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Remembrance of a Wound: Ethical Mourning in the Works of Ana Menéndez, Elías Miguel Muñoz, and Junot Díaz

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Remembrance of a Wound: Ethical Mourning in the Works of Ana Menéndez, Elías Miguel

Muñoz, and Junot Díaz

by

José Aparicio

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Latinx Mourning	4
<i>Testimonio</i> , or Bearing Witness and Ethical Mourning	6
Affects and Ethical Mourning	9
Against Freud	15
Ethnic Affect	22
Synopsis of Chapters	24
Urgency to Communicate: Cuban and Dominican <i>Testimonio</i>	27
Chapter One: The Ethnic and Ethical Mourning of Máximo, Matilde, and Ernesto	31
Máximo's Ethical Mourning: "In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd"	35
Matilde's Mourning in "The Perfect Fruit"	62
Ernesto's Mourning in "The Party"	80
Chapter Two: "An Impassioned and Original Painting": Love and Mourning in Elías Miguel Muñoz's <i>The Greatest Performance</i>	94
Rosa and Mario: Excluded	94
Men don't sit that way, shit: Mario's Identity	96
Records, you dope: Rosa's Identity	107
MARIPOSA: Carrying the world of the other	120
Chapter Three: Years and Years Now and I Still Think About Him: Yunior's Ethical Mourning in <i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i>	124
Yunior's Act of Writing	124
Yunior's Cannibalism	128
Fuck You: Yunior's Zafa	133
All we ever talk about is Oscar: Yunior's Ethical Mourning	152
Conclusion: Remaining Inconsolable Before History	155
Latinx	155
<i>Testimonio</i> as Bearing Witness	158
The Remainder	160
References	163

ABSTRACT

Remembrance of a Wound: Ethical Mourning in the Works of Ana Menéndez, Elías Miguel Muñoz, and Junot Díaz explores Latinx experiences of ethical mourning, an act akin to a scar remaining after a wound heals. This literary ethical mourning respects the memories of people and places no longer present. I define ethical mourning in Derridean terms and connect it to *testimonio* to illustrate how certain Cuban American and Dominican American characters, having lost their homeland through exile, immigration, and political turmoil, become practiced at mourning. For Derrida, ethical mourning employs poetic language to bear witness to a loss in such a way that makes fully coping impossible. In other words, ethical mourning treats mourning as an incomplete and ongoing process, much like the formation of identity is unfixed and recurrent.

Menéndez, Muñoz, and Díaz develop narratives and poetics of incomplete mourning and engage its ethical ramifications for narratives of the Latinx experience, particularly those by exiles from the repressive regimes of Fidel Castro's Cuba and Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina's Dominican Republic. My interdisciplinary interpretation and evaluation of mourning—using Derridean thought, affect theory, and *testimonio*—looks to supplement Latinx literature scholarship by addressing how Latinx authors and their characters cope with loss as a result of colonialism and coerced immigration or exile.

Mourning is diverse, changing, and ongoing in these narratives. In Menéndez's *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* (2001), I analyze the characters' self-transformations as they mourn Cuba and lost loved ones. In Muñoz's *The Greatest Performance* (1991), the author contests the

compartmentalization of identity through two queer Cuban outcasts and their friendship as told through a fantasy narrative. In Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), I reveal the interstices between Dominican ethnicity, writing, history, and politics created through ethical remembrances.

This study considers how loss—of homeland, rejected lover, and deceased love—poses a crucial challenge for characters in these literary works. Through characters in exile, these Latinx authors explore the ethical possibilities inherent in the pain of loss. In this way, I contest notions of assimilation and nostalgia for the Latinx subject, seeing the act of mourning as a poetic vision and possibility for both personal and political states of being that are continually renewed and transformed in the spirit of resistance.

INTRODUCTION

The psyche is never ready for reality; Maude Ellman points out two examples to support this claim: “sex before the infant understands the language of desire, death before the ego is ready to let go of the beloved” (*On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia* xiii). When the ego holds on to death, it endures symptoms as it relives going through the trauma. For some Cuban American and Dominican writers, incomplete acts of mourning serve to ethically remember lost loved people, places, and cultures through bearing witness to the traumatic, politically violent reasons for their loss and the Latinx¹ subject’s immigration or exile. This study shows how certain contemporary Latinx literature engages with what I define as ethical mourning in the context of borderlands and hybridity; this literature of mourning is related to a broader genre of writing and art that enacts rituals of our desires to relive and understand the past, including rituals that accompany death. These authors write about people and places no longer present, but like a scar, can still feel the presence of those absent people and places. I look at three stories from Ana Menéndez’s *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* (2001) to show how the main characters mourn homeland and lost loved ones; in Elías Miguel Muñoz’s *The Greatest Performance* (1991), I explore how the two main characters’ identities emerge out of dealing with their Cuban ethnicity against their queer sexuality, and then I explore how the main

¹ I use the term “Latinx” as a gender-neutral term instead of “Latino” or “Latina” to refer to people from Latin-American descent; one distinction to note is that the term Latinx refers to American born or first-generation immigrants or exiles as opposed to people born in and living in Latin America. Using the term “Latinx” to refer to all people of Latin-American decent has become more common as members in the LGBTQ community and its advocates have embraced the label. The gendered structure of the Spanish language has made “Latinx” both an inclusive and controversial term.

character Rosa ethically mourns her friend Mario through poetic expression; and finally in Junot Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), I analyze the manner in which the main narrator, Yunior, bears witness to his friend's, Oscar De León's, life by looking at the history of the de León family under the dictatorship of Trujillo. My argument arises out of defining ethical mourning in Derridean terms and connecting it to *testimonio* in order to state that these characters, having lost homeland through immigration or exile,² are practiced at mourning and thus prepared to ethically mourn other losses. These Latinx writers develop an incomplete mourning and its ethical ramifications for narratives of the Latinx experience, particularly of exiles from the dictatorships of Castro's Cuba and Trujillo's Dominican Republic.

These authors offer examples of ethical mourning, an ongoing process of remembering the lost, dead, or absent one or thing, as opposed to a more traditional Eurocentric idea of mourning that gained ground in some of Freud's earlier work. Sigmund Freud argues that in the "normal" work of mourning, the mourner eventually disconnects from the loss and moves on, and he further argues that when the past masters us—when the ego refuses to let go of the beloved—we fall into "pathological" melancholia.³ By contrast, Jacques Derrida offers a

² For the distinction between exile and immigrant see Juan M. del Aguila's "Exiles or Immigrants?: The Politics of National Identity," (1998) who states how "A cursory review of the factors that define either exiles or immigrants suggest that it is difficult to disentangle the highly subjective elements that shape the decision to leave one's country" (3). Generally, Cubans leaving shortly after Castro took over are considered exiles fleeing for political reasons; whereas, Cubans fleeing after 1994 are considered immigrants fleeing for economic purposes. Ylce Irizarry in *Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction The New Memory of Latinidad* (2016) gives a brief overview of migration: "The migration patterns of other Caribbean peoples reveal a significant difference in their acculturation. The 'first wave' of Cuban immigrants, who chose exile rather than life under Fidel Castro, popularly believed that the United States was a temporary home, not a new homeland. The 'second wave' of Cubans, over 125,000 refugees, entered the United States via the Mariel Boatlift in 1980.³⁶ Dominicans have also emigrated in two major waves: (1) an initial exile wave escaping the dictatorship of Trujillo or the political instability immediately following his assassination in 1961 and (2) a second wave, following an economic crisis in the 1980s, of approximately 225,000 refugees" (50).

³ Freud's early work "Totem and Taboo" (1913) explores the loss of the primal father in general. Later in 1915, he contemplates more personal losses in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), which more clearly makes this distinction between mourning and melancholia as normal versus pathological. Then, Freud writes "On Transience in the Land of Goethe" (1916) soon after writing "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud, in his later work, reexamines his distinctions between mourning and melancholy and includes melancholy as part of the work of mourning. While this reworking makes room for a period of melancholy, Freud, nonetheless, views the work of mourning as something that comes to an end. As Roger Starling highlights, "[Mourning's] 'work' is nonetheless complete when

different perspective on mourning. He challenges the idea of “normal” versus “pathological” mourning, seeing a tension between “possible” mourning and “impossible” mourning. Richard White explains how Derrida

describes a “possible mourning,” which successfully interiorizes the other, as opposed to an “impossible mourning,” which fails to incorporate the other and thereby preserves his alterity. Ironically, the possible mourning involves appropriation and assimilation and is thereby a betrayal of the other. The impossible mourning seems to respect the otherness of the other, and Derrida’s own acts of mourning, in various essays, involve self-conscious reflection on the failure of mourning as appropriation. (185)

Derrida believes that mourning is impossible and should always fail. I apply this premise to Latinx writers who depict mourning through their literature. These writers focus on preserving the alterity of the lost other or place and demonstrate how the Latinx immigrant or exiles in particular can carry out these challenging acts. I illuminate a connection between mourning and *testimonio*, ultimately expanding the definition of *testimonio* to include Derrida’s insistence on bearing witness using poetic language. My dissertation analyzes several Latinx characters and themes of writing in contemporary Cuban-American and Dominican-American literature through the Derridean lens of ethical mourning and bearing witness to reveal how these practices can inform the *testimonio* tradition. This interdisciplinary look at mourning—through Cuban-American and Dominican-American narratives, Derridean thought, affect theory, and *testimonio*—seeks to supplement Latinx literature scholarship. In diverse poetic and narrative ways, Latinx authors and their fictional characters cope with postcolonial and immigration and

the ego succeeds in detaching itself from the past through either the assumption of new objects or the temporary return of libido to the ego” (“Addressing the Dead of Friendship, Community, and the Work of Mourning” 110).

exile loss and produce forms of ethical and affective resistance against the sociopolitical forces behind the characters' traumatic life experiences (loss of a loved one, loss of a loved country and culture, marital infidelity, pain of torture, exile, alienation, social ostracism).

Latinx Mourning

This study focuses on Latinx authors and their acts of mourning, as their characters grieve various personal losses, such as exile from Cuba⁴ or the Dominican Republic and the loss of loved ones. I offer ethical mourning (akin to Derrida's impossible mourning⁵) as a concept to interpret these texts about loss. Ethical mourning and bearing witness are vital to these stories, as the characters experience hegemonic powers forcing them into diaspora, and they must deal with losses of homeland and loved ones; therefore, they must mourn and bear witness. These writers occupy a place between identities much like ethical mourning creates a place for the thing lost. Ana Menéndez, Elías Miguel Muñoz, and Junot Díaz exist along the hyphen in their place as Cuban-American and Dominican-American. Both groups share the experience of loss; these authors and their characters emerge in the U.S. as either immigrants or exiles themselves or first-generation Americans. Richard Alba and Victor Nee examine the anxiety of immigrants attempting to assimilate through language, culture and national identity. They explain how an immigrant's culture of origin is excluded from the mainstream and ultimately subsumed into the

⁴ *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba* (1995) edited by Ruth Behar brings together a collection of Cuban and Cuban-American writers, artist and scholars writing about exile, identity, politics and loss.

⁵ As I will elaborate throughout this work, I define "ethical mourning" in Derridean terms that uses poetic language to bear witness to the loss and as failure. Penelope Deutscher explains in *How to Read Derrida*, that "Derridean mourning. . . returns to his discussion of identity and difference. Derrida does not envisage humans as self-enclosed individuals different to each other. I am not fully autonomous of my friend in my life, nor am I autonomous of them in the wake of their death. I can never thoroughly take my leave of the other, because I was never fully independent from the other. In perfect mourning, we'd fully get over the other: but this belies the fact that we are always in relation with the (dead or alive) other" (72). Ethical mourning entails the impossibility of getting over the other. It also entails the use of poetic language to bear witness to the loss. As Derrida explains, "all responsible witnessing engages the poetic experience of language" ("Poetics and Politics of Witnessing" 66).

culture of their destination country. In this kind of assimilation, what Alba and Nee term “Latinization,” something is lost. This loss accompanies a presence that affects Latinx people in the United States. For instance, Gustavo Pérez Firmat explores the uneven seesaw between cultures on either end of the hyphen when discussing his generation of exiles who have lived in Cuba for a short time before residing longer in America. He states, “Spiritually and psychologically you are neither *aquí* nor *allá*, you are neither Cuban nor Anglo. You’re ‘Cubanglo’” (7). His assessment compliments this study’s characters since they are neither wholly here (in the U.S.) nor there (in their homeland). Gloria Anzaldúa expresses a similar sentiment about living on the border when she remarks that “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (25). The open wound can be imagined in terms of the mourning that immigrants or exiles face. If we perceive this wound as a scar documenting the remembrance of a wound—a representation of that which is now gone—then this wound adheres to the same logic of what this work will argue is ethical mourning. In my vision of this wound, I would add descriptions of living in-between feelings of heartbreak and mourning, dull and subtle, that these exiles and first-generation people experience. They suffer a loss that they hardly have time to process before the hurdles of assimilation begin; therefore, we can say that they cling to the loss as a presence. The loss is felt—the scar leaves a mark despite not bleeding any longer. Pérez Firmat alludes to this lingering presence of the thing that is missing: “For Cubans residence precedes essence, and essence is aroma. In our case, the hyphen is not a minus but a plus” (16).

This study argues that the idea of an aroma encompasses ethical mourning. An aroma lingers in an ephemeral sense. It represents the lost homeland that accompanies exiles as they assimilate into the new land. Importantly, because exiles have suffered loss, they are better

prepared to mourn the loss of other things. The idea of a lingering aroma informs my decision to use “ethical” instead of “impossible” mourning: ethical shows the trace of Emmanuel Levinas’s influence on Derrida’s thinking about mourning and friendship. In “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida concludes that Levinas’s concept of the face-to-face affords the other an absolute identity. Niall Lucy explains that “The problem here is with the absoluteness, the infinity, that this conception of exteriority requires. Such radical exteriority accords a reassuring self-presence to the otherness of the other, to the point where others might as well be rocks or trees” (*A Derrida Dictionary* 146). This kind of presence denies the interconnectedness of identity that Derrida relies on when he states that in death, the survivor must carry the world of the other. In using ethical mourning, I want to invoke Derrida’s idea that we respect the alterity of the other, and that we must use poetic language to bear witness to the other.

***Testimonio*, or Bearing Witness and Ethical Mourning**

This study will consider how loss—of homeland, rejected lover, and deceased love—poses a crucial challenge for characters in Ana Menéndez’s *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*, Elías Miguel Muñoz’s *The Greatest Performance*, and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Through characters in exile, these Latinx authors explore the ethical possibilities inherent in the pain of loss. In addition, they use their writing as *testimonio*, which Ylce Irizarry defines as “a narrative explicitly concerned with articulating a process of recognition and resistance of oppression,” as well as “a narrative form that not only calls for the awareness of brutality but also documents survival and self-determination” (264). She draws this definition from a history of bearing witness to atrocities set in Latin America and the Caribbean. The legacy of *testimonio* carries a long history, as outlined by John Beverly:

Testimonio is implicitly or explicitly a component of what Barbara Harlow has called a ‘resistance literature.’ In Latin America, where *testimonio* has enjoyed an especially rich development, it was sanctioned as a genre or mode by two related developments: the 1970 decision of Cuba’s Casa de las Américas to begin awarding a prize in this category in their annual literary contest, and the reception in the late 1960s of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965) and Miguel Barnet’s *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave (Biografía de un cimarrón)* (1967). (*Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* 31)

As Beverly also indicates, these *testimonio* roots go back even further to “nonfictional narrative texts like the colonial *crónicas*, and the ‘national’ essay (*Facundo, Os sertões*), the war diaries (*diarios de campaña*) of, for example, Bolívar or Martí or the Romantic biography, a key genre of Latin American liberalism” (31). Recently, *testimonio* extends beyond nonfiction works and biographies; arguably, these texts work as *testimonio* because they employ poetic language that, according to Jacques Derrida, reflects bearing witness to loss and atrocities in an ethical manner. Furthermore, I also seek to broaden the range of *testimonio* beyond strictly Latin American literature to include Latinx works, as Latinx writers must bear witness to losing homeland from afar. This study answers Louise Detwiler and Janis Breckenridge, who state that “it is time for *testimonio de jure* of scholarship to move forward because *testimonio de facto* on the ground has undergone a profound metamorphosis and many migrations” (1-2). *Testimonio*, then, can help us read additional works of literature beyond those by writers based in Latin American countries; it enables us to understand U.S.-based Latinx writers.⁶ Additionally, by

⁶ This study is certainly not the first to extend the idea of *testimonio*. For additional exploration of an expanding use of *testimonio*, see Louise Detwiler and Janis Breckenridge’s collected essays in *Pushing the Boundaries of Latin American Testimony: Meta-morphoses and Migrations* (2012); also Ylce Irizarry’s “The Ethics of Writing the

including fictional accounts into testimonio, we can appreciate the value of those fictional works to act against dictatorships and to expose the reader to the brutality of the character. While that brutality is “fictionalized” in literature, its truth is undeniable. As Irizarry states, “The only component that separates nonfiction narratives from fictional narratives, theoretically, is ‘truth.’ I wish to de-emphasize the value of truth defining testimonio because it is so problematic in understanding the epistemological goals of this narrative form” (“The Ethics of Writing the Caribbean: Latina Narrative as Testimonio” 266). For Cuban-American writers (such as Menéndez and Muñoz), they use *testimonio* to explore Fidel Castro’s regime and its impact on Cubans at home and abroad; for Dominican-American writers like Díaz, they consider Rafael Trujillo’s brutal regime. In both cases, the regimes are intertwined in U.S. foreign and domestic policies and are ruled by brutal dictators. Even though these are works of fiction, they bear witness to these regimes and these losses, and these writers are producing, if not an outright means of resistance to political oppression, at least an examination of that oppression while working through the mourning process.

The pain of Latinx writers and their characters arises from the affect of mourning. Mourning is understood through Derrida’s definition of ethical mourning as failure, as a memory of loss in an unassimilated way like an aroma. This study maintains that since these characters understand themselves as exiles mourning their homeland,⁷ they are already engaged in ethical mourning. In other words, these characters continually practice an ethical mourning of lost homeland that enables them to keep the lost loved ones with them even after the death of the

Caribbean: Latina Narrative as Testimonio” (2006) in *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*; John Beverly’s “‘Through All Things Modern’: Second Thoughts on Testimonio” (1991).

⁷ In Díaz’s work, Yunió and Oscar do not necessarily fall into the immigrant or exile category as having gone through a loss of homeland, but as I argue, they do mourn their families’ loss. Like many first-generation exiles or immigrants, they mourn a homeland that their parents tell them to mourn.

loved one. I do not suggest that only ethnic minorities or the “other” can ethically mourn. However, affects and mourning arise out of context, situations, and specific understandings of the world that individuals in exile or immigrants face more readily, since they have lost the apparent wholeness of their initial world and mother tongue and perpetually must live on the hyphen. In short, subjects who confront loss—of a romantic relationship, of a deceased loved one, of a homeland—must find a balance between assimilation and forgetting home, on the one hand, and preserving their cultural heritage in a new place, on the other. Attempting to create such a balance prepares them for the pain of mourning. Additionally, the authors’ act of writing becomes a poetic form of bearing witness and *testimonio*, which are political acts to contest the brutalities, injustices, and interventions in the Cuban and Dominican homeland as well as record the struggles of exiles in the United States.

Affects and Ethical Mourning

This study examines characters who exemplify ethical mourning and overcoming loss through failure. I do not separate mourning from the affects that accompany it because mourning shares similar phenomenological, lived experiences with mourning’s attendant affects, such as pain, sadness, and anger. Like affects, mourning throws subjects into obscure states of liminality. According to Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, affects fall into various categories of pre- or un- conscious states, as distressing the body and forcing the body to action or inaction, and as emerging out of opaque relations that lack any clear dialectic. Charles Altieri, who explores affects apart from moral and evaluative claims, indicates that theorists like Paul Griffith and Richard Wollheim caution against assuming easy definitions of either affect or emotion. I hesitantly move forward, suggesting that mourning, as a cluster of varying affects, cannot

encompass any simple definition or understanding. Rather, this study investigates the varying ways that a person in grief becomes consumed and changed by loss, whether that loss constitutes a person or an abstraction like country or homeland. Losses force subjects into emotional states that run the gamut of affective definitions: mourning disturbs the body, is felt physically, lingers in and out of consciousness, and, while not a foundational affect,⁸ loss delimits one's subjectivity.⁹ Just as I can become angry with someone and stew in my affective state until lashing out and attacking the object of my hate, I can realize my affective situation and handle my anger in a more positive, ethical manner.

In this study, I examine characters who make ethical decisions to handle the affect of mourning by failing to mourn; this failing to mourn gets defined against Sigmund Freud's definition of mourning as shifting libidinal energy away from the lost object. I argue that these characters confront this immense emotional turmoil with grace by enacting Jacques Derrida's analysis of ethical mourning, vis-à-vis, mourning as failure or impossible, as something that has no end. In *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, Derrida states that Freud's idea of successful mourning—one in which the mourner shifts libidinal energy away from the lost object into a new object—actually fails and that in failure, mourning succeeds. Derrida posits, “this is the law, the law of mourning, and the law of the law, always in mourning, that it would have to fail in order to succeed. In order to succeed, it would well have to *fail*, to fail *well*” (*Memoires: for Paul de*

⁸ For instance, Massimo Recalcati identifies hate as a foundational affect. He states that Freud names hate as the passion of being. The subject has to detach itself from its enjoyment and create a void. The infant's ability to say “no!” creates the difference between a “me” and a “you” and establishes a detachment from the mother. Hate, then, allows the self to emerge. Hate is the condition for possibility for others to exist: “Hate appears as a founding condition of exteriority, as a sort of passion of the body that spits out the malignant excess of enjoyment to constitute the very alterity—and exteriority—of the object” (157).

⁹ Affect “is integral to a body's perpetual becoming (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is), is pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundness by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter” (Gregg and Seigworth 3). In other words, just as one's place can help define their subjectivity, loss—what one no longer has—can help define one, too.

Man emphasis original 34-35).¹⁰ This failure exemplifies an ethical reaction to loss because it respects the otherness of the lost object. Derrida states that ethical mourning confronts an aporia of traditional mourning: one interiorizes and cannibalizes the other, but this consumption of the other occurs when the mourner acknowledges the otherness of the lost other. In *The Ear of the Other*, Derrida states that this interiorization¹¹ “ventrilocate[s]” so that the dead other inhabits the ego “like something other” or foreign within the ego (58). The dead other’s alterity is respected by the impossibility of full assimilation into the ego. Further, Derrida states that he fails “to do what Freud calls the normal work of mourning, with the result that the dead person continues to inhabit me, but as a stranger” (*Ear* 57-58).¹² Derrida warns against fetishizing and interiorizing the lost other so as to deny the other’s otherness completely; this caution arises out of questioning and resisting both incorporation and introjection. Mourning, for Derrida, emphasizes gaining awareness of this tension and realizing the inevitability of narcissistic incorporation. Penelope Deutscher explains for Abraham and Torok, “normal mourning” or interiorization, signifies eating the other, digesting the other, until nothing remains. On the other hand, in encryptment, or “unsuccessful mourning,” “there is an enveloping within one’s boundaries of an other that remains undigested, like Jonah to the whale” (“Mourning the Other” 165). The characters in this study confront mourning as a failure, respecting the lost object. They experience mourning as an affect that shapes their identity.

Indeed, a loss resulting in mourning shapes the mourner in many ways. Anlin Cheng, for example, explores one way that loss shapes identity in her work on the melancholy of

¹⁰ Abbreviated from here as *Memoires*.

¹¹ Derrida deconstructs Abraham and Torok’s idea of successful mourning through “encryptment.” Derrida’s main problem lies in the binary idea of successful/unsuccessful mourning. He looks at the inevitability as well as impossibility of this incorporation.

¹² Abbreviated from here as *Ear*.

immigrants. She analyzes Freud's theory on melancholy and mourning and reveals how Freud realizes that even in his conventional mourning, the subject might suffer melancholy. In order to get over "it," the subject needs to already have been, somehow, over "it" (Cheng 53). Freud's mourning entails a forgetting, which only reinstates the death: "Mourning implies the second killing off of the lost object" (Cheng 53). Cheng makes an interesting connection between mourning and melancholy, stating that the melancholic integrates the lost object while the mourner forgets the lost object, but in both cases, the result ends up with the disappearance of the lost object: "the production of denigration and rejection, however re-introjection is concomitant with the production and survival of 'self.' The good mourner turns out to be none other than an ultrasophisticated, and more lethal, melancholic" (53). The two methods are for the benefit of the subject who is dealing with loss—and in both cases, the subject either kills and denigrates the lost object (mourning), or hangs on to, fails to forget the lost object—in order to move on.

I establish this idea of mourning by looking at certain literary characters' emotional reactions to loss. I obscure the distinction between affect, emotion, and mood, on one hand, and feelings and sensations on the other, because these terms reflect ambiguous, subjective states, and their definitions change depending on which theorists define them. Affects, emotions, and moods can surface unconsciously and can influence physiological states; for example, in mourning, I can fall into a state of sadness that I would phenomenologically describe as a weight, a pressure, or a pit in the stomach. Once I acknowledge, interpret, and put that sadness into words, it becomes a feeling or sensation. The distinction is arbitrarily subjective. I eventually have to put affects into words and transform them into feelings. Affects, like language, carry a historical, social, and cultural dimension;¹³ additionally, like language, feelings and affects lack

¹³ These assumptions—that feelings and sensation carry with them historical, social, and cultural dimensions—that inform affects are outlined here, as Suzanne Keen suggests one should do. The problem with emotions, as she

consistent meanings that characterize the lived experiences of a sensation. These ideas are influenced by Rei Terada who refines Derrida's views of emotions. She argues that emotions find expression through language, and like language, emotions have no fully-present, fixed meaning. She maintains that Derrida:

describes a surprising consequence: if one does accept that duality [emotions rising to the level of concepts—a connection between the conceptual and the empirical], then our own emotions emerge only through the acts of interpretation and identification by means of which we feel *for others*... We are not ourselves without representations that mediate us, and it is through those representations that emotions get felt. Emotions are neither intentional nor expressive... whether they are directed at objects or not, whether we feel them on purpose or not, [emotions] take place on what must seem to be a mental stage peopled by virtual entities. (Terada 21)

The *cogito* can only feel the emotion when it represents the emotion to itself and reads this self-representation. Terada discusses Derrida's deconstruction of emotions, outlining how one only feels experiences that are not immediate. Furthermore, one only feels another's experiences to the extent that they mirror one's own. This need to present emotions to oneself through language, which complicates the emotions, occurs in feelings of mourning and

explains, is that "Emotion researchers generally accept that cultural and linguistic contexts can alter the naming, typology, valuation, and overt acknowledgement of particular emotions. They differ in practically everything else" (6). For further distinctions between these highly debated terms, one can turn to Marta Figlerwicz's "Affect Theory Dossier: An Introduction," where she explains the three basic "ways of experiencing affects" as an unconscious affect one has without actively knowing it; or one, consciously aware of an affect then creates a judgment based on the experience (known as "feeling"); or one can be aware of a feeling but not trust it; she goes on to say that even these three basic affects are debatable or distinct (3). I posit my blurring of distinctions wary of Ben Anderson's advice that we should proceed cautiously with theorizing and instead "We might...learn to offer up concepts that are equal to the ambiguity of affective and emotive life" (78). Since the definitions and theories of affect vary so greatly, he believes we should be careful in attempting a definitive explanation of emotions.

melancholy as well. I want to connect Terada's view here with Derrida's notion that ethical mourning occurs through poetic language. As Terada notes, emotions transpire within the self through language. Therefore, if we understand the Derridean idea that ethical mourning relies on poetic language, we can better understand how language influences the manner we process emotions, including efforts to cope with the loss of the other. My selected writers in this study portray experiences that were not immediate, and the characters become overwhelmed with loss; thus, mourning as an affect becomes felt when the character confronts it.

