QUEERING FAMILY: ACHY OBEJAS’S “WE CAME ALL THE WAY FROM CUBA SO THAT YOU COULD DRESS LIKE THIS?”

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For centuries most sexual and social abnormality has been marginalized and/or demonized, so that the dominant family story either completely lacked or strove to hide, punish, or expel queer elements. Narratives like Achy Obejas’s story “We Came All the Way From Cuba So That You Could Dress Like This?” are anti-imperialistic and subversive acts that explode the silencing of the queer family. The main character of the story is a politically radical woman who refuses to hide either her political or sexual affiliations within the realm of family, despite heavy cultural prohibitions against this. On the one hand, Obejas’s fiction juxtaposes images of national and familial exile that force a recognition of queer oppression as part of the appropriation of a family model in nation building. One only needs to look at who is blocking whom from inclusion to see a clear alignment of the dominant hierarchies, whether political or patriarchal and heterosexist. Expressions of violence designed to bolster the status quo, in other words conservative straight society, are not uncommon in real life and are not excluded from the Obejas text. However, in this paper I will argue that the main thrust of the short story is neither critical of social norms nor faultfinding in the face of a complex political reality. Over the course of the non-linear narration, we do not see an abrupt break between the young woman and her family; by the same token, we do not see a gradual separation between the traditional and the revolutionary. Queer and extreme youth is not completely ostracized nor marginalized, can not exist or be recounted outside of the family narrative. On the contrary, I find that a close study of the short story uncovers a queering element that ripples through the entire family history, a pre-existing grain of sand that irritates and finally allows the formation of the pearl—the tangible and beautiful expression of pure queer.

“We Came All the Way From Cuba So That You Could Dress Like This?” is the last story in a collection by the same name, the first book published by the Cuban-American author Achy Obejas. Marcus Embry notes that this work is “a remarkable collection of short stories or set pieces that together detail a young Cubana’s gradual intellectual, emotional, and sexual awakening, maturation, etc.” (98). The central focus of Obejas’s short story is the principal character’s retelling of her arrival as a little girl to the United States, her family having joined the political-economic flight from socialist Cuba. Interspersed among images of that key moment, she narrates snippets of her young adult life, establishing a web of connections between exile, family, and her development of a personal and sexual identity. Although the language used is colloquial and
Rather, the narrative subtleties need a careful teasing out for a complete appreciation of the work.

Embry suggests that "the text is built around the presence of the father and the moral and exilic worlds he represents," with the queer element being key in "the struggle to survive both the family and the new country and/or the loss of Cuba" (98). Like many Cuban exiles of her generation, the protagonist searches for her own identity through a series of interrogations—she questions her parents’ ideology, she questions her culture’s gender roles, and she questions the automatic assumptions about her sexuality. Referring to Obejas’s *Memory Mambo*, a novel that further develops the same kernel of plot, Kate McCullough posits that the protagonist’s sexuality will be a deciding force in her negotiations of identity in the public sphere as well as the private:

The transculturation evident in Juani’s narration results in a Cuban American subject who is specifically lesbian. If, as I will argue, Obejas’s protagonist struggles to recast the political as erotic, her ability to elide or resolve (to return to Pratt’s formulation) political contradiction in the realms of the family and reproduction is by necessity limited and reshaped by her standing, as a lesbian, at one remove from those realms. That is, Juani’s lesbianism renders the family and reproduction already unnatural for her, so that a formula that posits the solution to public political conflict in the private sphere of romance and the family is already put under strain. (578-79)

Like Juani in *Memory Mambo*, the protagonist of “We Came” is a specifically lesbian subject, although it remains open for debate as to whether her sexuality truly removes her from the center of either family or politics. To be sure, her quiet mother and nostalgic father, who remain rooted in a “Golden Age” of imaginary Havana, are confused by her increasingly apparent queerness as she grows up. However, rather than representing any cut-and-dried divisions, the short story effectively blurs the divisions between gender and sexuality, between sexuality and politics, and between all of these and family. The protagonist decides she has to “dress like that,” defiantly, linked to the counterculture, obviously not “straight” (in the sense of “establishment”), like a daughter who has taken the next step toward herself, but decidedly not away from family. What’s

