings instead of fulfilling them.

A Gaping Historical Wound

In this section, I present return as a concept in Cuban American fiction, including authors beyond the scope of my interest, such as Cristina García, to give my readers a broader view and a perspective for the close readings included in the following sections. Towards the end of the section, I introduce the three I will focus on exclusively later on, providing rationale for my choice. “What has taken me a lifetime to understand is that my

father reached back for his spiritual inheritance to Spain, as if Cuba almost didn't exist, because Spain was scar tissue, whereas Cuba was a gaping historical wound," remarks Alejandra, Achy Obejas' protagonist in *Days of Awe* (18). What seems to be the gaping wound for the first generation heals with time and turns into scars for the second one; the scars remind of the past pain, but do not hurt as much any more. Maya Socolovsky points out that differences between generations and immigration waves are also discernible in Cuban American writing, yet it might be challenging to unambiguously determine and categorize "various generations of Cuban American literary voices" (237). Eliana Rivero agrees with this sentiment when she states, "Cuban American national identity can be viewed as a cultural artifact open to a process of transformation, and more often than not it exhibits such a multiplicity of facets that it becomes almost essentialistic to speak about 'a Cuban American literatura'" (109). The broadly defined "younger" generation of "Cubands," who create their fiction in South Florida or place their characters in the Miami heat, have a peculiar place in the ethnic canon. Isabel Alvarez Borland enumerates the various ways they are called in her essay "The Memories of Others": Perez Firmat refers to them as ABCs – "American Bred Cubans," Rivero and Alvarez Borland as "ethnics," and finally O'Reilly Herrera uses the term "Cubands." More importantly, the author of the essay defines the focus of this younger generation: in the works of Cubands written in English, "the recovery and exploration of memories become central" (Borland, "Memories" 11). Since the authors in question are American Bred Cubans, all their memories have been passed down from their parents and grandparents. In the process of transmission, certain details get lost, and new interpretations arise as younger authors try

to make sense of the past through their contemporary lens, sometimes by visiting the island about which they heard so much.

Protagonists go to Cuba to seek their families, identities, and memories. Some of them are interested in truth, some in broadly understood comfort that the word *motherland* implies in its very connection to the maternal. Stuart Hall famously compared Diaspora's relation to the past to a post-partum experience: "The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past,' since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always already 'after the break.' It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (226). Lisette's experience in Cuba, the basis for Menéndez's short story "Her Mother's House," uncovers the layers of myth surrounding her mother's past; the woman is unable to locate the truth since her mother herself fails to remember it. Her experience resembles that of other Cuban American characters who feel separated from the island despite not knowing it. For many of them, the separation occurs when they are infants, thus making the post-partum analogy even more apt. The definitive nature of such separation is what the protagonists of more contemporary Cuban American fiction fail to comprehend; looking for connections to the island that they feel are natural, they are setting themselves up for failure.

Although the search for a mother or for a mother's past is a recurrent trait in Cuban American ethnic literature, the way it is utilized is by no mean uniform. In my interpretation, the differences in how the mother-daughter plot develops signal the shift between generations of writers. The two examples I discuss in this section – Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* and Ana Menéndez's *Loving Che* – seem to outline the

trajectory of this change, especially in the figure of Pilar Puente, one of the female protagonists of the former novel, who starts longing for Cuba and her maternal grandmother when she experiences an immense disappointment. After she sees her father with his new lover, she decides to visit the island:

That's it. My mind's made up. I'm going back to Cuba. I'm fed up with everything around here. I take all my money out of the bank, \$120, money I earned slaving away at my mother's bakery, and buy a one-way bus ticket to Miami, I figure if I can just get there, I'll be able to make my way to Cuba, maybe rent a boat or get a fisherman to take me. I imagine Abuela Celia's surprise as I sneak up behind her. She'll be sitting in her wicker swing overlooking the sea and she'll smell of salt and violet water. There'll be gulls and crabs along the shore. She'll stroke my cheek with her cool hands, sing quietly in my ear. (25-6)

In response to a painful crack in the foundation of her world, Pilar visualizes an idealized space of comfort her family left behind in Cuba. She is not so much interested in what Cuba itself will offer, as “fed up” with what she encounters daily in her own life. Since her mother is already a part of the new world – a business owner and a cheated wife in one as the embodiment of the stereotypically American freedoms – Pilar longs for the comforting touch of another maternal figure, her grandmother Celia. Her father's betrayal reignites the feelings of homelessness she expresses later in the novel: “Even though I've been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure what Cuba is, but I want to find out. If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged” (58). The grandmother becomes not only a substitute for Pilar's mother, but a holder of the identity the rest of Pilar's family lost on their way from Cuba; even her

company alone seems to be enough, in her granddaughter's opinion, to restore the order of life and the sense of belonging.

As years pass, however, the simple equation proposed by a teenager fails to encompass how she feels about Cuba any more. When Pilar attends Lou Reed's concert some time later, she no longer identifies Cuba with home: "'I'm from Brooklyn, man!' Lou shouts and the crowd goes wild. I don't cheer, though. I wouldn't cheer either if Lou said, 'Let's hear it for Cuba.' Cuba. Planet Cuba. Where the hell is that?" (García, *Dreaming in Cuban* 134). In her evolution from a displaced person longing for the old country to one that cannot find her place anywhere, Pilar demonstrates the progression of Cuban American authors who moved from treating Cuba as a haven or repose to realizing the physical place does not offer much in terms of resolving their own internal struggles or alleviating the pain of incompatibility.

Ana Menéndez makes her characters both in the short story "Her Mother's House" and in the novel *Loving Che* believe the former, only to send them to Cuba to discover the latter. Her body of work, especially *Loving Che* in its utilization of Che Guevara's images "signals an unprecedented retreat from history and from the traditional recording of the stories of exile" (Borland, "Memories" 17), which corresponds to the shift I emphasize in this section. Lisette, the protagonist of Menéndez's short story, motivates her trip in the following manner: "She wasn't going to explain to her mother things she could barely explain to herself. How every story needed a beginning. How her past had come to seem like a blank page, waiting for the truth to darken it" (*In Cuba* 210). Immigrants long for what natives take for granted: the view of the same hills their great-grandparents saw from their window, the touch of soil their ancestors spilled blood

to protect, and the closeness of the space where their inherited memories can take root. The truth implied by Lisette is dark, but it possesses meaning as opposed to the unsettled, drifting character of human blanks. Lisette never finds it. The same reason motivates the protagonist of *Loving Che* to follow the tracks of her mother – an enterprise that proves intensely disappointing and elusive.

As the daughters discover that they cannot access their mothers' Cuban identities, the entire island turns into a mere dream. According to Rodenas, Cuban American fiction focuses on “that most pivotal of narrative plots – the story of female development and identity” (48). The protagonists' parents escape the budding revolution, and so the new American generation represents an even greater rift between what Cuba used to be and what it is when the children return. Rodenas points out, “The failure of the mother-daughter bond depicted in [*Loving Che*], with the daughter's permanent loss of moorings, attests to the radical inversion of insular history – the revolution not as forward teleological progress, but as negation; the island as a place of the imagination” (48). It takes a physical return to the space of stories to realize its textual, imaginary nature. When the daughters become aware that the connection to their mothers cannot be fulfilled even in the space where they always imagined it possible, they are left disoriented and dejected.

The fact that the reader has access to the mother's narrative in *Loving Che* – Menéndez offers the entire story, though its credibility is questionable – also suggests that the traditional paradigm mentioned above, that of a daughter in a futile search of her mother's past, is subverted. In her famous work, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch, who influenced Rodenas' argument, is interested “not only where the stories of

women are in men's plots, but where the stories of mothers are in the plots of sons and daughters" (4). Hirsch describes the evolution of the term motherhood, noticing, "the mother became either the object of idealization and nostalgia or that which had to be rejected and surpassed in favor of allegiance to a morally and intellectually superior male world" (14). However, the subversive aspect in *Loving Che* proves above all that the mother's narrative does not always have to be trustworthy or even worthy of attention. The young female protagonist of the novel knows what she is searching for even the very first time she arrives on the island, "When I landed and saw the capital by the red light of sunset, I knew I had returned to find my mother. I took a room at the Habana Libre and spent days walking my grandfather's old neighborhood – knocking on doors, waving to women in their balconies, reciting to anyone who might listen the name of my mother and the three lines that were my only connection to where I had come from" (10).⁹² When she explains that she is not a tourist but a visitor trying to find her mother, the piece of information seems to placate even the agitated taxi driver who is loath to help others provide money for the Cuban regime (176).⁹³ The determination to repair the irreparable

⁹² Her story is, tellingly, a story of a woman who falls for Che Guevara; as Hirsch would say, it does not move beyond "literary conventions that define the feminine only in relation to the masculine, as object or obstacle" (8). However, the inconclusive ending might be a way for Menéndez to create a "female plot" that "act[s] out the frustrations engendered by these limited possibilities and attempt[s] to subvert the constraint of dominant patterns by means of various 'emancipatory strategies' – the revision of endings, beginnings, patterns of progression" (8). Thus, the ultimate uncertainty about her mother's romance with Che would work as the frustration of hopes to establish paternity in the national hero.

⁹³ Barbara Finkelstein describes a corresponding attitude in Holocaust survivors' children towards spending money in Poland: "My sister Deb had advised me to heed the March of the Living injunction against spending money in Poland. The Poles didn't deserve Jewish money" (39). Such private embargoes well reflect the political dimension of visiting Poland or Cuba. With insufficient communication between the nations and governments, personal boycotts seem to be attempts at expressing dissent.

link to the mother and to the island is what invites the unreliable story of Teresa de la Landre; the post-partum emptiness is filled with half-imagined stories based on random pieces of evidence, which create the props in the “theater of the past” Cuban authors build similarly to their Jewish American counterparts (these are described in more detail in the following section).

Despite the fact that the younger generation of Cuban American writers continues to use the same tropes – the mother/daughter plot, the return to the island as a pilgrimage of self-discovery – the Cuba of their fiction becomes more, and not less, elusive in the process. Admittedly, Pilar in García’s 1992 novel *Dreaming in Cuban* does not initially make it to Cuba, but stays in Miami instead, feeling welcomed by the traces of Spanish language and Spanish rule she finds in the city: “All the streets in Coral Gables have Spanish names – Segovia, Ponce de Leon, Alhambra – as if they’d been expecting all the Cubans who would eventually live there” (60), which complicates the idea of heritage and remembrance by demonstrating the multiplicity of spaces that can compose one’s unique homeland and contribute to an identity.⁹⁴ However, the novel ends with her and her mother’s trip to Cuba as a reconciliation of sorts. If García still presents the island as a viable option for the confused and disenchanted Pilar – an option that could perhaps deliver a better sense of belonging than the Brooklyn that leaves Pilar indifferent – the more recent publications by Ana Menéndez, Achy Obejas, and Jennine Capó Cruet leave little hope for this to happen.

⁹⁴ The first European explorer to enter Florida was Juan Ponce de León (1513), whose name is commemorated in one of Miami’s main streets, mentioned by García. Before it became an American state in 1845, Florida was periodically under the rule of colonial Spain.