That is, as these characters from *In Cuba I was a German Shepherd*, *The Greatest Performance*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* will demonstrate, even in mourning, one vacillates between overwhelming grief, confusion, sadness, and anger, to extremes of nostalgia for the lost object, to acceptance, and to a variety of other complicated, never pure feelings. Mourning, as an affect, should be understood as a force that influences and colors all other aspects of the mourner's life; therefore, one manner of reading these characters is through their reactions to loss. The feeling of mourning itself encompasses the unstable definitions of affect, emotion, mood, as well as the sensations of feelings, especially when the subject undergoes mourning arising from traumatic circumstances that forever change the mourner's life.¹⁴

¹⁴ Anlin Cheng reviews Homi Bhabha's exploration of the connection between assimilation and falsehood: mimicry is a colonial discipline that is doomed to failure. Mimicry means that ethnic others act a little like the dominant culture but not too much. The attempt by the ethnic to "internalize the other" is for Bhabha an authoritative injunction. An example of this injunction to mimic the dominant culture can be seen in the servant Indian dressed as the English in Babar the elephant. This imitation serves the purpose of showing that the ethnic is playing the game and trying to fit in, while also keeping the distance of never reaching "authenticity." Cheng says that "The concept of melancholic racialization, however, implies that assimilation may be more intimately linked to identity than a mere consequence of the dominant demand for sameness" (55). This melancholic assimilation (passing, acting like the dominant culture) is a *fait accompli* (an action that is done and cannot be changed). The ethnic subject forms an ego through this acting, but the ethnic other is never considered authentic. "Passing" becomes part and parcel of the ego, of the subject. In thinking about Cheng's idea and applying them to the Latinx characters here: they all mourn their homeland in the manner described here, and by mourning, I mean the ethical mourning defined as a connection to the loss object. Máximo, for instance, tries to assimilate in Miami but cannot get over his past; Rosa and Mario

Since mourning holds such power over a subject's identity, mourning should fall under the same theorizing as affect. Affect, along with mourning, throws subjects into hard-to-delimit or thematize (i.e. verbalize and explain) experiences. This phenomenon of feelings, like language that fails to hold fully-present meaning, emerges from undergoing and interpreting life, and mourning encompasses precisely the acceptance and awareness of this shifting ground between overcoming loss and remembering one's relation to it. Mourning should fall under affective and ethical categories since both mourning and affects share many phenomenologically lived experiences; these experiences, along with the associated affects, shape subjectivity.

Against Freud

While mourning has been explored as an event that can cause a subject to change, mourning is rarely discussed as an affect.¹⁵ Rather than follow Freud's initial ideas about mourning and melancholy (ideas Freud later revised), this study views ethical mourning as an affect that allows more nuanced impressions of mourning and emotional aspects of loss that have been explored more recently. The prevailing attitude toward mourning and the work of mourning

attempt to mimic American LGBTQ culture as Anglos but stay connected to their Cuban past. In this sense, these characters are forced to endure the various feelings and emotions of mourning because of the loss of their homeland.¹⁵ Most theorists think about affects in general and the various manners to look at affects. Sara Ahmed looks at mourning more specifically insofar as it enacts a "shared grief." She looks at communities that have a shared loss and uses the distinction between mourning and melancholia to think about these "affective communities." However, she uses Freud's more traditional definitions of mourning and melancholia; she explains, "if an affective community is produced by sharing objects of loss, which means letting go of objects in the right way, then the melancholics would be affect aliens in how they love: their love becomes a failure to get over loss, which keeps them facing the wrong way" (*Promise of Happiness* 141). I would argue the Derridean idea of ethical mourning in stating that this "failure to get over loss" would be the more ethical manner to mourn loss. The other discussion of mourning, specifically, as an affect is Martha Nussbaum in *Upheavals of Thought*, where she looks at grief. For her, emotions work as narratives helping shape the world. Nussbaum argues that emotion's biological structure takes on narrative form; our emotions help shape our ethical and emotional reality. She uses her personal loss—the death of her mother—to explore grief as an affect. Her description reflects the Derridean ethical mourning that my study explores. She explains how emotions can change the subject's perception of the world. Therefore, if we think of losing the world of the other and being tasked with carrying-the-world of the loss other, then Nussbaum's ideas about emotions (mourning, specifically for this study) changing the world overlap with Derrida's contention of dealing with loss. Additionally, Juan-David Nasio connects emotions and loss as an affect.

arise from Freud's belief that one must release libidinal energy connected to the lost object and overcome the loss by redirecting that energy into new objects.¹⁶ Failing to overcome mourning, Freud points out, leads to melancholy and obsessional behaviors. This attitude toward mourning and melancholy, as Kathleen Woodward laments, reflects a clinical attitude that leaves little room for more affective and positive responses to loss. She advocates for "a more expressive discourse" on mourning that addresses the emotional side of loss (Woodward 94). Juan-David Nasio, one of the few therapists who connects the emotions to loss, states that the pain of loss is "[t]he ultimate affect, the last defense against madness and death. It is a final struggle that attests to life and to our power to regain ourselves" (15). Woodward argues against these extremes of mourning as getting over a loss, on the one hand, or obsessional attachment in melancholy, on the other hand. Using J.B. Pontalis as her point of departure, Woodward views psychic pain as a middle ground between "anxiety and attachment to others" so that "[w]e may conclude here that it occupies a middle position in between mourning and melancholia" (100). For Woodward, we would do better to perceive mourning as something that happens between the neurosis and obsession of melancholy and the separation of mourning. This "in-betweenness" stems from a Derridean sense of ethical mourning that I argue for and that my selected authors emphasize in their characters' experiences.¹⁷

¹⁶ Freud, himself, comes to rethink his ideas on mourning. For instance, Woodward points out that Freud wrote "Mourning and Melancholia" after his father's death. *Interpretations of Dreams* was, according to Freud, his reaction to his father's death. Later, Freud is affected by the death of his grandson. In Freud, we see how much context—age, time period, and relationships—matter in interpreting our connection to our mourning and melancholy. In 1926's *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, Freud wonders when a separation produces mourning, anxiety, or pain. He leaves the question, admitting he knows little about pain. He only advances that pain "enters" the body. Many after Freud, however, still view the work of mourning as a process that ends.

¹⁷ Woodward explores Barthes' mourning, and she suggests a mourning that falls between pathological melancholy and the end of grief in the work of mourning. Woodward states that Freud views mourning as letting go, of untying binds. Melancholia, however, lingers like an open wound so that mourning is the healing of a wound. Barthes, in turn, views photography as a wound that allows for a refusal to forget and affirms his attachment to his mother. These ideas present a good point of departure, but she focuses her analysis on a person. I want to view mourning of the abstract (freedom, homeland, etc.) as a strategy for mourning the deceased. In keeping Woodward's "more expressive" discourse in mind, I complicate the idea of mourning and view it as an affective state that disrupts the

This dissertation's mourning interpretations draws some of the same language and ideas from additional theories of affect. For instance, Megan Watkins believes affects move people in one moment until it has dissipated and the subject forgets it. Affects, as Michael Hardt explains, "refer equally to the body and mind...involve both reason and passions...They illuminate...both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers" (ix). Mourning, likewise, as a lived experience can variously become visceral, raw, or unconscious; mourning—that feeling of sadness mixed with anger, despair and other sensations—is a judgment in that the feeling reflects an evaluation of the lost object.

The authors in this study show how fictional Latinx characters manage an affect of ethical mourning. The authors depict emotions and feelings as moving the subject as well as causing the subject to move others. In conceptualizing the overlap between *testimonio* and ethical mourning, I maintain that these characters engage with their emotions that leave them bearing witness to lost Caribbean homelands, languages, and loved ones. Ana Menéndez, Elías Miguel Muñoz, and Junot Díaz illustrate their characters as moved to ethically mourn their loved ones while also providing a *testimonio*. Losing an abstract concept first prepares the characters to ethically mourn their personal losses. Additionally, I relate the mourning of the Latinx subject to Derrida's ethical mourning. Derrida's model provides an understanding of a positive, ethical mourning that works against overcoming loss while also carrying the world of the other. Derrida reveals the paradox of mourning by suggesting that Freud's, as well as Abraham and Torok's, idea of successful mourning validates a rejection and forgetting of the other. The lost other gets

author's Latinx characters' identities and places in the world. People are rarely told to work through other affective states in the same manner that they are told to work through mourning. Those other emotional states are rather viewed as passing experiences.

interiorized, losing his or her alterity, but this failure, paradoxically, maintains the other's exteriority even while trying to consume the other. In "Fors," Derrida's earlier writing about Abraham and Torok's reworking of Freud, Derrida questions their new idea of "normal mourning" through interiorization that consumes the other to the extent of assimilation and, as Derrida metaphorically puts it, cannibalizing the other. Derrida realizes that the more one holds on to the lost other, the more the other is lost, ultimately complicating these notions about mourning. He contends that mourning causes one to mourn a part of the self. The authors of the works explored here create these complex situations in which characters cling to images of lost loved ones; the characters must cope with and mourn lost homelands, and then they must endure losing loved ones.

Derrida appears to have in mind Emmanuel Levinas, whose basic contention is that the other structures our own subjectivity. Levinas asserts that the other obliges us by its otherness and in confronting us with its face. He states, "The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face. And the idea of infinity alone maintains the exteriority of the other with respect to the same, despite this relation...the exteriority of a being is inscribed in its essence" (*Totality and Infinity* 196).¹⁸ Adriaan Peperzak unpacks Levinas's idea of this relation with the infinitely other and the responsibility that arises in the face of the other. Peperzak explains, "The connection lies in the fact that the other's emergence answers the deepest desire motivating me" (22). The desire, Peperzak continues, can never be fulfilled because it is "too deep or great" (22). Rather, this unanswerable desire becomes an unending ethical responsibility to the other, but to experience this responsibility, one must be an autonomous being of one's own (Peperzak 22-23).

¹⁸ Abbreviated from here as *TI*.

What Derrida views as the mourner mourning a part of himself can be traced back to Levinas's contention that subjectivity arises out of this infinite responsibility in the face of the other. Without the other to hold one accountable for that responsibility, one loses—and hence—mourns a part of the self. Derrida suggests that we respect this resistance between loss and fidelity. His view of ethical mourning maintains a fidelity to the lost other, respects the lost other's alterity, and continues the responsibility and dialogue begun at the first encounter with the lost other so that the survivor continues to respect the other.

I connect Derrida's approach toward ethical mourning to the characters in this study, as they constantly confront and deal with their mourning of homeland and lost loved ones. Derrida questions how, whom, and what to mourn, as well as the responsibility that the survivor has to the deceased; these questions are consistently faced by the characters in these stories. Derrida also examines the impossibility of ever properly naming, limiting, or thematizing loss, an impossibility that I argue these characters experience with grace and understanding. Penelope Deutscher explains Derrida's idea that in "normal mourning," the dead assimilates into the ego, losing its place as other (164). Abraham and Torok's encryption causes the other to be completely consumed, but in Derrida's ethical mourning, the other remains undigested. Ethical mourning, then, always fails to forget or to consume the other. Ethical mourning, furthermore, maintains the dialogue and connection begun at the moment of meeting the other. Derrida explains:

Interruption cast over each the pall of an implacable future anterior. One of us two *will have* had to remain alone. Both of us knew this in advance. And right from the start. One of the two *will have* been doomed, from the beginning, to carry alone, in himself, both the dialogue, which he must pursue beyond the

interruption, and the memory of the first interruption...And carry the world of the other, which I say without the facility of hyperbole. (“Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue—Between Two Infinities, the Poem” 140)¹⁹

Ethical mourning also involves a relationship with the other that continues after the other dies, termed by Derrida as “carrying the world of the other,” where carrying becomes an infinite responsibility for the survivor. For Derrida, to carry “no longer has the meaning of ‘to compromise’ [*comporter*], to include, to comprehend in the self, but rather *to carry oneself for bear oneself toward* [se porter vers] the infinite inappropriability of the other” (“Rams” original emphasis 161). He states that he begins “from this strange, dislocated bearing of the infinitely other in me...Before I am I carry. Before being me, I carry the other. I carry you and must do so, I owe it to you. I remain *before, owing*, in debt and owing to you before you” (“Rams” original emphasis 161-62). Ethical mourning, then, reflects a respect for the other’s alterity; it continues the dialogue begun with the other, it “carries” the world of the other, and it resists language and reason.²⁰

¹⁹ Abbreviated from here as “Rams”- In this essay, Derrida contemplates Hans-Georg Gadamer’s death; Derrida focuses on a line from Paul Celan’s poem, specifically the last line of the poem that states “the world is gone, I must carry you” (“Rams” 141)—I use this idea that Derrida focuses on to think about the mourning that occurs in these stories.

²⁰ Derridean denial of reason results from the impossibility of mourning and the rupture that results from losing a loved one. The paradox of mourning occurs from the closeness of the deceased and the responsibility the one who lives faces. Pascale-Anne Brault and Micheal Nass eloquently explain, faced with the death of the friend, we might forget this law: “The drama, it seems, is not so much that we lose the friend after death but that we can no longer lose them; they who were once so distant become all too close, too close because now only within us—in us as a part of us and of history and no longer a singularity that called us out of ourselves and first made us responsible for them” (27). How can one speak for the lost other and let the lost other speak for themselves? For a further elaboration of the impossibility of reason in the face of the responsibility of friendship, see Ana Luszczynska’s *The Ethics of Community*, where she explores Derrida’s (and Jean Luc Nancy’s) response to the anxiety that accompanies the inaccessibility of logic: “Such an experience is marked by the inability to ‘have’ the ‘knowledge’ of that which cannot be proven” (31). “Carrying” takes on this inability to “have” knowledge since knowledge lacks the ability to provide an answer for whom to mourn or how to properly mourn. Carrying, then, when used here implies a metaphysical “carrying” of the other within the survivor. This carrying carries the trace of inability, of impossibility: the need to remember the other but not appropriate the other.

This study explores how characters in these narratives illustrate more affirmative reactions and engagements with grief along the lines of ethical mourning, generally, and carrying the world of the other, specifically. They vacillate between succumbing to and overcoming grief by maintaining fidelity to their various losses, while refusing to deny the otherness of their lost loved ones; they refuse to reinvest their energy into metaphorical or metonymic substitutions. Certain characters practice activities that help them deal with their grief, but these activities actually engage memories of their loss. For instance, in *The Greatest Performance*, the two main characters deal with loss through creating a shared story. Rosa deals with her mourning by creating a poem that weaves her life with Mario's and by doing so, she uses poetic language to carry his world and bear witness to his death. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the main narrator, Yunior, takes on the act of carrying multiple Dominican others as he traces the protagonist's family, the de León-Cabral's, as well as relate the postcolonial history in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo-era oppression. Yunior gives voice, and thus carries the world, of Oscar's mother, Belie Cabral and her father, Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral.²¹

As Latina/os between cultures, the characters have already shown respect for a lost culture while integrating into a new one, prompting them to mine the affective gap between lost homeland and new home that serves as a model to ethically mourn lost loved ones. They reject the prevailing attitude of mourning as forgetting and embrace links to the past that help shape their identities of in-betweenness, helping them stay connected to lost objects. The following chapters analyze ethical mourning in succession of the characters' mourning of homeland, what Freud saw as mourning an abstract concept—or an ethical ethnic mourning. Then, I study the

²¹ Oscar's writing also represents ethical mourning, albeit in a more metaphorical way, and we can only imagine the results as his manuscript is somewhat lost. His manuscript, however, represents his attempts at bearing witness to his encounters with the Trujillo regime.

characters' mourning of their lost loved ones either through death or rejection of the loved one. Menéndez, Muñoz, and Díaz use Latinx contexts to frame mourning as an affect and as an act of bearing witness as they use certain characters and their hybrid histories to shape their mourning across generations and countries.²² Finally, I examine how characters overcome their grief or succumb to it. Derrida's "Rams" supports the idea of carrying the other's world after their death, but the death itself and the end of that world leave the mourner in a paradoxical situation.

Ethnic Affect

I argue that Latinx characters are prepared to ethically mourn because they are more practiced at loss having lost homeland. Latinx affect is the feeling of living life on the hyphen, of belonging and not belonging. The affect is similar to ethical mourning in that the subject becomes caught between two positions. The mourning must get over the lost, on one hand, but must fail at getting over the loss, on the other. Ethical mourning, then, relates to ethnic affect or to the exile's affect in that both conditions deal with loss. Additionally, I examine how nostalgia and ethnic emotions shaping identity influence these characters' ethical mourning, thereby supplementing and complicating the idea of exilic affect. José Esteban Muñoz's theory of

²² Context informs many theories of affect; for instance, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Sara Ahmed posits that emotions fashion "others" by allying certain bodies together, inside affective communities while marginalizing other bodies as outside of community. This delimiting of inside and outside occurs through the use of rhetoric—language and signs—that get repeated to elicit an emotional response. Affects become connected to certain rhetoric in order to shape affective communities. Patrick Hogan expresses how emotions stem from expectations; we anticipate emotions so that they fluctuate depending on prior mood and context. Most content approaches to emotions rely heavily on context to explain emotion. Rei Terada, for example, compares Derrida to analytic philosophers, looking first at the "content approach to emotion," where the content gives the emotion. Emotions are physical and chemical—in the body—and conceptual, so emotions stem from individual beliefs and desires, as opposed to Derridean subjectivity that states there is no stable, individual from which emotions emerge. Even without a stable individual—Terada's emotions after the death of the subject—context plays a pivotal role in how one might perceive emotions, interpret emotions, and then handle the emotions when encountered again.

“feeling brown” and melancholy’s role²³ in exilic/diasporic heartbreak should surpass a universalizing idea that latinxes feel differently.²⁴ By exploring heartbreak in this comparative manner, this dissertation will establish heartbreak’s role in shaping identity, ethnicity, and the characters’ modes of mourning. In other words, characters portrayed by Menéndez, Muñoz, and Díaz have all lost something—homeland, loved ones, lovers, and friends—but having confronted loss in the past, they are better prepared to ethically mourn these losses. Their experience with loss allows them to understand the importance, either consciously or unconsciously, of carrying the world of the lost other.

Furthermore, this study argues, along with Edward Said, that the exile undergoes an “unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,” and becomes practiced at mourning (173). Since the exile confronts the pain of this “unbearable rift,” their identity emerges from a place of affective turmoil. These losses stir emotions in exiles that force them to question their identity in a new land. As Martha Nussbaum maintains, “emotions shape the landscape of our mental and social lives”; therefore, unbearable shifts necessarily alter an exile’s identity (*Upheaval of Thoughts* 1). This study explores how some characters’ diverse reactions to their losses and their affective mourning shape their mental and social lives. Through ethical mourning, these characters manage to make sense of their pain. Nasio states, “In itself, pain has no value and no signification...to ease it, we must understand it

²³ Melancholy should be understood through Žižek reworking of the term; he differentiates between the object of desire and the cause of desire. Melancholy arises out of the fear of losing one’s desire (out of the cause of desire) for the lost object.

²⁴ Muñoz’s characterization in “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*” of Latina/o excessive feeling, positions whiteness as Law; therefore, minorities must conform and perform whiteness, “or at least mimic certain affective rhythms that have been preordained as acceptable” (69). The national affect (white-ness) deems Latina/o affects as over the top, spicy, and exotic. Hegemonic society stereotypes Latina/o affects in order to simplify and contain these ethnic differences. The majoritarian society attempts to essentialize ethnicity from the already arbitrary categories of geography and language to emotion. I argue that emotions are dictated by cultural and social context more than by ethnicity but still maintain that affects are too ethereal to categorize an entire race.

as an expression of something else detaching it from the real by transforming it into a symbol” (13). In addition to analyzing these characters’ affective reactions and confrontation with mourning and melancholy, I consider their subjectivities in relation to the subject’s fantasy space. Displaced exiles must confront a new network of symbolic relations revolving around the subject’s beliefs that help them order their worlds. Slavoj Žižek explains the fantasy by stating, “The original question of desire is not directly ‘What do I want?’, but ‘What do others want from me? What do they see in me?’” (*How To Read Lacan* 49).²⁵ The subject creates a fantasy to answer these questions; the exile, however, must reevaluate these questions and enter into a new context. This study analyzes the subject’s confrontation with the intrusion of the Lacanian Real into this symbolic, fantasy space.

Synopsis of Chapters

Chapter One will examine Cuban characters from three stories in Ana Menéndez’s *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* (2001), specifically how they cope with the heartbreak of exile when the hope of returning to their homeland becomes the realization that they cannot go back.²⁶ In the titular short story, Máximo illustrates ethical mourning as a continual process without end and the ethical call to carry the world of the lost other. Furthermore, Máximo highlights affective mourning in community; in other words, through his jokes and by forming a community with his friends at the domino table, Máximo ethically mourns both lost homeland and his deceased wife.

²⁵ Abbreviated from here as *HRL*

²⁶ Dalia Kandiyoti looks at nostalgia and consumerism in the story (“Consuming Nostalgia: Nostalgia and the Marketplace in Cristina Garcia and Ana Menendez.” (2013). Jennifer Ballantine Perera explores the stories representation of fractured exiles relying on memory, as well as explores themes of displacement, loneliness, and alienation (““Only In Miami Is Cuba So Far Away”: The Politics Of Exile In Ana Menendez’s ‘In Cuba I Was A German Shepherd.’”(2014). Lene Johannessen discusses exile and figuration (“The Lonely Figure: Memory and Exile in Ana Menendez’s ‘In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd.’” 2013). Maya Socolovsky explores how Cuba is imagined by the narratives (“Cuba Interrupted: The Loss of Center and Story in Ana Menéndez’s Collection *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*” 2010).

In the story “The Perfect Fruit,” Matilde first mourns the loss of homeland and then must cope with the loss of love as she confronts her husband’s cheating. She illustrates the difficulty in confronting loss; she uses Cuban food to work through her anger (at losing homeland and her husband’s love) and as revenge, but the process helps her transform from self-consuming melancholia (in the Freudian, obsessional definition of melancholia) to a more productive ethical mourning. In “The Perfect Fruit,” Matilde’s memories betray her mourning of place, and her fond memories of feeding her son, Anselmo, inform her activity that distracts from the pain of her husband’s cheating. Her mourning overflows into her cooking because she mourns her lost homeland in the traditional Freudian manner. Matilde illustrates how identity is comprised of what one has lost as much as what one identifies with. She also represents the dangers of traditional Freudian mourning. Through her cooking, she experiences the paradox of mourning; she eventually realizes that what she mourns in her relationship with her husband represents an abstract idea of love and marriage which she never actually had, and she uses food as a form of control in contrast to the pain caused by her husband’s cheating. In “The Party,” Ernesto suffers the simultaneous loss of homeland and his brother. When he finally confronts his mourning and carries the world of his brother, he manages to ethically mourn. “The Party” exemplifies the impossibility of mourning and the infinite responsibility to bear witness to friendship in the face of the other. Ernesto confronts his mourning, his memories, and his past when the old lady at the party forces him to face his role in his brother’s death and the guilt it has caused. He manages to overcome his mourning by bearing witness and carrying his lost brother’s world, as seen through the final dialogue in which he verbalizes his history to the old woman. None of these stories deal explicitly with race. Menéndez’s work captures how some Cuban Americans who look white and claim European ancestry do not explicitly mention the Cuban population’s mixed-race heritage.

Her stories focus on the Cubans as Spanish-speaking exiles, but do not make clear anyone's color in the same manner Junot Díaz does in his novel.

The second chapter focuses on the third novel by Cuban-American writer Elías Miguel Muñoz, *The Greatest Performance* (1991). The novel's dual Cuban protagonists, a lesbian exile, teacher Rosa and a gay refugee, male artist Mario, cannot wholly embrace their sexual orientation, as these queer identities were stigmatized in Cuba, or ethnic identity, an inability that leads to their mourning of homeland and sexual identity.²⁷ As friends who understand each other because of shared experiences as social outcasts in Cuba and the U.S., the protagonists narrate a dialogic story that they alone inhabit. Since Rosa and Mario are triply marginalized—in sexual orientation, ethnicity, and economically—they develop the skill of mourning both identity and their place in society, which allows Rosa to handle Mario's death in a positive and affirmative manner. Her mourning carries Mario's world and bears witness to his suffering and loss, all through poetic language that connects their names into Mariposa, which means butterfly in English, and then she creates a space in which his story can blossom.

The third chapter explores Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and its main narrator, Yunior, who becomes the voice bearing witness to Oscar's life; the novel, a polyvocal and intergenerational story, illustrates how Yunior navigates mourning through his poetic depiction of Oscar's life and death, his family's struggles across three generations, and Yunior's own personal confrontation with losses. Yunior states how he denies his ethical call to bear witness and mourn his friends, and he buries these feelings and acts in a stereotypical machista fashion, womanizing and partying, and not valuing his heritage and loved ones. When

²⁷ For a sustained examination of *The Greatest Performance* and the characters' tension between LGBTQ identity and Cubanidad see Karen Christian's *Show & Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction* (1997); also, see Ylce Irizarry's *Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction: The New Memory of Latinidad*. Justin Ross Sevenker argues to expand the definition of testimonio to include public sphere theory and include the novel as a testimonio.

he does finally bear witness by writing the novel we read, he emphasizes ethnicity as central to understanding the Dominican repression of its black ancestry, which is related to a shame about slavery and colonial repression; it also demonstrates the brutal colorism of the Trujillo regime and how it influenced racism on the island. By confronting it, he manages to share a *testimonio* about the Dominican Republic. Yunió grapples with the moral dimension of ethical mourning: he describes his loss by trying to respect the other in his otherness and by allowing multiple voices to share their story.

Urgency to Communicate: Cuban and Dominican *Testimonio*

These texts emphasize the act of storytelling, concern diasporic communities fleeing dictatorships, and all portray mourning. In that sense, I use these stories to explore the idea of ethical mourning through carrying the world of the other and through bearing witness. That is to say, these stories all present aspects of what I define as ethical mourning. Ana Menéndez and Elías Miguel Muñoz illustrate bearing witness to loss and do so in their second language, English. Through their works, I analyze how ethical mourning helps the exile endure loss, and I seek to expand the concept of *testimonio* beyond nonfiction. Isabel Alvarez Borland stresses the difficulty of defining works by Cubans and Cuban-Americans but does posit certain commonalities between them, such as portraying an exile's experience alongside historical context and trauma. Since these writers endure loss through exile, they provide examples of characters in mourning. The stories here illustrate exiles from dictatorship, so they all deal in fictional accounts of real historical events. Borland analyzes this tension between history and fiction by turning to Mario Vargas Llosa. Borland summarizes Vargas Llosa's view of using fiction: "In fiction, the greatest truths are revealed through the artistic use of language, which,

unlike history and other kinds of narratives, is not rooted in a form of inquiry that must respond to reality” (*Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona* 2). This blurring of fiction and history overlaps with certain Derridean ideas of mourning and bearing witness.

These Latinx writers are all caught between loss of homeland and their United States residence.²⁸ This tension forces these writers to confront essentialist, constructed identity. Ana Menéndez and Elías Miguel Muñoz’s characters confront their Cubanidad while Junot Díaz’s characters struggle with their Dominicaness. In *Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction*, Karen Christian asserts that Cubanidad “reflect[s] a prevailing societal belief in clearly definable identity categories and in the related notion of ethnic ‘authenticity’” (62). Irizarry offers a concise notion of Dominicaness as “one’s Dominicaness or one’s culturally authentic Dominican identity” (“This Is How You Lose It: Navigating Dominicanidad in Junot Díaz’s *Drown*” 166, fn4). Crucial in these descriptions, however, is a lack of a detailed definition. Since ethnic authenticity lacks clear distinctions, I offer Pérez Firmat’s anecdote of how Desi Arnaz provided the ideal of Cubanidad, sharing that “several generations of Americans have acquired many of their notions of how Cubans behave, talk, lose their temper, and treat or mistreat wives by watching Ricky love Lucy. Just last semester, I had a Cuban-American student who claimed he had learned to be a Cuban male by watching *I love Lucy* reruns from his home in Hialeah” (*Life on the Hyphen* 1-2). I think of Ricardo Pau-Llosa’s poem “Frutas” that states, “Growing up in Miami any tropical fruit I ate/ could only be a bad copy of the Real Fruit of Cuba./ Exile meant having to consume false fruit,/ and knowing it in advance” (*Cuba* 31).

²⁸ Their position in the U.S. is special because they join a significant Spanish-speaking minority which is at the same time fragmented and diverse, and the U.S. has particularly impactful relations with Cuba and the D.R., and its location in reference to the two other countries, located so close to the home, make it so that travel is somewhat more possible (at least in the imagination).

Indeed, Cubanidad signifies an ideal of authenticity based on stereotypes or reductive ideals—for Cuban identity that entails a certain machismo, speaking Spanish, dancing salsa, and drinking *un cafecito*—that is only partially apparent in lived reality. We see this idea of essential Dominicaness in the opening of Díaz’s novel; Yuniors, the narrator, describes Oscar in the Dominican negative: “Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about—he wasn’t no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock. . . . (how very un-Dominican of him) (11).²⁹ These writers’ characters, however, have lost a material past—not necessarily an “authentic identity”—and must carry the world of that loss, and then they must cope with the loss of loved ones. They carry the world of the loss through poetic language.