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1 McCullough’s take on the narrative structure of *Memory Mambo* also sheds light on that of the short story. McCullough explains, “This postmodernist form links the present to the past without representing the present as the telos of that past. Thus it suggests that past and present are connected but does not (unlike Juani herself, who would like to but cannot) neatly explain how or why that connection functions. Juani’s desire and failure to achieve mastery of her narrative might therefore be read as the novel’s refusal of what Pratt calls a ‘Euroexpansionist teleology’ in favor of a more flexible, open-ended transculturated account.” (582)

2 Achy Obejas has spoken against what she sees as a separatist and limiting narration of the lesbian existence, preferring to locate her lesbian protagonists squarely within society, and most particular, within their family. McCullough quotes her interview with Kris Kleindienst: her novel [*Memory Mambo*] counters this trend by locating its heroine in an extended Cuban American family that is itself located in larger, overlapping political contexts. Juani moves through the world of the novel in relation to her parents, sisters, cousins, tios, and tias, so her identity is produced in a largely heterosexual, ethnically marked community in which her lesbianism is tacitly understood but rarely explicitly recognized. Obejas argues that “culturally we’re defined by our families. In *Memory Mambo*, Juani doesn’t just function in the world as a lesbian. Mostly she functions in the world of her family. Her community is her family” (583).
more, she forces her parents to reconsider exactly why they left Cuba, and what elements of freedom are worth fighting for. Throughout the struggle she maintains the right to re-envision their family dynamic in such a way as to recognize the reality—a reality that includes her lesbian self as well as a queer familial element that predates her physical realization of the sexually deviant. The power of the queer, the not-so-normal, as it exists within the most dominant normative social institution (the family) is both surprising and unsettling. When this "deviant" strength is incorporated into narrative, the traditional family (hi)story is entangled with and infiltrated by the queer.

Queering the Family Romance

In as much as the "queer" encompasses the traditional semantics of oddness or eccentricity, as well as a more recent definition of gay, or more generally, practicing sexual or gender deviance, Michael Warner’s definition of queer as moving away from “normal” seems to be the most comprehensive and comprehensible. In “We Came” the institution of family is queered, or seen through a transverse and sexualized gaze, in many subtle ways. In other words, by means of narrative strategies the reader is forced to perceive family as anything but the “normal,” conservative, and heterosexist institution usually imagined as corresponding to the term. Perhaps the most transparent and easily traceable strategy employed in this story is a queering of the family romance. Originally a Freudian term describing the child’s fantasy of belonging to a family of higher social standing, the phrase can also pertain to any imaginative refashioning of one’s family in order to mentally flee the drab or grim family dynamic that surrounds one. In other words, the family romance is a story that underlines and supports a self-visioning of family that may or may not have anything to do with reality. Often such a story is full of melodrama; impossible dreams are clutched to impassioned breasts, gaining additional narrative viability by virtue of their fictional quality. Quite often, the idea of escape or rescue is factored in, and the self-abnegating sacrifice of those characters deemed as good outweighs the wickedness perpetrated by the villains. As with any narrative, the decision of who is good or evil, who needs rescuing and how, and how one is to interpret any particular sequence of events is up to the narrator himself. Freud was quite aware of the psychological power inherent in the family romance, and attributed to it the successful overcoming of economic as well as emotional trials and tribulations. In “We Came” a brand-new family romance is cunningly and quickly crafted by the paterfamilias in response to his family’s flight from Cuba. His daughter recalls, “The immigration officer…asks my parents why they came over, and my father, whose face is bright red from spending two days floating in a little boat on the Atlantic Ocean while secretly terrified, points to me—I’m sitting on a couch across the room, more bored than exhausted—and says, We came for her, so she could have a future” (113-14). Inspired, he continues, “It was a miracle we got out, but we had to do it—for her, and he points my way again” (120).