The three authors I choose to focus on in this chapter all subvert the conventions of Cuban American fiction. Aware of the props typically used in this type of writing – like images, genealogies, linguistic and spiritual references to Cuba – they tend to utilize them but to very different ends. The mandatory figure of Changó or Ochún becomes a way to ironically undermine the authority of American writers in writing about Santería; the photographs turn into arbitrary signals of invented histories; and finally maps become descriptions of “memoryscapes” rather than landscapes. Even though the authors send their protagonists to Cuba, the trips are exhausting, confusing, and morally ambiguous. Ana Menéndez’s candid outlook and deep understanding of her community makes her an expert in noticing and describing the nuances of Cuban American living. The theme of her works, in her own words, is the disconnect “between the search for external truth and the inability to turn that search inward” (Interview 27). Borland asserts, “The nature of Menéndez’s writing can help us understand the position of a writer whose fiction manifests a tension between the desire to uncover the truth and the need to preserve the memories of her Cuban ancestors, even if they are false” (“Memories” 19). Thus, the short story “Her Mother’s House” in the collection *In Cuba I Was A German Shepherd* (2001) and the novel published two years later, *Loving Che* (2003), both feature young female protagonists on their quest to find the truth about Cuba and about their families. Both women’s efforts are frustrated, as they find that they cannot trust the stories of their mothers and that the Cuba they encounter will not answer their questions for them, either. Lisette realizes that the house her mother described as a mansion is nothing more than a farmhouse, and the stories related to it are inaccurate at best. The unnamed protagonist of *Loving Che*, on the other hand, receives a box containing her mother’s story about a

passionate romance with Che Guevara. Her subsequent trip to Cuba does not provide any definite answers about the veracity of her mother's claims, leaving the woman confused and exhausted.

Although both parents of the female protagonist in *Days of Awe* – a novel by Achy Obejas published in 2001, the same year as Menéndez's *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* – are alive for the most part of the novel, Alejandra feels like she has to pry the answers to her questions from the island of Cuba itself rather than depend on her parents' replies. Her "struggle to come to terms with her own identity" is what brings her back to Cuba, "to her childhood home and to the relatives who had remained there" (Goldman 62) in the same vague hope expressed by Lisette in "Her Mother's House" – that the empty page of her life could be finally filled up. Obejas complicates the seemingly obvious motif of return as a way to discover one's identity when what Ale discovers turns to be less than univocal. The heritage she encounters in Cuba is that of not only *cubanidad*, but also Jewishness; her father's vague self-definition starts making sense when Ale reveals that his existence in Cuba before his daughter was born had been that of a crypto-Jew. The trip is even more complicated by Ale's simultaneous attempts at finding her sexual identity. The multiple layers of discovery match the complicated history of the island, provided by the author through well-researched references to scholarly historical sources as well as popular legends and myths.⁹⁵⁹⁶

⁹⁵ For instance, one of the facts Obejas seems to be citing with delight is that "[a]mong Columbus's crew were many marranos – Spanish for pigs – or conversos, as the forcibly Christianized Jews were more gently referred to, including his ship's physician and lookout, Rodrigo de Triana, said to be the first European to lay eyes on Cuba" (33).

⁹⁶ Goldman points out that Obejas uses "a rather paradoxical system of intertextual citation in the novel," which involves two extremes: either citing the source diligently or incorporating it into the text of the novel without any reference at all, "seamlessly" as

Jennine Capó Crucet's short stories are much more grounded in Miami and the United States in general. Her collection *How to Leave Hialeah* (2009) sends only one character to Cuba, and the reader can only see the trip through the eyes of her husband, who chooses to stay home. The rift it produces between the spouses, as Nilda betrays their shared essential values and goes back to the place she and her husband had left years before, helps me frame the returns of Lisette, Alejandra, and the nameless protagonist of *Loving Che*; it demonstrates the reactions of the first generation Cuban Americans to their children's and grandchildren's decisions to travel to the island. Capó Crucet is more interested, however, in the life of the Diaspora on American soil, and thus her short stories are filled with the signifiers of Cuba in the form of the theatrical props I locate in Cuban American and Jewish American fiction. The one titled "Resurrection, or: The Story behind the Failure of the 2003 Radio Salsa 98.1 Semi-Annual Cuban and/or Puerto Rican Heritage Festival" incorporates the elements of Santería in a diametrically different manner from that utilized by Obejas, yet again providing the perspective to understand the latter author. All three female writers, however, take pleasure in bringing the island with them wherever they go in the form of artifacts and images.

Portable Island

The "wistful theater of the past" from Michael Chabon's description, which inspired me to write the section in the previous chapter devoted to the way Jewish American writers insert theatrical props into the bodies of their novels as references to the old world, serves well as an analogy for the tools Cuban American writers use in their

Goldman says (68-69). The author of the essay sees this difference as "the distinction between cultural property and foreign territory," as Obejas uses Cuban "episodes" as hers but makes sure to provide citation for "other world literatures" (69).

fiction to preserve a connection to, if not Cuba exactly, then at the very least to their image thereof. Ruth Behar observes, “Wherever we Cubans go, we take the island with us, lugging it along in our memories and dreams” (“After the Bridges” 3). Using shortcut signifiers, like religious artifacts or maps of Cuba, is a way to pack up the island and keep it close at all times. While not referencing Chabon, Borland calls photographs in Ana Menéndez’s *Loving Che* “props” (Figures 32), pointing to their theatrical character. In her other essay, Borland explores “how the idea of inherited memories shapes the creative process of today’s younger Cuban-American artists”; what she observes is, among others, the process of inserting extratextual elements to excavate the past: “Since the early 1990s, Cuban-American novelists, led by Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* [1992], have featured within their fictional worlds embedded diaries, documents, and photographs that allowed the central protagonists to gain access to a buried or forgotten past” (“The Memories of Others”). All these embedded additions to the textual layer of the novels create visual, more tangible links to *cubanidad* that otherwise escapes definition, since its nature is inherited. Ana Menéndez, whose great-grandparents on her mother’s side were Lebanese refugees escaping the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War I (*Adios, Happy Homeland*), thus motivates the process of inserting physical realities into both actual lives and the bodies of the novels, “I remember my American friends could go to their house and say, ‘This desk is from my great grandmother; this rug is from my father’s aunt.’ All we had of our country was stories, the intangible” (Interview 27).⁹⁷

Populating the world of stories not only with fictional people but also fictional artifacts –

⁹⁷ “Most importantly, through the mother’s invented story, *Loving Che* metaphorically recreates Menéndez’s effort to examine the process through which her parents forged their own personal stories, which in turn became Menéndez’s ‘borrowed’ memories” (Borland, “Memories” 19).

seemingly created or used by them – that create an illusion of reality might be an attempt at creating the tangibility that is lacking in the immigrant world: thus, for example, the genealogies are frequently drawn for the reader as a more concrete representation of family ties.

Both Cuban and Jewish American writers make use of genealogies in telling their intricate stories of immigrant generations; Cristina García and Dara Horn devote separate pages at the beginning or at the end of their novels respectively to draw genealogical trees of the fictional families whose fortunes they recount. The trees are intrinsic parts of the novels, but they also stand apart organizationally; they are meant to be helpful tools in following the story, yet they also highlight its artificiality – by moving back and forth between pages, the reader is forced to realize the story’s fictitious character, as it becomes impossible to simply lose oneself in the reading process. On the one hand, embedded documents like these seem to provide a link to the history, yet increasingly, they mark the manner in which history is subverted. Borland also recognizes this paradox in later Cuban American fiction, as she observes, “today’s interior texts turn away from the idea of history altogether” (“Memories”12). Her example, Menéndez’s novel *Loving Che*, uses historical evidence in a non-historical manner, or at least in a manner that differs from the typical understanding of history as objective, sequential and hardly private; by generating personal stories around the historical figure, Menéndez proves neither possesses any objective claim to truth.

To an extent, all the props used in Cuban American fiction underscore a paradoxical relationship: the closer the text or the reader gets to encompassing Cuba’s character, the more elusive it becomes. “Only in Miami is Cuba So Far Away,” the title

of a popular song by Bette Midler and a scholarly essay written by Jennifer Ballantine Perera, points to Cuban Diaspora's inability to accurately represent or imagine Cuba, which is admittedly the issue all immigrants face, yet made more acute by the physical proximity and resemblance of Miami to the island. However, to be on the island does not necessarily mean getting closer to its core nor reducing the accompanying nostalgia, which is a sentiment well expressed by Orlando González Esteva, a Cuban American poet writing in Spanish, in his haiku:

*Aun en Cuba,
si los pájaros cantan
añoro Cuba. (17)*⁹⁸

Pérez Firmat understands the poem to reflect the nostalgia for *Cuba de ayer*, as well as the sentiment that “Cuba has never become entirely itself” (19). The longing does not cease even on the island because the travelers long for the Cuba of their parents' stories, which is not there anymore, either due to elapsed time or the inaccuracies of the stories. Like the ocean in Horn's novel and in transatlantic studies in general, which can signify separation or connection depending on the context, the props used in Cuban American fiction emphasize the duality of memory: remembering Cuba can bring it closer, but it could also paradoxically distance the second generation from its reality by creating a purely theatrical image. Though it is a frequent trope in immigration literature, in Cuban fiction this duality feels especially painful only miles from the physical presence of the island.

⁹⁸ “Even in Cuba, / when the birds sing, / I long for Cuba” (my translation).

For Obejas, religious artifacts become the props in performing her Cuban Jewishness, which the protagonist discovers through her multiple trips to the island. I, however, focus on one item discussed in a short paragraph almost buried in the thickness of the novel: the map of Havana that Alejandra studied and memorized as a child. It emphasizes the imaginary quality of Cuba even more than the photographs of Che Guevara that Ana Menéndez famously uses in *Loving Che*. However, I also devote time to discuss Menéndez's pictures because they speak so well to Dara Horn's *In the Image*, whose visual layer is very rich even if the Jewish American novelist does not actually embed any physical pictures within the text. Finally, I point to the use of Santería in Obejas and Capó Crucet; even though a highly spiritual practice, Santería seems to be present in contemporary Cuban American fiction only superficially, as a source of symbolism and theatricality rather than more profound meaning. Although not a specifically Cuban American trait, in conjunction with other tropes I analyze it helps me paint a picture of what second generation understands as and remembers of Cuba.

With every nostalgic statement, Cuban American authors admit to certain limits of perception: when the heart is involved, the eyes seem to be seeing precisely what they want – or imagine – to see. A good example of this tendency is Achy Obejas' description of Alejandra gazing wistfully at the ocean: “[W]hen I step on the pier at Key West, on the southernmost tip of the United States and where Cuba is closest, I don't need help spotting Havana. Without the benefit of binoculars, without stars or moon to light the way, even with a mist of clouds, I can always discern through the abyss of the sea the sprinkle of lights on the other side” (Obejas 50). Obejas, of course, is not trying to say that Alejandra has extraordinary eyesight, helping her to notice Cuba's lights from the

American shore. The nostalgia she is experiencing limits, or perhaps in a way extends, her vision only to what she wants to perceive. Similarly, the prop that Alejandra remembers from her childhood – an old map of Havana – gives her imagination a seemingly solid foundation to build her fantasies upon. It is a perfect “controlled abstraction” (Muehrcke 17): the streets’ names are all there; the intersections have the precise angles offered by the city itself; the distances can be imagined if not exactly traversed. The rest is the imaginative creation of inherited wistfulness.