This ethical mourning will provide a heuristic to analyze Latinx literature dealing with loss by expanding and extending testimonial in both theory, as way to consider and apply *testimonio*, and in the literature, by expanding it beyond Latin American works written in Spanish. By expanding the definition, this study applies Detwiler and Breckenridge’s idea that *testimonio* is changing so that readers recognize “that there is no one way to ‘do testimonio’” (*Pushing the Boundaries of Latin American Testimony: Meta-morphosis and Migration* 4). Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez explain that “Some scholars define testimonio by focusing on the form of the narrative. Specifically, it is an account told in the first person by a narrator who is the real protagonist or witness of events” (“Testimonio: Origins, Terms, and Resources” 527). John Beverly also sees testimonio as a narrative act, and states

²⁹ Díaz, precisely, questions what “authentic” might mean, and exposes a good deal of the hypocrisy about race and gender that Dominicans have absorbed so that they see people of darker skin as less Dominican, and the Trujillo era and pre-Trujillo era have had brutal instances of genocide to exterminate people of darker color that do not fall under the definition of Dominicaness. Likewise, in Muñoz’s *The Greatest Performance*, the characters challenge the idea of Cubanidad since they identify as LGBTQ.

“The situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself” (*On the Politics of Truth* 32). According to George Yudice, “testimonio writing can be defined as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g. war, oppression, revolution, etc.)” Yudice, furthermore, states that in testimonio writing, “the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity” (“Testimonio and Postmodernism” 17). One way to expand this definition of Latinx *testimonio* is to examine what and how Derrida has in common when he speaks about testimony.³⁰

This dissertation explores and expands these definitions to argue that fiction that deals with real life events can help the reader understand truths about the Latinx foreign other. In other words, I examine how Latinx writers undermine the idea of a fixed Latinx identity by creating a tie with the testimonio to link identities and oppressed identities. The Derridean influence will be obvious as this work focuses on how mourning is impossible because self-same identity is impossible; therefore, ethical mourning deals with mourning as an incomplete and ongoing process much like identity, rather than fixed, is an incomplete and ongoing process. The selected works reveal how the gaps and points of inferences fail to capture and close off mourning so that poetic language becomes the ethical ideal for relating loss.

³⁰ Noemí Acedo Alonso traces the long history of testimonio, and then, she uses Derrida’s “The Law of Genre” to argue that no single definition of testimonio works because genres are multifaceted without purity between genres. After tracing this history and various definitions of testimonio from various disciplines, she concludes “Como puede ir observándose, toda definición es imprecisa, justamente, porque cumple bien su función de establecer un límite que permite catalogar algunos textos como testimonios validados, dejando a otros fuera. No obstante, la reflexión que proporciona la crítica literaria es crucial para darle un espacio a una serie de textos que, antes del orden trazado por la institución, circulaban sin filiación alguna.” Naomi Lindstrom’s *The Social Conscience of Latin American Writing* provides a history of the evolution of testimonial writing (and some critical debates about it). See also George M. Gugelberger’s *The Real Thing*.

CHAPTER ONE: THE ETHNIC AND ETHICAL MOURNING OF MÁXIMO, MATILDE, AND ERNESTO

Characters in Ana Menéndez’s short story cycle *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* (2001), specifically Máximo, Matilde, and Ernesto, exiles in the United States since the 1960s, cope with exilic heartbreak and the mourning of their Cuban homeland as an affect shaping their attitudes toward and experiences of their place in the world. This exilic affect deals with loss, and as such, informs ethical mourning. These stories suggest that telling jokes and stories, reminiscing, cooking, and performing other creative activities can constructively and ethically engage the affects of mourning. In three stories, the eponymous story “In Cuba I was a German Shepherd,” “The Perfect Fruit,” and “The Party,” I will interpret the manner in which Menéndez shows her characters managing to respect their homeland’s culture and memories of what they have lost, while also relinquishing some of both to assimilate in America. Namely, they overcome grief by holding on to it; they remain attached to the lost objects they mourn, which represents the ideals of ethical mourning. Máximo’s jokes, for instance, allow him to overcome his mourning for homeland, while still retaining his connection to it. Matilde suppresses memories of her cheating husband, and she overcomes her grief only when forced to encounter the stain that Raúl places in her fantasy space.³¹ Ernesto spends “The Party” remembering the

³¹ The fantasy space should be understood through Žižek’s interpretation of Lacan, wherein the fantasy represents what one calls “reality.” Žižek states, “In the network of intersubjective relations, everyone is identified with, pinned down to, a certain fantasy place in the other’s symbolic structure.” As Žižek further explains, one only relates to the other insofar as the other embodies a settled place in our dreams (*Enjoy Your Symptom* 6)—Abbreviated from here as *Enjoy*.

past and his role in his brother's death; once he confronts, remembers, and respects the past, he manages to ethically mourn the loss of his brother.

Menéndez perceives Cuban identity as shaped by the emotions and experiences of the first wave of exiles who fled Castro's repressive regime and started over in Miami.³² This analysis considers Menéndez's aesthetic as *testimonio* and posits that her strategy involves a Derridean idea of ethical mourning, or a call to bear witness to tragic events. Writing about exiles, she interlaces stories and disrupts chronology to challenge normative narrative structures and bears witness, as Derrida suggest we should, through poetic language.³³ As Cuban exiles from the 1960s living in Miami for approximately thirty years, these characters must understand and cope with their personal histories, Castro's regime, the trials of immigrating and assimilating, as well as with their relationships to each other, to place, and to what they have lost. Their ability, or inability, to process these circumstances shapes their mourning. Mourning

³² Cubans' and Cuban-Americans' affective experiences place them in a unique identity among others in the United States because many of them, especially the ones in these stories, pass as Anglo. Jose Esteban Muñoz argues that minorities face problems attempting to perform whiteness (a thesis I believe is too general and sweeping); in "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover* (and Other STDs)," Muñoz states that "acting white has everything to do with the performance of a particular affect" in order to perform normativity. I understand Muñoz as saying that minorities must act/perform in a certain manner for whites in order to be considered normative, but by acting white, Latinos (minorities) lose their own political ontology. This problem becomes explicitly addressed when Máximo vacillates between being a minority on display playing domino, but must remain calm in the face of the spectacle that the majority culture (Anglo Tourists) wants him to inhabit. Muñoz goes on to state, "I am interested in plotting the way in which Latina/o performance theatricalizes a certain mode of 'feeling brown' in a world painted white, organized by cultural mandates to 'feel white'" (68). This idea is interesting, for Junot Díaz, as Oscar is brown but immersed in white culture—as he says, what is more sci-fi than the DR. Sc-fi captures that "brown" feeling by telling stories of diaspora and exile, about attempting to fit in even in a strange land. For Menéndez, the characters must first deal with their Cuban past and what they have lost (homeland and loved ones) before they can assimilate into U.S. culture. For the characters in Menéndez, we see how pain becomes the excess that Muñoz describes. These characters have lost their homeland and feel a pain. Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, provides a useful description of pain on the body—although, for these characters, that pain is emotional more than physical, the description is useful nonetheless— she states "So pain can be felt as something 'not me' within 'me': it is the impression of the 'not' that is at stake. It is hence not incidental that the sensation of pain is often represented—both visually and in narrative—through 'the wound'; [. . .] The wound functions as a trace of where the surface of another entity (however imaginary) has impressed upon the body" (27). This pain, for the exile or immigrant, is a mental one. The wound is one formed when the subject is torn from their homeland. This wound must heal before the subject can move on, but healing means that it leaves a scar, that the subject can never fully move on because there is always a scar that remains to remind them.

³³ Derrida examines the ability of poetics to bear witness to tragedy, which will be explored later when Derrida's notion of bearing witness connects to *testimonio* literature.

influences—but does not ultimately define—their Cuban-American identity, as they are able to engage in ethical mourning that respects the past.

Menéndez’s text should be read as *testimonio* literature for reflecting Derrida’s analysis of poetic works bearing witness to tragedy. In other words, following Irizarry’s broader definition of *testimonio* as literature that recognizes brutality, documents survival, and “foreground[s] the need for communities to cohere and free themselves from oppression,” Menéndez’s collection embraces a nuanced sense of “truth” that adopts an ethics of testifying (264). Menéndez provides various perspectives of characters in exile to accentuate the importance of community and the need to remember the past.

That these fictional stories steep themselves in historical truths highlights the author’s need to bear witness to the atrocities of Castro’s revolution shaping her characters.³⁴ Menéndez’s narrative strategy, furthermore, depicts historical events that the characters, of disparate ages in different times, experience. As Borland states in *Cuban-American Literature of Exile*, “The reader...[knows] that the success of these accounts [is] not based on the literal reproduction of facts but on the way in which these writers [are] able to pattern their experiences of the past into a meaningful narrative” (91). The narratives (indeed, all the narratives of this study) employ disjointed structures and defy neat categorization by genre to bear witness through poetic style.³⁵

³⁴ I would add to these ideas of testimony Derrida’s contention of ethical bearing witness through poetic language; he states, “all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language.” Derrida contends that an experience cannot be reduced to a singularity (to any singular event), which can then be passed on and experienced by someone else. Therefore, in bearing witness, one would be irresponsible to state “facts” in such a way so as to reduce the experience to those mere facts as what “actually” happened. Derrida examines the impossibility of taking the place of the other and the impossibility of recreating the experience for an other; additionally, Derrida explores testimony and giving testimony. He explicates that testimony is precisely the relying on evidence or proof in the lack of no actual evidence or proof. As he advances, “For it to be guaranteed as testimony, it cannot, it must not, be absolutely certain.” (“Poetics and Politics of Witnessing.” 68). If, rather, an experience is offered in poetic expression, the experience is admitting its non-reducibility and non-totalization. Poetic language admits to its failure to seize or capture the moment fully.

³⁵ I would extend Alvarez Borland’s comment to the exiles, themselves and to the characters under analysis. This style of metafiction, and playing with chronology, informs all the texts examined in this work. This play becomes utilized for slightly different reasons, depending on author and diegetic context. This technique, additionally, is used

Menéndez's collection presents interrelated stories that do not follow the rules of chronology or narrative to poetically render each exile's memories and experiences. Her style thus resembles the exile's memory, which relates lived experiences from the past in no particular order. As Borland observes, "A literature born of exile by force relies on memory and imagination, for the cultural reality that inspires it is no longer available to fuel the artists' creativity" ("The Memories of Others" 11). Ylce Irizarry's *Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction: The New Memory of Latinidad* (2016) states that one reasons these stories desire to communicate a story about character identity instead of a broader concern about community or ethnic identity is because of shifting attitudes within exile and about exile. Speaking about *The Greatest Performance* and Demetria Martinez's *Mother Tongue* (1997) (in a quote that applies to all the examples in this work), she states "These novels tell a story that is based on but not limited to the characters' identities, especially their designated political status. [These texts] draw on nonlinear, mimetic aesthetics to depict the changing experience of exile in the United States" (159). My reading of ethical mourning can complement this idea of the changing experience of exile since it focuses on personal loss (albeit of fictional characters) and how that loss affects their identities and place in exile. Irizarry goes on to state "As protagonists incorporate voices in their narratives—storyteller, listener, and witness—they invite readers to consider their own ethnic, political, sexual, and intellectual community membership. The narrative of new memory combines experience, imagination, and agency to tell a new story of one's identity, culture, or other community defining her or his belonging" (159). This study wants to look at what is missing; how the loss of identity through the loss of a loved one or loved place shapes identity, and it looks at how these losses are endured.

in Menendez's other works *Adios, Happy Homeland* and *Loving Che*, as well as Elías Miguel Muñoz's *The Greatest Performance* and *Crazy Love* and Junot Díaz's work as well.

Máximo's Ethical Mourning: "In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd"

So Bill Clinton dies in office and they freeze his body. [. . .] Okay, so they freeze his body and when we get the technology to unfreeze him, he wakes up in the year 2015. [. . .] he's curious about what's happened to the world all this time, so he goes up to a Jewish fellow and he says, "So, how are things in the Middle East?" The guy replies, "Oh, wonderful, wonderful, everything is like heaven. Everybody gets along now." [. . .] Next he goes up to an Irishman and he says "So how are things over there in Northern Ireland now?" The guy says, "Northern? It's one Ireland now and we all live in peace." [. . .] Clinton goes up to a Cuban fellow and says, "Compadre, how are things in Cuba these days?" The guy looks at Clinton and he says to the president, "Let me tell you, my friend, I can feel it in my bones. Any day now Castro's going to fall."
(Menéndez 3-4)

Máximo, a Cuban exile, has successfully integrated into Miami life, illustrating his assimilation and ethical engagement with losing his homeland. Máximo's attempt to process his grief over his deceased Cuban wife allows us to consider the conflicting positions of early Sigmund Freud, who argues for the necessity of mourning and subsequent release, and Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek, who prefer a melancholy that retains connection to the lost person or place. "In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd" suggests that joke-telling, and perhaps other forms of creativity as well, can reconcile the positions of Freud and Derrida and Žižek in a constructive way.

Máximo came to America in 1961, two years after Castro's revolutions of 1959, "[f]or reasons he told himself he could no longer remember," with his wife and two daughters (Menéndez 6).³⁶ His reasons for exile are ambiguous, but he likely left to avoid the political and socio-economic changes brought about by Castro. He likely did not think his move to the United States would become permanent. Like Máximo, most Cubans in the first wave of exile believed that the Americans or a counter-revolution would overthrow Castro in a few years, allowing

³⁶ In January 1961, Cuba's relation with the U.S.S.R. was well established, and relations between Cuba and the U.S. became more hostile, which gives credence to the idea that Máximo left, like many did, for political purposes.

them to return home.³⁷ Edward Said contends that since exiles are cut off with no roots, no land, and no past, they attempt to “reconstitute their broken lives” (177). Máximo’s generation, however, delayed this reconstitution for years because they thought they would return soon, and that belief distinguishes their encounters with nostalgia from those of other exiles who consider their move permanent. When Máximo’s story takes place, for instance, he is no longer nostalgic, partly due to a stagnant political situation of Castro’s continued rule and the U.S.’s continued cold stance that leaves him with no desire to return, and partly because for most Cubans living abroad in the U.S., a return to Castro’s Cuba would not be feasible. Cubans living elsewhere, such as Canada, have been able to return to visit their homeland, and partly because he respects his memories of Cuba too much to ruin them by going back.

Máximo uses jokes as a form of ethical mourning and bearing witness. He uses jokes to undermine Castro’s regime and to cope with his losses. Máximo first begins to tell jokes to cope with the realization that he will not return to his homeland, and then later as a manner of dealing with his wife’s death. Upon arriving in Miami, Máximo works odd jobs until he and his wife open a restaurant where they employ other Cuban exiles and serve Cuban food “to the nostalgic” (Menéndez 7). Eventually, his wife falls ill and dies. He sells the place, and with the encouragement of Raúl, his employee and friend, ends up playing dominoes with fellow Cubans and other Latinos at Miami’s historic Domino Park, even though Máximo feels encroached upon by the tourists’ gaze. He learns to enjoy playing, even telling jokes and looking forward to mastering the art of the game. When he is not playing, however, his memories linger on his wife. While he plays, he develops a growing discontent at a tour group, and he erupts in an outburst

³⁷ For example, some Cubans believed that a counter-revolution would overthrow Castro’s regime, which led to the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. The date of this failed invasion might be a reason Máximo left with the idea that another invasion or Western intervention would eventually succeed.

that demonstrates his failure to mourn.³⁸ Máximo has distanced himself enough from his lost homeland that he can enjoy playing dominoes at the park, but he remains attached enough to his culture to lash out in anger at being treated as a spectacle.

Máximo's jokes disconnect him from Cuba and help to form a community in Miami at his domino table; cooking—old recipes he used to follow with his wife—allows him to acknowledge the presence of her absence and the absence of home. This process of mourning the past through jokes, games, and stories prepares him to ethically mourn his wife. Against some of the critical work on Menéndez's short stories presenting Máximo as suffering nostalgia, I argue that Máximo endures the pain of loss and separation from homeland but does not long to return; his nostalgia, such as it is, stems from his ethical mourning. Dalia Kandiyoti hints at this ethical mourning, stating that Menéndez's characters move between identities of "ethnicity, consumerism, and personal history" (83). She adds, "Menéndez also presents dominant discourses of nostalgia from the perspective of a character who undermines them and yet cannot help but suffer from the loss of the past" (Kandiyoti 89). Kandiyoti explains that nostalgia's etymology is *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (pain), indicating a painful return home. However, Máximo, like many of the Cuban diaspora who have lived in America for years, has abandoned any thoughts of returning home. Kandiyoti's assertion—that the characters caught in nostalgia are undermining that nostalgia—can also be interpreted as a state the characters experience because they maintain a fidelity to the past while refusing to allow that past to overwhelm them. They mourn their lost culture while maintaining and remembering it through their way of life in America.

³⁸ Failure to mourn should be viewed positively in the manner that Derrida states that ethical mourning fails.

Máximo's grief resists the idea of nostalgic longing for a lost *Cuba de ayer*, without Castro; rather, his mourning of homeland reflects loss without nostalgia, a feeling that precisely recognizes Cuba as lost without hope of return. I agree with Ana Luszczynska's claim that "Máximo is constantly troubled, melancholic, and disoriented. He appears to understand the potential dangers of nostalgia and the fixed and reductive (alleged) truth it seeks to re-present" (95). His memories temper his nostalgia, and he soon realizes that this nostalgia cannot hold, that it offers no comfort; he realizes, as Pérez Firmat states, that the Cuban exile engages an imagination that cannot be sustained. Pérez Firmat explains:

The problem is, imagination is not a place. You can't live there, you can't buy a house there, you can't raise your children there. Grounded in compensatory substitutions, the recreation of Havana in Miami is an act of imagination. But imaginings cannot sustain one indefinitely. Sooner or later reality crashes though, and the exile loses the place that never was. (10)³⁹

Lack of desire to return home undermines the argument that Máximo's longing is rooted in nostalgia. He acknowledges that his early intention to return in "two years' time" is a fantasy, especially as he reaches his fortieth year in exile without his wife and with his children having moved away (Menéndez 6). This forty-year extended exile belies the idea of return; yet the stories, as Jennifer Allantine Perera claims, represent fractured exiles relying on memory. She discusses the stories' themes of displacement, loneliness, and alienation, but then asserts, "An overriding theme is that of return, and the belief, at least for the first generation of exiles, that their stay in Miami is only transitional" (Perera 11). Indeed, Máximo and other first-generation exiles believed they would soon return to Cuba as late as the 1970s. By the 1980s, however, that

³⁹ Abbreviated from here as *Hyphen*.

idea began to die. The Mariel boatlift that occurred from April to October in 1980 saw “[o]ver one percent of the Cuban population [leave] for the United States” and helped Fidel Castro and the island “to rid itself of (or identify) dissidents who were not supporting the communist regime” (Boswell and Curtis 53). This historic event helped first-wave exiles by giving them political refugee status and the rights that accompany it. It also signaled to the first exiles that they would not return home any time soon. Indeed, the first wave of exiles had to come to terms with their place in America. As Cristina María García points out in *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (1996) “To maintain a sense of cubanidad meant to preserve those customs, values, and traditions that they associated with being Cuban, and the emigrés created numerous cultural organizations to promote and reinforce these values in exile. In preserving and expressing their cubanidad, they asserted an identity that was political as well as cultural. Despite their condition as refugees in a foreign land, they were still—and always would be Cubans” (83-84). For Máximo at this point, he has mourned his homeland and must confront the pain of losing his wife.

First-generation Cuban exiles such as Máximo began to understand the futility in wanting to go home, as Máximo’s opening joke about a cryogenically frozen Bill Clinton reveals; moreover, Máximo’s generation has lived in America at least as long as they lived in Cuba. Most of them no longer entertain the idea of return. From personal accounts of relatives and friends who fled Castro’s regime, I know the vast majority prefer to keep their memories of pre-Castro Cuba pure rather than tainting their image of home by returning. These daunting realizations of Cuban exiles, such as Máximo and most of Menéndez’s characters, force them into affective, ethical mourning that both relinquishes the idea of returning home and refuses to forget.

Furthermore, nostalgia fails to adequately describe Máximo's actions, his memories, his jokes, and hallucinations of his wife.

Máximo's memories of Cuba juxtaposed with his activities in America reveal the paradox of ethical mourning; he maintains a fidelity to the past even as his jokes exemplify a growing distance from it. Máximo immerses himself in Miami life without his wife and distances himself from his homeland by eating Cuban food, recreating the recipes he used to eat with his wife (notably, in Miami), playing dominoes with friends, and telling jokes about Cuba. These activities—activities he has done only in Miami—are American ones, detached from his Cuban memories, and they mark his changing relationship to his homeland and an underlying fear that Cuba has forgotten him as much as he attempts to forget it. The more he creates a new life in Miami, the more he loses his attachment to his homeland, but these activities, while separating him from Cuba, illustrate a respectful attachment to his birth place. On one level, he never cooked or played dominoes in Cuba, but on another level, these activities belong to his Cuban culture.

Máximo's memories reveal a pain that he is working through, which Derrida would regard as ethical mourning because they represent the presence of an absence. As the narrator explains:

In Cuba, the stories always began, life was good and pure. But something always happened to them in the end, something withering, malignant. Máximo never understood it. The stories that opened in the sun, always narrowed into a dark place. And after those nights, his head throbbing, Máximo would turn and turn in his sleep and awake unable to remember his dreams. (Menéndez 7)

Luszczynska highlights the vocabulary of “good and pure”—words that reflect “classic articulations of a metaphysics of presence, the desire for and nostalgia concerning goodness and purity” (97). She claims that what the participants of these stories vocalize represents a lost Cuba and, more importantly, a lost “good and pure” past. Perera, likewise, suggests that the idea of a pure past turns dark because no such pure past exists. I, however, prefer to focus on the preposition *In* since it is, after all, “*In* Cuba” that stories began as life being “pure and good” (Menéndez 7). Máximo’s inability to remember the dreams he has after hearing about stories “*In*” Cuba fulfills Slavoj Žižek’s exilic definition for melancholy. According to Žižek, what makes the exiled melancholic

is not the prospect of leaving the place that was for years his home, but the much more subtle fear of losing his attachment to this place. What makes [him] sad is [his] creeping awareness that, sooner or later... [He] will integrate [him]self into a new community, forgetting and forgotten by the place that now means so much to [him]. (*HRL* 68)

The very act of telling stories about Cuba reveals the paradox of his situation. The stories Máximo hears turn dark as he realizes that he has forgotten and been forgotten “*In* Cuba” since he has assimilated in Miami. These tales about Cuba occur in Miami and reveal the dark turn all stories about Cuba eventually take. Stories “*In* Cuba” that begin in the sun inevitably reach their revolutionary dark end; all stories “*In* Cuba” end the same—with Castro’s dictatorship and scores of exiles, and this Cuba quickly becomes one that Máximo no longer wants to be “*In*.” Máximo’s situation reveals how much he has assimilated and how much he has been forgotten by his homeland. Whereas the stories Máximo formerly shared with friends took place on a college campus, they now occur at the former professor’s restaurant. Indeed, all lives might have

been “good and pure” at some point, especially with the distance of time and the fading of memory, but now life turns dark with every passing year the exiles spend in Miami, forgetting and being forgotten by Cuba. The withering malignancy of these texts results from the tellers’ inability to accurately recall the old stories and as a result of historical truths that led all storytellers to the United States as dissidents and exiles.⁴⁰

The more Máximo accepts his place “in” Miami, the more he begins to lose his desire for Cuba and returning home. Importantly, Máximo can be said to have lost his desire for homeland but not his attachment to it. Žižek discusses the distinction between object and cause of desire, noting that the melancholic may possess an object but has lost the desire for it: “the cause that made him desire the object has withdrawn, lost its efficiency” (“Melancholy and the Act” 662).⁴¹ Máximo left Cuba, without saying good-bye to anyone, and believed he would return in a few years.

In his case, then, Máximo possesses the abstract notion of homeland but his desire for the physical place (and his desire to desire that place) has faded. This paradox is Lacan’s *objet petit a*, the void in reality around which reality is displaced and centralized. As Žižek explains, “This object is the sublime object (of ideology), the object elevated to the dignity of a Thing, and simultaneously the anamorphic object (in order to perceive its sublime quality, we have to look at it awry—if looked at straight on, it appears as just another object in a series)” (“Melancholy” 662).

⁴⁰ The story’s darkness could also result from the Miami exile ideal of how things were better in Cuba. The phrase “Eso no pasaba en Cuba” (that never happened in Cuba). The stories that opened in the sun, on Cuban soil, now turn dark as nothing in America is as good as it was in Cuba. One can just look at the Abuelo in PBS’s *Que Pasa, USA?* Sitting outside on a sunny day, Abuelo remarks that the sun shone more brightly in Cuba.

⁴¹ Abbreviated from here as “Melancholy.”

For Máximo, playing dominoes represents the embodiment of lost desire. The void-lack only works when embodied in an object, which in Máximo's case becomes the dominoes. Žižek maintains that this void is best personified in Derridean, deconstructionist ethics: an ethics that calls for the always-already withdrawn negative trace of its own absence. We can never be fully-present, accountable, or ethical enough in the face of the other. The other is a void around which to build this ethics. For Máximo, we can apply this analysis to his cultural, ethical mourning. His activities reveal the loss of desire, but he upholds a respectful fidelity to the thing lost. The void, his lack of desire,⁴² which spurs Máximo to assume the responsibility of remembering, becomes embodied in the act of playing dominoes since he can recreate a sense of community and the homeland he lost. From exploring a present absence, Derrida claims that mourning the deceased friend induces an infinite conflict of loyalty to the loss; Máximo's loyalty vacillates between his lost homeland and the place he makes for himself in Miami. The narrative suggests that activities like playing dominoes and cooking were not central to him in Cuba as they are now. But in Miami, he assimilates by indulging in these activities, which prepare him to cope with the loss of his wife and to ethically mourn her.

Máximo's inability to invest his libidinal energy completely into other objects reveals his ethical mourning. He maintains a fidelity to his lost homeland and thoughtfully remembers his wife. Máximo keeps his homeland within him even as he begins to adjust. We can apply to exiles who lose their homeland, as Máximo has, Derrida's notion that through ethical mourning, mourners lose a piece of themselves when a friend dies. The exile must carry the world of lost

⁴² In this case, *objet petit a* is working on different levels. Žižek explains "We have to distinguish here between l'objet petit a as cause of desire and the object of desire: while the object of desire is simply the desired object, the cause of desire is the feature on whose account we desire the object." He goes on to apply this distinction to the melancholic, who "is not primarily the subject fixated on the lost object, unable to perform the work of mourning on it; he is rather the subject who possesses the object, but has lost his desire for it, because the cause that made him desire this object has retreated and lost its efficiency" (*HRL* 66). That is to say, Máximo is attached to Cuba as can be seen through his cooking, jokes, and domino playing, but he has lost his desire for Cuba.

homeland that helped constitute his or her subjectivity in much the same manner that Derrida's mourner carries a piece of the lost loved one. As Derrida describes, "[T]he world [is] suspended by some unique tear...reflecting disappearance itself" (*The Work of Mourning* 107).⁴³ The exile who has lost homeland feels this tear as if he has lost a close friend.

Upon moving to Miami, Máximo must navigate two worlds—his lost homeland and his new home—while enduring the trials of exile. Máximo reinvest his energy into a new world where he must relearn how to exist, but he remains tied to his Cuban roots through his memory. Unlike Anne Anlin Cheng's racial melancholic subject, who, in order to become a "good cultural melancholic...longs for a version of herself that excludes herself," Máximo preserves his Cuban identity through his activities even while facing the change from homeland to new place (51). This conflict between places, as well as Máximo's experience of transforming from professor to restaurateur, prepares him for the work of mourning when his wife dies.

Máximo fears losing the memories he has of his wife because, to him, forgetting her equates an infidelity to her memory. His worrying highlights the ethical stance of memorial. Derrida's analysis of ethical mourning manifests in Máximo's reflections; he still dialogues with Rosa in her absence and carries her world, a responsibility that, as Derrida explains, occurs at the moment of meeting and begins the work of mourning before mourning takes place: "the mourning that follows death but also the mourning that is prepared and that we expect from the very beginning to follow upon the death of those we love. Love or friendship would be nothing other than the passion, the endurance, and the patience of this work" (*Work* 146). Máximo's encounter with this work emerges in his anxiety over what his memories mean, especially as they start to fade. The narrative exhibits Máximo replaying old memories against his future

⁴³ Abbreviated from here as *Work*

possibilities: “Then the blank spaces of his life lay before him. Now he stood with the gulf at his back, their ribbony youth aflutter in the past. And what had he salvaged from the years? Already, he was forgetting Rosa’s face, the precise shade of her eyes” (Menéndez 29). His efforts to salvage his memory showcase his concern about forgetting her face.