Less than 24 hours in this new country, the narrator’s father is already fashioning a fiction that will sustain him over the years. Paradoxically, in this twist on a family romance, the father is imagining a new self, a new father figure for his child, rather than the unsatisfied child imagining a new family. This fiction is an interweaving of familial and national elements, such as the idea that his daughter’s future depends upon a capitalist economy and a national identity that transcends geographical boundaries. His story will resemble that of hundreds of thousands of Cuban exiles from socialist Cuba, in that the father is a hero wishing to rescue his patria from
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the grasp of a wily and wicked ruler who has taken over by force and transformed a previously pristine and powerful country into a beleaguered and unfortunate land. By the same token, his story maintains that the Cuban family of 1960 (and the family’s future, symbolized by the children) is in dire straits, in desperate need of realignment. Again, the fiction places the father in the role of rescuer, taking his wife and daughter to a place that will allow them the freedoms and successes denied to them on an island where the needs of the community are mistakenly placed above the desires of the individual. The father is a perfectly masculine and heterosexual hero, whose wife and female child need his intervention and continued protection. Ironically, he wishes for his daughter the rights and privileges normally due a son in a capitalist and patriarchal system, an inconsistency that will be discussed later in this paper.\(^3\) Whereas the assumedly correct configuration of both family and nation allows for fairly despotic ruling, including the patriarchal right to invent the family and national romance, the fathers in exile will claim that their own version of reality is indeed just and true, while the stories being propagated in socialist Cuba are pure propaganda.

The narrator’s father unsurprisingly will be overcome by anxiety when confronted by a Cuban photographer at the INS, who claims to be a friend of the family. Instead of being a needed and desired family connection in a strange land, the photographer is a threat to the precariously established new order. With the creation of a new family romance, a new mythology that will incorporate whatever details that best support it, the possible emergence of subversive minutiae from an unfamiliar source must be avoided. The father returns to his creative narrative, interpolating a new story as a diversion for the newsman: “The whole northern coast of Havana harbor is mined, my father says to the Cuban man as if to distract him” (120). The national fiction thus bolstered, he further connects the plights of nation with that of family, repeating that they faced such grave dangers only for the sake of their child.

Notwithstanding the similarity of his perception to that of an entire generation of Cuban refugees, even with a preponderance of circumstantial evidence that points to its veracity, the reader can’t help be suspicious of his motives and his resultant story. From the very beginning the narrator’s tone undermines the objectivity of her father’s explanations, casting them in the light of fantasy or legend. Her descriptions of her father emphasize his lightning-quick impromptu composition and his melodramatic delivery; the verbal artistry is clear while his credibility is not. However, the protagonist is not satisfied with an implicit criticism or subversion of her father’s story. The ultimate explosion of the family romance is direct and aggressive, a frontal attack of father by daughter, occasioning a violent response from him. As this moment is crucial to the understanding of the entire short story, a lengthy quotation detailing the confrontation is both necessary and forgivable. The daughter begins recounting her memory, saying:

In 1971 I’ll come home for Thanksgiving from Indiana University where I have a scholarship to study optometry. It’ll be the first time in months I’ll be without

\(^3\)By tying the father’s masculinity and sense of patriarchal entitlement to the capitalist system that he left in prerevolutionary Cuba as well as the one in his reluctantly adopted country, I do not mean to imply that patriarchy and gender inequality are solely capitalistic systems. On the contrary, as has been shown time and time again, socialist Cuba has not escaped the cultural legacy of machismo and homophobia present on the island from the arrival of the Spanish. I simply mean to point out that the character sees his gender as related to his politics and national identity.
Queering Family: Achy Obejas's "We Came All the Way from Cuba. . ."

an antiwar demonstration to go to, a consciousness-raising group to attend, or a Gay Liberation meeting to lead.

Aliaba's, I almost didn't recognize you, my mother will say, pulling on the fringes of my suede jacket, promising to mend the holes in my floor-sweeping bell-bottom jeans. My green sweater will be somewhere in the closet of my bedroom in their house.

We left Cuba so you could dress like this? My father will ask over my mother's shoulder.

And for the first and only time in my life, I'll say, Look, you didn't come for me, you came for you; you came because all your rich clients were leaving, and you were going to wind up a cashier in your father's hardware store if you didn't leave, okay?

My father, who works in a bank now, will gasp—¿Qué qué?—and step back a bit. And my mother will say, Please, don't talk to your father like that.

And I'll say, It's a free country, I can do anything I want, remember? Christ, he only left because Fidel beat him in that stupid swimming race when they were little.