In Ale’s description, the map itself has an air of nostalgia and romance about it. It is not just any map, but one that has signs of time stamped on it, which makes the imaginative process of reviving the city an almost archeological activity:

As a child, I once found a weathered street map of Havana among my parents’ things and began to slowly, methodically, memorize the city. I started with Old Havana, the historic quarter, the cobblestoned, cramped lanes that spoke to me through photographs old and new about a constant cadence, about doors too close together, about a strangely comforting and untidy intimacy. I imagined being there, sitting on a grimy stoop, watching the human parade like a native. (Obejas 55)

The photographs once seen and the map in front of Alejandra intertwine in her imagination to create a synchronized version of Havana. In itself, any map is a paradox of multiple layers “in that physically it is mere marks on sheets of paper, yet visually it brings to mind a multidimensional world, containing objects and even emotions not perceived directly on the piece of paper” (Muehrcke 323). The synergy of the process provides much more than just the sum of individual parts: Alejandra is now able to hear,

see, and sense the place. Its incessant hum, the relative lack of space typical of all islands – especially when compared to the American vastness – and certain “untidiness” about the place make Alejandra feel cozy and give her a sense of belonging: she can engage in people watching “like a native.” In the challenging teen years of her life, when the question of her identity is slowly forming in her head, Alejandra uses the map to navigate the uncertainties of the in-between period of her life: the map gives her the feeling that she knows a place intimately and that there exists a place to which she truly belongs.

The authority Alejandra obtains from studying the map masks the insecurities of her daily life. “I could,” she states, “at the age of fourteen or fifteen, talk knowledgeably about how Compostela and Habana streets ran the full length of the district. I could place their intersections with Luz and Sol and inject just the right irony when mentioning Porvenir – a tiny, block-long street whose name means ‘a hopeful future’” (Obejas 55). The physical reality of the map is a space of certainty, where no surprise cul-de-sac can arise overnight, and the imaginary Havana behind it welcomes the teenage girl to become her Cuban alter ego: “Curiously, I never imagined my parents there, our apartment or the floral shop. I pictured only me, a Cuban me, wild and free” (55). Because it is so distant despite the intimate knowledge Alejandra possesses of it, Havana allows the space for wild fantasies of freedom, which even then must have sounded ironic to the girl. Cuba, however – notwithstanding its dependence on the regime’s whims – offers temporary freedom from the American self, which Alejandra senses is perhaps only learned and not felt. In this equation, the map is the vehicle of this imaginary freedom.

It is arguably the most exciting part of any trip when travelers imagine with the help of a map all the places they are to visit. Whether reality can catch up to this initial

image is not really so much dependent on reality itself, but on the imagination of the traveler. Phillip and Juliana Muehrcke, professors of geography, observe in their essay on maps in literature, “That a map – or, for that matter, even a group of maps – cannot duplicate the infinite variety and complexity of reality has been a fruitful subject for literary imagery” (317). More interestingly, they also claim that in this specific shortcoming lies its “great allure.” Map as a symbol demonstrates the frustrating nature of “returns”: no matter how well prepared the protagonists are for the trip “back” or “home,” the lack of complete synchrony between what is imagined and what really exists is bound to produce dissatisfaction. The map itself is like the island that the protagonists of Cuban American fiction find when they visit after years of absence; it is both “more and less than itself, depending on who reads it” (320); the Muehrckes even claim that “people are drawn to maps because each person sees what he wants to see in them” (331). As opposed to the island, which in the nuanced world of the novels tends to evade categorizations and offer little more than contradictions, the reality of the map can be organized at will to create a coherent universe in accordance with the viewer’s perspective.

The same cannot typically be said about photographs: they tend to leave less room for interpretation, as the photographer decides which part of the picture the viewer will be privileged to see. In *Loving Che*, the protagonist’s grandfather refuses to provide any tangible evidence of her mother’s existence despite her pleas: “You want documents, photographs. This is truth to you?” (6).⁹⁹ The words will come to haunt the protagonist when she indeed receives a package full of pictures and stories, none of them even

⁹⁹ The protagonist later learns what her grandfather knew already: that “[s]trictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph” (Sontag 23).

remotely credible. It is precisely the stable nature of an image that allows for its own destabilization through the addition of context or a story that surrounds it. As Borland observes, for “these heritage artists” – as she calls Ana Menéndez and Alberto Rey among others – “the photograph functions as a point in time that, because it is frozen, allows for its appropriation and for a different framing of the experience of inherited exile” (“Memories” 12). In *Loving Che*, Menéndez, for example, “takes advantage of Che Guevara’s status as a pop icon” by using “the published photographs of this overly recognized public figure” in a story whose credibility is questioned not only by the protagonist of the novel, but even by the authority figures she asks for help (for example, a University of Miami professor) (Borland, “Figures” 31-32). Hence, despite their seemingly self-explanatory nature, photographs are prone to manipulation and, just like it is in the case of maps, viewers can in fact see whatever they desire in them.

The pictures provided by the alleged mother of the protagonist seem to be hard evidence corroborating her love story, yet it is only the context of her writings that gives them any meaning. *Loving Che* is one of the books that “debunk the idea that historical and fictional writing are all that different” (Borland, “Figures” 32). Menéndez shapes the half-personal and half-historical narrative, believing that “history is not what a society chooses to remember, but rather what an individual chooses to invent” (“Figures” 37).¹⁰⁰ Teresa de la Landre invents the context for the photographs, focusing on the personal as opposed to the political or historical layer, choosing to invent her own version of the past. The image of Che, for example, speaking to a large gathering of people before the

¹⁰⁰ Dara Horn mirrors this sentiment in *A Guide for the Perplexed*, when she claims: “People find what they wish to find, and remember what they wish to remember, regardless of the evidence presented to them” (320).

Revolution began, makes the protagonist's mother ignore the foreground and focus on the backdrop: the mass of excited people and "those palms, eternal witness to the blowing winds" in the recognition of the beauty and passion of her land (50). Che Guevara, the central figure of the photograph, does not warrant one mention, as the personal story of the mother has not yet been intertwined with that of the national hero. In a telling scene from Beatriz Rivera's novel *Playing with Light* that matches this logic, the female protagonist Rebecca is looking at the photographs from Cuba, not grasping why her father claims he never knew "those people": "There aren't any people in the picture," Rebecca observes, to which her father answers, "Yes there are. They're in the shadows" (8). Here, the foreground and background are in fact empty of the most significant element in the picture: people who inhabited these places, and whose absence is more telling than whatever the picture actually displays.

The way Teresa contextualizes the photographs she sent to her daughter destabilizes their seemingly fixed nature.¹⁰¹ John Urry, a sociologist investigating the power and complexity of the tourist gaze, asserts that treating visual data as simple records of facts might be inaccurate – they are not simply "blocks of space-time," as they "have effects beyond the people or place or events to which they refer" (Urry and Larsen 155). According to the scholar, people tend to treat photographs in particular as "miniature slices of reality" instead of what they really are – "statement[s] about the world" which can uncover "its constructed nature or its ideological content" (168). The problematic assumption that the protagonist's mother in *Loving Che* seems to rely on is

¹⁰¹ Menéndez makes a point at the beginning of her novel to question the photographs' ability to convey any truth about identity: "Many of the subjects of these old photographs . . . carry a grave shadow about their mouths, as if they were already resisting the assertion that these images might represent their true selves" (1).

that “the camera does not lie,” when in fact taking photographs is “a power/knowledge relationship” (168-9). The selection of the photographed material, as well as the choice of angle, is the act of shaping performed on the object. Thus, photographs are controlled doubly: by the photographer and then by the interpreter of the image, like the maps are first adjusted in size and scale by the cartographer and then interpreted by the user. Teresa also presents a selection of photographs that has been carefully curated and contextualized, making it akin to a museum exhibition, where chronologies and causalities are scrupulously arranged and interpreted for the viewer.

Menéndez includes nine photographs in her protagonist’s package, eight of which are easily accessible pictures of Che Guevara. The remaining one is a photograph of an infant, presumably the protagonist herself, incorporated as if to add credibility to the remaining ones, though no direct relationship can be established between them. The infant is sitting alone on a large bed, looking intently in the camera lens that hides the photographer. As always, the mother is absent from the picture – there is no firmer evidence of the person behind the camera than the flashlight reflected on the wall behind the baby. Similarly, the mother is never quite there in the protagonist’s life, but the reflection of her existence is always at the back of the protagonist’s mind. The picture acquires a new meaning in the framework of Teresa’s narrative: it is not a conventional family photograph of beloved offspring. Instead, the viewers who know her story understand that the little girl will soon be parted forever with her mother, and they can see the sign of pending separation in her dark, sad eyes; they can sense the powerlessness and vulnerability she will have to manage both in her childhood and in her life as an adult.

The sequence of Che Guevara's photographs in Teresa de la Landre's narrative proves their dynamic, unstable character. "We need to think of photographs," Urry admonishes, "as corporeal, travelling, ageing, and affective, rather than bodiless, timeless, fixed and passive" (Urry and Larsen 156). The Guevara sequence is organized both in accordance with historical chronology – from the moment he addresses the crowds to his death – and the personal chronology of the romance. As the narrative progresses, the photographs become more intimate: in the first one, Che is surrounded by masses of people; in the following ones, he is in the company of one person, and later on his own. The last pictures of the sequence are the most intimate: Che is lying on a bed, relaxed, with a playful look in his eyes. Teresa complements the picture with a love scene description, providing context for the playful look and the intimacy. Ernesto Guevara's body displayed on the bed and the emotions he is experiencing are all laid bare for the viewer to see or, as Susan Sontag would argue, to consume. Sontag's rather somber view of photography turns it into a morally ambiguous act: "[Photography's] main effect is to convert the world into a department store or a museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption" (110). Like the department store that Teresa de la Landre passes on her way to the studio, photography is the museum "every era builds . . . to its longings" (*Loving Che* 61). El Encanto of her description stays exactly the same even as the revolution develops, with "the rigid mannequins standing there as sculptures from another age" (61). Teresa's photographs taken out of the context of her narrative present humans like the effigies in the store: inflexible and insensitive to

the change going on around them.¹⁰² They are there available for shameless consumption, open to the “promiscuous” eyes of the viewer (Urry and Larsen 178).

To the protagonists of some contemporary Cuban American novels, the act of consuming photographs leads to the consumption of Cuba in lieu of actual travels. At times, it is their only way of accessing the island due to travel restrictions. Urry claims, “as people become photographers, so they become amateur semioticians and competent ‘gazers’” (Urry and Larsen 178); similarly, the consumers of maps and images become virtual tourists without the need to travel. Yet the competency achieved this way is false when it comes to understanding the nuance and complexity of the island. Alejandra, the protagonist in Achy Obejas’ *Days of Awe*, recognizes that she cannot depend on her father’s stories, in which his figure only made cameo appearances: “Instead of memories, his recollections were photo captions for tourists, snapshots of an idyllic and faraway moment in time” (201). She draws a direct relation between the manufactured quality of photographs that Urry discusses and the same artifice of her father’s memories, which were merely quick snapshots of his life – representations of his true self at the same level of honesty as the precisely framed pictures of Cuba in tourist folders.