The idea of something “salvaged,” Luszczynska observes, “connotes a recuperative keeping, holding on, rescuing, and preservation” (107). This salvaging or recuperating enacts Derrida’s idea of mourning as an act of refusing to forget. The anxiety he feels at this moment represents a metaphysical, temporal, and specialized representation that haunts him. As Luszczynska articulates, “The plural ‘blank spaces’ indicates a number of unknowns to come while the singular ‘gulf’ implies a lone yet massive absence. Spatially structuring temporality, they both call forth emptiness, non-presence, or absence (in both time and space)” (107). The blank spaces were before him in the past, however, as the qualifier “then” indicates. Now, what remains is a gulf, a present emptiness suggestive of his fading memory and his fear of losing them. The gulf also represents his deceased wife’s lost world.

Máximo’s past shifts from future possibilities represented as “blank spaces” to the emptiness of “the gulf” behind him, and this shift informs his exile community identity that becomes structured by loss. In other words, in Cuba, Máximo’s future lay before him with unwritten possibilities, but in Miami, those possibilities have passed, and the image of an abyss has replaced possibility. With his wife’s passing and homeland gone, he now experiences the affective overlap of exile identity and mourning. When his future lay before him, it included Rosa and all the possibilities afforded by life with her in Cuba. Now, in Miami, without his wife, Máximo experiences a “gulf” that represents the emptiness within—an emptiness his wife left with her death. The once positive possibilities of blank pages take on a new meaning since these

pages no longer include his homeland or his wife. This loss, however, illustrates Máximo's affective state as an exile.

The exile sees multiple perspectives and must create new experiences and memories against the backdrop of old ones.⁴⁴ As Said states, echoing Derrida, the exile must “work through” connections “not by rejecting them. Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, a bound with one's native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both” (Said 185). Máximo's diaspora prepares him for ethical mourning because he has worked through losing his homeland already, and he now fears forgetting his wife. He does not reject or forget homeland; he realizes that he has lost it. He also acknowledges that life continues without his wife, but he copes with it out of love for her, not out of moving on and shifting his libidinal energy. In this respect, his kind of mourning aligns more with Derrida's principles rather than Freud's.

Máximo's experiences prepare him to ethically mourn the loss of his wife since he has already endured great loss and cataclysmic change as an exile: he loses his homeland, moves, changes careers, and embraces many affective states. Marta Figlerowicz observes that some usefulness appears in self-awareness and empathy “that comes from having fallen into many affective experiences and from being ready always to fall into a new one or to experience several affects at once” (9). Máximo fears forgetting his wife's face because he worries about her loss. Since emotions resist articulation, they become easily confused and overlap. Máximo mediates his emotions by interpreting worry over forgetting, but the very concern over forgetting

⁴⁴ Ylce Irizarry in *Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction: The New Memory of Latinidad* outlines stories of “new memory” (stories of Latinx writers who move beyond writing about arrival). These writers draw on past literary traditions and metanarrative techniques along with paratext to convey new stories created from collaborative endeavors that create a “new memory” that is unhindered of nostalgia. “In Cuba I was a German Shepherd” can fall under a narrative of new memory since Máximo creates a communal space for creative storytelling in his jokes.

illustrates his ethical mourning, his inability to forget. In forgetting her face, he has not completely forgotten it. Against Freud's theory of overcoming loss, Derrida expresses ethical mourning as a resistance to forgetting; he states:

Upon the death of the other we are given to memory, and thus to interiorization, since the other, outside us, is now nothing. And with the dark light of this nothing, we learn that the other resists the closure of our interiorizing memory. . . . death constitutes and makes manifest the limits of a *me* or an *us* who are obliged to harbor something that is greater and other than them. (*Memoires* 34)

Máximo remembers his past with Rosa and their daughters—now imagined as blank spaces transformed into a gulf between himself and Rosa and his past; the gulf epitomizes an aporia he faces in his inability to interiorize her and in forgetting her features while keeping a faithfulness to her memory.

Even in the face of forgetting the “precise” shade of Rosa’s eyes, Máximo continues to mourn her, at first through vivid hallucinations and later through his act of cooking. After her death, he refuses to move on or forget her and their life together. According to the narrator, “It was that year after Rosa died and Máximo didn’t want to tell how he’d begun to see her at the kitchen table as she’d been at twenty-five... He saw her at thirty, bending down to wipe the chocolate off the cheeks of their two small daughters” (Menéndez 9-10). These memories keep him connected and unable to move on in the manner Freud advocates for in mourning.⁴⁵ The narrative describes Máximo as “caught inside some nightmare” (Menéndez 10). His

⁴⁵ Freud states that the libido detaches from the lost object. One slowly separates from the object; where one once invested so much libidinal energy, that energy disappears, and the reality (the loss of that object invested with so much energy) takes over little by little, until “the ego is left free and uninhibited once again after the mourning-work is completed” (Freud *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia* 205). Furthermore, Woodward states, “Inarguably for Freud the most important aspect of this work of mourning is that it must come to an end” (95). The idea that someone in mourning will eventually not be in mourning is precisely what Derrida explores and challenges.

hallucinations of Rosa are nightmarish because they represent his loss and the rise of his affective mourning. The nightmare marks Máximo's fear at his endless responsibility to bear witness to his wife's death, as well as the nightmare of his altered life—that he has lost a world. These hallucinations signify grief as outside of language and outside of time. In the midst of his hallucinations, “He had something he needed to tell them [the hallucinations of his wife tending to his children]” (Menéndez 10). A thunderstorm then “shatter[s] the morning of his other life” (Menéndez 10). The emotional intensities of mourning defy accurate or even close approximation. Affects happen, and the subject then reflects on the circumstances and turns feelings into words. Brian Massumi's idea of “virtual” affects informs the notion that one feels an affect before expressing it through language. In all these ways, affect is grounded in flashes. For instance, years later, Máximo contemplates the unnamable affective pain he feels, and thus hears the thunder of his present place in the memories of his past. He cannot decide what to tell his family because emotions defy language. As Massumi states, “The level of intensity is characterized by a crossing of semantic wires: on it, sadness is pleasant” (24). This crossing of wires, where sadness is pleasant, describes Derrida's examination of mourning. Derrida acknowledges that if one fetishizes the lost other, the other will remain lifeless since that extreme acknowledgment reveals the finitude of death. The nightmare—seeing his dead wife—represents for Máximo his successful failure to mourn.⁴⁶

That his grief haunts him even after so many years suggests Máximo's successful failure to mourn. Most of his activities in Miami began there but still remind him of Cuba or his wife. Cooking dinner “kept [Máximo] occupied for hours, remembering the story of each dish” (Menéndez 14). He keeps an extra chair without knowing why, and “[e]ven the marigolds

⁴⁶ Failure to mourn, here, is precisely the ethical way to mourn. Máximo's mourning succeeds because he cannot fully forget his wife; he succeeds because she still haunts him. He carries her world, as Derrida might put it.

reminded him” of his wife; immediately after these thoughts, he reminisces about meeting her (Menéndez 14). These memories evince his connection to his past and his wife and his failure to mourn them. The time he takes to cook and remember stories about the dishes allows him to recall the stories he shared with Rosa when they worked in the restaurant; the cooking of Cuban food represents less a connection to Cuba than it does a connection to a skill he acquires and shares with his wife.

This kind of melancholy, as Freud would argue, refuses to relinquish ties to the lost object. However, Žižek feels that Freud’s preference for mourning—the subject’s acceptance of loss, over melancholy—the subject’s identification with the lost object, requires reexamination. “Against Freud,” Žižek declares, “one should assert the conceptual and ethical primacy of melancholy” (“Melancholy” 658). In melancholy, a remainder occurs that fails integration, “and the ultimate fidelity is the fidelity to this remainder” (“Melancholy” 658). Mourning kills the lost object (again), while melancholy stays faithful to the lost object. As Derrida posits, in mourning, “The survivor, then, remains alone...At the least, he feels solely responsible, assigned to carry both the other and *his* world, the other and *the* world that have disappeared” (“Rams” emphasis original 140). Máximo carries his own world—the lost world he left in Cuba—along with his wife’s world after her death. Máximo manages to overcome his grief (while still carrying the world of Rosa and continuing a dialogue with her) through his cooking and hallucinations, thus maintaining a fidelity to the remainder that he cannot integrate.

He manages to overcome his grief and ethically mourn his wife due to the affective community he forms with his domino foursome and through his jokes that reveal his connection to and simultaneous detachment from the past. The men partake in an affective experience

outside of language.⁴⁷ All of them understand the pain of exile because of a dictator. They process the experience of diaspora from homeland and attempted assimilation to the new land. They share pain as well as laughter at Máximo's jokes, and they commune by playing together at the park.

Teresa Brennan's theories on group affect can be used to explore Máximo's foursome. She states that an affect arises in social situations, even if each member of the group feels the affect differently. Notably, they experience many of the same types of affect: the pain of exile, loneliness, and the ability to laugh. As Menéndez writes, "The men came each morning to sit under the shifting shade of the banyan tree, and sometimes the way the wind moved through the leaves reminded them of home" (3). They also experience tensions stemming from cultural differences; indeed, the Dominicans know they are missing something in the jokes. Antonio and Carlos "knew they didn't understand all the layers of hurt in the Cubans' jokes" (Menéndez 9). They certainly recognize some, if not all, of the layers since they, too, fled from a Caribbean island with a murderous dictator. The jokes connect them. They bicker like family, and "the four men learned to linger long enough between sets to color an old memory while the white pieces scraped along the table" (Menéndez 11). This gathering helps Máximo go on with his days and provides him with the creative outlet of telling jokes.

Máximo's jokes and the group laughter represent one of the more contagious affects, and the jokes demonstrate the community created at the domino table while indicating that Máximo has overcome his grief enough to distance himself from his homeland without forgetting it. Simon Critchley points out the intersubjective character of joke telling and shared laughter: "One

⁴⁷ Outside of spoken language, specifically. Cuban domino entails a team of two who work together to rid themselves of all their dominos before the opposing team does. In a sense, the game works as a metaphor for how people come together—through connections—and "other" the opponents who are not alike.

might say that the simple telling of a joke recalls us to what is shared in our everyday practices. It makes explicit the enormous commonality that is implicit in our social life” (18). Playing dominoes acquaints Máximo with people who listen to him, and his jokes allow him to relate to these men. Furthermore, as Sara Ahmed points out, joking creates an affective community since such a community “can require not only that you share an orientation toward certain objects as being good...but also that you recognize the same object as being lost” (Ahmed *The Promise of Happiness*).⁴⁸ In accordance with comedic tradition, the jokes, all directed at Cuba, accomplish a simultaneous connection and distancing. Alenka Zupančič explains the paradox of comedy, suggesting we should view comedy in a more personal manner than usually conceived, as something that does concern us.⁴⁹ We joke about personal matters because those matters constitute subjectivity:

if the dead serious can be approached only in comedy, this is not because any other approach would be too terrifying and would crush us completely, destroy us, but because it would miss the crucial point. For what is at stake...is not reduction of ourselves (and of all that we are) to a nonbeing, not the destruction of our being, but its *emergence*—its emergence outside meaning, yet inextricably from it. (Zupančič 182)

Máximo’s jokes reveal this dichotomy of inside/outside. His jokes highlight an ability to embrace Zupančič’s “crucial point” and his distance from his subject matter. The subject matter reveals his link to homeland and his capacity to make it an object of ridicule.

⁴⁸ Abbreviated from here as *Happiness*

⁴⁹ For instance, Simon Critchley reviews philosophizing on comedy. He states that finding something funny resembles taking on “philosophical perspective” in that “it is to view the world and myself disinterestedly” (*Humour* 62). I agree with Zupančič, however. And Máximo’s jokes reveal his investment in his subject matter—not a single one of his jokes deal with anything other than Cuba. Many of his jokes deal with loss, however, which many people including the Dominicans can relate to.

Jokes might fail at undermining the regime or enacting political change, but they allow Máximo satisfaction in turning the tragedy of exile into comedy. Pérez Firmat outlines the exiles experience that can apply to Máximo; after an initial “substitutive stage,” the exile grows tired of replacements for his or her lost culture and falls into “destitution.” In this stage, exiles lose their ground, “they no longer know their place . . . they have in fact lost their place. Rather than nostalgic, they now feel estranged and disconnected” (Pérez Firmat 10).

Máximo’s second joke establishes the idea of longing for a place to know again. Some Cubans are on a beach when they see Fidel Castro with a raft, attempting to leave the island. Castro remarks, “I’m sick of this place too. I’m going to Miami.” One of the observing Cubans responds: “Coño, compadre, if you’re leaving, then there’s no reason for us to go. Here, take my raft, and get the fuck out of here” (Menéndez 8). This joke reverses the idea of return, illustrating Máximo’s melancholy as defined by Žižek. The joke implies that Máximo wishes to be one of the Cubans on the beach, witnessing the regime and hastening Castro’s exit. The joke also reveals the “layers of hurt” that Máximo experiences—the worry of his homeland forgetting him, of falling into Žižek’s melancholy. Furthermore, the joke reveals how Cuba still haunts his memory, but laughing about it creates a distance. The vengeful desire for Castro to suffer the pains of millions forced into exile and the desire to have Castro admit the country has become a disaster resonates with Dominicans who have also been forced to flee a violent dictator. Regarding this angle of revenge, the joke functions according to Freud’s analysis of “hostile” jokes: “A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously; once again, then, the joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible” (*Complete Works* 103). The very thought of return has become futile. Máximo’s joke highlights

how remaining Cubans feel about the revolution: they want to leave or want Castro to, and this mirrors Máximo's desire to cause Castro the pain.

His joke allows Máximo a small rebellion, even if it is confined to Miami, away from the repressive state. Freud explains the manner in which a joke like this works: "The joke then represents a rebellion against authority, a liberation from its pressure. The charm of the caricature lies in this same factor: we laugh at them even if they are unsuccessful simply because we count rebellion against authority as merit" (*Complete Works* 105). Máximo's humor does little to actually undermine authority, but for his domino table audience, the joke counts as rebellion.

This joke also hints at the guilt Máximo carries for his easy passage—he escapes from Cuba by plane rather than by raft (the fate of less privileged Cubans desperate to leave the island)—while reducing Castro to the status of exile in the hopes that he will realize the harm his revolution has caused. In having a Cuban on the island offer Castro a raft to leave, Máximo's joke reveals his distance from the political situation since he left instead of staying to help fight the revolution. Instead, he must attempt ineffectually to undermine it through jokes in America. The joke works, however, because it creates community. For Freud, jokes that render our enemies "small, inferior, despicable, or comic," enable us to overcome them. We also form a bond with the listener, who "bears witness by his laughter" (*Complete Works* 103). The jokes, like storytelling, allow Máximo a small rebellion and form a connection to his friends. Sara Ahmed explains how this joke acts as rebellion. She states, "The speech act is always spoken to others, whose shared witnessing of the disgusting thing is required for the affect to have an effect. In other words, the subject asks others to repeat the condemnation implicit in the speech act itself" (94). Taking Máximo's joke as a speech act, we see how he implicates his friends to

condemn Castro's regime. The people hearing the joke become a community against what the joke undermines.

Since he controls the narrative technique, Máximo regards his jokes as an artistic form of storytelling. They also prevent him from becoming "a goddamn spectacle" (Menéndez 24). He tells Raúl, who first suggests going to the park after Rosa's death, that he does not want to be a "sad spectacle in someone's vacation slide show" (Menéndez 9). Specifically, since he rejects nostalgia, he dreads becoming a silent object of it, just a nameless face in a souvenir photograph from someone else's vacation.⁵⁰ Tour guides supply the official narrative for tourists, who miss anything beyond the "spectacle" they witness. This tourist narrative excludes the players' stories and jokes meant for the men. It denies the exiles a voice of their own. This appropriation of the players' stories into a homogenized narrative of quaint, and now happy in Miami, Cuban male camaraderie over a charming game of dominos (through a hegemonic discourse) causes violence.

Levinas examines the totalizing violence of appropriation and turning the other into an object: "The distance of transcendence is not equivalent to that which separates the mental act from its object in all our representations, since the distance at which the object stands does not exclude, and in reality implies, the possession of the object, that is, the suspension of its being" (TI 49). The tour guide treats the park and those within it as objects, and he fails to give the players a voice—to engage them in any meaningful manner—and he treats them all the same.

⁵⁰ "Spectacle" is used twice to describe the scene at Domino park. The players are "spectacles" and Máximo describes himself as a spectacle; indeed, the park is commodified by the city of Miami and made part of the city's tours. The attention causes some of the old men to play up to the image the city attempts to portray; that is, some of the men perform their ethnicities for the crowds. The narrative states: "The worst part was how the other men acted out for them [the tour groups]" (Menéndez 24). Guy Debord comments on this kind of spectacle in capitalist society, stating "The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life... The world we see is the world of commodity" (21). The park and the men playing become a commodity through their performance; they allow themselves to be colonized in this manner, and the spectators buy into the "authenticity" of the spectacle. The use of the word practically appears intentional, since Máximo worries precisely over the commodification of the park and his image.

The players hail from all over, as Máximo's two Dominicans indicate, but the narrative the tour guide relates creates a commodified image of old, Cuban men playing their national pastime. Máximo prefers the story of Cuba as told through jokes in the community he forms. Máximo uses jokes to tell a different story about Cuba and in order to cope with his destitution. He loves the act of telling the joke, and "over the years he'd learned a thing or two about the physics of laughter" (Menéndez 3). Critchley asserts that "true humour can be said to have a therapeutic as well as a critical function" (15). Later, Critchley states, "laughter lets us see the folly of the world in order to imagine a better world in its place, and to change the situation in which we find ourselves" (17).

Máximo's Pepito joke reveals the folly of the Cuban exile's world. After spending the day at a school, Castro asks Pepito, a young student there, "What would you like to be when you grow up?" Pepito smiles and says, "Comandante, I would like to be a tourist." Raúl responds, "That is so funny it breaks my heart" (Menéndez 16). The joke reveals how even Cubans still residing in Cuba no longer want to live there and prefer to view their birthplace through the tourist's gaze, reflecting an idealized version of the island that Castro disseminates, in contrast to the darker version told by Cuban exiles. Also, the joke reveals an irony in Castro's communist island where education is free, but doctors and lawyers would be better off as tourists on the island. That Cuba's economy relies on tourism leaves Castro without grounds to condemn the answer. Importantly, this joke exemplifies why "In Cuba" the stories that start off "good and pure" (Pepito getting educated in school) turn to darkness (Pepito wishing he were a tourist). Pepito's joke reminds the reader that this kind of comedy cannot change the situation on the island. Raúl's response to the joke—heartbreak—illustrates the exiled Cubans' situation: the joke

is funny because it speaks to the situation on the island, but the people are powerless to change their sociopolitical circumstances.

Máximo embraces his Cubanidad—the essentialist idea of performing Cuban-ness—and grows to enjoy the park, despite that its tourists commodify him and force the others to perform their Cuban-ness, because it provides him a space to commune and tell stories. Máximo “grew to like dominos” and after a game, “he liked to look over the table as an artist might” (Menéndez 16). He resents the tourists and the tour guide who know nothing of his art. Menéndez, through Máximo’s narrative and his relationship with the other players, reveals how the stories at the park are more complicated than the tourist guide would have the tourist believe. Historically, the city of Miami established the park as a way to capitalize on the Cuban exiles who propped up make-shift tables across from the Tower Theatre to play in the 1970s. The city of Miami built the park in 1976, but it went into decline so that by 1986 local merchants complained of drug dealers and other vagrants and wanted the park closed or moved. The players countered, and in 1987, the city of Miami began to restore the park amidst several complaints:

The city commission unanimously approved the parks [sic] re-opening on November 19, 1987. They decided not to permanently close the park despite numerous cries from the local businesses. They did provide a solution to pacify the merchants. The Little Havana Development Authority would run the new system. They would be in charge of keeping peace in Domino Park. (Hornstein “The Naming of Domino Park”)

This history shows how the players and Cuban community came to have a say in this park, and how it was initially something not imposed, but sprang up in the 1970s owing to the desire of players to create a community. However, more than just keep the peace, the new system

established Máximo Gomez Domino Park as a tourist attraction and commodity for Miami's tourist industry. In September of 1988, the park finally reopened. Shortly after came the tour buses and the Little Havana Development Authority's narrative of Domino Park as a "slice of the past" (Hornstein "The Naming of Domino Park"). (The nickname downplays the park's revolutionary namesake Máximo Gomez).⁵¹ Through a loophole, the park set an age restriction (fifty-five) to play in the park, a rule that only helps to perpetuate the city's use of nostalgia as a narrative about the park (and to help keep young vagrants from congregating around the area). Máximo, well aware of this constructed narrative and the tourist's gaze, tells Raúl, "You see, Raúl... You see how we're a spectacle" (Menéndez 24). Máximo plays for the opportunity to form a community with his friends and revels in the pleasure of creating his own narratives through comedy.

By creating his own narrative and community, Máximo manages to resist the "promise of happiness" imposed on these players. The city of Miami attempts to use the park to control its exiled population through distraction. Ahmed, who examines the discourse and industry of happiness, explains how the "promise of happiness" endeavors to control a population. She argues that "consensus is produced through sharing happy objects, creating a blanket whose warmth covers over the potential of the body to be affected otherwise" (*Happiness* 192). In Máximo's exilic case, a paradox emerges. He recognizes the park's function as a tourist attraction that displays the men as "spectacles," yet he still becomes annoyed when the tourists appear. Moreover, he no longer feels happiness in longing for Cuba, but he derives pleasure from

⁵¹ The park's official name is Máximo Gomez Domino Park, named after the Dominican born revolutionary who led Cuban rebels against Spanish colonialism. The protagonist's name creates an interesting parallel with the revolutionary fight against the Spanish attempting to control Cubans, and the tourist industry attempting to control the Cuban exile story. Both Máximos are displaced, but manage to bring people together on foreign land. Both bring Cubans and Dominicans together in opposition to the oppressor.

sharing this space and his jokes with his foursome. He experiences short bursts of happiness while telling jokes: “Máximo loved this moment when the men were warming to the joke and he still kept the punch line close to himself like a secret,” and in playing: “Máximo liked to look over the table as an artist might. He liked the way the row of black dots snaked around the table with such free-flowing abandon it was almost as if, thrilled to be let out of the box, the pieces choreographed a fresh dance of gratitude every night” (Menéndez 4; 16-17). Though he more than likely played in Cuba, his memories of the past and these depictions of his current happiness contain no mention of it. Menéndez portrays his enjoyment of dominoes using the language of art and exile while also revealing his ethical mourning of remembering home and distancing himself from that past. City officials offer a secure place for the men to play if they agree to allow tourists to stare. Máximo loves the game and the laughter, but he rejects this deal. His refusal to condone the tourists’ harmful gaze culminates in the final scene, when Máximo’s joke is partially directed toward the tourists gawking at the men playing dominoes. For Máximo, the park represents his place in Miami—not in Cuba. The park becomes his place to create and use his imagination: “But soon came Máximo’s jokes during the shuffling, something new and bright coming into his eyes like daydreaming as he spoke” (Menéndez 11). His happiness arises out of his ability to daydream, to tell stories, and to sit at the table with his friends, not from memories of playing in his homeland.

Máximo’s final “Jaunito the little dog” joke demonstrates the therapeutic value of joking, the community of storytelling, and Máximo’s transformation in exile. His first attempt at the joke fails when his “story” gets cut off. The tour guide appropriates his story of the players and creates a stereotype by describing playing dominoes as a “slice of the past. A simpler time of good friendship and unhurried days” that builds bonds and community (Menéndez 25). Máximo

responds by stomping his feet and waving a fist at the tourists, yelling, “Mierda! That’s the biggest bullshit I’ve ever heard” (Menéndez 26). The domino players offer little in terms of “a slice of the past.” The old Cubans in exile, in Miami, are gazed upon by tourists, a highly constructed present with little resemblance to their previous lives. For Máximo, Domino Park pales in comparison to his Cuban past as a student and professor, in which dominoes served a small role, as did cooking Cuban food. Academics and his wife were the primary concerns of his past. Furthermore, the tour guide’s words cause Máximo to recall his actual past and present, mourning his wife and missing his children. What the tourists observe is a constructed present in Miami, not an authentic Cuban past.

The jokes he tells and his strategy in playing dominoes reflect how little Máximo can control in his life, so when the tour guide attempts to take this away by appropriating and distorting the meaning of the dominoes game, Máximo can no longer ignore or accept the city’s discourse that speaks for and totalizes him. His outburst reveals the frustration caused by the tourists’ pictures and the guide’s artificial, false narrative. Máximo “could no longer sit where he was, accept things as they were. It was a moment that had long been missing from his life” (Menéndez 26). History and politics dictated his past, leaving him with little choice but to accept the developments in his homeland. Upon moving to Miami, he sacrifices power over his career in academia and settles for a restaurant. When his wife gets cancer, he has even less control. Máximo’s time at the park is one of the few things he *can* control, so the guide’s misrepresentation of him and his friends becomes especially hurtful.

The moment that had been missing from his life is the outburst of pain that he enacts. Nasio’s explanation of the scream elucidates this scene: “The scream does more than represent pain and the agent who provokes it—it indicates the intolerable character of one and the

injurious character of the other. This shows, indeed, that the essence of pain is realized in a scream” (104). Máximo’s “Mierda!” represents his realized pain; he finally speaks for himself and relinquishes completely any idea of “a slice of the past.” Luszczynska views the logic of this scene as “appropriate, totalizing, and murderous...Cuba is accessed as an unmoving object to be re-presented alongside the ‘Cuban’ as its ontological corollary” (102). Máximo, who resists nostalgia, cannot sit and listen to his life narrowed into such a violent discourse.

In contrast to the thwarted joke that precedes his outburst, Máximo manages to complete Juanito’s story as the narrative ends. Juanito, a mutt, flirts with a pure, white poodle who rejects him by scoffing, “Do you have any idea who you are talking to? I am a refined breed of considerable class and you are nothing but a short, insignificant mutt.” Máximo delivers the punch line: “Here in America, I may be a short, insignificant mutt, but in Cuba I was a German shepherd” (Menéndez 28-29). He then turns his face away to hide his tears. He immediately thinks of his daughters as babies; sensing the tourists behind him, Máximo states, “Tell them to go away...Tell them, no pictures” (Menéndez 29).

This joke illustrates Máximo’s imagination at work. As Luszczynska argues, finishing the joke reveals his transformation: “Equally significant is the fact that Máximo’s response to the leaning and breathing departs from the three previous choices he had made...he had sat still, erupted, or cried” (109). In opposition to the totalizing images taken by the tourists and the tour guide’s stereotyping, Máximo uses the joke, a performance for both the men at the domino table and for the cameras behind him, to relay his experience as an exile. His humor and even his tears in the wake of his joke, furthermore, represent his awareness of his place in Miami; the joke casts Máximo (as a once successful professor) as the mutt (a retired restaurateur). Critchley comments on a joke’s ability to help one cope, stating: “Humour is an anti-depressant that does

not work by deadening the ego in some sort of Prozac-induced daze, but is rather a relation of self-knowledge. Humour is often dark, but always lucid. It is a profoundly *cognitive* relation to oneself and the world” (original emphasis 102). However, Maya Socolovsky believes that the joke disappoints, declaring that “the failed joke...signals a loss of center and individual identity [and] a loss of community” (240). Against her contention, I posit that the final joke represents Máximo’s self-awareness and acceptance of his place in the world outside Cuba without nostalgia and without his wife, not a failed joke at all. His command that the tourists leave and take no photographs highlights his loyalty to the community created at his domino table with these three men, all of whom cope in exile and joke amongst each other.⁵²

Menéndez shows how Máximo’s version of ethical mourning entails humor as a way to remember what was lost, which enables him to ethically mourn his wife. In other words, ultimately, creative acts enable Máximo to reconcile his mourning and melancholy by acknowledging the past through storytelling—his jokes—while also moving beyond it. He replaces his longing for Cuba with the pleasure of friendship, entertaining an audience, and by using language to create a new layer between himself and painful memories. Máximo uses jokes to tell his story as an exile and to relate to his domino-playing friends. He experiences no nostalgia; rather, he respects his past. Máximo continues to “carry” the world of his wife, and he assumes his place in Miami by acknowledging his position as a mutt who was once a great German shepherd in Cuba.