And then my father will reach over my mother's thin shoulders, grab me by the red bandanna around my neck, and throw me to the floor, where he'll kick me over and over until all I remember is my mother's voice pleading, Please stop, please, please, please stop. (121)

Even as the protagonist attacks the family romance, she undermines all that is seemingly precious to the head of the family. The father's need to expound and defend a politically circumscribed notion of his Cubanness has been inextricably tied to his defense of his own masculinity and prowess. His daughter, a voice of rebellion against national bellicosity and heterosexist oppression, as well as an advocate of "consciousness raising," is also a student of optometry, symbolic of her dedication to seeing the truth. When she insists upon transgressing upon the long-standing family and gender rules and expressing the truth as she sees it, she questions her father's role as the family hero, as the conquering patriarch. Her taunting denigration of his puny physical and economic power in Cuba places him in the position of the maricon, or faggot, an officially powerless and socially marginalized figure in Cuba as well as the United States. He can not abide the image of himself as less than macho, of his national status as less than that of a legitimate and vindicated political exile, so he beats his daughter into silence if not into submission.

The protagonist's willingness to explore a personal and national identity that contradicts the family romance is in reality an ability to see what was already there in the first place. The cover story for her family's flight from Cuba has been queer from the beginning, and their resultant residence in the United States opened up the possibility for queering on many other levels, including the sexual. Nonetheless, the bottom line remains that the narrator and the family are still 100% Cuban, even if that means finding an alternative definition of the nationality. As Eve Sedgwick articulates: "When it occurs to us, then, to run this question of national definition athwart some already articulated questions of turn-of-the-century sexual definition, we must be prepared to look at more directions at once than one" (150). The short story in question most definitely questions assumptions of gender and sexuality integral to the Cuban identity. If I do not come to exactly the same conclusion as Maite Zubiaurre, that Obejas (in Memory Mambo) is constructing a gynocentric imaginary of the fatherland, I certainly agree with her theoretical underpinning, that "Nación e identidad no son una esencia intemporal que se expresa, sino una
construcción imaginaria que se relata (García Canclini, “Narrar” 12; qtd. in Zubiaurre 3). In “We Came’ the narrator looks all ways at once, narrates multiple angles at once, and finds a hybrid space that allows for a multifaceted and queer definition of family and nation.

Gender Muddle, or How Did This All Begin?

Given the human proclivity to search for the cause and origin of all things, despite the limits of speculation and investigation, I am forced to ask how the Cuban family becomes a hybrid space in this narrative. Upon first reading the daughter’s accusations of her father, I questioned the internal consistency of such behavior. Her audacity is not at all at odds with her persona as a political activist, but it is decidedly queer and apparently a reaction against the conservative previous generation. Is she finally acting out in a directly visible manner, after long repressing her thoughts and conforming to a more ideal (read: conservative, manageable) version of daughterhood? Or, contrary to what we might imagine, is this interaction in keeping with the usual family dynamic? In other words, when did all this queerness in the family begin? After careful study, I have come to the conclusion that one of the origins is certain to be the family’s perception of the gender continuum, a central concern of this short story identified by Nara Araújo (100).

The gender of the protagonist is established early, when the child’s father uses the marked subject and object pronouns “she” and “her.” Interestingly enough, the child’s own narrative voice has remained grammatically and semantically androgynous for the few paragraphs before her father speaks. Nonetheless, the family romance quickly verifies her gender, and her “correct” gender expression is modeled by the adults at the INS office almost immediately thereafter, in the second-hand items they offer the child. The “volunteer for Catholic Charities . . . approaches me with gifts: oatmeal cookies, a plastic doll with blond hair and a blue dress, and a rosary made of white plastic beads” (114). She is thus placed in the feminine sphere of domesticity and religion, with a surrogate child to serve as practice for her future. Ironically, she will never play with the doll (a sign of her incipient gender inconsistency?) although she will also never let her play thing go even as an adult (115).

For good or ill, the child is not left in the unambiguous and pre-established construction of femininity for long. This rescued girl, the protagonist, is expected to fulfill her parents’ dreams for here, or to be more exact, their dreams for themselves that have been frustrated by the forced exit from Cuba. Her father wants her to rise in the judicial system until she is “the object of envy and awe” to make up for what “he can’t achieve on his own now that we’re here” (117). Despite his power as the narrator of a family history, her father’s power is curtailed by his lack of dominance over the language of his chosen asylum. He is restricted to repeating the same nostalgic notions in English, or to communicating with other members of the exile society in Spanish, neither of which communicative acts take him beyond his own self-imposed limits. His own understanding of life rests on the assumption that he will be returning to Cuba in triumph, along with other exiled Cubans, to resume their places of power at the level of family and nation. For this reason he never fully enters into the society of his new home, sitting out the elections and neglecting to become a citizen, “because Nixon will get us back into Cuba in no time, where [his] dormant citizenship will spring to life” (119). Although his wife and daughter know better than to say anything, or maybe even think anything, his role in the family is drastically redrawn as well. Although he acquires a job in a bank, economically supporting his family, and maintaining
the rights due to the head of household, he is aware of his own figurative emasculation as the powerful macho. At one point he attempts suicide when he finally realizes that he will not be able to take his family back to where they were (geographically as well as psychologically).