The way second-generation protagonists perceive photographs resembles their attitude towards another prop I discuss in this section – Santería understood more as its external manifestations than the spiritual practice. Obejas frequently reflects her fascination with the theater of the Cuban past when she describes such cultural artifacts

¹⁰² In this sense, Menéndez observes, “Death more and more appears to reside most comfortably in the photograph” (224). The author uses both Sontag’s *On Photography* and Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* to demonstrate through her novel that “[p]hotographers labor diligently with their lights and their chemicals, without realizing they are agents of death” (*Loving Che* 223).

as La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity), Cuba's most recognized religious symbol, and various figures of Santería. Her protagonist follows the steps of Jewish Cubans in a similar manner to that of a cultural anthropologist, Ruth Behar: both are interested in cemeteries, iconography, as well as historical accounts. Santería is one of the essentials of Cuban American fiction; it seems that a novel or a short story about the Cuban American population can hardly go without the mention of Changó or Elegguá; Cristina García makes Santería one of the most important themes of *Dreaming in Cuban*, and Achy Obejas tries to incorporate its elements into her narrative as signifiers of the links to the island. The interest in this form of spirituality is perhaps not only motivated by its direct connection to Cuba, but also by its very nature. "Santería's main purpose is to assist the individual, regardless of their religious background or affiliation, to live in harmony with their assigned destiny by ensuring they possess the necessary rituals to navigate life's difficulties," suggests M. A. de la Torre in *Santería: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*. The idea of living harmoniously and accepting the assigned destiny is especially important in diaspora, where ruptured and incomplete identities long for fulfillment. De la Torre points out that Santería "begins with the believer's problems, for the problem is an obstacle preventing the individual from reaching their full potential"; the appeal of Santería is based on the fact that it does not, like many Western religions, take as its "starting point . . . an almighty, all-knowing God," but "a frail, hurting person" (4). The clients come to their santeras with daily issues, such as financial trouble, a broken heart, or a persistent disease; while the medicine available to them at any corner drugstore helps with purely "physical ailments," Santería helps with the underlying cause, which is identified as "spiritual disharmony"

(5). Because of its rootedness in earth – de la Torre calls it a profoundly “terrestrial religion” as opposed to the celestial concerns of, for example, Christianity – Santería can bring relief to those whose problems are also “rooted in earth”: both in the land that they left and the land in which they are now trying to take roots.

The issue of uprootedness is at the heart of Santería, as it originated in Cuba with the influx of West Africans, forced to the island by slave traders. Scholars estimate the number of slaves who were thus uprooted from their native land and brought to the island to be at least one million (Wedel 28).¹⁰³ The majority of them were Yoruba, a tribe originating from what we now know as southwestern Nigeria, who shared the same language and religion. They believed in a powerful god ruling a number of lesser deities to whom people turned for help. In Cuba, the Yoruba people formed *cabildos*, “societies for mutual help, religious devotion, and entertainment,” frequently encouraged by the local Catholic Church in hopes of converting the participants (28). According to Johan Wedel, Santería developed in the *cabildos*, mainly in the provinces of Havana and Matanzas, and was shaped to an extent by Roman Catholicism. Two crucial parts of the religion were dancing or performance, which later turned into religious ceremonies, and healing with the use of medicinal plants and herbs.¹⁰⁴ Present-day Santería devotees think of themselves as Catholic, but the definition of what Santería means is elusive, especially that it is now practiced both in Cuba and in the U.S. (predominantly in South Florida).

¹⁰³ This overwhelming number is the reason behind a Cuban proverb, “And your grandmother, where is she?” which expresses the common assumption that every Cuban “has a drop of African blood in their family” (Wedel 77).

¹⁰⁴ “At the end of the nineteenth century, medical services were scarce in Cuba,” recounts Wedel, “When sick, the majority of the blacks and many whites from the Creole population relied on African healing knowledge and medicinal herbs and plants” (30).

In her dissertation turned into a book, Kristina Wirtz argues that Santería “emerges as a religion through religious practitioners’ debates over what it is, how it should be practiced, and how to definitively identify religious experiences. These debates are complicated by competing stances toward Santería that imagine it very differently, not as sacred practice or moral community at all” (Wirtz xiv). It is this “discursive activity,” according to the scholar, that “bring[s] into being something they largely can agree is Santería” (Wirtz xiv), which is parallel to the constantly fluctuating notion of what Cuba is for the Diaspora. Its image is shaped by the discussions at the Noche Buena table and at the exchanges between the first and second generations, who try to negotiate the island’s existence and meaning through incessant debates, like the ones portrayed by Ana Menéndez in “Miami Relatives.”

Santería fits very well into the central theme of Achy Obejas’ *Days of Awe*. In the first pages of her novel, Obejas describes her protagonist’s birth as an event that demonstrates the way two streams of Alejandra’s life will always intersect. As Ale is fighting to survive through the issues caused by Rh incompatibility (tellingly, an incompatibility between generations that stems from the blood), a representative incongruence occurs: her mother builds an altar to Santería deities and eats a rooster’s heart, while her father recites Jewish prayers next to the Catholic priest. Santería’s complicated roots, the intertwined histories of the African people and their traditions penetrating the Cuban Catholicism brought by European slave traders, is a fitting symbol of not only Alejandra’s internal struggle to determine who she is, but also the struggle of any Cuban American who takes the religion overseas yet again (even if the seas are not as vast as during the first Middle Passage). The authors I am interested in acknowledge the

existence of Santería in immigrant communities in the U.S., but they usually see it as superficial – thus my perception of Santería in this section more as a prop.

Alejandra’s mother’s focus on the external elements of the religion (as opposed to the quiet, inward-directed prayer of her father) demonstrates the performative character of Santería. Katherine J. Hagedorn emphasizes the role of music and dance in communication with Santería’s deities: “[The] sphere of sacred intent is most often constructed by resurrecting the memory of the sacred in both folkloric and religious performance. And in both types of performance, the memory of the sacred is translated through the body” (77). Eating the rooster’s heart is very much a religious act performed through the body of the devotee, with the religious symbol penetrating the body to heal from within. According to Hagedorn, “The body is where ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ meet, where the boundaries are blurred, and it is this liminal space that is both powerful and disruptive because it . . . forces the participants to renegotiate their respective ‘rules of engagement’” (77). Rules of engagement are also constantly negotiated and renegotiated in Alejandra’s household, where Santería figures standing in the corners have to be reconciled with the Jewish heritage safeguarded by her father.

Although the figure of the Elleguá – “a proud cultural artifact, evidence of nationality as much as spirituality, resting openly in a corner of the living room” – is the testament to Alejandra’s mother’s Cuban “mania” (260), it does not mean the same for Ale. The symbol of the mother’s nationality and spirituality works at a different level for her daughter: MamaChola, “the name for Ochún in palo monte,” is little more to Alejandra than her mother’s screen name, and aché, “Yoruba for grace,” little more than her password (260). The figures of Santería become effigies of an exotic and fascinating

religion that provides external proof of a deeper connection to Cuba, where no deeper connection is to be found. When Ale discusses Cuban religion, she does it from a distanced perspective of an anthropologist:¹⁰⁵

This is the oddity of Cuba as a godless society: Everywhere I went, people mentioned their deities, by name or by implication: through barely concealed bead necklaces that signaled by their color combinations to whom the wearer was devoted, or via shell-eyed Elegguás behind doors, glasses of water, or cigars left to burn on their own. It seemed everybody . . . thought they had a touch of clairvoyance and was constantly reading signs into the most ordinary words and gestures. (67)

It seems Ale takes pleasure in recognizing Santería devotees by their beaded jewelry or in understanding the deeper meaning of seemingly commonplace objects. However, “their” deities, who are her mother’s deities, too, are not Alejandra’s anymore. Santería is perhaps the most moving example of the second generation’s simultaneous attachment to and distance from their parents’ culture. Second-generation authors avidly incorporate the elements of the religion into their works, both because it is a spiritual link to Cuba and because the colorful tradition seems to fit very well in their narratives, but they claim no competence in the matters of Santería, as if the actual connection were only possible for those who learned it in Cuba. Even though Santería communities thrive in Miami and beyond, the protagonists who long for the real experience of Cuba seem to dismiss the local manifestations of the religion as somehow not valid enough.

¹⁰⁵ Even if not all anthropologists can pride themselves on achieving this distanced perspective, and indeed some – like Bronisław Malinowski – advocate “participant observation,” it is a fair assumption that their outlook is modified by their outsider status.

Jennine Capó Crucet presents a rather radical view on the incorporation of Santería into literary narratives. In one of her short stories – “Resurrection, or: The Story behind the Failure of the 2003 Radio Salsa 98.1 Semi-Annual Cuban and/or Puerto Rican Heritage Festival,” whose very title does not allow for an entirely serious treatment of either the festival or its literary description – she seems to ridicule the reader’s desire for Santería as a staple of Cuban American fiction and the only recognizable element of Cuban culture. “Resurrection” is a story of Jesenia, an intern at Radio Salsa, who wishes to raise Celia Cruz from the dead in order for everyone to feel the happiness on hearing her sing live at a Heritage Festival organized by the station. Jesenia first stops by a Catholic church, where Sister Marcela suggests this type of request is “not God’s work” and sends her to the nun’s sister, showing how closely linked the two religions are, how Santería comes into play when the church fails. Capó Crucet underlines the financial nature of Ocila’s help, especially when the first thing Jesenia sees after arriving at her house is a placard that claims “*All sales final – aquí no hay ‘refund’*” (6). Every aspect of Ocila’s “office” – the television that keeps playing, the half-eaten food on the nightstand – goes against Jesenia’s (and the reader’s) expectations of what a santera’s house should look like (“[s]o you reason that maybe santeras don’t necessarily like advertising their religious affiliations through their home decor” [7]). Ocila makes sure Jesenia understands that she “can no control lo que pasa” (6). Above all, Ocila and Capó Crucet make sure the reader understands that either of them “can’t convince you to believe in something you don’t trust” (10). Santería has to organically arise from within the seeker of spiritual balance, and if believed half-heartedly, it produces mediocre results.

Capó Cruet does not claim, however, that the author of a work of fiction is solely to be blamed for inserting meaningless effigies of the religion without any deeper meaning. “What happens next is up to you because it relies on your knowledge of Santería,” informs the narrator of the short story, shifting the responsibility for the story onto the reader (9). The author comments on the readers’ lack of expertise and the allure of the appearance of expertise that reading can provide: “The point is, barring your own attempts at research – and you know how lazy you can be, how else do you find the time to read stuff like this? – you need to be told, preferably by someone you’d consider an expert, an insider. Someone who knows enough to drop the name Changó (a.k.a. Santa Bárbara) or Babalu-aye (a.k.a. San Lázaro) in the same way Ocila does to give her act credibility in front of Jesenia” (90).¹⁰⁶ In the most provocative statement, however, the narrator shifts not only the responsibility but also blame for the stereotypes about the religion and lazy writing of authors, “But what kind of story would such a confession leave you with? Not the one you expected – you wanted chicken blood, people wearing burlap, goats maybe, statues eating fruit and drinking bottles of beer. You want zombies” (9). Jesenia receives the advice she was expecting, and the readers typically receive a narrative they were expecting. Capó Cruet undermines the expertise of both the reader, who expects the most outrageous and exotic manifestations of the religion not to understand it but to make the reading process more pleasurable, as well as the second-generation writers, Cuban Americans who, as she point out, know only as much as what

¹⁰⁶ Just like Ocila in the short story drops names to build her credibility, *I Love Lucy*, “most watched show of the decade [1950s] introduced families in the United States to a Cuban-born bandleader who frequently pounded a tall drum and called out ‘Babalú’” (Schwartz 119). Rosalie Schwartz observes, “Uninitiated North American viewers understandably overlooked this reference to a high priest of santería” (119).

they learned from looking at their neighboring santero's rituals (just as she did). Their vision of Cuba is already exoticized and arbitrary, and the "Cuban" modifier of their Americanness does not seem to be sufficient to accurately portray the intricacies not only of the religion, but also of Cuba itself.¹⁰⁷

In her essay "Consuming Nostalgia," Dalia Kandiyoti argues that "return to place or past ways of life may be impossible or inconvenient," and when that takes place, "the need for strong cultural identities is fulfilled through the purchase of foods, clothes, crafts, travels et al., which are marketed through nostalgic discourses" (82). The objects she mentions function as substitutes for return (indeed, Kandiyoti considers short travels to homelands as substitutes for long-lasting returns). The props defined by this section – maps, images, and the figures of Santería – are readily available, consumable objects of nostalgia, which also function in lieu of actual returns. It is predominantly in the form of these objects that "Cuba haunts and menaces domestic spaces in the stories, narrates itself through allegory, and produces ghosts that, in contrast to the tourist's clicking camera, create an uneasy narrative" (Sokolovsky 247). The figures of Santería have an especially uneasy story to tell, as they can represent either Cuban spirituality or superficial embellishment expected by the reader, depending on, as Capó Crucet suggests, what the reader trusts. Maps, on the other hand, and even more so photographs, which activate "memory travel" (Urry and Larsen 155) and make places "consume-able at a distance" (167), are open to interpretation and allow for creating imaginary worlds based on historical or geographical facts. Instead of drawing Cuba nearer, the props blur its

¹⁰⁷ In her short stories, Capó Crucet tends to depict the life of the diaspora rather than their Cuban counterparts, though "And in the Morning, Work" takes place entirely on the island.

definition so that it becomes even more arbitrary and distant. Instead of providing a unified representation of Cuba, which the author or perhaps the reader might desire in vain, the singular mentions of Elleguá or a couple of photographs we are offered increase its fragmentation. The protagonists seem to be aware of this fragmented and insufficient picture, and they frequently decide to travel to Cuba to make an attempt at consolidating the fragments into a coherent whole.