⁵² The joke reveals Máximo’s layers of hurt. It plays up to the Latino stereotype of the *machista*, to the fears of the ethnic-racial other who menaces Anglo women, and it reveals a certain self-loathing since Máximo was a professor. The joke also indicates the ignorance of the Anglo tourists, much like the “white” poodle, not realizing that the men they are objectifying once had lucrative careers, education, and culture.

Matilde's Mourning in "The Perfect Fruit"

"In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd" and "The Perfect Fruit" both explore the need to acknowledge a lost object, whether homeland or person, in an ethical manner that maintains a fidelity to the object. "The Perfect Fruit" shows how repressing, forgetting, or any effort to suppress the past and lost object is ultimately counterproductive, because repression does not eradicate the pain of loss and betrayal; it only masks that pain until it resurfaces in other harmful ways. For instance, when Matilde, the story's protagonist, finally mourns—in the Freudian sense of forgetting the lost object and going forward with life—she suffers because she yearns to abandon her past, leading to psychic pain in lingering memories she refuses to face. However, when she confronts and remembers her lost object—her homeland and her lost love—she manages to ethically mourn.

For many years, Matilde mourns in the traditional Freudian sense by forcefully repressing her past, which causes problems in her everyday life. She succumbs to what Freud calls melancholy, a state requiring intense efforts over a long period of time to evolve. She transfers her libidinal energy away from her attachment to her Cuban homeland and her marriage, and her growing estrangement from her husband and focuses it on their son, Anselmo. Initially, her story illustrates the danger of overcoming grief by detaching from the lost object. Her mourning differs from Máximo's, however, since she still interacts with her husband, even as she needs to mourn their marriage. Her memories of his infidelity—once sublimated—come flooding back when she fears she might lose her son; only when she allows herself to experience the long repressed pain of her husband's long string of marital betrayals does she manage to mourn ethically and thereby process her loss in a more constructive manner.

“The Perfect Fruit” demonstrates the contrast between traditional Freudian mourning and the Derridean ideal of ethical mourning. At the beginning of her story, Matilde mourns her homeland by forgetting it and assimilating to her new home, initially leaving her incapable of ethically mourning her marriage. According to the narrative, Raúl left Cuba before Matilde and missed the birth of Anselmo. In Cuba, the embargo hits the island hard,⁵³ and Matilde stops eating in order to feed her son. Matilde finally reunites with Raúl a year later, and she begins to grow comfortable in her new home until she realizes her husband has been cheating. She suppresses that realization and concentrates all her energy on Anselmo. Once an adult, Anselmo states that he has an “announcement,” and Raúl guesses, “They’re [Anselmo and his girlfriend, Meegan] getting married” (Menéndez 57).

The news awakens old memories in Matilde, and she suddenly becomes obsessed with bananas that Raúl planted in her yard years before. Previously, she ignored the fruit that had been so plentiful in Cuba. However, she now begins cutting them down and baking them into different treats. In the process of trying to remove what she perceives as yellow stains on her green yard, Matilde comes to accept the memories of her husband’s cheating that were previously suppressed. After finally acknowledging them, she confronts Raúl. Thus, the process of cutting down the bananas becomes a metaphor for ethical mourning in that one must maintain a fidelity to what was lost.

Her attachments to Cuba no longer “persist in the psyche” ((Freud *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia* 205). Like Máximo’s memories, what little of the past the narrative includes does not evoke a hopeful, nostalgic return; instead, her memories revolve around

⁵³ Shortly after Castro took power, President John F. Kennedy imposed a partial economic embargo in 1960. By 1962, the U.S. extends the embargo to all goods and services, and Cuba initiates a rationing system “when it became obvious that there were many goods people wanted to buy that were in short supply” (Boswell and Curtis 33).

Anselmo and his care. Once he was born, “She stopped eating. The shelves in the stores were never more than half full now and the women said it had something to do with the yanquis” (Menéndez 57). Her association with the past is unpleasant, as when she worries that her son will not have enough food. By detaching from this past, however, she fails to mourn it ethically, producing complicated emotions stemming from the failure to work through her grief. In other words, by overcoming her loss in the traditional method, she gets stuck.

Matilde forgets her loss in the traditional manner, which means she, unlike Máximo, has not practiced mourning. In Miami, Matilde directs most of her energy and attention onto her son in part to suppress unpleasant feelings about her husband. Confronting her pain, a necessary step for ethical mourning, would mean confronting Raúl and changing her identity as a wife and mother. However, the family unit is traditionally crucial to Cuban women’s identity. Boswell and Curtis note, “Prior to 1959, a Cuban’s self-confidence, sense of security, and identity were established primarily through family relationships” (180-81). With her marital relationship strained, Matilde turns to her son. When he gets bullied by having his hat stolen and returns home crying, she bakes him cupcakes. When he is in high school, she waits up for him to return from dates and serves him flan. Concentrating all her energy on Anselmo and feeding him at every milestone enables her to ignore or forget her heartbreak, but it also denies or overemphasizes one single aspect of the female self, motherhood, at the expense of the whole person and her sense of self. When she first arrives in Miami, she barely thinks of Cuba. Her memories and ethical attachment to her past fade as she adjusts to Miami. Failing to ethically mourn Cuba and all she left behind, she is ill-prepared to properly mourn her marriage. However, the potential loss of Anselmo to his own marriage causes extreme anxiety that compels

Matilde to confront her losses. She cuts down the bananas that represent her husband's phallic recklessness and obsessively transforms them through cooking and baking.⁵⁴

Cooking creates levels of disturbance and, paradoxically, peace for Matilde. Providing nourishment for her son has reawakened a certain attachment to Cuba that she previously denied, especially as the activity that transforms her mourning and redirects her libidinal energy.

However, the bananas also represent Raúl's infidelity, the phallic symbol of his enjoyment. She only notices the bananas (or is aggravated by them) when she faces losing her son to a woman who sparks her first memories of Raúl's infidelity. These new acts of cooking link her son, her husband, and her past, but since the cooking emerges with the bananas, a mistake of her husband's planting, it also highlights her husband's cheating.

Cooking represents control (the manipulation of ingredients and the power to feed her family) and loss of control (over her husband's infidelity). As the woman of the household, Matilde experiences some sense of control by cooking and nurturing Anselmo, but she also loses control by immersing herself in this role to forget her husband's cheating, which, in Cuba, was an acceptable, if not outwardly discussed, male behavior. As Boswell and Curtis explain, "The tradition of machismo dictated that males demonstrate virility through physical strength, courage, and business success. It was common, and considered proper, for males [in Cuba] to have extra-material affairs" (182). Cooking, then, also works against Matilde by representing her expected gender role and reminding her of the infidelity she attempts to repress.

⁵⁴ Matilde presents an epic spread of diverse Cuban recipes. One can see this spread as Menéndez's undermining of the idea of Cubanidad by stretching Cuban cooking beyond the "typical" ethnic custom to the extraordinary particular act. Additionally, if we think of the stereotypical Cuban woman's place in the home cooking, then this extreme act of cooking can be viewed as Matilde's revolt since the food takes over the kitchen to such an extent that it confronts Raúl. In other words, Raúl is confronted with the problems of Cubanidad: women should stay home and cook. Men should sleep with many women and have mistresses. But Matilde pushes this logic to an absurd conclusion.

Her conscious repression of Raúl's unfaithfulness also reveals the abandonment she felt upon arriving in Miami. She moves to a new country and joins her husband, who immediately withholds affection and support. As a result, Matilde takes up old-fashioned Cuban cultural norms perpetuating common clichés and double standards; in other words, women take care of the household by cleaning and cooking. Generally, a middle-class Cuban woman was "limited to the role of wife and mother. She was preferably chaste, subservient, and sexually innocent" (Boswell and Curtis 32). Cristian María García points out "While women's roles have adapted to the realities of life in exile, men's roles have not changed accordingly, at least not among the older generation. The man of the house is still expected to be the principal breadwinner, or at least the one with the most desirable job and the highest income. Attitudes toward sexuality remain as rigid as they did in Cuba. A man who cheats on his spouse is forgiven more quickly than a woman who does the same" (*Havana, USA* 91). Matilde knows these norms, so she attempts to live them. Denying her losses leaves Matilde with little sense of her identity. She neither contemplates the loss of her homeland in shaping her position in patriarchal matrimony, nor does she reflect on the loss of her once loving marriage. Her emotions are no longer directed at the specific objects that cause them, e.g. Cuba and her relationship with Raúl; rather, she aims her emotions towards Anselmo, his new fiancée, and the bananas.

This anger over her husband and the loss of her homeland causes several problems. Matilde gets over Cuba because her attachment to home is already rather weak, but her inability to confront her painful marriage provokes her when she realizes that Raúl and her status in Miami cannot meet her expectations. Her walks, for instance, become disturbing when she feels the other women on the block staring at her, "[a]nd, she'd be wrenched from her dreams again. With each day, her happiness with Anselmo and the trees seemed more like a gauze that wrapped

around her heart to keep it from spilling out” (Menéndez 62). She ignores the obvious—at least, what will become obvious—that her husband has love affairs outside their marriage.

Matilde demonstrates the problems that arise from neglecting to process emotions. Faced with her damaged relationship, she ignores that anything has changed. When she first understands her happiness as merely “like a gauze” that is keeping her heart “from spilling out,” she attempts to confront Raúl: “She wanted to ask Raúl if he too felt his life tilting, everything sliding away from him. She wanted to ask him if he remembered how she used to read to him from a red book of poems” (Menéndez 63). She searches her memory for a connection to her husband, but never addresses him directly. Altieri makes the case for this kind of abstract “Involvedness.”⁵⁵ One’s sense of involvedness “depends on our recognizing that the form of our affective engagement derives from structures we share with other agents” (Altieri 197). She does not recognize her mourning (an affective state) because she fails to realize how her situation structures her emotions; specifically, she ignores the “other agent”—her husband and his role in her depression. This failed attempt at connection, however, does little to soothe her. She never experiences a moment of nostalgia with her husband, and his absence—“Raúl left the house at 7 each morning now and often didn’t come home until 9”—leaves her feeling unloved, with “the distance well[ing] in her chest” (Menéndez 63). At this point, Matilde only has her conjecture and the anxiety caused by the neighbor woman’s stares.

⁵⁵ Altieri’s argument deals with how affects matter in and of themselves because they influence identity. He wants to bracket out affective states from philosophy and cognitivist who posit affects as useful for ethical concerns. Affect, Altieri believes, are good for their own sake. In that argument, Altieri moves away from adjectival descriptions—angry, sad, etc.—and explores how the arts help shape affects. Involvedness arises out of his view that art can “sharpen our awareness of the intricate ways we feel our attention and care becoming contoured to other existences,” and he believes this awareness can be refined through a “dramatic situation” or in how what we read asks us to relate to how other readers read. These ideals he calls “involvedness” (194). Matilde appears to want to connect to her husband through a life they once shared, but when he denies her, she becomes further removed from her own emotions and denies her feelings a little more precisely because he denies how she reads their situation.

Instead of leaving Raúl and taking Anselmo with her, she forgets and overcomes in the manner Freud believes a mourner should. This forgetting, however, undermines stable psychic development since it merely represses uncomfortable memories that surface later. Three months after arriving in Miami, Matilde receives a phone call late at night, and when she picks up, no one answers. The next day, she stirs out of bed one time to feed Anselmo and gets lost in dream-like thought: “Matilde floated between all the worlds she had known. She would turn and wake in Havana and even the bougainvillea was where she had left it” (Menéndez 65). These reflections nourish her attachment to better times, so at this early stage of her exile, she mourns her past but stays connected to it.

As time moves on, however, she does nothing to cope with the heartbreak of Raúl’s cheating. Dormant grief consumes her until she decides to “make Raúl’s secrets her own, snatch them from him before they flowered into repentance. They would always be something she had” (Menéndez 65). The wording in this passage is vague, but the flowering repentance appears to belong to Raúl, and his secrets will remain as such because Matilde refuses to confront them out in the open. Repentance connotes the idea of feeling sorry for a past action or for having regret, but Matilde prefers to forget and keep her past concealed. She thus willfully forgets these transgressions and buries them deep into her unconscious so that, as she believes, they will remain within her.

Matilde’s inability to mourn means that she briefly transfers the neglect from her marriage onto her son. Her failure to confront Raúl and her feelings of abandonment send her into a temporary depression, which conforms to Freud’s idea of “proper” mourning. As an exile with little education, she has few options, including options for employment; and as a young mother, she is the designated care giver for her child. Since her Cuban culture accepts infidelity

and machismo, she cannot feasibly leave Raúl. In her depression, she ignores the hungry cries of baby Anselmo and endangers him temporarily. Involuntary child abuse is not part of the official narrative of Cuban women, upheld as consistently sweet, caring, self-sacrificing mothers. This extreme neglect contrasts with her thoughts earlier of being “everything” to him. She never connects the neglect from her husband to her depression, and she never processes that emotion or confronts him about his infidelity. Matilde represents the perils of traditional mourning instead of the ethical mourning that forces one to confront and carry the past.

Instead of directly confronting her lost relationship she distracts herself with Anselmo and feeding him. Matilde goes to the kitchen and begins cooking. She picks up “little Anselmo in her arms and whispers, ‘Mami’s back. Mami’s back’” (Menéndez 68). This idea of being back (being present) does not confront the reality of her situation as a new mother whose husband is cheating. Rather than facing her jealousy and anger, she throws herself into a new activity. Freud believes this process of finding a new object of desire is normal and allows the ego freedom to attach to these other, new objects. Here, Matilde devotes herself to Anselmo’s care and nourishment until “Anselmo grew fatter and fatter and every day Matilde forgot a little more” (Menéndez 68). Through her cooking and parenting, she can forget the phone call, the neighbor’s stare, and her own suspicions—as well as her own neglect of her beloved son.

In this respect, the older rebellious Matilde’s outrageous Cuban cooking of bananas allows her to confront Raúl indirectly and to subtly acknowledge her awareness of his cheating. The narrative never explicitly states that Matilde has forgotten the affairs, but it does indicate that she makes Raúl’s secrets her own. I interpret this as her purposeful repression of his infidelity. Matilde, furthermore, never confronts her emotions of anger and jealousy. Emotions are understood as either the physiological (bodily) reaction and the accompanying sensation, or

the cognitive (mental) understanding of the sensation, or as Stanley Schachter and Jerome E. Singer maintain, both the physical reaction (in accordance with Henry James) and the cognitive activity of labeling the emotion. While experiencing a physical reaction to her emotion of hurt and lack of self-worth when she was a young mother, Matilde never actually names these emotions or confronts them, and she ignores it by forgetting the feeling in order to care for Anselmo. To ignore the emotion constitutes a failure to act.⁵⁶ As Nussbaum states, “Emotions are closely connected with actions...Emotions, in short, are acknowledgements of our goals and of their status” (*Upheaval of Thought* 135). Neglecting to acknowledge her emotional states—to actively mourn by putting her affects into words (feelings)—means that Matilde effectively denies her grief. This denial hinders her mourning because ethical mourning needs an expression and introjection of the lost other, which Freud saw as pathological. Derrida, however, reverses this hierarchy by stating that pathological incorporation venerates the other’s alterity. Incorporation means that the other maintains its difference and heterogeneity.

Matilde’s refusal to ethically mourn through most of the text leads to the suppression of jealousy over Raúl and her son’s future wife, Meegan; her reaction to denying this pain prompts her overzealous cooking in place of mourning. Denying her jealousy prevents Matilde from mourning and from reconstructing herself. Nasio states that jealousy “is a variant of psychological pain. It is the reaction to a supposed loss of the love that the loved one gave me and that he or she then gave a rival. Jealousy is an affect that mixes with the pain of having lost the love of the loved one, the integrity of my narcissistic image, the hate of my rival and, finally my self-

⁵⁶ Raúl puts Matilde in a difficult position: for if she had confronted him at the time, she might not have gotten anywhere. He might not have listened to her and just continued, considering it his right. He might have considered divorce, which would have been awful for her, without any other Cuban network to fall on. The story points out her extreme isolation. So, one can understand her refusal to confront her loss and her feeling of hurt because of his cheating. Menéndez manages to capture the nuance of an evolving mourning that leads to ethical mourning.

reproaches for not having held my place” (48). Anne Carson believes that “The jealous lover covets a particular place in the beloved’s affection and is full of anxiety that another will take it” (14). Matilde experiences the pain of jealousy when an adult Anselmo, moves away, no longer enjoys her flan, and announces his engagement. Fear of losing him resurrects her painful memories and secrets, spurring a neurotic, obsessional reaction.⁵⁷ When Anselmo first moved out, he would often visit and eat her flan, his favorite treat. As Socolovsky notes, “Cooking has long served a useful role: sublimating the unbearable knowledge of Raúl’s affairs and dulling the pain of motherhood” (243). Additionally, cooking, becomes an action she shares with her son, allowing her to forget her husband.

But when Anselmo appears to “hide his flan in pieces along the corner of his plate, Matilde thought of this new black-haired woman” (Menéndez 53). She feels a jealousy at “this” woman, and questions Anselmo about his lack of appetite: “‘What’s the matter, angel?’ She asked. And then, ‘You used to love my flan.’ And he responds, ‘‘I still like your flan, Mami’’” (Menéndez 54). The shift from “love” to “like” illustrates Anselmo’s growing distance, and, for Matilde, represents her loss of control over the connection to her son. The impending engagement, moreover, mimics Matilde’s lost marriage since Meegan resembles the woman with

⁵⁷ Žižek explains the role of guilt and obsession in psychoanalysis that we can usefully apply to Matilde. Žižek states that “In psychoanalytic theory, one talks a lot about the transference or the ‘projection’ of guilt,” but he wants to rethink this idea as one escapes away from the traumatic experience into guilt. If we apply this idea to Matilde, she escapes from the guilt of neglecting her son (in the manner that her husband neglected her) as well as escapes the guilt from failing to acknowledge her husband’s cheating. To elaborate the connection I am making, I turn to Žižek, who explains that the subject relates guilt “to the inconsistency of the big Other (the symbolic order). . . It is in this sense that we should interpret the dream about the father who doesn’t know he is dead: his figure persists, retains its consistency, till he is told the truth. Therefrom, the typical obsessional compulsion: I must prevent at any price the Other from learning (that it is dead, impotent)—better for me to die than for the Other to get to know the horrible truth. . . better for me to assume the guilt quickly than for the other’s (father’s, the loved woman’s) stupidity, impotence, etc., to come into public view” (*Enjoy* 44). Thinking of Matilde’s situation and the banana’s phallic symbolism, her obsessional acts of cutting down and baking and cooking all the bananas arises out of her need to keep Raúl’s secrets her own, to not allow his recklessness into the public view of her son and Meegan, while also keeping Raúl ignorant of her knowledge; in other words, she wants to keep the secret that she has kept Raúl’s secrets.

whom Raúl had his first affair. Matilde worries about dark-haired women who will steal away both her son and her husband.

Initially, her forgotten memories surface when Raúl plants the banana trees, and they strengthen when the trees bloom. The bananas represent Raúl's infidelity and symbolize the buried memories and emotions Matilde has ignored. They were planted "one afternoon while she was away, and for eight years the trees lay quietly in a far corner of the yard" (51). The bananas, though, like all of her grief, become displaced. Menéndez writes, "At first Matilde had been angry. She stood by the kitchen sink and looked out the window at the first soft shoots and cursed Raúl's recklessness. But each day after that she thought less and less about the trees until they passed into a deep part of her memory that was almost like forgetting" (51). The phrase "almost like forgetting" shows how the trees represent memories that she attempts to forget, the "recklessness" of Raúl's actions. She has already made his secrets her own, but Meegan, Anselmo's future wife, forces Matilde to remember that Raúl is capable of recklessness. Her memory of the past—the "at first" of the passage—contrasts with the following statement: "Now Matilde stood at the sink not thinking about the ancient trees but about her son and the woman he was seeing" (Menéndez 51). Matilde only notices the trees when she fears she might be losing her son. Socolovsky points out that "In the present, the memory of Anselmo's girlfriend, combined with the sight of the unruly bananas in the yard, reawaken Matilde's dormant and suppressed memories of the problems in her marriage" (243). The distinction is more subtle; only when Meegan reawakens the memory of Raúl's infidelity does Matilde view the bananas as a symbol of his disloyalty. The banana trees symbolize Raúl's infidelity, and Matilde forces herself to "think less and less about" them.

Although her outrage is ostensibly directed at Raúl for planting the trees, Matilde is also subconsciously releasing her long-suppressed anger at his betrayal, an anger she has displaced onto the bananas. Observing the bananas intrude on her sanctuary, she thinks to herself, “how could he?” The bananas and Raúl’s infidelity become further conflated when she considers, “Maybe the others were there all along, blending into the green” (Menéndez 59). Maybe the other women, like the neighbor, were there all along, but Matilde forced those women to blend into her memory “like forgetting” in order to repress Raúl’s hurtful behavior.

The bananas coloring the view of Matilde’s yard represent this jealous anxiety of another possessing the place that belongs to her. For Matilde, the house and yard form her safe place, where she nourishes her son and relaxes; however, Meegan sparks her memory of Raúl’s other women so that the yellow reminds her of that which she attempts to forget. Rather than her clean, green yard, she worries about “another”—a gaudy yellow intrusion—annexing her soothing place.

These symbols of Raúl’s infidelity reawaken feelings she had long ignored, and facing these repressed emotions provokes her to finally confront Raúl. This confrontation occurs only after she accomplishes the nearly impossible task of erasing what Lacan calls *the blot*, or what Žižek has reimagined as the *Hitchcockian blot*, *the stain*, or *the knot*. The “blot” has been theorized in various manners depending on the theorist, such as the other’s gaze, excess knowledge, or a kernel of the real; in applying this idea of the blot to Matilde’s situation, the blot represents the knowledge that her fantasy is fantasy. Žižek explains:

In “psychic reality,” we encounter a series of entities that literally only exist on the basis of a certain misrecognition, that is to say, insofar as the subject does not know something, insofar as something is left unspoken, is not integrated into the

symbolic universe. As the subject comes to “know too much,” he pays for this excess, surplus knowledge “in the flesh,” by the very substance of his being.

(*Looking Awry* 44)

When Matilde confronts the bananas—Raúl’s recklessness—she knows too much, and her cutting down and cooking and baking the bananas represents her attempt to return to a state of not knowing, of erasing the blot from her fantasy space.

Matilde relates to the bananas first as a stain, a blot on her soothing green lawn. She obsessively perceives the bananas as gaudy intrusions on her lawn. Her yard no longer suits its calming purpose; instead, the bananas are “More yellow. Ruining the lawn that Matilde had come to count on, that had soothed her” (Menéndez 58). In her first confrontation with Raúl, she merely points out the literal meaning of the bananas: “You ruined my beautiful green yard” (Menéndez 61). She targets the symbol instead of what the bananas represent: Raúl ruining their marriage.

For strengthening mental stability, which Matilde has lost, Žižek advises refusing the cliché of “forgive and forget,” insisting that we forget the event but never forgive it because the trauma can overwhelm a subject. In contrast, I argue that ethical mourning allows for the consumption of loss while simultaneously remembering it so as to avoid repeating the trauma. Cheng illustrates the need to remember past traumas. She indicates the dangers for U.S. society to bring up minority groups because, on one hand, clinging to past injustices can “reinscribe a whole history of affliction or run the risk of naturalizing that pain,” and, on the other hand, “it is surely equally harmful *not* to talk about this history of sorrow” (Cheng 14). Matilde manages to forget the pain caused by infidelity by forcefully repressing her memory, through cooking, and by disavowal, but Anselmo’s girlfriend, with her “liquid black hair” coupled with the bananas

discoloring her tranquil view, cause Matilde to “curse Raúl’s recklessness” and force her to remember.⁵⁸

Matilde obsesses over transforming the bananas since it is one of the few things she can control; she changes the bananas from symbols of Raúl’s illicit sexual enjoyment to sweets with little nutritional value. Renata Salecl examines the obsessional’s attempt at control:

The obsessional tries to master [her] desire and the desire of the Other by never giving up thinking or talking. [Her] strategy is to plug up [her] lack with signifiers and thus to avoid the object of [her] desire. Lacan also points out that the obsessional does not want to vanish or to fade as a subject, which happens when the subject is eclipsed by the object of [her] desire and jouissance. The obsessional tries to demonstrate that [she] is the master of [her] own desire and that no object is capable of making [her] vanish. (*(Per)versions of Love and Hate* 65-66)⁵⁹

Matilde cooks to validate her ability to control her own desires, and neither Adriana (Raúl’s first mistress) nor Meegan can overshadow her. She stops short of admitting her pain at losing her relationships with Raúl and her son and offers excuses for not making dinner and for avoiding confrontation. She takes her anger out on Anselmo instead, telling him, “You look like a hanger with a suit draped over it” (Menéndez 52). She regrets insulting him and admits to herself that “She wanted to run after him, explain that the comment wasn’t even meant for him. Wasn’t even meant for her [Meegan]” (Menéndez 54). Salecl’s analysis of obsessional behavior

⁵⁸ Precisely, her “memory that was almost like forgetting” reflects that her memory can never forget. She can almost forget, but the lived experience of heartbreak forces the heartbroken to remember that she is forgetting. Seeing Meegan, who resembles Adriana, Matilde is forced to recall her heartbreak, just as seeing the bananas remind her. Phenomenologically, heartbreak and mourning has that moment when the heartbroken remembers that she has forgotten about the heartbreak. For Matilde, she has the bananas and Meegan to remind her as well as those spontaneous moments of remembering the forgotten.

⁵⁹ Abbreviated from here as *POL*

can shed light on Matilde's actions: "The obsessional's speech always suggests meaning that desperately tries to cover desire, or, more precisely, the obsessional speaks and thinks compulsively only to avoid his desire" (*POL* 10). Matilde yearns to be Raúl's desire and Anselmo's as well; she replaces this longing with cooking. According to Freud, "the pleasure which is normally attached to the content of thought becomes shifted onto the act of thinking itself, and the satisfaction derived from reaching the conclusion of a line of thought is experienced as a sexual satisfaction" (qtd. in *POL* 10). Matilde derives much pleasure from cooking, especially from the act of ridding her yard of the gaudy bananas since doing so allows her to shift and repress her desire.

Matilde's mourning assumes an ethical quality when she confronts the past and experiences her repressed torment. Soon, however, the obsession becomes sinister: "She couldn't stop thinking about the bananas. They were everywhere, disordered, growing. All these years she had patted her life back into place. Now she felt that familiar falling away, the old panic of not understanding. She wanted her peace back" (66). This obsessional thought, the worry of disorder, the panic of misunderstanding exemplifies the Lacanian blot or "quilting point in its purest: a perfectly 'natural' and 'familiar' situation is denatured, becomes uncanny; loaded with horror and threatening possibility, as soon as we add to it a small supplementary feature" (*Awry* 88). The banana trees added to her lawn are precisely this small detail.

The monochrome lawn represents the smooth fantasy space⁶⁰ around which Matilde orders her universe; it serves as a method for masking her marital troubles. However, as

⁶⁰ Fantasy, for Lacan, teaches one what to desire; every subject invents this fantasy in order to know what to desire. Immediately, to this idea of fantasy, one should add that "The desire staged in fantasy is not the subject's own, but the other's desire, the desire of those around me with whom I interact" (*Žižek, HRL* 48). The "fantasy" in Lacan correlates to the never fully-present subject in poststructuralism. *Žižek* explains: "'Fantasy' designates an element which 'sticks out,' which cannot be integrated into the given symbolic structure, yet which, precisely as such, constitutes its identity" (*Enjoy* 103). In other words, the fantasy gives the subject a (absent) present consistency. Matilde's fantasy consists in her taking the place of the other's desire. When Raúl, as other, ceased desiring her, she

Socolovsky indicates, Meegan and the bananas cause a return of the repressed for Matilde; she remembers infidelity and marital problems she has been ignoring. Matilde's fantasy, therefore, collapses when Meegan and the phallic bananas ruin her fantasy space and her happiness. The fruit provokes her to isolate this blot, compelling her to confront the disavowed truth of her relationship: for thirty-seven years, she has forced herself to ignore his disrespect and disloyalty.