With all of this in mind, the reader is not completely surprised that the father ignores or transgresses his own ideals about gender when dreaming about his daughter’s future. He betrays the antiquated notion that women’s place is in the home, under the protection and care of the masculine sex; with this chink in the patriarchal armor he creates a psychological opening that will support the further queering of his family. The subtlest irony rests in the fact that his wishes for his daughter actually coincide with the ideals of gender equality espoused by the new regime in Cuba. Not that these standards have been realized, even to this day—the upper echelons of government are still as pristinely male as in the United States. Even the father’s desire that his daughter be part of a fair and serious judicial system reflects the proposed systemic changes on the island. “Not that he actually believes in democracy—in fact he’s openly suspicious of popular will—but he longs for the power and prestige such a career would bring, and which he can’t achieve now that we’re her, so he projects it all on me” (117). Her father wants to recuperate his own power through her, despite her gender, despite her wishes, and despite the danger of entertaining such a transgressive stance in terms of gender roles.

Somewhat more traditional in her gender imaginary, the protagonist’s mother envisions her as “the owner of many appliances and a rolling green lawn; mother of two mischievous children; the wife of a boyishly handsome North American man who drinks Pepsi for breakfast; a career woman with a well-paying position in local broadcasting… She sees me as fulfilled, as she imagines she is” (117). This image rests on the magical thinking underlying the double work day for women; “super-women” will be able to manage a successful career while not failing their primary duties to husband and children, not the least of which is to maintain an image of physical perfection for herself and the home (this is yet another gender myth shared by contemporary Cuba and the United States!). Keeping home and family is the woman’s job, of course, one which the mother performs right up until the death of her husband. Still and all, several hints point to her frustration and dissatisfaction, queering the surface appearance of their post-war American idyllic family. On their first day in the U.S., she tries to tone down his histrionic scene in the grocery store, but he ignores her attempts to calm him (122). When she disagrees with his opinion, Rmy mother will shake her head but won’t contradict himT (124). Even at the funeral she masks her repugnance at the vigil with her husband’s body, which she does not want to see. She explains later, “I couldn’t leave, it wouldn’t have looked right, she’ll say. But thank god I’m going blind” (128). Yet the mother’s self-proclaimed frailty hides an inner strength that freely emerges after the death of her husband. The protagonist marvels, “A week after my father’s death, my mother will buy a computer with a Braille keyboard and a speaker, start learning how to use it at the community center down the block, and be busy investing in mutual funds at a profit within six months” (130). With this revelation we must reread the mother’s daydreams of a double work day for her daughter. She is not a naive and delicate woman who hopes that her daughter can find happiness in material wealth and a heterosexual marriage; instead, she is an adept social chameleon who hides her own gender inconsistency from the merciless ¿qué dirán?, or community gossip. Always bubbling underneath the surface, working unconsciously on her daughter, is this powerful and resolute streak that defies convention.

Both mother and father have an enormous influence in this close-knit family, and both have contributed to the queering of their child. Embry remarks that the immigrant father figure in the early Obejas works “serves as a moral and cultural backdrop; the issues raised are both confla-
tions of admiration and loathing, and also anxiety over the degree to which the second generation is doomed to repeat the very mistakes or assume the identity of the first” (99). In “We Came” the protagonist creates self as a queer mirror of her parents despite her judgements of them. For example, she starts smoking at her father’s funeral, in spite of hating the habit in her father (128). The message is that she is more than ever her father’s child, despite their ideological differences, despite her disturbance of the apparent family status quo, and despite (or even because of) the barrier between the living and the dead. Indeed, the two have an unusually close relationship, one not at all paradigmatic of the Cuban father-daughter bond, partially due to his treatment of her as not exactly a girl. She explains, “My father does not imagine me ... as a wife or mother because to do so would be to imagine someone else closer to me than he is, and he cannot endure that.... He will never regret not being a grandfather; it was never part of his plan” (117). While this is a far cry from actively advocating a homosexual lifestyle for his daughter, it is an implicit permission to act outside of the normal constraints of feminine comportment. To this extent, at least, the queering element is already evident in the family system.