What Did You Lose in Cuba?

I devote the last section of the chapter to the discussion of the physical returns to the island, which have to challenge both the inherited memories of the second generation and the postcard quality of the tropics that the young travelers are familiar with. In the last pages of *Loving Che*, Ana Menéndez traces the long path in both photographic techniques and psychological understanding of images that humanity has taken since “The View from the Window at Le Gras.” Just like watching postcards from the tropical islands can seem as repetitive as the stock images they use – the “visual constructions created for the tourism industry” (Thompson 3) – reading the descriptions of returns in Cuban American fiction quickly turns into a circular activity of going through precarious stays at Miami International, shockingly short flights, and waves of ambiguous feelings at arrival and during the quests for mothers and family houses, each description is written with the awareness of the communal repetitiveness of experience and at the same time with the freshness of a personal outlook. The characters in Cuban American fiction consciously go through uncannily similar experiences of return, which they recognize from the stories of their friends and relatives, yet they still approach them with a combination of fright and anxiety usually reserved for the unknown. Alejandra in Obejas’

Days of Awe admits, “I knew – from the stories of Cuban acquaintances – that there were certain similarities to all first return trips to Cuba. I knew, for example, that at some point I would go looking for our home in Havana, that I would break down and cry at an unexpected moment, that it was assumed I would call the relatives who’d stayed on the island, buy them presents, have an emotional reunion, and promise to stay in touch” (66). This section covers all the steps mentioned by Obejas: overwhelming emotions, search for the Cuban home, and even the purchase and transport of presents, highlighting some elements common to ethnic returns in general, but also those that make Cuban and Jewish returns unique. The paradigm of common signposts makes it all the more surprising and crucial when the protagonists stray from the pattern.

“You’re going to Cuba again? What did you lose in Cuba?” are the words many second- and third-generation Cuban Americans might have heard before going on their trips. Ruth Behar reminisces, “That’s what my grandmother Esther, my Baba, said every time I’d see her in Miami Beach on my way to yet another return visit to the island I had left as a child” (*An Island Called Home* 1). Frequently, the return to the island causes more anxiety in the friends and relatives than in the traveler herself. It is seen as an act of rebellion and betrayal – a change of heart that signifies a deeper change in identity. In Jennine Capó Crucet’s short story “The Next Move,” the wife’s decision to visit her sisters in Cuba causes a rift between spouses, as the husband finds it difficult to understand where the sudden impulse had originated: “I always said that I would never get on a plane again unless it was back to a free Cuba, which meant that in thirty-nine years of marriage, the only plane Nilda and I had ever been on together was the flight that took us *from* Cuba . . . I’d always though Nilda felt the same way as me about not going

back” (Cruet 42). Nilda’s decision unmasks an unknown person – one whose ideological sympathies are not clear and whose motives differ from the core values she and her husband took to be theirs at the time of the flight.

Nilda and her husband, Luis, belong to the first-generation of immigrants, and their attitudes toward the “return,” especially before Nilda has a sudden change of heart, reflect those of Esther, Behar’s grandmother, as well as the mother of Lisette, Ana Menéndez’s protagonist from a short story titled “Her Mother’s House.” When the first generation realizes that their escape from Cuba, for which they still congratulate themselves every now and then while listening to the world news, is a source of inherited nostalgia or at least curiosity that leads their children and grandchildren back to Cuba, they are far from encouraging. “Cuba’s changed, it’s not the Cuba I was born in,” says Lisette’s mother in response to the news of her daughter’s plans, “It’s a mistake for you to go now” (Menéndez, *In Cuba* 211). Lisette’s mother means the “now” as “now that Lisette is divorced,” but underneath this typical fear of what people would say lies a deeper anxiety: the one who escaped from Cuba is scared to hear how the place has changed and how her own memories might not be compatible with this unknown space. Alejandra’s father voices a similar sentiment on hearing about her plans: “‘Sometimes, it is better to imagine a place than to see the reality,’ he said swallowing hard. ‘Sometimes, I think, it is better to have that ideal, that hope’” (Obejas 54). To an extent, these sober voices are right: those who return rarely find what they were looking for, and if they do, it is far from what they expected. Additionally, each dollar they spend is a dollar supporting the regime their parents and grandparents escaped. The nameless female protagonist of Menéndez’s novel *Loving Che* encounters the anger of a stranger who

believes just that: “I was to travel by charter flight from Miami to Havana and was advised to be at the airport at least four hours before the scheduled departure time. I took a cab to Miami International and when the driver asked me where I was traveling, I told him, without thinking, Havana. I watched his face change shape in the rearview mirror and sat still as he went on a tirade about giving money to Castro” (*Loving Che* 176).¹⁰⁸

The decision, which is hard as it is, becomes even more difficult when everyone, including random strangers, inform the traveler that it is not only reckless, but also morally suspect.

The same ideological underlying causes Luis, Nilda’s husband in “The Next Move,” to feel cheated doubly with every communication exchanged between the island and his home; “any way you look at it, with every phone bill, Castro was ripping me off,” he says with dismay (Capó Cruet 46).¹⁰⁹ It is no wonder then that Luis feels betrayed and tries to keep his wife at home at all costs, “My grandson was five or six then. He’d had strep throat and missed a week of kindergarten. I told Nilda that the boy getting sick was a sign from God that she shouldn’t leave, but by that point, she would hear none of it” (45). Luis threatens Nilda with their grandson’s health, but he also half-believes that

¹⁰⁸ The same woman notices, “So often in Miami I have departed from a friendly conversation with a lingering chill, as if some malignancy ran beneath the surface. So often . . . I had the sense that the person chatting so pleasantly with me was only waiting to be offended, to detect in some innocent or ignorant statement a secret adherence to repellent beliefs” (*Loving Che* 175).

¹⁰⁹ After the fall of the Soviet Union, the subsidies from Moscow suddenly stopped, which led to more welcoming position towards returning Cubans: “Cubans abroad were urged to return again and fewer restrictions were placed on their movements. Their remittances were welcomed with open arms. After the U.S. dollar was declared a legal currency in 1993, Western Union set up shop in Cub. The *gusanos* became mariposas (butterflies) who flew back bringing gifts for their families; those who were once viewed as *traidores* (traitors) became *traedólares* (dollar carriers)” (Behar, “After the Bridges” 4).

her trip is sufficient reason to cause God's wrath. In fact, Nilda herself is experiencing heightened anxiety; Luis informs the reader with a sense of guilt for letting her go that "Nilda had been vomiting every afternoon since [they] decided she would go to Cuba to visit her sisters" (44). This extreme reaction matches the feelings of anxiety experienced by the young protagonists of the second-generation, even though, like Alejandra, they understand that returning is an experience that, as other Cuban Americans testify, fits into a certain template.

Achy Obejas points out the performative quality of homeland tourism when she recounts, "From the moment flights were first allowed between the United States and Cuba, the return has been something of a spectacle" (Obejas 63). It seems that the younger generation has a rather hard time taking the whole process with gravity. Even though they understand that Cuba is under communist rule, and that the trip takes the traveler not only to a different space, but seemingly also time, they find it difficult to escape the sense of absurdity the scenery evokes:

Peek at the waiting area in Miami International and the Cubans who are going back are easy to spot. They're the ones in the special holding pen who, in order to get around the weight limits imposed on baggage, wear three and four gaudily colored shirts at a time, boots as big as clown's feet over sandals or sneakers, belt made from strings of sausages. Women don hats whose brims are dotted with earrings, pins, and other bangles that relatives in Cuba can resell to tourists. Men carry American-brand cigarettes in every pocket, and practical Italian handbags stuffed with medicines they'd normally mock as effeminate in their everyday lives. (63-64)

Obejas points out the unusually large baggage, filled up with food and other bare necessities that the Cubans on the island are lacking.¹¹⁰ She notices that there exists a certain silent agreement between the customs officers and the passengers: “Curiously, returning exiles are seldom bodily searched in Miami, seldom asked about the peculiar bulges in their bosoms or thighs. It’s an honor system to which everyone seems to silently subscribe” (64).¹¹¹ This heightens the feeling of the surreal, as no other place and no other flight at the airport warrants a similar loosening of restrictions. Obejas underscores that even the most vehement opponents of the regime, who normally would not support the government with a penny, give money to the travelers to pass along; however, “money’s never trusted to traveling Americans or other Latin Americans, only to Cubans, who, regardless of politics, are the only ones who really understand” (64). It seems only those who have Cuban blood in them can grasp the unwritten rules of various honor systems and navigate the transition between the capitalist and socialist realities.

Menéndez recounts this process with less appreciation for the silent systems of understanding; her experience at Miami International is darker and more confusing, yet just as absurd: “Inside the terminal to which I’d been directed by the agency, I found no

¹¹⁰ Menéndez provides a corresponding description of her protagonist’s fellow passengers: “The three were dressed in very new and very bright clothing, and I decided that they were Cubans returning from a visit with their Miami relatives. . . Like most other travelers, they were burdened with large and obviously heavy bags” (*Loving Che* 176).