Shifting how she perceives the bananas allows her to acknowledge that Raúl's cheating hurts and that she must confront him to maintain order in her life. The tenuous relationship with order, Socolovsky notes, is provisional, since "the past is insistent in its haunting. The apparent harmony in the kitchen is deceptive...because her calm life has been displaced by a new presence" (244). Matilde recalls an old wedding photo, which, as Socolovsky observes, disturbs her memory. Provoked by the photo and by her growing realization that her anger toward Raúl over the banana trees has been misdirected, she confronts him as he walks in the door: "Do you remember Adriana, Raúl? Oh, she was very beautiful. You must remember her. In this photograph, she was kissing you on the cheek. Of course, in friendship. But the camera caught the stars in your eyes. I've never seen you as happy since. That smile" (Menéndez 72).

"That smile" was the first secret she swallowed and forgot, and the picture captures this first moment of Raúl's recklessness that she forced herself to ignore. Matilde's anxiety over his infidelity highlights the problem of desire outlined by Lacan. In "Love Anxieties," Salecl writes, "A woman is concerned that she does not possess the object that a man sees in her, and thus she constantly wonders what is in her more than herself; because of this uncertainty, she endlessly questions the Other's desire" (94). Matilde, however, takes the possession from Raúl, the phallic bananas, and makes them her own. She accepts the fantasy of her subjectivity and chooses not to

took the place of Anselmo's desire, and now the bananas represent her inability to fulfill her fantasy position—to be the other's desire—she attempts to rid herself of this blot in her fantasy space.

depend on an Other for her own identity. She also realizes that she holds no control over or deep knowledge about Raúl:

Matilde took a deep breath. Where was the center? What did Adriana matter now? Raúl's women, the late nights, the vacant phone calls? She looked at her husband, so round and soft. She remembered thinking, on their wedding day, that one day she would understand him. Child dreams. We live alone in our own core, flitting over the surface now and then, pretending. (Menéndez 73)

This passage reveals Matilde's epiphany that one can never understand an Other. Derrida elucidates this point: "The other is infinitely other because we never have any access to the other as such. That is why he/she is the other. This separation, this dissociation is not only a limit, but it is also the condition of the relation to the other, a non-relation as relation" ("Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility" 71). Matilde realizes that subjectivity's center, if it exists, resists penetration so that one can only skim over the surface.

Confronting her repressed and disavowed memories and accepting that she will never know Raúl allows Matilde to finally face him. In the end, her cooking becomes the occasion of her confrontation. She places a pie in front of him and implores, "Please eat...I made it just for you" (Menéndez 74). By baking and serving the pie to Raúl, she communicates that his symbolic power will no longer work on her. In this way, she ethically mourns her moribund marriage, since she preserves a connection to the past (which she now remembers clearly and no longer represses or disavows). Consuming the pie represents Raúl's acknowledgement that he has encroached upon her fantasy space. He ruins the structure that orders her life and lends her the illusion of her subjectivity; he objectively and involuntarily planted his enjoyment in her yard in an unconscious attempt to control the relationship. Matilde manipulates the symbol of his sexual

pleasure for her own enjoyment and feeds it right back to Raúl, forcing him to face the crucial role he plays in her life: they form a couple living together and should respect each other's alterity.⁶¹

Matilde exemplifies the problem in Freud's notions about how to process grief. Juan David Nasio interprets Freud this way: "In normal mourning, the withdrawal of the libido is progressively displaced onto another object" (122). As "The Perfect Fruit" demonstrates, this displacement is impossible. Initially, Matilde relocates her libidinal energy onto her son to cope with the loss of her homeland and failed relationship, but the psyche will find what it loses if that loss is not dealt with. In contrast, Máximo, in "In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd," shows how nurturing a healthy connection to the past—through memory and emotions—can foster new realms of identity and new spaces for subjectivity to bloom.

Matilde's revenge in the form of cooking bananas represents the idea of ethical mourning in that she breaks from the past (she distances herself from her husband by transforming his phallic power) but maintains a connection to it (the need to feed her son as she did in Cuba). Whereas she used to cook and care for her son to forget and deny her husband's cheating, she now cooks and serves a pie to her husband in order to remember and to show Raúl that his power is virtual. Matilde undermines both his subjective power as patriarch and the symbolic belief in power itself. Lacan explains this virtual power as the subject supposed to believe. She believes Raúl has the power as husband.

⁶¹ Žižek posits this point lucidly: after advancing the position of Lacan who states we should "avoid as much as possible any violation of the fantasy space of the other," Žižek asserts that "What confers on the other the dignity of a 'person' is not any universal-symbolic feature but precisely what is 'absolutely particular' about him, his fantasy, that part of him that we can be sure we can never share" (*Awry* 156). Raúl, then, should realize the sacrifice that Matilde made in ignoring his infidelity for the sake of their son.

Matilde's baking is therapeutic; it enables her to work through repressed memories and understand that she, herself, can realize her own power and subjectivity without Raúl. In therapy, the patient views the analyst as "the subject supposed to know," and treatment becomes an act of transference where the analyst "knows" the secret that the patient hides, which she needs to access to be cured. Matilde has worked through her symptoms, and she comes to realize that her husband's control is virtual. The pie offered to him represents this knowledge that his phallic (symbolic) power works only insofar as she allows it to, which is to say not at all since she has transformed it and enclosed it in a pastry.

One could read the story another way since the phallic symbol that holds power presented to Raúl does not change much in practical terms. She is not leaving him. Her "revolt" is a conservative one; Menéndez is not showing us a liberated Cuban woman, but nonetheless, someone who has transformed. Her mourning might end up undermined because she must live with Raúl. Thinking about how Derrida states that in mourning, the other must be incorporated; and in "Rams," he says that survivor must "carry the world of the other" so how can one mourn a lost love when that love survives and carries their own world still? The dialogue continues in contrast to mourning the dead in which the continued dialogue becomes an internal one in the survivor. In broader terms, the Cuban experience can be viewed through this kind of thwarted attempt at ethical mourning since most Cubans believed they would be back on the island in two to three years' time. Her mourning her lost marriage does not fall into a strict Derridean ethical mourning that requires an object gone forever.

Ernesto's Mourning in "The Party"

In "The Party," Menéndez uncovers the wounds and fragments of the mystery of the Cuban exile's youth in their homeland and focuses on Ernesto's mourning of that past. Several characters share traumatic loss—Ernesto, Máximo (from the earlier story), and Joaquín—including the loss of their integrity, and for Ernesto, the loss of his brother (who remains unnamed), prior to leaving Cuba. The story addresses the interstices of personal loss and political rule. Ernesto, the protagonist of "The Party," resembles Máximo in that both experience the past in the present. The difference lies in Máximo's purposeful recollection of the past, compared to Ernesto who appears, much like Matilde, forced to remember traumatic events of loss. These unique experiences with the past result from different circumstances in their lives. Máximo comes to Miami to provide a better life for his family when Cuba's politics make it difficult for him to practice his profession. He enjoys a loving relationship with his wife, and his hallucinations of her symbolize his happy memories of his past life. Ernesto's connection to the past, however, carries much guilt of surviving while his brother met a political death in Castro's prison, which hinders him from accurately recalling the past. As attachment to the past is requisite for successful ethical mourning, Ernesto's guilt undermines his ability to ethically grieve. According to the narrator, "Some recollections fade; others continue to sharpen in the shadows until one day, suddenly, they prick through the veil of years" (Menéndez 183). Similar to Matilde, Ernesto mourns as Freud suggests: he "gets over" the past, but that past seeps through his memory through the comments of the old woman who implies that Joaquín is an assassin, possibly of Ernesto's brother by denouncing him until he must confront his mourning and learn to carry the world of his lost brother.

Menéndez uses the setting of the party for Cuban exiles, gathered to welcome Joaquin as a new exile, to present Ernesto's confrontation with the past. The nameless old woman personifies ethical mourning and the need to maintain a fidelity to the lost object. She acts as a reminder for Ernesto to bear witness to his brother's death instead of forgetting it and moving on. Ernesto manages to ethically mourn after questioning the old woman and recalling fragments of the past, which he relates to those at the party.

As he interacts with the old woman, Ernesto undergoes the process of ethical mourning. Initially, he resists recalling the past. Then, unable to ignore the woman any longer, he finally reaches a state that forces him to bear witness by telling the story of his past and his deceased brother. The first line of the narrative illustrates how history and loss always impinge on Ernesto's life. She "is at his ear again, a jumble of half forgotten words until she whispers, 'But have been here long?'" Ernesto squeezes her hand and smiles before nudging past her. 'Not too long, not too long,' he says, but his thoughts are already elsewhere" (Menéndez 183). This first interaction shows that she, like his past, is present "again" even if she relates "half forgotten words." Rather than listening and deciphering what the old woman has to say, Ernesto placates her and walks away. He barely acknowledges her before his thoughts drift to something else.

This first encounter commences a series of important changes in how Ernesto relates to his past. As he speaks with another party guest, "for the first time in his life...[he] wondered how often he had been misled by a familiar gesture, fallen in love again with a memory" (Menéndez 184). Ernesto misremembers the past because he has grown comfortable in his repressed memories and because he avoids confronting past traumas. It remains unclear why this particular moment compels him to contemplate his memories.

The old woman's opening question about how long they have been "here" ignites a change in Ernesto by prompting him to scrutinize his years in exile. This thought troubles him. Before he encounters the woman again, he spends some time thinking about the past. He recalls one of the last happy memories about Máximo and Joaquin: "This is how it was before politics and leaving; this is the image Ernesto rubs like an amulet against the others" (Menéndez 185). As he contemplates the past and mourns a time before politics, he wonders if he has fallen in love with these memories again. Interestingly, there is no mention at this point in the narrative about the imprisonment or death of his brother. Instead, Ernesto mourns a time before these traumas. Jeanne Riou comments on the idea of mourning as a haunting of "occupied time" that can apply to Ernesto, who mourns a time in order to deny the mourning of a person. Riou discusses how accepting loss results in something else lingering, expressing, "More than simply a recollection, this memory might be described in phenomenological terms as intentionality" (45). This intentionality of loss gets directed to a time before the time of loss so that "looking back is therefore an emotionally-laden rather than neutral activity" (45). He denies mourning his brother and focuses on the era before political change, leaving him uncertain of his place "in time." Riou describes libidinal energy, occupied with loss, as "a form of haunting" (49). The time he wishes to remember, before he caused his brother's death and the revolution imprisoned Joaquin, haunts Ernesto.

Ernesto's mourning evolves with each encounter at the party, bringing him closer to his forgotten memories. In his next encounter with the old woman, for instance, Ernesto attempts to ignore the past again, but their third meeting finds him unable to do so any longer. The old woman follows him relentlessly: "Across the room, the old woman who follows him everywhere holds her hand out as if to get his attention, show him that she's still there. Ernesto makes a

motion with his head, then turns back to Hortencia” (Menéndez 188). Unperturbed, the woman finds Ernesto in the shadows and confronts him: “The old woman finds him in the half-light under a paper lantern. She wants to know who has brought her here. She whispers so as not to offend the family: ‘Tell me again who is it who has died’” (Menéndez 188). Ernesto’s first reaction is to ignore her again and walk away, “But instead of walking, he leans back towards the old woman and talks directly into her ear. ‘No one has died, Señora. No one. Only Joaquin has finally come out of Cuba’” (Menéndez 188-89). Her question reminds Ernesto that, while the party is gathered to welcome Joaquín, his own brother *has* died. Furthermore, her query forces Ernesto to recall his and Joaquin’s role in Ernesto’s brother’s death. The woman reminds Ernesto of Joaquin’s nickname, *El asesino* (the assassin); therefore, Ernesto’s answer that “no one has died” is false. Many people have died, and obviously, some have died by Joaquin’s doing, including Ernesto’s brother. Ernesto confronts his guilt even as the narrative fails to clarify how he and Joaquin influenced his brother’s death. We learn that “his guilt is so old that he is comfortable with it; it is a warm hole” (Menéndez 188). However, the text does not disclose the precise source of Ernesto’s guilt and never names his brother. These absences represent the lost world that Ernesto must now carry within, a world nearly impossible to share because it survives only in Ernesto’s memory and internal dialogues he continues with his lost mother and brother. Limited to Ernesto’s viewpoint, the narrative demonstrates how mourning evolves from getting over the lost object to keeping a fidelity to it through ethical mourning.

The old woman’s address to Ernesto begins his process of recalling the past trauma he has failed to confront directly. Past images “bubbled into his consciousness as if his collected memories had grown too vast to be contained” (Menéndez 185). She reminds him that “someone” has died, provoking Ernesto’s repressed memories to surface. Her question forces

Ernesto to remember not the exact truth of the past, but its affective trauma. Žižek explains the purpose of recalling trauma: “The point is not to arrive at factual truth of some long-forgotten event—what is effectively at stake here is, quite literally, the *recollection* of the past, i.e., the way this remembrance of the past bears on the subject’s *present* position of enunciation, how it transforms the very place from which the subject speaks (is spoken),” and when the subject comes to understand this forgotten past and incorporates this knowledge, they are transformed (*Enjoy* 37).⁶² During the next confrontation with the woman, Ernesto’s memory remains inaccurate; nonetheless, she awakens past events that he carries with him in the present. The old woman strolls through the restaurant and stops at an areca tree, musing, “In Cuba...we used to put iron spikes through the guanabana trees. They gave the biggest fruit that way” (Menéndez 192-193). Her distorted memory confuses areca tress with guanabanas, even though they are quite different. This mistake mirrors the distortions in Ernesto’s memory. He, too, cannot get his stories straight. His inability to properly recall the last good time the trio enjoyed stems from the conflicting emotions of the guilt clouding his memory and the old woman’s question about who has died. As Ernesto remembers the story, the three were illegally capturing lobsters on the beach when the police showed up (or someone from the hotel). Ernesto remarks, “Thank God for Joaquin.” Máximo corrects him, and the two offer varying narratives:

“What do you mean, Joaquin? Thank God for you.”

“But Joaquin faked an epileptic attack.”

⁶² Additionally, we can begin to see the overlap this kind of ethical mourning has with testimonio. By bearing witness to the tragic event, the subject becomes transformed, which shares that goal with testimonio. Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez state, “Voicing the experience provides a kind of active journey from torture, oppression, or marginalization that ultimately leads the speaker or writer to become the empowered survivor.”

“It was you who had an attack,” Máximo says and laughs. “A real one. Asthma or something. You stopped breathing and we had to get the hotel medic to give you a shot of something.”

Ernesto stops and looks at Máximo. “You have it wrong.”

“You have it wrong, my friend,” Máximo says.

[. . .]

Ernesto shakes his head. Máximo cheery and businesslike. And for him to have forgotten the details of the last good memories between the three of them. It wasn't like him at all. (Menéndez 191)

In Ernesto's memory, he casts Joaquin as the hero who gets them out of trouble. Arguably, this unconscious rewriting of history serves to placate Ernesto's suppressed feelings of guilt over celebrating the man who bears partial responsibility for his brother's death. Indeed, Ernesto's presence at the party surprises many in attendance. Hortencia comments, “I didn't expect you here” (Menéndez 186). Raúl tells him, “I think it was good of you to be here” (Menéndez 192). The atmosphere of the party is awkward because Joaquin is an ambiguous figure, who was responsible—though no one blames him—for Ernesto's brother's death. Since, as the text later reveals, Joaquin admits some responsibility for it, Ernesto's memory fails to accurately recall exactly how his brother died in order to welcome Joaquin to Miami. Salecl states that “For Lacan, memory primarily has to do with not remembering the trauma, the real on which the subject centers his or her very being. When we tell our stories, it is the point at which we touch the real that our words fail, but fail so as to always come back to the trauma without being able to articulate it” (*POL* 86). Ernesto's memory of the last time the three men were together permits

him to remember Joaquin as someone who helped instead of assisting in jailing Ernesto's brother.

The old woman enables Ernesto to ethically mourn. Ernesto peers more deeply at his memories, and when he sees the old woman standing by the areca, he thinks of his mother, increasing his willingness to explore the past. Ernesto often imagines scenes that are "very much like a dream. It happened more and more," and these dream-like memories "bubbled into consciousness," indicating repressed memories forcing their way to the surface (Menéndez 185). This moment, in which the old woman reminds him of his mother, conjures another dream-like vision, and he is "too tired to hold back the images in his mind" (Menéndez 197). His mother keeps vigil by gazing out of the window, waiting for his brother to return; Ernesto knows that he died in jail but is too scared to tell her. Instead, he states, "It all happened so long ago... You have to forget it now," and she responds, "Your brother is only away on a trip to the capital... He will return thin and hungry and I will feed him" (Menéndez 198). The exchange highlights Ernesto's inability to ethically mourn at this point. He wants to forget those injuries that happened long ago, and he has failed to tell his mother. He shares her pain but he reacts to it differently, by attempting to forget, repress, and conceal it in his unconscious.⁶³

Menéndez thus gets at some complicated ways in which people went into exile: Ernesto left and his mother stayed, motivated by the same reasons. In facing the death of his brother, Ernesto reevaluates his own identity because his brother was part of his world; with his brother dead, so too is this part of his world. Ernesto has denied this death (as a part of him, as a world

⁶³ Sara Ahmed attests to the need to recall past injuries that cause pain, stating, "forgetting would be a repetition of the violence or injury. To forget would be to repeat the forgetting that is already implicated in the fetishisation of the wound. Our task might instead be to 'remember' how the surfaces of bodies (including the bodies of communities [...]) came to be wounded in the first place" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 33). In Ernesto's case, forgetting doubly causes a repetition of the injury since Ernesto is responsible for the injury in the first place.

he must carry). In traditionally mourning his brother and getting over the loss, Ernesto has failed to confront death, which confuses his identity and memory. However, in conjuring old memories, Ernesto must reconsider the role he has played in his family's pain. The old woman serves as the agent who provokes his memories to "prick through the veil of years" (Menéndez 183).

Clifton Spargo's analysis of Levinas can help inform Ernesto's mourning and his problems with memory. According to Spargo, for Levinas, the *other's* death ruptures a person's ability to cling to a stable identity, in contrast to Martin Heidegger's notion of using the "mineness" of death to establish identity. Unlike Heidegger, Levinas' analysis of death is not the personal project of the ego. The other's death, more so than one's own, shapes identity. Spargo highlights this distinction to stress the value of Levinas' social implications for death. Using these approaches, we can infer that Ernesto's memories fade and become distorted because the death of his brother has ruptured his "being"—his identity—in such a way that he still mourns the loss (losing his brother feels like his own death) and his memories are less factual recollections of the past than they are fanciful imaginings.

These interactions with the old woman and the surfacing of his repressed memories prompt Ernesto to start to try to bear witness for his brother. By confronting his past and sharing it, Ernesto opens himself up to community since he realizes that his suffering, while unique and personal to him, also constitutes a shared wound for those around him.⁶⁴ Ernesto connects to his community by confronting his mourning and memories through storytelling. By acknowledging

⁶⁴ Clifton Spargo argues how mourning transcends personal attachments and opens the mourner to more general affects of suffering. Spargo differentiates his idea of mourning from Freud's "therapeutic detachment" (39). Similar to Freud, Spargo states that "healthy" or non-pathological mourning develops into a mood that swivels one outward. He advances, "mourning performs a dislocation within memory, what Levinas also refers to as a de-posing of identity" (60). Spargo reads mourning the same as Levinas's traumatic account of subjectivity since "the basic posture of vulnerability Levinas locates at the center of ethics," informs ethical subjects (36).

his sense of loss, he repudiates his previous emotional detachment and accepts the work of ethical mourning.

Once Ernesto opens up and begins to share his pain, he becomes highly aware of language. Socolovsky believes that:

Like Máximo in the title story, Ernesto is the storyteller who loses all desire to connect through language as he realizes that narrative only creates alienation, isolation, and the crumbling of any supposed center to his Cuban memory of self. This loss of a Cuban center indicates a transition from the comforts of nostalgia—which those around Ernesto and Máximo seem to have—to the nothingness of estrangement. Ernesto, then, rejects language entirely. (242)

While I agree with Socolovsky that these two characters have transitioned away from nostalgia, I, again, oppose the idea that it sends them into an abyss of separation. Ernesto realizes, as Máximo does, that maintaining a connection to the past through ethical mourning fosters healthy community networks. However, Ernesto also understands the dangers of language:

Through his old thoughts, Ernesto hears Raúl connecting words without meaning: tough times, idealism, the struggle, disappointment. And Matilde with the aggressive empathy of powerless woman following right behind him, scattering pretty words like rice at a wedding. All around him, the party swells with phrases and pieces of words, snatches of breath and insults and declarations of love. (Menéndez 201)

Nonetheless, Ernesto does not reject language entirely, since he acknowledges its importance in expressing his mourning. In fact, he admits after the above passage, “My brother died in jail” (Menéndez 201). This declaration, I believe, marks Ernesto’s transition from the

repression of trauma to the epiphany that he must work through his pain by sharing his story and bearing witness. Ernesto hears the partygoers using empty words “through his old thoughts” (Menéndez 201).⁶⁵ Translating the events into words totalizes the other, and Ernesto fears that using words with no meaning to tell his story will not do justice to his brother’s memory: “Suddenly, Ernesto is weary of language, weary of words and the memories they try to trap and kill for viewing. He is tired of all the layers in a sentence, the phrases that live only to conceal” (Menéndez 201). Ernesto suspects that telling his story might involve words that can be misconstrued; he doubts his memory of events and feels guilty for his role in his brother’s death.

Ernesto’s distrust of language manifests in his tendency to refer to himself in the third person and in the manner he wishes to tell his mother what happened. The story Ernesto narrates is about Ernesto himself. We find out that Ernesto’s brother “was very involved in the movement” and that “his own brother began typing up leaflets that he didn’t like, this friend—well, this friend called on Joaquin” (Menéndez 200).⁶⁶ This phrasing is ambiguous. Either Ernesto’s brother opposed the pro-Castro leaflets, outs himself by telling Joaquin, and is imprisoned, or Ernesto’s brother wrote anti-Castro leaflets and, concerned for his brother’s

⁶⁵ Derrida wonders about the language of mourning: “There is thus no metalanguage for the language in which a work of mourning is at work. This is also why one should not be able to say anything about the work of mourning, anything about this subject, since it cannot become a theme, only another experience of mourning that comes to work over the one who intends to speak” (*By Force of Mourning* 172). Language cannot get above and beyond mourning. Derrida suggest that the person who works at mourning comes to realize “that mourning is interminable. Inconsolable. Irreconcilable” (*By Force* 172).

⁶⁶ The narrative has an ambiguity that might be a mistake or might be purposively done in lieu of Ernesto’s unreliable memory. Putting together Ernesto’s dialogue makes it sound as if Ernesto, himself was writing leaflets that his brother did not like: “This friend we [Ernesto and Joaquin] had, he’s dead now. He died very young. But as a young man, he was very involved in the movement. So much so that when his own brother began typing up leaflets that he didn’t like, this friend—well, this friend called on Joaquin, you see. Joaquin was rising in the system pretty quickly... This friend only went to Joaquin for advice. Joaquin went to another friend for advice. And so on. No one blamed Joaquin, especially since a few months later, the revolution came for him as well” (200). The manner in which the rest of the narrative goes, it sounds as if Ernesto’s brother was writing anti-Castro leaflets. Ernesto worried about his brother, asked Joaquin for advice on how to protect his brother, but the anti-revolutionary activity made its way back to the wrong person, and Ernesto’s brother went to jail and died. Ernesto never tells his mother that he is responsible for his brother’s imprisonment and subsequent death, and his inability to tell her, as well as his role in his brother’s death, causes a guilt in him that hinders his mourning.

safety, Ernesto seeks Joaquin's advice that ends in the brother's jailing. What is certain is that both Ernesto and Joaquin caused Ernesto's brother's imprisonment and death. Ernesto expresses his guilt when he wonders "if someday he would see his mother again and tell her the truth and kill both her sons for her at once" (Menéndez 201). This thought can be read in the symbolic: by confessing to his mother, Ernesto will be disowned, dead to her. He may wish for his own death as payment for his brother's. Writing on forgiveness, Derrida supplies a useful approach for understanding this scene as Ernesto's apology. As Deutscher explains, "True forgiveness would have to forgive the unforgivable" (*How to Read Derrida* 79). Ernesto's actions are unforgivable in this sense, so his mother's forgiveness would be impossible because she is not around to hear it and because of what is at stake in forgiveness.

Another way to analyze his remark stems from the death he faces at admitting the death of his brother. Judith Butler argues that in losing, we come to realize our ties to the thing lost. She states that mourning changes us, and that:

maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. (22)

The death of both sons has already occurred because Ernesto has lost an integral part of himself, and now that he can confront his mourning, he realizes that their mother has already lost both sons when one has died and one has emigrated.

Thinking of the title, one could argue that the party represents Ernesto's (and most likely Joaquin's) changing attitude towards the communist party in Cuba. Many Cubans supported

Castro's coup of Batista, and they hoped that Castro would, as he promised, reinstate Cuba's constitution. These supporters were the first to be disillusioned, and in many cases, were the first to flee or be imprisoned for their dissent. In this sense, Ernesto becomes tired of the "party." In the final confrontation with the old woman, Menéndez exhibits Ernesto's transformation from traditional mourning to ethical mourning. The ambiguous narrative that refuses to reveal any clear dates or political alliances leaves the story of Ernesto confronting his mourning. The old woman, once again, pulls at Ernesto's sleeve, and whispers "Tell me again why I'm here" (Menéndez 202). Ernesto, rather than giving an empty response, a nod of the head, or ignoring her, "turns to the old woman" and replies, "You see, Señora... We've been in this country for almost forty years" (Menéndez 202). He faces the woman and begins to tell the story of the exile community. He does so in order to narrate the story of his brother. More than likely, the story he offers the old woman will begin with Castro's student movement, since the woman, and all of the people at the party, are there to welcome Joaquin home, and in many ways, Joaquin's story begins with the student movement. Ernesto will repeat the story he just related to Mirta and the others about Joaquin, and that story will lead, again, to his brother's death. Ernesto thus bears witness to the political and historical traumas he endured, as well as the personal ones. His capacity for sharing this narrative with the old woman reveals his acceptance of the ethical call to bear witness and to ethically mourn his brother. In this respect, he joins Máximo and Matilde in completing a process that takes him from ineffective Freudian mourning that involves forgetting memories of and attachment to lost objects to ethical mourning that enables them to live more authentically and move forward in their lives by acknowledging past events, pain, and betrayal.

Menéndez leaves the reader with three stories that examine ethnicity, ethical mourning, and affects in nuanced manners. For Máximo, jokes take on a form of bearing witness—of a

testimonial—to a brutal dictatorship. He moves from dealing with the loss of homeland to dealing with the death of his wife. In facing such tragedies, he reveals the importance of ethical mourning. For Matilde, Menéndez shows the struggle of Cubanidad—of context and the gendered and exile situation—in mourning. She struggles to confront her lost love, her husband's cheating, because she has little recourse in leaving her husband and living on her own with her son. Her mourning, then, entails her creative act of cooking that forces a confrontation with her loss. For Ernesto, the reader cannot know how fully he will confront his mourning. Menéndez leaves us on the cusp of discovering Joaquin, how he will act with Ernesto, what will be revealed. His manner of conversing with the old woman gestures to a positive enactment of ethical mourning since he will share the story of brutal dictatorship and the death of his brother.

CHAPTER TWO: “AN IMPASSIONED AND ORIGINAL PAINTING”: LOVE AND MOURNING IN ELÍAS MIGUEL MUÑOZ’S *THE GREATEST PERFORMANCE*

Rosa and Mario: Excluded

Chapter one argues Ana Menéndez’s characters practice Derridean ethical mourning as they cope with loss, preparing them to cope with future losses as well. I analyze how Menéndez tends to structure her stories on the cusp of a new discovery, and that we can read those stories as engaging ethical mourning, that is, a process of indefinite mourning rather than a finished situation. The three stories I discuss end with a kind of suspense, waiting for the next piece to unfold (Máximo after his outburst at Domino Park, Matilde after she confronts her husband, and Ernesto after he bears witness to the old lady). Meanwhile, Elías Miguel Muñoz’s work explores the lives of two narrators who are both part of the Cuban LGBTQ⁶⁷ community and are, therefore, outcast within the exile Cuban community because they fall short of constructed standards of Cubanidad; Rosa, in contrast to Matilde, is not the feminine model of a proper Cuban woman who cooks for her husband, and Mario is not the simulacra of Ricky Ricardo. Muñoz’s novel further exemplifies Derridean ethical mourning. Muñoz depicts two homosexual Cubans, one an exile who left after Castro’s revolution, and one a refugee who left during the Mariel boatlift, named Rosa and Mario, who are excluded from the conservative Cuban culture due to their nonnormative sexualities and from American culture due to their ethnic background.