That Was Then, This Is Now

“We Came” is equally a story about family, about the dilemma of second-generation Cuban immigrants, about the transgression of sex and gender norms, and about the power of narrative. The narrative structure, fragmentary and non-linear, is as queer (or postmodern) as any elements of theme or plot. The protagonist narrates much of the story in the present or future tense, despite making frequent chronological jumps among moments in her past. Time and time again she returns to a now when she is ten years old and just arrived to the United States. The image of the young girl is static, as befits a photograph, with details like a grubby green synthetic sweater that she refuses to give up, and a “plastic doll with blond hair and a blue dress ... a thing I’ll never play with but which I’ll carry with me all my life, from apartment to apartment, one move after the other” (114-15). The girl’s seemingly disjointed story is rife with messages about not wanting to let go, about holding on to the past even as it is created and transformed through interactions with others. She says of her shabby green sweater, emblematic of her family and past, “I’ve been wearing it for two days straight and have no plans to take it off right now” (113). When confronted, she is stubborn, silent, and ultimately successful: “All I hold on to is the felt of the doll—cool and hard—and the fact that the Catholic volunteer is trying to get me to exchange my green sweater for a little gray flannel gym jacket with a hood and an American flag logo. I wrap myself up tighter in the sweater...” (114-15).

Interspersed between the verbal images of that day, as clear and visual as photos, she projects to a future that hinges on her present, a now to be, an eventuality that technically has yet to pass, within the parameters of narrative integrity. The last line of the short story holds a narrative irony that hints at how the story’s complexities might be read. The protagonist says, “What none of us can measure yet is how much of the voyage is already behind us” (131). In this story that unfolds in time, a time that escapes preset boundaries of human thought and control, a multiple and simultaneous unfolding that defies principles of organized grammar, that measurement is literally unattainable. In the narration, as in life, it is truly impossible to know with any certainty how much of what transpires belongs to the past, present, or future. The impossibility of complete comprehension or chronological categorization pertains to the three core issues of the story: family, sexuality/gender, and nation/exile. Hybridity and fluidity in the definition of modern Latin
American cultural and national identities has been discussed at great length by Nestor García Canclini; his arguments apply equally well to Cuba. As García Canclini explains, “Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity” (95). Despite our human tendency to mark periods and generations of nationality or even of exile (e.g. pre- or post-revolutionary, first generation versus bridge generation exiles), these terms only point to generalities for which the exceptions are legion. Suffice it to say that any attempt to determine a monolithic or unchanging definition of what is Cuban, or even what is Cubanamerican (Aratujo’s spelling), can only prompt debate. The simultaneous existence of multiple signification, the proliferation of subtle differences among them, is one of the elements that marks lo cubano. By the same token, current scholarship in GLBTQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) studies acknowledges that categories of gender and sexuality are not only social constructions, but form part of a continuum. The transgender and intersex movements bring a new level of challenge to our understanding of gender, focusing on the true fluid nature of gender and the arbitrary and fundamentally incorrect nature of a dichotomous gender system (m/f). Similarly, an individual’s perceived (or declared) sexual identity can change over time, reflecting changes in one’s desires or in one’s understanding of one’s own gender. Family history is anything but linear; generations after generations repeat patterns, consciously or not, due to the subtlety and unpredictability of genealogical inheritance mixed with the inevitable mutual influences of family interactions. When the protagonist says, “What none of us can measure yet is how much of the voyage is already behind us” she utters a truth that applies to her situation threefold; the evolution of her political, sexual, and familial self is ongoing and not subject to calculation.