¹¹¹ The process of preparing is equally meticulous: “At home she had stuffed five hundred in cash in a sanitary napkin that she layered between two pairs of underwear. She had another three hundred she would declare, and another one hundred fifty that I shoved in her bra before we left the house so that she could offer it up as bribes, both on this side and over there. And don’t remind me that it cost me over a thousand dollars for her to fly to Cuba in the first place. All this money *I* had worked to earn, and I was just handing it over to Cubans we’d always thought had picked wrong and stayed behind” (Capó Crucet 43).

evidence of a flight to Cuba. Everyone I asked, from porters to ticket agents, looked me up and down before answering that they had no idea. I felt, after a while, as if I were asking for directions to the nearest porn emporium” (*Loving Che* 176).¹¹² The flight to Cuba does not seem to be a communal event; it is a lonely, scary occurrence that others do not understand and know nothing of, unless they are Cubans and traveling on the same plane. “After a few anxious minutes of wandering round the concourse,” relates Menéndez’ protagonist, “I spotted some stairs and decided I had nothing to lose by descending. It was so dark that at first I could barely make out the throngs of people standing in the line below” (176). Instead of simply going downstairs, the passenger is “descending,” as if the space of the airport turned unexpectedly into one of hell’s circles. Finally, the young woman feels as if the experience were too unreal to be happening, and she starts questioning her sanity: “Over the next several hours, the line shifted, bulged, thinned, but never seemed to move. People came and went as if they had been standing there simply for the experience. The whole thing had such an air of unreality that I began to wonder if I had lost my mind” (176). The organized Western society, with its system of punctual departures, neat lines, and transparent communication gives way to the confusing semi-structure of understatements, silences, and increasing chaos, which nevertheless somehow leads the passengers to their destination, albeit at a time and manner they had hardly been expecting.

¹¹² Nilda’s husband in Capó Crucet’s “The Next Move” remembers their way to the airport not simply as slow, but slow because of God’s dismay at his decision to accept Nilda’s trip: “I remember taking Nilda to Miami International . . . the traffic was so terrible that I thought God was punishing me for letting my wife go to Cuba” (43).

Perhaps the relatively mild sense of disorganization, or at least organization based on unfamiliar rules, is a preparation for the encounter with the real Cuba, which the thirty-minute flight cannot afford. Landing in Cuba offers its own air of unreality: “the spooky green-uniformed soldiers from the Ministry of the Interior” present at the José Martí International airport and the process of passport control, which is “obscure and require[s] signatures and stamps from a vast number of functionaries – none of whom [seem] immediately available” (Obejas 50). In this unfamiliar place, Alejandra is not the only one feeling insecure: “At the end of the miserably hot and stuffy line, a nurse asked each and every passenger how we were feeling and if we wanted our blood pressure taken. Nearly everyone declined, instantly paranoid about what message they might be inadvertently transmitting about their fears or vulnerabilities” (50-1). Even if charter flights make visits possible, not everyone feels safe to return, especially if their name is known in Cuba as that of anti-Castro opposition.¹¹³¹¹⁴

¹¹³ As I am writing this chapter, about nine charter flights on regular daily schedules leave from Miami International Airport to Cuba. Although they probably do not go through the same circles of hell as they or their parents went through in the 1990s, some things are exactly the same. According to the NPR report from June 2014, passengers are seen carrying “even flat-screen TVs and other appliances,” as the exchange of tourists is unprecedented in both directions: “It’s a legal loophole in the 50-year-old trade embargo — one that’s having a real impact on Cuba’s economy, and allowing Cuban-Americans to become investors in Cuba’s emerging private sector. Shortly after taking office, President Obama made it possible for more Americans than ever before to travel to Cuba. He began by lifting restrictions on Cuban-Americans. Before the change, they could travel to Cuba only once every three years. Last year, Cuba’s government made an even more unexpected move: It began allowing its citizens to visit the U.S., with few restrictions” (Allen).

¹¹⁴ The discussion below Allen’s report is a good example that the moods are still heated when it comes to Cuba and the economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. Among voices that strongly oppose the embargo, those that express willingness to invest in Cuba, there are ones that warn against its dangers, providing lists of political prisoners and examples of problems foreign investors encounter. There are, of course, also voices like Dorothea

These Castro opponents, however, nevertheless slip money into the passengers' pockets to take to their families, and those who seemingly want to forget about the island are craving the news about their loved ones and the country itself. Obejas asserts, "Anytime a Cuban returns to the island, we become couriers for those who do not. No matter how obstinate those who remain abroad may be about their exile, how partisan to the U.S. embargo, there is no blockade of emotions" (63). The reference to the embargo, which can only work for products but never for feelings, demonstrates the complexity of returning to Cuba. Those who oppose the Castro regime and support the embargo already have a hard time reconciling these feelings with the fact that their families, who have been left behind, might suffer because of it. Traveling to the island increases moral dilemmas and makes them question decade-long choices. Thus, Nilda's husband, Luis, is understandably upset when his wife does not call for a while – not only because he thinks that something happened, but because he is simultaneously interested in and angry at the island: "Her not calling meant that something else – her sisters, a tour of her old house, the whole damn island – was more important than me" (Capó Cruet 58). Luis' feelings are an ambivalent mixture of different types of jealousy: on the one hand, the island is taking away his wife; on the other, the wife gets to see the island they both pledged not to set eyes on until it becomes free.

The visitors who do not think of themselves as anything other than indifferent to the island are expected to let go of their emotions once they touch Cuban soil or see their old house. Just before Lisette in "Her Mother's House" realizes that the stories of her mother's impressive mansion are only stories, she is overwhelmed by the anticipation and

MacDonald's, who adds a good layer of confusion and ignorance with her comment: "End the sanctions. Cuba is on my bucket list."

the emotion of being so close to where her mother grew up that she can hardly contain her tears: “The landscape was green and flat but for the hills. She came to the end of the road where it disappeared into a field of sugar-cane. And in the next minute, Lisette was pressing her tongue to the roof of her mouth, determined not to cry, not now, not over something so stupid as the colors of the afternoon” (Menéndez, *In Cuba* 215). The sight of the hills imagined for so many years, which have been there for her parents and grandparents before her, inspires an outburst of emotions that is both expected – after all, that is what everyone seems to feel as they return – and surprising in its strength and inevitability. Lisette’s immediate reaction is to stop this overflow; she is “determined” to keep her composure, as if it were embarrassing, childish even, to lose it over “stupid” elements of the landscape that usually leave her unimpressed. The effort to ensure her trip differs from the paradigm is futile, and her typically strong reaction is mocked by the events of the evening, when the actual house of her mother inspires merely disappointment and a rather rude awakening from her fantasies.

Achy Obejas illustrates a common scene at the Jose Martí Airport, which is the source of the predictability associated with returns, depicting the feelings that the passengers of the short flight to Cuba experience right after landing,

As we stepped to the ground there was an overpowering smell of mildew in the air. Many of our fellow passengers became highly agitated. Most just stood there at first, disoriented, aware only that they were firmly in Cuba for the first time in so many years, their hands shaking, tears coursing down their cheeks. Some dropped to their knees and kissed the tarmac, wails of despair coming from them until other passengers yanked them back on their feet. (74)

For Alejandra, the most anxiety-provoking moment of the trip is looking at the gathering with the fear that she would not be able to experience Cuba the same way. Despite the unsettling atmosphere of both airports and a stressful landing, she admits to feeling “strangely invulnerable”: “What could be more dramatic than returning to the place of your birth and feeling nothing, absolutely nothing, but the slightest shiver of an echo from a bottomless pit?” (75). Even if the shared imagery of the return calls for agitation and tears, wails and kisses, it is difficult for the second-generation visitors to experience these feelings quite the same way as the first-generation exiles do. If they are overwhelmed by emotions, like Lisette is at the sight of the hills, they cannot be certain if the sudden sentiment had been implanted in them before they even left, and to what extent they can trust their feelings.

It is even more challenging to determine how the visitors feel about this supposed homeland when rather than the sense of belonging or familiarity, they experience a sense of alienation, deepened by the fact that the city they arrived from is so unbelievably close. “I knew,” confesses the protagonist of *Loving Che*, “that beyond the line where the ocean seemed to meet with the sky lay Miami, that short, short flight away that somehow now seemed the longest flight I had taken in my life, so far away did I suddenly feel from that world I had left” (179). Yet again, Miami’s spatial closeness is unhelpful in making the woman feel at home in Cuba. The change she experiences feels more like that caused by time travel than just a regular charter flight. Alejandra from *Days of Awe* finds similar distance within familiarity; unlike the protagonist in *Loving Che*, she manages to locate her parents’ friends and family with a high degree of certainty, yet the fact that people whom she does not recognize know who she is proves exceptionally disturbing: “I was

unnerved by the fact that he knew me, knew my birthday, knew I shared the same life span as the island's most recent experiment. I felt ephemeral" (Obejas 71). In the face of Cuba's centuries-long history and its inhabitants' knowledge thereof, which surpasses her own by decades, Ale feels even more unstable and transient. She comes to the island looking for a specific Cuba that Cuban Americans have in mind, but is faced with its multidimensionality, as well as the fact that what she thought of as her motherland is in fact quite foreign.

The disillusionment of Cuban visitors stems from the years of anticipation, days and weeks spent studying the maps of Havana, looking at the sunny photographs of the Malecón, and consulting fears and hopes with the figures of Elleguá. The protagonist of *Loving Che* admits she is "half paralyzed by [her] longings" (208); the hopes and dreams of her mother and her Cuban past create a net of expectations that are impossible ever to be met. Obejas' description of Ale's first landing in Cuba is evocative of this longing and the darkness that ensues. Alejandra narrates, "As the plane sailed into Havana on my first trip back in 1987, I looked out the window in anticipation but saw only black. Cuba doesn't light up until just before the actual landing: The fleeting illumination, which comes from posts situated far apart" (74). Much like the blackness the passengers see when they expect a sea of lights below, Cuba surprises visitors insofar as it does not offer an immediate gratification of the homeland fantasies. If it ever lights up as homeland, it certainly does not do so just in appreciation for the visit: the travelers need to find their own way in the maze of Havana streets and search blind alleys to make the island their own, though even this is frequently insufficient.

Alejandra, who fears the possibility of not being able to feel anything on arrival, describes her first days on the island as gloomier and dirtier than expected: “We emerged onto a slender street that cut through a residential neighborhood of faded flat-roofed homes. Everything was gray. It was just after dawn and raining in long, hard sheets” (Obejas 57). The multicolored island from the tourist folder gives way to the common everyday. As the incessant rain changes Alejandra’s perception of the streets, they become more typical of the Westerners’ descriptions of the communist bloc: without the colorful and abundant signifiers of capitalism, like storefronts and advertisements, the island is just as sad as the European countries behind the Iron Curtain. Even the items characteristic of Cuba alone, like *Santería* offerings, seem lacking in the magic and exceptionality Ale associated with them in the States:

In 1987, I strolled through the city breathing something like burning sulfur in the air. Whether on the majestic boulevards of Miramar or the tight alleys of the historic district, I would run into discarded animal parts: an empty crab shell, chicken bones with the marrow sucked out of them, a fish skeleton so complete and white it looked like an ivory comb. At first I considered these might be offerings to gods I didn’t know, but they seemed much too random, too ordinary and blunt. (60)

What imagination painted as special and exciting – and the family kept sacred because of the distance – becomes unbearably quotidian once Alejandra sees it in its natural environment. The visitor is not even sure if what she sees is sacred or profane – the lines blurred and the randomness overwhelming. The “majestic boulevards” collide with discarded animal remains, and the beauty of island clashes with the sulfuric smell. As Ale

tries to take photographs of what seems to be her parents' view from the window – one that she “remembers vaguely” – she is frustrated even in this enterprise. The man at one of the windows informs her matter-of-factly: “No one's going to remember those buildings. They're new” (70). The Cuba encountered proves not to be the Cuba whose memories Ale inherited.