⁶⁷ For a more sustained look at the intersection of queer theory and Latinx culture see: Michael Hames García and Ernesto Martínez’s *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader* (2011); Sandra Soto’s *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer. The De-Mastery of Desire* (2010) as well as her chapter “Queerness” in *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature* (2012); and José A. Quiroga’s *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (2000) to name just a few.

Muñoz creates two characters who grow up apart but end up becoming friends and creating a shared history together, lending intimacy and interiority to the text. The two characters share their separate narratives with each other first, then find ways to interweave them. They blend their histories together and interject each other into their pasts. Rosa, for instance, pretends that her childhood pictures capture Mario in them, that they were friends growing up. The text follows Rosa from her sexual awakening in Cuba to exile, first in Spain, then in California. Simultaneously, the narrative portrays Mario from his childhood in Cuba, where he was abused by his father and molested by an adult, to his exile in America and his history of lovers. The two become friends in California, where Rosa helps Mario through his struggles and eventual death from AIDS.

In a Derridean stance, Muñoz positions his characters' longing for homeland as a forbidden impossible past that must be remembered for ethical mourning to occur. Furthermore, the stories feature Derrida's idea of carrying the world of the other (of continuing a dialogue with the deceased other). In retelling their stories, the narrator-protagonists imaginatively place each other in their past to illustrate how loss of an other equates to a loss in oneself. Derrida contends that ethical mourning employs poetic language to bear witness to lost loved ones without immersing the work of mourning. Ylce Irizarry states that "The whole novel is a conversation between two people without a shared past who create a shared present and future" (*Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction* 183). Arguably, by sharing their histories, the two now share a past which allows them to create their shared presents and futures even if only through storytelling and poetic language. Rosa's mourning of Mario reveals how poetic experiences can be healing and life sustaining, as Rosa uses elements of poetry to bear witness to a lost loved one. This experience allows her to combine her story with Mario's so that he becomes part of her life, as

seen in the poem they write together that combines their names into “Mariposa” which translates as butterfly in English, and hints at the word’s use as a homophobic slur. Mario also partakes in his own mourning with Rosa, which helps her through his loss.

The novel ends with both reconstructed into a combination of their names “Mariposa,” an image that evokes the transformative power of their friendship and their loss. Through their friendship, they share their stories unfettered by societal condemnation. With each other, they can embrace their ethnicity and sexuality. The butterfly represents a new life after transformation, an apt symbol for Derridean mourning in which one person dies but lives on in the other, who is left to carry their world. Mario and Rosa represent how initial losses can serve as preparation for successfully mourning future ones.

Men don’t sit that way, shit: Mario’s Identity

Mario’s identity as a Cuban, male homosexual, forbidden in his culture and his home with his macho father, means that he must repress his sense of self and, in a manner, mourn the closeted piece of his identity. Therefore, Mario becomes practiced at mourning as a young effeminate boy in Cuba, which prepares him for additional losses. At home, his father’s rejection of his homosexuality, which was often abusive, complicates his relationship with his identity⁶⁸. In a sense, he loses a piece of his identity. His earliest memories center on loss, and Mario represses his emotional response to grief. One of his first recollections is of his father’s cruel test of his young son by abandoning him in a crowd to test his manliness: “People go by. They don’t

⁶⁸ Sara Ahmed speaks to this situation. We can say that Mario, especially in these early recollections, comes to know himself as a cause of unhappiness to his father. Ahmed explains “To arrive into the world is to inherit the world that you arrive into. The family is a point of inheritance, shaping what is proximate to the child. The queer child fails to inherit the family by reproducing its line. This failure is affective; you become an unhappiness-cause” (*The Promise of Happiness* 95).

notice my tears. Where's my Pipo" (Muñoz 29). A woman helps Mario find his father, who says "that it was all a prank" and then imposes the typical machismo attitude, telling his son "Tears are for sissies" (Muñoz 29). Dennis J. Berenschot observes how "In *The Greatest Performance* the patriarchal 'Pipo,' Mario's father, subjects his son to a cruel socialization in order to force him into a performance pattern that is acceptable to Cuban society" (*(Re)Writing Performance: Exile and Identity in Cuban Literature* 81). The abuse, and thus suppression of identity, becomes worse. The most striking example occurs during a meal when Mario blows on his soup and tries to get comfortable by straddling his chair. His father reacts violently: "He pulls the tablecloth and my soup spills. He throws a piece of bread at me. He pinches the inside of my thighs, hits my chest. He grabs me by the hair and pokes my stomach with his fingers. 'Men don't sit that way, shit!' he yells. 'Only broads sit that way, so they can air out their pussies!'" (Muñoz 35). Greg Mullin⁶⁹ observes "The pinching and poking, forms of sexualized violence, enforce on the boy the stark realities of Cuban patriarchal heteronormativity. The merest hint of effeminacy is treated as treachery to masculinity, and traitors are subjected to the kinds of violence suffered by women" ("Seeking Asylum" 153-154). His father then enters Mario's room, destroys all his drawings, and shoves his face into the spilled colors on the floor, commanding Mario, "Eat it all. Eat it" (Muñoz 35). The abusive treatment by his father causes Mario to mourn the repressed pieces of his identity, which becomes informed by what is not there. According to Karen Christian, "As he [Mario] grows up, Mario's sense of self is heavily influenced by official discourses that operate to criminalize his desire and to render him invisible, cloaked in a shroud of secrecy" (71). Mario must conceal his homosexual inclinations to win his father's acceptance,

⁶⁹ Greg Mullins article "Seeking Asylum: Literary Reflections on Sexuality, Ethnicity, and Human Rights" explores the issue of LGBTQ asylum seekers and the persecution, both societal and state sanctioned suffered by writers like Reinaldo arenas and characters like Rosa and Mario.

which his father withholds nonetheless; this repression causes Mario intense pain. As Irizarry contends, “[Pipo] is acting as a heterosexual male disciplining his son’s body. His conformity, though, is not without consequences to others; it imposes power over and pain onto his son” (*Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction* 188). His mourning process centers on reconnecting with the repressed aspects of his personality and finding ways to transcend his pain.

Mario’s identity is further strained after Hernando, the local pedophile, rapes and belittles him for assuming the feminine role in their sexual relations. Mario trusts Hernando, who promised never to ridicule him: “He promises me he’ll never tell on me. He’ll never say, Yeah, look at him, he’s a faggot and he gives me his ass” (Muñoz 36). After Mario ends their abusive relationship, Hernando does just that by indicating that he could have been more violent. As William Deaver points out, “Hernando is a real man because he penetrates rather than submits. He is not a homosexual according to the Latin American definition because he does not commit gender treason” (440). But Hernando’s scorn makes Mario feel that he, Mario, must be guilty of such treason. Mario grows even more confused and alienated after a classmate on whom he has a crush cruelly rejects him. Antonio, the crush, tells Mario, “I told you to get out of the way. Go find yourself another macho to fuck you. You faggot” (Muñoz 41). These experiences compel Mario to further suppress this part of his identity, and he becomes practiced at having to conceal pieces of his identity and his past. Ylce Irizarry points out that much of Mario’s narrative reflects his abuse and the confusion this reflection causes for his identity. She states, “Mario’s abusers’ recognition of the boy’s femininity becomes a site for the boy’s questioning, as a boy and as a man, whether his sexuality was natural or created by his father’s lack of affection and sexual deviance and/or the rapes Mario experiences” (*Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction: The New Memory of Latinidad* 187). Thus, Mario learns through various male figures in his life that his

homosexuality must be hidden. Rosa recalls when Mario was propositioned by a barber's son, Paquito, who warns Mario, "Never be a tattletale. . . No one here's gonna treat you bad for being a queer. But if you're a tattletale you'll get killed" (Muñoz 24).⁷⁰ In the wake of this abuse, Mario eventually recognizes that to survive, he must repudiate the part of his Cuban identity that vilifies his sexuality.

After fleeing Cuba, Mario copes with his loss—of identity, homeland, and family—by performing roles he believes society expects of him. He downplays his "Cubanidad"—the cultural, political, and public aspects of being Cuban—because machismo was never part of his personal identity; for Mario, his father models the ideal Cuban man, teaching his son to normalize abuse and cruelty. While he struggles with his queer identity in Cuba, in America, he finds people who accept it. He downplays his ethnicity, however, to fit in better with his new friends. Mario often embraces how he looks "more Gringo than Cuban" (Muñoz 122). Thus, to finally embrace the sexual aspect of his identity, he must forgo his ethnic and political heritage. He changes for his lovers, meaning he still cannot be himself. When visiting a Puerto Rican lover in New York, Mario wonders, "Does he really not mind the fact that I'm a Cuban worm, a traitor to the Revolution? Does he not mind that I don't give a fuck about politics?" (Muñoz 100). In other recollections, Mario concentrates on his sexual history but not familial roots, colorism, and political apathy, as these aspects of himself matter less now in America. Christian asserts that Mario projects an image of the "non-latino" gay identity by eliminating family background and

⁷⁰ This anecdote Rosa shares might not be Mario, but a friend she inserts into the story of her history as Mario. The narrative jumps from Rosa and Mario telling each other stories from their past, and them interlacing those stories and putting them in that time and space to share their histories. Nonetheless, the sentiment is one that Mario knows. His sexuality must be downplayed, not discussed. This sharing of stories is important for Rosa and Mario since they cannot share their grief with their families, they are left alone. Sara Ahmed makes the point that when families ignore the lived experience of queer family members, then the queer family member is left without family. Ahmed reminds us that "When queer grief is not recognized, because queer relationships are not recognized, then you become 'nonrelatives,' you become unrelated, you become not. You are alone in your grief. You are left waiting" (*The Promise of Happiness* 109). Mario, however, has Rosa, so they manage their grief together.

his Cuban past. Mario admits to performing for his lovers, but after recalling a night of passion with a lover, he feels “[t]ired of performing,” which he will repeat later (Muñoz 70). He overcompensates his loss of Cubanidad with sex.

Mario’s homosexuality means compromising his identity in Cuba, but in the U.S., he copes with his lost past by painting about his memories.⁷¹ As he ponders his subject, old voices interject: “Each splinter, each drop of cement, lumber falling, the sound of the saw, the nails that are being drawn in . . . *No son of mine is gonna be a faggot!* The poster hanging inside one of the neighboring living rooms, I will draw it” (Muñoz 67). The scene he draws represents the intrusion of his father’s voice and Mario’s persistent struggle to embrace both his sexuality and culture. Following the opening of this chapter, however, Mario celebrates his homosexual lifestyle: he goes on dates, has sex with different men, and attends parties. His emotions vacillate between relishing his gay relationships and grieving the memories he leaves behind. In one fragment, he cannot sleep because as he notes, he is “thinking too much lately.” He then realizes that his lover reminds him of himself in his youth. Mario remembers his home and Christmas: “Feliz Navidad at home with pork roast and black beans. How long ago was it?” (Muñoz 72). He processes these thoughts through painting because, while he downplays being Cuban for the Anglo gays he has sex with, he fully embraces his identity as an artist. Mario flirts (and

⁷¹ In what the reader can assume is America because the last Mario chapter had his father working at camps in order to get out of Cuba, and the following scene takes place in fragments that include watching Federico Fellini’s *Satyricon*, a film composed of fragments that was released in 1969. The movie’s themes reflect what we read—fragments that reflect fragmented identity. Furthermore, the movie represents a pre-Christian attraction to bodily pleasures. As I have been arguing, Mario denies his Cuban past in order to embrace his homosexual future; one in which his identity rest on his sexuality more than on his ethnicity. Eileen Lanouette Hughes quotes Fellini’s view of the film’s sexuality: “(The Romans) were much more open and free. There was no moral judgment. To be homosexual was just part of sex. All our information comes to us from the Catholic Church...They have nothing of the Catholic desire and fear of sex, which is considered impure... You are always taught sex is impure but you know it is a lie. So, in this pagan world, you are obliged to see sex with desire but cut off from the Catholic education” (Hughes 15 and 131). These ideas on sex, particularly homosexual sex, reflect the sexuality that Mario will come to embrace in America.

eventually seduces) a friend's lover, Jimmy, who asks Mario, "How do you make your living?" to which Mario replies, "I paint" (Muñoz 70). Through painting, Mario connects with a piece of himself that he represses in Cuba because it was considered effeminate.

After losing his family, homeland, and cultural heritage, Mario begins to mourn by manipulating his identity and his past in his fantasies. For instance, he describes a revenge fantasy that mixes sexual indulgence with Hernando's rape, the first man with whom he had sex, with the pain of being abused, which provokes Mario's desire to avenge himself on Hernando.

This moment of imagination illustrates how Mario chooses to grapple with his past pain. He recalls how his past with Hernando affects him: "Blackmailed into committing a crime against my body. Eager and reluctant; threatened and forced, curious; feeling sinful, self-conscious and spiteful; embittered, impassioned, prematurely aware of my human form, I went back to him" (Muñoz 121). The narrative remains ambiguous about whether or not Hernando is actually present to ignite Mario's revenge fantasy. Something, however, drags up old memories of abuse and neglect. To cope with this hurt, Mario contemplates all the ways he would torture Hernando. Lazaro Lima looks at how this revenge fantasy begins with Mario biting Hernando's penis. He explains "Marito wishes to mark and inflict pain upon the abuser's body, as his body was pained, filled, and emptied by his abuser's intrusive phallus. But this time the orifice has a bite: the very mouth that bore witness and eventually related the terror of his rape is now a writing instrument with teeth, in both deed and action" (*The Latino Body* 140). The fantasy ends with Mario cutting him, thinking, "I pull back your [Hernando's] skin like this, all the way back, look how it moves, and then your insides swell up" (Muñoz 123). This sadistic fantasy contrasts with an earlier one in which an angel takes his pacifier, demonstrating how Mario manages to exert better control over the story of his life. Žižek explains a function of fantasy that can help

elucidate this revenge scene. Fantasy can protect one from the Real that becomes too much to encounter. Mario's fantasy of revenge, while only a fantasy, is the raw Real. Žižek posits, "if what we experience as 'reality' is structured by fantasy, and if fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real, then reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real" (*HRL* 57). In other words, the fantasy helps one cope. If in a dream, someone kills a person and wakes up relieved that the dream was not "real," Žižek would state that the dream is, in fact, real, and that a person merely wears a mask to conform to society. In this sense, the fantasy to make Hernando suffer is Mario's real identity or desire that, because of society, he cannot realize. The fantasy is the Real that Mario encounters: his desire for violent revenge against the man who abused him.

This moment becomes one of the first in which Mario successfully manipulates his fantasy world to process his trauma. He manages to enact the revenge he desires, whereas his childhood fantasy finds him impotent. The fantasy in which an angel takes his pacifier and refuses to return it ends in frustration. Mario strikes the angel to get his pacifier back, "but the angel d[oes not] obey [him]" (Muñoz 30). He learns to showcase or obscure components of his identity: his homosexuality or his Cubanidad, for instance. In America, Mario copes with his exclusion from the dominant, white English-speaking society by reshaping his reality through fantasy and by adjusting his identity to fit into society.

The childhood imaginations of Rosa and Mario illustrate the importance of controlling one's personal narrative to fit in and avoid prejudice. To the extent that Mario successfully exercises this control, he is practicing Derridean mourning. Additionally, as Irizarry points out "Muñoz is less concerned with violence between men and women than he is with the violence between women in lesbian and mother/daughter relationships and between men in homosexual

and father/son relationships. The repercussions of domestic violence and pedophilia become the sites for the change in their story: Rosa and Mario's new memories of their sexuality"

(*Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction: The New Memory of Latinidad* 184). Also, we can interpret that their stories change because they become part of each other's lives, which as Derrida states creates a change and dialogue that enacts the melancholy that one day one friend will survive the other one and be tasked with carrying those stories. This sharing and remembering require dealing with the past. Mario deals with his past not by forgetting it, but by embracing a new narrative featuring his multiple lovers. His new life story eventually unites all parts of his identity and includes his time with Rosa.

These stories can be interpreted as fetishes that help both protagonists (especially Mario) cope with the reality of their world. Žižek explains how fetishes work when describing the case of a man whose wife dies; the man survives unscathed, able to discuss her death from breast cancer and his loss with little emotion. The man's friends realize that he always carries his wife's pet hamster with him: "his fetish, the embodied disavowal of her death" (*Enjoy X*). When the hamster dies months later, the man breaks down and enters the hospital with severe depression. The stories Rosa and Mario tell operate in a similar fashion; they allow Mario to filter through his traumas as an effeminate boy enduring his father's abuse. According to Žižek, "In this sense, a fetish can play a very constructive role of allowing us to cope with the harsh reality: fetishists are not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thoroughly 'realist,' able to accept the way things effectively are—since they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to conceal the full impacts of reality" (*Enjoy X*). Indeed, Mario accepts reality through stories and fantasy. He uses fantasy—the stories he shares with Rosa—to reinvent and confront the violence he has suffered.

Mario's performances reflect his need to assimilate in the American gay community and to survive until he grows "[t]ired of performing" (Muñoz 70). He then begins to use fantasy to deal constructively with his past and mourn his losses. At a Halloween party, he realizes he has been "[n]ourishing [his] fantasies," which has left him empty because these fantasies have excluded pieces of his identity (Muñoz 124). As his vampire costume connotes, Mario has been feeding off other people so that he has no identity that truly reflects him. Christian comments on Mario's lusty transformations: "By all appearances, his Cuban cultural background is erased completely in his 'performances' with numerous lovers. Mario perceives their expectations of him and strives to fulfill these by immersing himself in 1970s white gay culture" (61). Thus, Mario grieves parts of his identity, his past, and his homeland. However, he does manage to carry those lost pieces within him without allowing them to define him, as Derrida recommends for the ethical mourner. Notably, he subtly mourns his lovers who have helped him find his place in the world. Butler suggests how these losses help shape the survivor, stating "If I lose you...then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I, without you?" And then she states, "I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well" (22). Loss defines identity even when the lost object is homeland or ideals. In accomplishing ethical mourning, Mario realizes how his losses define him.

Mario's epiphany recognizes how he has molded himself into a sexual identity that eradicates his cultural one. Significantly, he affirms, "I had never stopped acting my part while I was there, impersonating the frightful blood sucker like a true diva" (Muñoz 125). This realization prompts a turning point. Until now, he has assimilated to Anglo-American society by denying his cultural roots, and he has defined himself mostly through his sexuality, which means accepting an imbalance between being Cuban and his assimilation as "white." His ability to feed

off his lover's energy and culture sustains Mario as he learns how to construct narratives to his advantage. At the Halloween party, he runs outside, "[d]esperate for air and desperate for life" (Muñoz 125). He recalls how no one noticed his insecurities, while "Behind the suave veneer there was a homeless boy, a little man incapable of killing, driven solely by his need to see His Holy Spirit become flesh" (Muñoz 125). He acknowledges that he needs to perform as a sexually compliant Latino gay lover to avoid alienation, and this indicates the beginning of his ability to deal ethically with the past by defending his cultural roots. Mario begins to ethically mourn by confronting and manipulating his past, which prepares him to mourn his own death. Christian highlights how Mario processes his memories and embraces himself; for Rosa and Mario, "the pain of the past makes memory more of a burden than a source of pleasure. Yet they refuse to allow themselves to be tormented by the things they recall" (Christian 83). He connects ethically with both his past and sexuality. With Rosa, he learns to celebrate his entire identity and actively engages with his own mourning.⁷²

In America, immersed in his homosexual lifestyle, Mario suppresses his ethnicity so much that when he learns he has AIDS, Mario hesitates about what to tell the doctor. He recalls the story to Rosa: "And for the life of me, I couldn't respond... How could I tell him who I was. Did I know?" (Muñoz 129). Mario proceeds to disclose all his sexual encounters because, as a gay man attempting to fit into American culture, sexual acts comprise his identity. He describes himself as "the master of lusty transformations, [who] had a way of proliferating endlessly" (Muñoz 126). These scenes reveal how much Mario has lost; his identity relies now only on sex.

⁷² Conversely, Irizarry argues that "Rosa's relationship with Mario is what enables her, as an adult, to embrace her sexual orientation and acknowledge its primacy in her self-identification" (*Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction: The New Memory of Latinidad* 185). Alvarez Borland states a similar sentiment about Mario's friendship with Rosa: "His friendship and support allow Rosita to better understand and accept both her ethnic and sexual selves, and through Mario's acquaintance a more authentic way of living is possible for her" (*Cuban-American Literature of Exile* 111).

When the doctor says, “Talk to me, please. Don’t tell me your name, just who you are,” Mario answers with his sexual history (Muñoz 129). He excludes his past in Cuba, his family details, and his abusive childhood.

That Rosa already knows Mario’s history with the doctor—she narrates his story looking back while bearing witness to his life and death—reveals how the two influence each other’s identities by fusing their stories. This moment also illustrates how bearing witness requires them to tell each other’s story. Ernesto Javier Martínez speaks to this idea of sharing stories; he argues “*The Greatest Performance* is narrated by two childhood friends who bear witness to each other’s common history of resistance and gender nonconformity. Because its characters share a horizontal attentiveness (a mutual bearing witness) to each other’s predicament, the novel shares the burden of queer representation in a way that also gestures towards critical reflection on gender, race, and nation” (*On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility* 132).⁷³ Rosa will share Mario’s story beyond his sex acts and will include his sexual awakening and his childhood in Cuba—indeed, the story I have just summarized that is presented to the reader. Her past will be mixed with his as she ethically mourns and bears witness to his life; the narrative integration also demonstrates how much one person becomes part of another. As Derrida describes in *The Work of Mourning*, losing a friend means losing part of oneself. He states, “the world, the whole world, the world itself, for death takes from us not only some particular life within the world, some moment that belongs to us, but, each time, without limit, someone through whom the world, and first of all our own world, will have opened up” (*Work* 107). In bearing witness, Rosa relates Mario’s story because it is central to hers, and in fidelity to ethical mourning, she tells that story by clinging to it. José Esteban Muñoz’s interpretation of

⁷³ While Martínez misreads the plot—Rosa and Mario meet as adults—his contention about a mutual bearing witness stands.

melancholia in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* resembles how ethical mourning works. Esteban Muñoz extends this idea to ethnic and sexual minorities. He proposes “a different understanding of melancholia that does not see it as a pathology or as a self-absorbed mood that inhibits activism. Rather, it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names” (J. Muñoz 74).⁷⁴ Through ethical mourning as bearing witness, Rosa reconstructs Mario’s identity to intertwine their lives.

Records, You Dope: Rosa’s Identity

Through synthesizing their personal narratives, Rosa and Mario try to escape from the pitfalls of hegemonic discourse. They manipulate their stories for one another to create a place for their nonnormative identities to flourish. Rosa, presumably speaking to Mario, begins by setting a scene; Muñoz also clarifies that what follows is only narrative reality, exhibiting the performativity of identity. Rosa opens her story with place and continues with pictures. She announces, “We are in Cuba, of course” and then calls attention to the narrative along with the idea of a shared cultural story (Muñoz 13). While some immigrants and exiles share commonalities, Mario and Rosa differ from most of the Cuban diaspora: “You know how the story goes,” Rosa remarks (Muñoz 13). Later, she mixes reality with fiction through her pictures: “See that cute guy there, in the back, behind Maritza? He’s the one. My buddy. In my childhood story you have become that kid, Marito” (Muñoz 16). Rosa’s manipulation highlights the

⁷⁴ José Esteban Muñoz’s book examines how Latino, Asian, and Black artist—from television to visual arts to Pedro Zamora from the MTV show *The Real World*—affect mainstream culture through what he terms “disidentification.” The queer artist works within dominant culture while undermining that culture. His theory seeks to find a place for minority cultures (an intersectional idea of minority: people of color, LGBTQ) a place in the majority culture (cisgender, heteronormative, and white).

importance of performing different identities by controlling them; for example, her imagination allows her to experiment with different identities, which helps her to blend into American society when necessary later. However, Mario is “[b]latantly obvious” and suffers because, unlike Rosa, he fails to perform and conform to mainstream Cuban society and its rejection of homosexuality. Rosa molds her fantasies to attract the princess of her dreams, and in retelling the story to Mario, she inserts him into it.

Rosa gains practice in mourning by learning to deny her lesbian sexuality and tomboy ways in Cuba. Early in the text, Rosa’s account of her love for Maritza hints at her need to find a shelter from heteronormativity. Rosa expresses Maritza’s fear of “contracting my [Rosa’s] illness [lesbianism]” (Muñoz 25). However, she does share a moment with Maritza that is “kind of magical, if you can believe that” (Muñoz 25). Out in the country, hidden away from society’s pressures, Rosa and Maritza kiss after Rosa sings to her. Rosa croons, “I suggested we go to the plantain field after dawn. And we did. And as soon as we were out of sight I kissed her. Then we walked holding hands” (Muñoz 25). This event makes Rosa realize that love can bloom outside of heteronormative society, but also that she must suppress her sexual desires in Cuba. Subsequently, she loses her homeland and must cope with that loss as well.

After Rosa loses her first love, Maritza, she becomes adept at mitigating loss through artistic endeavors and her imagination, which will help her ethically mourn Mario later. She describes images to tell her story: “Here’s a picture of me at school: Rosita with her clique. The one with the curly red hair, that’s Maritza” (Muñoz 14). She discusses Maritza’s teachings about the revolution, philosophy, and art. Soon, however, Rosa’s father informs her that she is leaving the country. She worries that children at school will label her a traitor, but they all support her. Her thoughts turn to Maritza: “My only wish (I remember this clearly) was to stand in the middle

of the school, right next to the flag, and to embrace Maritza, kissing her curly red hair and her lips. Telling her in front of the whole world that I loved her” (Muñoz 15). But her love comes to nothing. While sharing these events with Mario, she tells him that Maritza is getting married.

Muñoz also uses fantasy structures in Rosa’s narrative: in particular, he highlights the queer fantasy of respect and love. And like Mario, she explores these fantasies through art and her imagination. Years later, when Rosa receives Maritza’s wedding invitation, she states, “I felt for the first time that Cuba was vanishing from my life” (Muñoz 17). The invitation arrives when Rosa is still young, living with her parents in California. Maritza symbolizes, then, the interstices of mourning: Rosa’s first heartbreak, a romantic ideal of Cuba, and the forced, early repression of her sexuality. She learns to deal with this loss through artistic and imaginative endeavors. As a child in Cuba, she notes, “My fantasies started early. In them I was usually a handsome knight in love with a princess...Everyone respected me and loved me. Especially the women. And I always managed to get the women of my dreams” (Muñoz 17). Rosa’s fantasy that everyone respects her speaks to a Lacanian definition of love. Lacan views love as a subject that provides the other with what the other lacks.⁷⁵ Rosa sublimates the absence of her love through fantasies in which she is respected and loved. In her fantasy, Rosa positions herself as what the other desires. Žižek writes about the role of fantasy in sexual desire, explaining how fantasy depends on Lacan’s statement that “There is no sexual relationship” (*HRL* 49). Because there are no guarantees for enjoyable sex, “Every subject has to invent a fantasy of his or her own, a ‘private’ formula for the sexual relationship” (*HRL* 49). Rosa, who has yet to experience a real sexual relationship, develops this fantasy to find a lover within her society’s accepted heteronormative

⁷⁵ Owen Hewitson explores Lacan’s ideas on love. Lacan expresses this idea of lack in Seminar X: “For it is with this lack that he loves. It is not for nothing that for years I have been repeating to you that love is to give what one does not have. This is even the principle of the castration complex: in order to have the phallus, in order to be able to make use of it, it is necessary precisely not to be it” (Lacan qtd. in Hewitson).

discourse. In reality, she cannot engage her sexuality. Later, in California, like Mario, she invents other realities denying her Cuban, religious culture to indulge her lesbian relationship with Joan. As Alvarez Borland points out, “Rosita describes her life with Joan and her search for assimilation into American culture as demanding that she erase her Cuban self” (*Cuban-American Literature of Exile* 111); Rosa, therefore, uses alternate realities to write her history with Mario and to ethically mourn his loss.

Rosa creates a kinder and more accepting past so that she can mourn her losses. She falls back on storytelling and art, often blending the two when she tells her story through images. About her first impression of California, she tells Mario, “Guess what I’m holding. What do you mean you can’t tell? Records, you dope! Can’t you see the faces on the covers? Look closely, chico. I know it’s a super-old photo but try, look at it” (Muñoz 81). The records she holds are old Cuban music she bought at a California record store. This anecdote showcases her connection with the past and refusal to forget it in mourning it.