Her state of flux is of course not unique, but part of normal life processes, and is mirrored by the changes occurring around her. One senses a queering of her family, for instance, in their growing openness to their daughter’s identity, in their changing expectations of life in the United States, in their quirky dance of communication amongst themselves. Less and less do they reflect a seamless image of a “normal” family, and thus a la Michael Warner, more and more do they seem queer, odd, different. I speak not simply of a queer sexuality here, obviously, but the larger definition of that which strays from the societal norms of any culture. I still must wonder whether this is a new queer element or one that has been a part of the family dynamic from the beginning. Current theories in family psychology suggest that major changes in family, whether abrupt or infinitesimally slow, occur only by overcoming huge resistance (see Family Systems Theorists Murray Bowen, Salvador Minuchin, and Virginia Satir). Successfully queering the family either presupposes an inherent family queerness that will accept and embrace an intensification of itself or signals an impetus so great that it can not be stilled by one of the most powerful social forces imaginable—the family’s need to maintain a status quo. So in this family, which is it—an underlying note of queer or an irresistible queering force that overcomes the normal, or the status quo? If it is the latter, then it is significant to realize that the cultural norms might be more tolerant than one might suppose. Foster suggests that “matriarchal strength in the private sphere . . . has been accommodating toward gayness even when it is also complicitous with the patriarchy in wanting sons to produce grandsons” (5-6). Yet this fissure in the predominating anti-queer ideology suggests to me that a grain of queer must exist somewhere within even the most ingrained
patriarchal system, if only by virtue of its negation. By extension, perhaps the institution of family can not escape at least (dis)identification with the social and/or sexual deviant? If that is the cultural pattern, then how much more queer is this family, whose patriarch does not even ask for heirs to carry on his name and his line?

In “We Came,” collateral elements hint that this family has been queer in some sense all along. In addition to the queered family romance and the conscious muddle of gender identity that has pervaded the family imaginary, the narrative consciously sexualizes the family. Socially bolstered sexual taboos prohibit us from acting on sexual feelings for members of the family, restrict us from exhibiting too affectionate caresses or discussing sex in view of older relatives, and even keep us from imagining our parents as sexual beings. However, here Obejas dares to include various evocations of sexuality and even descriptions of queer sexual acts interspersed within the family narrative. Small asides take on a more transgressive meaning when seen in this context, such as the young narrator’s comment that her godfather who is officially sponsoring their immigration “lives with his mistress somewhere in Miami” (114). Her godfather, the cultural link between family and religion, and moreover the political link allowing their move to the United States, is framed as a carnal and imperfect being, with little or no other description to mitigate the portrayal. The process of immigration is also sexualized, in the scene where a Cuban woman from Colombia is recruited to chat with the young narrator and make her welcome. Their discussion includes her telling the little girl about being forced to do “sinful work” when she herself came to this country, after which she “pats [the girl’s] lap” and reads the following passage from the Bible, “Your breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle that feed upon the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will hie me to the mountains of myrrh and the hill of frankincense. You are all fair, my love; there is no flaw in you” (116-17). The vaguely erotic nature of the Bible passage, the physical intimacy between the girl and the older woman, and the latter’s allusions to the sex trade bring a strongly sexual and enigmatically queer tone to the story. As both parents are still in the same room, they participate (albeit unknowingly) in the strange sensuality that permeates this family event.

Probably the most blatant mixing of sexuality and family is provided by the narrative structure itself. The brief narration of various sex scenes in the middle of the story verbally juxtaposes images of family, exile, and queer sexuality. In the third segment of the short story, between two segments that occur in the INS office, the narrator talks of her two “yellow-haired lovers,” one a young man and the other a woman named Martha who “rip[s] tee-shirts off my shoulders, brutally and honestly” (115). Significantly, the scene that follows is that of the sensual Christian woman and the scene before is a mix of the narrator’s nostalgic memories of her grandmother, her own memories of the INS office (“my mother smiles weakly at me from across the room” 115) in counterpoint with her mother’s memories of that day (“poignant and good” 114). The most sexually graphic passage in the short story is sandwiched between two images of the narr-

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4In Gay Cuban Nation, Emilio Bejel argues forcefully that “homosexuality and so-called national identity have been intertwined in Cuban texts since the 1880s.” In the introduction, he makes the argument that Cuban nationalist discourse has “inscribed, by negation” the ideas of “homosexuality and homoeroticism.” In other words, Bejel attempts to show how the gay, lesbian, and transgender subject intrinsically forms part of the Cuban national identity, even if this is by virtue of exclusion. Utilizing the lens of postmodern and queer theory Bejel cogently argues that national discourse, be it essay, fiction, or film, (dis)identifies with the marginalized gender transgressor.
tor’s father, one in which he says that her visiting Cuba would be a betrayal of the family, and the next his death by heart attack brought on by road rage. Nestled between these two snapshots of her father’s high emotion and volatility she narrates her own explosive encounter with her first Cuban lover: dynamic, vocal, and delightfully messy. Even the narrator’s speculation about life without exile, if her family had stayed in Cuba, is framed in terms of sexuality; she wonders, “if we’d stayed then who, if anyone—if not Martha and the boy from the military academy—would have been my blond lovers, or any kind of lovers at all” (125). At least in the narrator’s mind, nothing separates her queerness from her family.