The flawed nature of memory is a persistent topic in Cuban American literature, and the protagonists' returns rarely help to make sense of the inherited memories – if anything, they make them even harder to interpret. Obejas expresses this sentiment in Alejandra's words upon seeing what she imagines must be her parents' neighbors' house: “Didn't my father once save a cat trapped on the stairway across the street during a hurricane? Or were all these memories like those of the Greek columns, sweet but invented?” (70). These sober questions include typical tropes of inherited memories in Cuban American fiction: there is, of course, a hurricane on the island; there is an act of bravery or exceptionality on the part of the parent; there is, finally, a house whose mansion-like appearance (Greek columns) turns to be a dream.¹¹⁵ The inability to determine with any certainty whether the memory is true stems from the fact that it is inherited and transferred to Alejandra through many imperfect lenses. Some of the disappointment arises from the stories of the first generation, whose memory is flawed or whose narratives are deliberately misleading. In an interview with Marya Spence, Menéndez states, “All three of my books, in their own ways, are obsessed with memory – how we want it to be infallible truth, but it's not” (27). In *Loving Che* and in “Her Mother's House,” the young women look to find meaning to their incomplete lives – this

¹¹⁵ Ana Menéndez provides all of these in her short stories collected in the volume *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* and in her novel *Loving Che*.

incompleteness the result of interrupted immigrant lives – but both “daughter-protagonists” experience utmost disappointment. As a result, “they are willing to put aside the reality they encountered in Cuba, choosing instead to go along with their mothers’ version of the past” (Borland, “Memories” 19). In the short story, Lisette’s mother’s obsession with her old life in Cuba and the immense, overwhelming nostalgia for the past condense in the image of her old house. According to Lisette’s father, “The first years of their marriage, all her mother did was talk about her lost plantation . . . [S]he used to lie in bed giving him imaginary tours of the house. The graceful stairway laced with gardenias in the summer, the marble fireplace her father had installed on a whim after visiting the States, the long white-shuttered windows that looked out over the gardens, the mar pacíficos, the royal palms” (*In Cuba* 214). The image becomes a part of the family’s life, a constant in the changing world of the new country. Whenever members of the family wish to find comfort, they can revisit the image; its precision and level of detail allow for virtual tours of the mansion – one can almost feel the breeze and see the royal palms gently swaying.

Lisette, however, decides to take one step further and visit the source of the image. Despite her mother’s admonitions about the changed Cuba, the woman finds herself in the Cuban fields, overwhelmed by emotions, with a map her mother drew for her.¹¹⁶ The emotions change dramatically once Lisette realizes “that it was a house, but it

¹¹⁶ A hand drawn map or a map with hand drawn circles and stars is a trope in Cuban American fiction and non-fiction (mainly memoir). María de los Angeles Torres reminisces about the map her father, otherwise opposed to her trips to Cuba, gave her: “Unlike my mother, who had returned to visit her relatives, my father had never returned; in fact, he refused to talk about our trips at all. Yet for this trip, he sent me an old Esso map of the island and Matanzas, the city of his birth. He had carefully circled the places he wanted me to visit” (163).

could not be the house she had come all this way to see” (218); what she comes across after traveling all the miles to see a grand mansion of her childhood imaginings is less than impressive: “This was a house with small windows carved high on the uneven walls. A flat, pitted roof on red tile. A single front door, wooden and cracked. An iron latch that hung open. A house with small windows. Uneven walls. Red tiles. Iron latches” (*In Cuba* 219). While listening to the current residents’ stories about the place, Lisette realizes her mother chose to erase crucial details from her memory, like the fact that it was not Lisette’s grandfather who grew the most delightful roses on the island, but his servant instead. The young visitor feels as if she entered someone else’s reality, and that she did not come any closer to grasping the reality of her own dream; what she encounters is “the house of someone else’s imaginings, a different story” (*In Cuba* 219). Menéndez’ narrative is a telling example of the incompatibility of memories and reality, an acute reminder that the process of remembrance is imperfect and the stories it produces – deformed. Thus, the fact that the second generation’s idea of their ancestral homeland is tentative at best is not only the result of having never visited the place (if it were the case, ethnic returns could eliminate the provisional), but perhaps predominantly due to already distorted stories they have inherited from their ancestors. Lisette’s mother sets her daughter up for failure by omitting and twisting the truth, and, above all, by making it seem like her Cuban past is the ultimate experience – the root of all roots like her house is the mansion of all mansions.

Ethnic returnees’ disillusionment arises directly from the expectation of finding truth in its purest form, truth that would give life meaning. Lisette is not able – nor willing – to explain to her mother why she wants to go to Cuba. She claims that it is a

work-related trip, but it seems anything but once she asks her mother for the map to her old house. What she finds so difficult to express is, “How every story needed a beginning. How her past had come to seem like a blank page, waiting for the truth to darken it” (*In Cuba* 210). Yet her stay in Cuba proves to be highly disappointing. Instead of the imaginary places rich with stories, whose real-life equivalents exist both on maps and in reality, what Lisette is left with is a story alone. Paradoxically, we learn about the frustrations of the second generation through the eyes of the first in “The Next Move.” Luis experiences Cuba differently after Nilda’s visit: “[F]or me, Cuba the *place* has been a story ever since Nilda came back. She came back and told it to me, and now it is worse than nothing” (Capó Cruet 61). The wife’s story, which Luis understands is far removed from the reality, substitutes for the convenient lack of actual experience that existed in his life before. Where there used to be an emptiness of forgetting, now exists a story filled with longings and imaginings that cannot be satisfied – not with more stories, not with returns.

The disenchantment of this realization oftentimes leaves the visitors despondent and exhausted. No other protagonist experiences it more profoundly than the young woman in search of her mother in Menéndez’ *Loving Che*:

I made several more trips, each as unsuccessful as the last. And though I met many people and passed out my address to anyone I thought might have known my parents, I waited in vain for word. Eventually, I stopped traveling to Havana, the trips leaving me more and more exhausted, not only from the uncertainty but from the sadness that I came to understand more clearly with each visit. Havana,

so lovely at first glance, was really a city of dashed hopes, and everywhere I walked I was reminded that all in life tends to decay and destruction. (10)

The sadness resulting from the first visits is relatively mild; the woman understands that the island is not what she imagined it to be, and that her quest is necessarily futile. She perceives Cuba as a place of decline, as she starts realizing that the body of dreams she has created is void of substance.¹¹⁷ Because her entire life involved waiting for her mother and her motherland to give meaning to her life, the lack of the former and the ruin of the latter make it seem as though hope itself were not available any more. Yet again, the level of expectations makes the disappointment harder to endure. More importantly, the feeling spills over to the protagonist's American life, which she always considered somewhat inferior to her imaginary Cuban heritage. Her perspective becomes infused with melancholy, as the experience of metaphorically losing her mother one more time seems to foreshadow her own death.

No disappointment is greater, however, than the one experienced after hopes are revived. Thus, the strongest hit comes when Teresa's package gives the protagonist new hope that leads to another fruitless trip:

In the weeks that followed, I underwent a period of the most profound exhaustion I had ever experienced. For some days I was unable to work. I lay in bed day after

¹¹⁷ One of the differences between the first and second generation seems to be in the way they utilize their stay on the island. When Nilda asks her husband if he thinks that she should stay one more month, he cannot grasp why she would even entertain the thought. However, as he sees his wife at the airport, he understands: "What was left for her there to do? She said, of course, of course. I didn't think about what I'd said until I saw her sinking down the airport terminal toward me, her face red from crying so many goodbyes, her hands empty. She had left everything in there, even her suitcases, for her sisters to have, everything except her driver's license and her plane ticket" (Capó Crucet 60).

day. What gripped me wasn't sadness in the way that one usually understands it, I could not even experience anything close to despair. I simply felt very tired. It was as if the world about me were in the grips of a terrible illness and now lay next to me, softly exhaling a stale breath. The song of the mockingbirds at my window now failed to stir me; the cloud shadows did nothing to me. I simply lay, as I imagined an animal or an insect might, wanting nothing dreaming nothing, not content or discontent, just caught in a sort of waiting. (*Loving Che* 219)

The period of depression the young woman experiences – the feeling of being “caught in a sort of waiting” – comes with the realization that the stable truth, a definite beginning to her story, to use Lisette's analogy, is not accessible. The waiting stage seems to be the expression of the second generation itself; the female protagonists of Menéndez's fiction attempt to overcome this diasporic hibernation by hoping, dreaming, and actively pursuing the past, but ultimately they have to admit defeat and return to the timeless waiting. Caught between homelands, languages, and loyalties, they start understanding that their only way to survive is to acknowledge that the dreams of motherland are just this: dreams.

* * *

The preoccupation with the limits of truth among Cuban American authors makes the return to the island a special occurrence, one that has the potential of determining what Cuba means for the second generation. The disappointment of the return is so prevalent in contemporary Cuban American fiction that some authors start questioning whether what Cuba truly is matters if the idealized image works well enough. Beatriz Rivera's book *Playing with Light* (2000) explores various versions of truth in the context

of Cuba, and if it does not exactly offers replies, it certainly asks the same questions as Alejandra does: “[W]ere all these memories . . . sweet but invented?” (70). The novel depicts the life of two groups of women listening to stories about each other’s life: contemporary upper-class South Beach citizens forming a book club to discuss a novel about cigar factory workers, and the workers in the cigar factory following a futuristic novel, chosen by *el lector*, about an American book club. The endless mirroring leads to discussions centered on the issue of truth, as the women wonder what in the novel that they are reading can be classified as such. When the founder of the club, Rebecca, points out that they are reading a novel based on a scandal covered in Cuban newspapers, the other women counter, “Yes but the truth is not necessarily credible either. Who cares about the truth?” (134). The truth and its paradoxical lack of credibility is a frequent topic of the book club discussions, and the question of whether truth needs to necessarily be told in a work of fiction spills over to the women’s lives, where they struggle with white lies and little betrayals of the everyday. One of the scenes that really shakes the women depicts a European gang who makes human meat sausages. “The part about the sausage is revolting,” Conchita comments with a sigh, to which one of the women responds, “But it’s true apparently, it’s in the footnote” (87). Yet again, one of the readers responds: “Who cares? Truth does not always need to be told” (97). In a rather atypical manner, Cuban-born and Miami-raised Rivera develops the very same theme that the majority of Cuban American authors attempt to explore – the validity of their ties to the motherland and the authenticity of the stories from and about the island that are available for the U.S. audience. It seems that the traditional pursuit of truth and authenticity of the homeland

gives way to the resigned awareness of its limits and even of certain value in accepting its distortions and muting its traumas.

The search for a univocal island is thus abandoned in favor of the intimate and personal understanding thereof; it is exchanged for a “portable island” every emigrant carries as if it were a suitcase. In the final passage of her essay included in *The Portable Island*, Behar describes the Cuban American condition in the following manner: “We each carry a different piece of Cuba in our suitcase. Piece by piece, we will put the island together again and try to make it whole. Or maybe we are learning to live with the realization that the island can never again be made whole. Maybe we now understand that it was never whole to begin with. Maybe the island is as whole as it can ever be in each suitcase we carry from one destination to another” (“After the Bridges” 8). Within this description, she contains the emotions contemporary Cuban American fiction conveys while depicting returns to the island. There is hope that Cuba can be somehow restored to its pre-revolutionary, or at least pre-emigration, status. There is disenchantment and the painful acceptance on learning that it might never be possible. Finally, there is the retreat to the diaspora and comfort in its power to remember, no matter how accurate the memories. After all, who cares about the truth if the images and props the members of the diaspora always have close to their hearts are of an island that is better and whole.