The final scene of the book is a last look back at the family’s arrival to the United States. The seemingly conservative and traditional placement of the family members creates a comfortable space into which the queering elements have already crept, albeit unnoticed as such by anyone but perhaps the narrator. The little girl is in bed, with her new plastic doll perched on her pillow, and her parents move to the window in a pose that reinforces traditional gender roles in the family: “He beckons to my mother, who jumps up and goes to him, positioning herself right under the crook of his arm” (131). The Ozzie and Harriet perfection of the image is belied by what initiated their rush to the window—“a screech out in the alley followed by what sounds like a hyena’s laughter” (130). Mom and Dad’s indulgent acceptance and enjoyment of the unspecified scene before their eyes hinges on their perception of it as part of the new experience of exile, of asylum in a strange land. “Can you believe that, he says. Only in America, echoes my mother” (131). The immediate implication of the sounds, given the time of night, the physical space—a darkened alley, and the reaction of the two onlookers, is that they are sexual yet relatively benign in nature. Has a sailor followed a sexual conquest (female or male) into the alley, where a feigned screech is followed by the hilarity that marks its performance? Or are the screech and laughter, emitted by a pair of drag queens in full regalia, camping up a reaction to a stumble in stilettos? Given the indeterminate location—somewhere off Biscayne Boulevard in Miami, a street covering a wide expanse—either interpretation seems plausible, but different areas of Biscayne Blvd. are definitely connected to the gay and lesbian community.5 Hints within the narrative also point to a queer reading of the image, such as the narrator’s choice of words to describe her own participation in the voyeuristic act: The little girl lies in bed “wondering about the spectacle outside the window” (131). The term “spectacle” suggests a public show or display, as well as something marvelous to behold, and easily fits the showiness and performativity of drag. Moreover, “spectacle” draws our attention as well to the spectators, who despite remaining relatively physically passive do participate in the act being viewed, if only through their vision and emotional reactions. Whatever the spectacle, sexual or not, homosexual or not, it without a doubt symbolizes all that is away from the normal—or queer—in the new country. As the couple embraces and looks on, they implicitly embrace the queer elements that will come to permeate

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5Evidence that Biscayne Blvd. is connected to the GLBTQ community is plentiful, with only choice examples related here. According to an advertisement on Time-Out.Com, the Lambda Passages Bookstore, at 7545 Biscayne Boulevard, is a “mainstay of local gay and lesbian culture [that] has been a part of the now-gentrified gay communities of Morningside and Belle Meade for 17 years. Stock includes ample selections of gay and lesbian literature, art books and titles addressing subjects such as self-help, coming out, and religion and homosexuality.” Similarly, the gay nightclub Cactus is located at 2041 Biscayne Boulevard. Finally, several of the social events associated with the Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival took place at venues along the Boulevard, as listed on the official Film Festival web site.
the family's life in exile (Muñoz's *Disidentifications* provides a fascinating discussion of the spectator's role in the performance of queer politics and identities).

Embery closes his study of the "Cuban Double-Cross" saying that the new generation of Cuban literature represents moves beyond a naive perception of exile and return. In his words, "the lies being told are not only the lies of the patriarch, but they are also the lies of memory and culture. They are lies of simple dichotomies and of an assimilationist project that is just as dangerous, but is no longer pushing homogenization" (106). His comments go directly to the heart of the matter, the fact that Obejas is not relating a straight or straightforward story of a family in exile. The imbrication of nation, family and queer is complex and inescapable in this transcultural tale. Obejas has written a hybrid text, a story on the borderline between the national and transnational, between the heterosexual and the queer. Her story is part of what Emilie Bergmann and Paul Julian Smith call the "slow and patient labor of translation" of "addressing national and linguistic borderlines" in the narration of the queer (9). "We Came" both addresses and verbally caresses the borderlines, until we see the limitless possibilities of their interstices. Obejas shows us the oyster, complete with a shimmering pearl, the beautiful result of constant action and reaction, of ceaseless irritation of membranes and muscle. As readers, our participation rests in the intellectual appreciation of the grain of sand, the queering element that originally miniscule, has grown into the lustrous center of her narration.

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