Since second-generation Cuban Americans are, in fact, American citizens, their image of Cuba is shaped not only by the already questionable stories of their parents, but also by the American imaginary in regards to the island; for them, Cuba “becomes nothing more than a mechanically reproduced memory and a place that is popularly marketed and exoticized for tourism or for those who never have directly known it”

(Sokolovsky, “Cuba Interrupted” 238). Hence, the returns to the island, which are charged with impossible expectations and hopes, are necessarily disappointing. Interestingly, the template mentioned by Obejas – which includes looking for the ancestral house, overwhelming emotions and reunions, and which Cuban American authors follow pretty closely – does not mention the feeling of frustration and unfamiliarity that Cuban travelers frequently encounter. For Ale in *Days of Awe*, it is just a fleeting impression, but for at least one of Menéndez’s protagonists it results in long-lasting depression. The more “paralyzed by longings” (*Loving Che*) the returnees and the higher their expectations, the more vulnerable they are to experiencing disillusionment.

In a way, the props Cuban American authors use are a safer manner of remembering the island than actual returns as they keep the distance between Miami and Cuba, which perhaps sometimes feels too close. In the beginning of Rivera’s novel, Rebecca starts the book club after coming across an old Cuban photograph of a *tertulia* (a reading salon), which she intends to recreate in her Miami Beach house. Here, too, the novel uses a common motif in diasporic Cuban literature: that of photography as substitute travel. Ana Menéndez goes even further in her attempt to incorporate the tangible elements of Cuba into her intangible and inconclusive narratives by inserting the historical pictures of Che Guevara into *Loving Che*. The effect it produces is, however, far from substantial, as the context provided for the photograph sequence by Teresa de la Landre proves more than elusive: if anything, the images heightening the imaginary relationship between the second-generation protagonist and the island due to the questionable nature of Teresa’s narrative and her daughter’s failed attempts to establish for certain the veracity of the mother’s claims. Thus, the props and additions used by

Cuban American writers have a paradoxical effect of increasing the distance to the “real” Cuba, while simultaneously creating the impression of greater intimacy and closeness.

Just like Teresa’s photographs, which mean only as much as she wants them to mean, maps and Santería figures are artifacts that gain significance depending on who is looking. The maps in Menéndez’s and Obejas’ fiction represent the relationship of second generation Cuban Americans to their homeland: while factually accurate, maps can hardly recreate the cultural context necessary to intimately understand a place and its people. They do, however, generate desires and dreams that become the most palpable way of connecting to Cuba. The way elements of Santería are incorporated into Cuban American fiction suggests a more anthropological perspective of the authors, who no longer entirely “trust” the religion, as Capó Crucet implies, but rather see it as a necessary component of their work. Maya Socolovsky’s analysis of Cuban American narratives leads her to observe, “Cuba is not a center to which [exiles and their children] can return, either actually or through a memory that can be easily and safely replayed and marketed from a distance. Rather, it is an aspect of the imagination that menaces and haunts their present domestic space; it is at times unspeakable, and ultimately, it is indirectly and implicitly present through its very absence” (“Cuba Interrupted” 238). The props of Cuban American fiction highlight the absence instead of creating sustained presence; they are just like Nilda’s travel is to Luis: they tell a story of Cuba, and it is “worse than nothing” (Capó Crucet 61). At the same time, this highlighted absence is much easier to live with than the experience of return, with its inevitable ambiguities and disappointments. One can always fold the map and store it on the highest shelf, or hide the Santería figure in the closet – symbolically returning from a journey to the past – but

once an actual ritual starts in the walls of the actual city, it irrevocably involves the present, and this is dangerous to the tourists of the past and their images of the homeland.

CONCLUSION

People find what they wish to find, and remember what they wish to remember,
regardless of the evidence presented to them
--Dara Horn¹¹⁸

In the final scenes of *A Guide for the Perplexed*, Josie learns, “[I]t was impossible to control the future. But it was possible to control the past” (Horn 309). Arguably, this is what the protagonists who travel in order to “return” to their homeland learn as well: their connection to the past, the way they envision and cherish it, is a result of the lens provided by the second generation and can change in the aftermath of the travel. The interest in describing returns and their significance stems from the belief that the diaspora’s survival and identity depends on understanding its past, and space is an essential part of the past. Cuban authors might subscribe to Pedro Pérez Sarduy’s statement and agree that “maintaining direct and constant contact with Cuba has been, and remains, fundamental for individual and group preservation” (159). Jewish second- and third-generation writers realize that “[a] person’s nationality, no matter how treacherous it turns out to be, shapes his innermost being and his capacity to feel joy in the world” (Finkelstein 44).¹¹⁹ And since both Cuba and Eastern Europe feel, at times, to the members of the first generation like “a truncated limb they couldn’t go on without” (Lehrer x), the interest of their descendants in the often controversial spaces of the past is only natural. If the trips are undertaken as quests and not missions, in that they do not have strict itineraries and are not heavily mediated, they provide opportunities for new,

¹¹⁸ Horn, Dara. *A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013. Print.

¹¹⁹ Finkelstein describes, for example, “Forty-eight years of living in the United States – of watching ‘I Love Lucy’ and ‘Seinfeld,’ of picking presidential winner every time except for Adlai Stevenson, of protesting the rezoning of their property from commercial land to wetlands preserve. None of these activities had made my parents less Polish at heart” (44).

sometimes surprising relationships with the charged locations, made more and more possible by the changes happening on the island and in Eastern Europe daily.

This project was completed in the transition period, which could significantly alter future narratives of return and which reinforces the validity of Lehrer's "ethnography of possibility." Beside the stereotypical view of Poland as "an historically blighted land of pogroms, antisemitism, Jewish exclusion, persecution, and murder, and today a place of historical denial by Poles and lingering fear and hostility for Jews" (Lehrer and Meng 1), a new image appears more and more consistently: one of Poland as "home to profound debate and reflection on the loss of its once large – and today minuscule – Jewish minority, representing perhaps the cutting edge of Holocaust memory work in Europe more generally" (2).¹²⁰ An important part of this change is the newly opened POLIN – Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw (the main exhibition was first demonstrated in October 2014). Its location in the heart of the former Warsaw Ghetto fills the void in the city's physical as well as emotional landscape; it is a long-awaited addition to the various museums representing purely Polish martyrology and one that has a potential of altering Jewish descendants' returns to the place of their parents' and grandparents' life and death. By focusing on the former, the Museum constitutes an important counter-balance to the most frequently visited Auschwitz museum. On the Cuban side, the significant warming of relations between the island and the United States,

¹²⁰ "Despite Poland's minuscule contemporary Jewish population (estimates from the decade ending in 2009 vary from about 5,000 to 20,000 among 40 million Poles), in the past fifteen years the country has seen a profusion of Jewish-themed events, venues, and sites. Significant efforts at the state level to remake Poland's Jewish heritage through museums, monuments, and commemorations have emerged. Jewish conferences, ceremonies, memorials, performances, festivals, and other events in Poland outstrip public programming in countries with much larger Jewish population" (Lehrer 1).

apparent for example in the recent (August 14, 2015) reopening of the American embassy in Cuba after fifty-four years, is already changing the climate for Cuban Americans living in the States. The shift is described as a “new era” due to the easing of travel and trade restrictions (without lifting the contentious embargo), but journalists and political commentators are also careful not to sound overly optimistic by pointing out that “there will be difficulties ahead and fresh misunderstandings” (“US Flag Raised Over Reopened Cuba Embassy in Havana”). The way both countries will manage these inevitable conflicts will become a litmus test of the new “era.”

In Poland, a new challenge just like this has recently arisen: the alleged discovery of what is known to the media as Nazi gold train in my home town of Wałbrzych not only allowed numerous media outlets to report on a mysterious, intriguing case in the dead summer season, but it also prompted the government of Russia and the World Jewish Congress to preemptively advance claims to the findings.¹²¹ The allure of mystery aside, the case of the missing train reheated old resentments and old stereotypes: Jewish gold and Jewish greed featuring prominently in the comment sections of Polish articles on the matter, which bring unpleasant and rather frightening associations to the gold Polish peasants robbed from their Jewish neighbors in Gross’ book. The ability to move with due tact and diplomacy on the part of the Polish government – whether the train is indeed unearthed or remains a mystery – will indicate the level of preparedness for the transition

¹²¹ The legend of a train buried in the underground corridors underneath the city of Wałbrzych, which Hitler packed with treasures robbed from the Książ castle during the war, has been alive in my region for decades, but until now nobody had claimed to know where it was located. Two as of yet unidentified treasure seekers (one Polish and one German) are basing their findings on radar images, which they shared with the local government, leading to what can only be called a gold rush not only in Poland, but also in international media.

Lehrer hints at in her “ethnography of possibility.” Discussing and managing the embargo and human rights issues might prove the same for Cuba.

In my project, I showed that the new generation of writers is prepared for a change, even if their first-generation parents or grandparents are not. The urge to visit their ancestral homelands is stronger than the admonitions of the elders, and, as I demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, authors portray it as an almost unstoppable force sending protagonists to these lands, sometimes under the guise of other business. It feels that this force is now at work on the political arena, pressing changes that the protagonists of Ana Menéndez could hardly have predicted (they would mostly be surprised all this is happening while Fidel is still alive). Though both the authors and their protagonists are, as Borland says, “twice removed from their culture” and “obliged to create vicariously from the memories of others” (“The Memories” 11), and they often present some underlying assumptions and prejudices inherited from the first generation, their readiness to talk about the difficult ancestral homelands, regardless of the frequently dissatisfying outcome of their trips, foreshadows and promises the change that we witness today. Despite the difference in emotions that short ethnic returns generate for Jewish and Cuban writers – Cubans expect a lot and find disappointment as a result, Jewish protagonists either expect nothing or expect the worst, so, naturally, they end up more pleasantly surprised – the very urge to go and challenge the first-generation perception of these places highlights the new, controversial idea that perhaps nostalgia, in its sentimentality and in its pain indicated by the *álgos* part of the word, is “the religion of fools” (Horn, “Guide” 264). Leora and Saul discover their Jewishness actively and without regrets after their trips instead of treating a large portion of their heritage as

taboo. Teresa de la Landre's daughter goes through bouts of depression after her trip to reemerge free of the illusions that were holding her back. Possibilities seem to lie in the present, even if that present is heavily based on the past.

The necessity to make this distinction is perhaps best summed up by María de los Angeles Torres in her reflections on the experience of dislocation:

Cuba, however, is no longer home, it is a point of reference. Home, my mother-in-law once told me, is where your children are born. I resisted her claim. Her world had been destroyed by World War II. She escaped the death of the Holocaust. And although she returned to Vienna and in some ways had a professional life in her home country, she had accepted that it was no longer her home. At the time I did not have children, and I was at the beginning of a journey that I thought I could recuperate my physical place of birth as home. Ignorant of the impact of time, I believed our home was still there, it was just politics that kept us out. We wanted to believe in the exceptionalism of our case, the uniqueness of circumstances. But we are not exceptional. Dislocations, in so many forms, are common experiences. At the end, I have found comfort in the fact that we are not so different than so many other diasporas. (167)

Torres' claims complicate the relatively clear-cut distinction Tsuda makes between ancestral and natal homelands, adding to it yet another dimension: the homeland as the natal place of one's children. Rather than proposing a scientific way of looking at what homeland represents, Torres opens up a discussion of what it could potentially mean to the dislocated and how the process of negotiation of the homeland's meaning can help them move on. Perhaps this is also why second and third generations insist on visiting the

dark homelands of their ancestors' past: to find new meanings for their ancestral homelands that would go beyond the hopes and prejudices they inherited and to use them in the present rather than past.

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