Rosa’s retelling represents her attachment to her early days in California before she embraces her sexuality and begins to leave these cultural markers behind. The pictures exemplify the presence of absence, an ideal of ethical mourning. She uses pictures to remember the past and inserts Mario into it. Kathleen Woodward can help explain Rosa’s desire to include Mario in her early life. She discusses how loss helps us understand our lives: “Retrospectively we read our lives . . . as having been shaped by a rhythm of attachments to and separations from people we have loved” (Woodward 93). The story she shares reflects her repressive Cuban heritage that ignores her sexuality and an Anglo culture in California with prejudice toward her Cuban roots. Since she comes to love Mario intensely, she includes him in the story she creates.

In America, Rosa becomes practiced at mourning her lost homeland and culture. She tells Mario about her neighborhood, Garden Shore, which is “clean and moderately affluent, a predominantly middle-class city” (Muñoz 81-82). Rosa feels the pain of loss and wants some Spanish records because, as she argues, she “hated American music and if [she] didn’t find some way of entertaining [herself], of alleviating [her] Cuban depression, [she’d] surely commit suicide” (Muñoz 82). Her repressed sexuality prompts Rosa to cling to a lost past through her preferred method of art, in this case music. She reveals as much while showing another picture to Mario, this time from her freshman year, featuring a boy who had a crush on her. She tells Mario, “No, he wasn’t my boyfriend. And I didn’t have a girlfriend either! Are you kidding? I was totally and pathetically repressed in those days” (Muñoz 83). Like Mario, when she clings to her Cubanidad, she must suppress her sexuality, because she knows her culture and her family oppose homosexuality. She describes all the ways she rejects American culture and longs for Cuba: “I was convinced that I had left my heart buried behind, on the island, just like the song said. *Cuando salí de Cuba*” (Muñoz emphasis original 84). The song aptly portrays ethical mourning and how the subject must carry the lost object within. The lyrics, by Luis Aguile, read, “Nunca podré morirme,/ si mi corazón no lo tengo aquí./ Alguien me está llamando, / me está aguardando que vuelva allí,” which translates roughly to: I’ll never be able to die/ I don’t have my heart here/ someone is calling me/ waiting for my return there. The song reverses the notion of mourning as cannibalistic, of eating the other and carrying the lost other within.⁷⁶ Instead, the speaker has left part of himself behind. The song denies the melancholy that Žižek discusses. Žižek suggests that what makes one sad is not the lost home, but the subject’s fears about losing their desire for that home. The speaker leaves his heart behind so as not to cope with the loss.

⁷⁶ The song also plays on the here and there – the exiles feeling of two places.

The song, then, symbolizes Rosa's fear as she begins to mourn her homeland, which ends abruptly.⁷⁷

Muñoz illustrates the dangers of a type of mourning that gets over the lost object; he uses nostalgia, not in a negative connotation, but as a positive reminder of the exile's lost culture.⁷⁸ Rosa begins the process of mourning by attempting to release her lost objects and attachment to her old culture. She states that Cuban music makes her cry, and continues, "one day I got sick and tired and decided not to go to the Million Dollar anymore. I need to stop living off memories the way my parents do, I said to myself. I began to see nostalgia as the enemy. And the images of my homeland that I carried inside as an obstacle for my success" (Muñoz 84). She begins to embrace American culture, and in the process, manages to leave her Cuban "nest" without attaching herself to a man. Her detachment from culture accompanies the celebration of her sexuality; as she states, "I had said to myself, Niña, your native island is Lesbos, not Cuba" (Muñoz 92). She moves in with her girlfriend, Joan, but reports to her parents that Joan is only a roommate. Joan represents the dangers of traditional Freudian mourning because she forces Rosa to surrender her attachments.⁷⁹ In contrast, Rosa clings to those cultural memories and signifiers of her identity, as ethical mourning demands. The more she attempts to repress them, the more these symbols provoke her.

Joan, whom Rosa meets at a bar, exhibits Rosa's conflict between her sexuality and ethnicity. Joan works for a Spanish-language channel in Los Angeles filming commercials for their Hispanic viewership. Rosa's sexuality adds another dimension to her identity as an exile,

⁷⁷ The letter from Maritza about getting married is somewhat the reverse of the song, for here in Rosa's life, the desired other in Cuba is not reciprocating.

⁷⁸ Arguably, the opposite of nostalgia thought of as a painful return. Rather, she ethically mourns through her connection.

⁷⁹ Attachment, here, should be thought of as Rosa's fidelity to losses she has endured.

distinguishing her from other Cuban exiles and complicating what Joan symbolizes, since she commodifies “Hispanic” culture but denies Rosa her own Cuban nostalgia, which veers closely to a type of nationalism. Edward Said explains that the exile clings to nationalism in order to belong to a place with language, culture, and customs. Nationalism functions like Hegel’s dialectic: an exile clings to nationalism, inadvertently othering and exiling additional people. The concept of nationalism creates a rhetoric of belonging to a habitus with history and geography so that the exile alienates herself. Nationalism creates a split between “us” and “them” by othering groups along the lines of right and wrong. Said asks, “How then does one surmount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride, collective sentiment, group passion?” (177). For Rosa, however, if she clings to nationalism, she loses Joan, but if she renounces her Cuban attachments and partners with Joan, she cannot be with her family.

Like Mario, Rosa suppresses her Cuban heritage to conform in America. For instance, she hides her cultural roots—her music, movies, and food—to appeal to Joan by becoming a “meat-and-potatoes kind of gal” which ultimately fails (Muñoz 115). Rosa’s lament, “My only cherished traces of the past...those corny and ‘dishonest’ singers, remnants that I felt forced to hide as if they were a terrible and shameful drug addiction,” reveals that she must hide her ethnicity to fit into the dominant culture’s identity narrative (Muñoz 116). As Christian explains, “The dominant culture, represented by Joan, views Rosa’s ‘cherished traces of the past’ as blatantly excessive in relation to white, middle-class norms of propriety” (62). Rosa’s watered-down coffee at the American burger joint she frequents five days a week signifies the watered-down version of Latina-ness Joan sells, an image Rosa must perform to comply with Joan’s culture, much as Mario must perform for his lovers. Christian further explicates these ethnic

performances: “Rosa’s and Mario’s perception that *cubanidad* is fundamentally incompatible with American gay/lesbian identity, are manifestations of ethnic essentialism” (62).⁸⁰ She also alludes to Judith Butler’s claim that these performances of “essentialized identities” exist in their repetitions, mere illusions of them as originary (62-63). Mario and Rosa construct a narrative as Cuban-gay/lesbian-Americans that they share outside of either Anglo-American gay communities or their Cuban heritage. They “escape from reality” in a Laguna “shack” and exist in the narrative of their creation, a safe place outside society’s gaze (Muñoz 149). Rosa and Mario’s story allows them to embrace identities outside of the constricting narrative of Cuban culture that denies their homosexuality or of American culture that denies their Cubanness. Rosa and Mario cannot, in the “normal” society they belong to, live their simultaneous existence as Cuban and gay, neither can they drop one side of their identity for the other, as they have forged both identities; therefore, they create a story for themselves where the entirety of their identities can live freely.

Rosa’s nostalgic music indicates her position on the hyphen, as Pérez Firmat describes. Pérez Firmat dedicates many ballads to exploring music in exile, many of which can apply to Rosa. As he echoes the sentiment of Rosa’s “dishonest singers,” he states:

What we were resisting was the reality of exile. At once reticent and self-indulgent, this music had a dual purpose, for it allowed one to vent the affect of exile—the nostalgia and the disorientation and the sorrow—without directly confronting its specific circumstances. Like exile itself, these songs were both escapist and adaptive, a ‘flight response’ to the unpleasantness of life.

(Life on the Hyphen 104)

⁸⁰ The idea of *cubanidad* precisely explains the conflict felt by Rosa and Mario, who are outcast in their families for not fitting into the idea of what it means to be Cuban.

Rosa must conceal her escapism from Joan, along with the anxiety of life in exile and on a hyphen of the closet: out with Joan and her friends but closeted with her family and community. Joan denies Rosa her escape through music, creating an odd tension since Joan is likely to understand Rosa's love of Cuban music (especially as Joan sells "ethnic culture" to exiles and immigrants); however, Rosa feels the pressure to assimilate. Like Mario, Rosa must adapt her performances depending on each audience. She either plays straight for her family or downplays her ethnicity for her lover. The performances of both characters exceed heteronormative or ethnic discourse—"passing" in these cases entails more than wearing outer masks to hide behind—they radically challenge and undermine ethnicity.

Alan Sinfield, in "Diaspora and Hybridity: Queer Identities and the Ethnicity Model" (1996), rightly worries that "imperialists cope all too conveniently with the subaltern mimic—simply, he or she cannot be the genuine article because of the intrinsic inferiority; and gay pastiche and its excess may easily be pigeon-holed as illustrating all too well that lesbians and gay men can only play at true manliness and womanliness" (282-83). Unfortunately, Mario and Rosa exemplify Sinfield's contention: within Cuban society, they must act gender-appropriate, and with their lovers, they must act ethnic-appropriate. They are always caught between the two worlds.⁸¹ The two can escape these pressures only with each other; in one another's company, they can be fully themselves, Cuban and gay.

By hiding her sexuality and compromising this part of her identity with her family Rosa experiences mourning and loss, which prepares her to mourn Mario later. Her brother, Pedro, serves as a heteronormative foil. In stark contrast to Rosa's closeted lesbianism at the José Martí

⁸¹ Pedro's questioning of Rosa's sexuality, along with Rosa's grandmother's questions about marriage, exemplifies the problem of authenticity. Imperialists, as Sinfield says, believe in a single authentic identity; a view that extends to machismo culture, which posits that Rosa can only be authentic if married with children.

Cuban club, Pedro performs his machismo proudly within Cuban culture, “playing the Cuban stud with the beautiful and untouchable-before-marriage *Cubanitas*, his typical medallion with the Virgin of Charity hanging from his neck, displayed over his hairy chest” (Muñoz 117). Pedro’s freedom of sexual expression contrasts with how Rosa denies her sexuality within her ethnicity. Rosa suggests how Pedro performs, “*playing the Cuban Stud*,” identifying his medallion as “typical” and “displayed” on his chest, indicating that her “much-too-macho Republican brother” exploits his assigned role as Cuban male, as epitomized with his speech that “sounded more Cuban than Ricky Ricardo” (Muñoz 117).⁸² Pedro’s performance includes a litany of questions, modeled in cultural Cuban norms, directed at Rosa about her sexuality.

For all his posturing and heteronormative performances, however, Pedro never discovers a love outside of language⁸³ in the same manner as Rosa, who must endure his questions because she becomes “a true antiheroic image, a liberated thirtysomething human being with no ties and no roots anywhere” (Muñoz 118). Rosa, without identity, refers to herself in the third person and as a human being with no clear gender, ethnicity, or sexuality. She is torn between her Cuban culture, which shuns her sexuality and which she has attempted to leave behind, and her sexuality, which is indifferent to her culture.

Rosa must also hide her sexuality from her grandmother, who constantly asks her about marriage and children. Her Abuela remarks, “Baby, I just want what’s best for you,” and, “I want you to be happy” (Muñoz 93). However, Rosa must navigate her happiness in the face of

⁸² Pérez Firmat explores how the image of Ricky Ricardo influenced generations of both Americans and Cubans about how to act Cuban. Pedro, too, performs his Cuban-ness based on the simulacra of Ricky Ricardo, but a more acceptable—coming from the paradigm of Cuban-Latin-lover Ricky—version of Cubanness than his sister or Mario.

⁸³ Pedro only finds stereotypical “love” that fits within societal definitions; Christian observes, “Pedro’s Cuban performances . . . work to reaffirm his ties to *patria*. Yet Rosa’s comparison of her brother with Ricky Ricardo points out the illusory nature of the identity those performances appear to express” (64-65). Pedro’s performances harmonize with the Cuban club’s definition of *machismo*, and the comparison with Ricky Ricardo illustrates Pedro’s performance of what Anglo-American society believes Cubanness comprises.

disappointing her grandmother by not living up to the cultural expectation of making a family and in the face of Joan, who wishes to downplay her “dishonest singers” and Cuban background (Muñoz 104). Rosa’s happiness relies on living up to her grandmother’s version of cubanidad as heteronormative. This idea of happiness based on essentialist tropes of Cubanness reflects another aspect of Rosa’s life that she must lose; in other words, she cannot embrace her whole identity and be happy. She either must embrace her lesbian lifestyle and disappoint her family, causing her sorrow, or she must reject her sexuality, which also causes her sorrow but satisfies her family.⁸⁴ Sara Ahmed examines how the desire for happiness is thwarted in the grandmother’s speech act. Ahmed states that we direct our lives toward social good, a tendency arising out of societal and cultural contexts. The family with the queer child, then, invokes this speech act, “I just want you to be happy,” which reinforces heteronormative perceptions of happiness. The exchange produces unhappiness; as Ahmed describes:

The father is unhappy as he thinks the daughter will be unhappy if she is queer.

The daughter is unhappy as the father is unhappy with her being queer. The father witnesses the daughter’s unhappiness as a sign of the truth of his position: that she will be unhappy because she is queer. The happy queer becomes unhappy at this point. In other words, the unhappy queer is made unhappy by the world that reads queers as unhappy. And clearly the family can only be maintained as a happy

⁸⁴ For many Latinos, happiness is not exactly the primary goal; as we can see from Rosa’s family love, duty, and responsibility tend to be stressed more, as when Rosa’s grandmother wishes her to get married and have kids. Once in America, the idea is to follow the happiness of the American dream against the communism of Cuba, which calls for the people to sacrifice for the revolution and the state, or even in a Cuban family, to sacrifice for the family. Particularly, for Latina women, they tend to carry more of a burden of duty (versus the Cuban men who can play the stud); the grandmother cannot conceive of happiness outside of heteronormative ideals of marriage and children. A common idea in Cuban households is the sadness of the family over the queer child, not because the child is gay but because the child will have a hard life fitting into society.

object, as being what is anticipated to cause happiness, by making the unhappiness of the queer child the point. (“Happy Objects” 43)

The grandmother’s wish for Rosa belies the speech act. Rosa must deny her happiness one way or another, sacrificing her love life or her family.

Muñoz’s use of a double narrative fulfills the Derridean ideals of ethical mourning through poetic language and through continuing a dialogue with the lost other. Derrida’s discussion of the “law of friendship” can elucidate Rosa and Mario’s relationship, particularly how they synthesize their stories and create poetry. Derrida believes the survivor will continue to say the name of the deceased; this dialogue takes the place of the dead, and the same could be said of creative pieces that represent the friendship. In weaving a story and poem together, Rosa already mourns before Mario’s death. Derrida maintains that one is always already losing the other and mourning in advance. The poem serves as an image of their friendship, and Derrida asserts that “The power of the image [is] the power of death” (*Politics* 151). Rosa and Mario erase their past through the narratives they relate to each other using pictures, paintings, and the stories they recreate. Mario erases his cultural background, liberating him of oppression—a freedom only gained by suppressing his cultural heritage—just as Rosa suppresses her Cubanness for Joan’s sake. With each other, however, they can embrace their identities and commiserate about their losses. This transparent relationship, between two Cuban outcasts who need not suppress their ethnicity nor queerness with each other, follows the model of ethical mourning. Mario and Rosa help one another embrace a nuanced identity accepted in its complexity instead of a simple antithesis of straight or gay, and Rosa manages to bear witness to Mario’s life through poetic expression. Rosa addresses her story to Mario, which reflects the idea of mourning starting at the first encounter between two people. Rosa’s mourning begins before

an actual death, with the knowledge that Mario is dying. Rosa depicts the scene for Mario and proceeds to narrate their meeting, including Mario in her childhood pictures. Derrida discusses this beginning of the end in several works. For instance, in “Rams,” Derrida describes the interrupted dialogue with Gadamar. Also, in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, he states that there is “no friendship without this knowledge of finitude” (28). As Derrida explains in “Rams,” melancholy proceeds all friendships; this melancholia stems from the knowledge that “as always with friendship, at least this is how I experience it each time, from a sad and invasive certainty: one day death will necessarily separate us. A fatal and inflexible law: one of the two friends will always see the other die. The dialogue, virtual though it may be, will forever be wounded by an ultimate interruption” (139).

Mario offers his story to Rosa because their friendship represents an identity outside of language.⁸⁵ Narrating her story to Mario, Rosa imagines what it would have been like to be friends while children in Cuba: “How much pain we would’ve saved each other had we been there together, at the genesis, for real” (Muñoz 17). The two ultimately participate in each other’s worlds, a testament to ethical mourning. They both come to realize how much they have changed one another and how art can speak to their friendship. Rosa describes what their relationship means: “After searching Heaven and Earth for a true love, for a generous homeland, for a family who wouldn’t abuse us or condemn us, for a body who wouldn’t betray our truest secrets, we found each other: a refuge, a song, a story to share” (Muñoz 149).

⁸⁵ What I mean by outside of language is that their love does not rely on essentialist ideas of cubanidad or identity. They love each other beyond signification. As Derrida describes, love has traditionally been the love of a who—who the person is, or a what—what the person is, so that one loves a person for their beauty or intelligence and when one of those aspects changes, the person falls out of love. Rather, since Rosa and Mario undermine the idea of essential identity, they love each other outside of essentialist conventions, outside of simplified social meanings in either Cuba or the United States.

Significantly, Rosa equates their identity—sexuality, family, homeland, body—to the refuge of artistic creations. At this moment, Rosa rewrites the narrative of their lives, merging experiences to help each other mourn and bear witness to the other’s story. Rosa proclaims, “We were made in test tubes and were able to choose, as adults, the identity and gender that we fancied. Then we were free, until the moment of our deaths (painless deaths) to change from man to woman, from woman to man, from tree to flower, from ocean water to ivy. Better yet: we have existed from time immemorial as air” (Muñoz 150). Muñoz provides a story of exiles attempting to find a place they fit in. Cristinía María García eloquently states the following about the story: “In trying to define their relationship to both Cuba and the United States, most Cuban American authors have come to accept their hybridity, while others have concluded that they don't fit anywhere. In the process, they have not only articulated the concerns of their generation but enriched the literature of their adopted country” (191).⁸⁶ Muñoz’s story provides an example of ethical mourning while extending the literature and representation of Latinx, LGBTQ people.

MARIPOSA: Carrying the World of The Other

Rosa’s narrative reflects on the weighty changes death brings to the survivor. Against Alberto Sandoval Sánchez’s reading⁸⁷ of the end of the novel where he states, “What is at stake here is that after AIDS their freedom has come to its end. The only way to survive is to escape by erasing history” (“Breaking the Silence, Dismantling Taboos” 165), I argue quite the opposite: by rewriting their histories, by recalling those histories and dealing with them with each other,

⁸⁶ García incorrectly states that “Rosa and Marito, one a lesbian and the other a gay man, are reunited in California after years of separation” (*Havana, USA* 191). Lazaro Lima analyzes a book review that misreads the story. He points out that “The events narrated by Rosita reconstruct not a friendship that ‘extends back to their childhood’ but the desire to reconstruct the shared experiences of ethnic, cultural, and sexual marginalization” (*The Latino Body* 142-141).

⁸⁷ Alberto Sandoval Sánchez, like García, has mistakenly read the novel’s fantasy history of the two protagonist sharing a past as true.

they—particularly Rosa who survives Mario—manage to ethically mourn by carrying the world of the other. Derrida supplies an approach for understanding this change. He affirms that when the friend dies—when that friend’s world is taken away—the survivor must carry the world of the lost other. He states that “When the world is no more,...then I must carry *you*, you alone, you alone in me or on me alone (“Rams” 158). Rosa and Mario create their narrative when Rosa promises Mario, “Yes, I will create this place where you can be who you’ve always wanted to be” (Muñoz 151). This place allows Rosa to switch roles with Mario so that they can play the opposite gender. Through these narrative manipulations—a shared space between Rosa and Mario—the two can fuse and transform into “MARIPOSA” in a fantasy space, but this place is a fairytale for the two characters; Rosa reminds Mario, “But do not forget to repossess your original form before the stroke of midnight” (Muñoz 149). As a new breed of “Cubans hyphen Americans,” as Mario puts it, their narrative manipulation is only fantasy, not to occur in the dominant American culture because their Cuban heritage opposes their sexuality; therefore, to embrace their sexuality, they must deny their culture (Muñoz 107). With each other, however, they can play any role they desire. Derrida speaks of names when he claims that surviving and mourning always-already mire friendship. For instance, he posits that mourning is encrypted in the manner we use friends’ names since the name survives the person. In this sense, Rosa is left to speak Mario’s name; as Derrida states, “[T]he name signs death and...races toward death even more quickly than we do...It is in advance the name of a dead person. And of a premature death that comes to us in it” (*Politics* 130). Rosa combines the names so that Mario’s death will forever be part of her in Mariposa. His death, along with their merged names, clearly illustrates that Rosa loses a piece of herself; Mariposa will always be incomplete since Mario has passed. Therefore, as Irizarry states, “The narrative of new memory she [Rosa] creates for them will be the last

story, the last language, he [Mario] will ever hear: it is brand new and beautiful” (*Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction* 194). I would argue that Rosa and Mario both create the story that will change both of them forever.

This mixing of identities—as mariposa—reveals the linked worlds of Rosa and Mario in ethical mourning. Mariposa joins the two together, who have been transformed much like the butterfly their names invoke. The moniker also empowers the term ‘mariposa,’ a homophobic Spanish slur referring to gay men. Finally, the name also illustrates an inexorable link between two people who have changed each other’s worlds. Tammy Clewell explores Freud’s remarks on remembering a lost object. Agreeing with other scholars like Greg Forter, Clewell interprets Freud’s thoughts on mourning as a process enabling one to let go: a “hyperremembering” where the subject replaces the real absence with an imaginary presence; Clewell quotes Forter, who argues that the mourner withdraws their feelings of attachment to distinguish between the lost object and the idea of the lost object, allowing the mourner to memorialize this object. Forter adds, “Mourning helps us to relinquish real objects by building psychic memorials to them—the memorials we call ‘memories’” (Forter qtd. in Clewell 38-39). Clewell supports Forter in theory, indicating that Freud describes mourning as a “hyperremembering” that enacts “obsessive recollection” to replace “an actual absence with an imaginary presence” (Clewell 44). What Forter describes, however, leads to, in Clewell’s words, converting “loving remembrances into a futureless memory. Mourning comes to a decisive and ‘spontaneous end,’ according to Freud, when the survivor has detached his or her emotional tie to the lost object and reattached the free libido to a new object,” causing the replacement of the lost object (Clewell 44). Derrida and Žižek advocate against these notions that mourning ends and that the survivor must detach emotionally. Rosa and Mario have become so vital to each other’s lives that, in shaping a

memory for him, Rosa makes him part of her world; she creates a story that carries his world through poetic language.

Muñoz's novel exemplifies the idea of Derridean ethical mourning. Mario will forever be intrinsically part of Rosa and her identity. The two embrace each other's past and maintain a dialogue that continues after Mario's death. Derrida observes, "Love or friendship would be nothing other than the passion, the endurance, and the patience of this work [of mourning]" ("By Force of Mourning" 176). For Derrida, mourning begins before the loved one dies. The death itself enacts mourning. Muñoz's novel demonstrates the ethical act of mourning since it carries the world of Mario, a story that begins when he meets Rosa. Derrida argues that the fidelity is kept because the friend is gone and "can no longer be but *in us*" (ibid. emphasis original 188). This "in us" begins at the moment of friendship, with the anticipation that one of the two friends will have to mourn the other some day. Derrida qualifies the "in us" as breaking down the limit of inside/outside, for it names a space and orientates a perspective, and for Derrida, this limit is an image. The other forms nothing more than images left "in us" of the absent other. Derrida speaks of these images in us as the last debt owed to a friend. He appears to gesture at Levinas by suggesting that to process mourning the other, we must get over ourselves: "I mean the mourning of our autonomy, of everything that would make us the measure of ourselves. That is the excess and the dissymmetry" ("By Force of Mourning" 189). The other exceeds the mourner ethically, and by combining their stories into "Mariposa," in a poem, Rosa and Mario enact these requirements for ethical mourning.

CHAPTER THREE: “YEARS AND YEARS NOW AND I STILL THINK ABOUT HIM”:

YUNIOR’S ETHICAL MOURNING IN *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR*

WAO

Yunior’s Act of Writing

In Elías Miguel Muñoz’s *The Greatest Performance*, Rosa exemplifies the ideal of ethical mourning in how she intertwines her life and identity with Mario. She creates a dynamic story honoring Mario’s voice and bears witness to his life. She builds this world for him after losing her homeland and learning to mourn her past. With the death of her friend, she realizes how much of that homeland is carried within and must add Mario and his lost homeland to the duties of carrying and mourning. She bears witness through poetic language, which Derrida considers the more ethical means of mourning because it denies any telos or attempt at capturing the lost one’s lived experience. The mourner’s use of poetic language to carry a lost world also appears in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, written in 2007 by Junot Díaz. The protagonist Yunior tells Oscar’s story while bearing witness to the Dominican Republic’s fukú curse of colonialism; therefore, the narrative functions as *testimonio* according to Derrida’s interpretation of art as bearing witness along with an understanding of *testimonio* as a heuristic. Yunior’s story of Oscar’s life and of the brutal history of the Dominican Republic applies to Derrida’s description of “bearing”; he states, “It is perhaps there [the hermeneutic place of going from meanings to meanings] that, alone in distancing of the world, the poem hails or blesses, bears (*trägt*) the other, I mean ‘you’ –as one might bear the grief of mourning... This poem is the ‘you’ and the ‘I’ that is addressed to ‘you,’ but also to any other” (“Rams” 153).

Through the act of writing, Yuniór bears witness to the other, Oscar, and shares his story to the reader. Yuniór's narrative recognizes Oscar by providing his silenced voice a means of expression when we keep in mind Ylce Irizarry's argument that *testimonio* concerns itself with recognizing oppression and resisting it. Thus, Yuniór supplies a history of the oppressed in the Dominican Republic. His storytelling, a poetic act, takes on postmodern gestures through the mixing of high and low art. John Beverly explains how a postmodern aesthetic can help tell *testimonio* stories:

the aesthetic and ideological significance of *testimonio* depends on its ability to function in the historically constituted space that separates elite and popular cultures in Latin America and to generate postcolonial non-Eurocentric narratives of individual and collective historical destiny. Where literature in Latin America has been (mainly) a vehicle for engendering an adult, white, male, patriarchal, 'lettered' subject, *testimonio* allows the emergence—albeit mediated—of subaltern female, gay, indigenous, black, and proletarian 'oral' identities. (“‘Through All Things Modern’: Second Thoughts on *Testimonio*” 19)

Yuniór fulfills these double tasks of bear witnessing and ethically mourning his friend, while also bearing witness and offering a *testimonio* to the Dominican Republic.

In *Oscar Wao*, Yuniór⁸⁸ survives the fukú curse brought on by colonialism (and the Trujillato propped up by American interventionism) in the Dominican Republic and the aftermath of his family and community's immigration.⁸⁹ He also outlives Oscar De León, a

⁸⁸ Yuniór, the narrator of much of the novel and a character-witness, serves as a foil of Dominican male artist (Yuniór's vocation as writer only gradually becomes evident while Oscar's dedication to writing is one of his core features). As part of this chapter will explore, Yuniór inhabits both the sensitive artists, foil to machismo, while performing machismo and embracing Dominicaness.

⁸⁹ Yuniór and Oscar's families appear to have been poor and fled post-Trujillo instability as economic immigrants.

Dominican American who, due to his love of speculative fiction and nerd culture (pertaining to a white English-language sub-group and his obesity), never fits in with other Dominicans, and because of his Latino culture, never truly fits in with mainstream Anglo-Americans. Yuniors is tasked with carrying Oscar's world and telling the story of his life. He shares how Oscar must navigate his own identity while falling in and out of love easily. Yuniors flashes back to Oscar's mother, Beli Cabral, and her father, Oscar's grandfather, Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral. Dr. Cabral lays the fukú curse on the family when he refuses to bring his daughter, Jacqueline, to meet Trujillo; he is also imprisoned and tortured for a joke he makes criticizing Trujillo.⁹⁰ Amidst narrating these events, Yuniors provides Lola, Oscar's sister, space to tell her story and to describe her relationship with her mother and grandmother, La Inca. Yuniors also uses footnotes to document the dictatorship of Trujillo and American intervention on the island, along with other historical moments. Yuniors's story peers into Oscar's past as well as that of his family and the Dominican Republic, demonstrating how the narrative surpasses a simple retelling and enacts an ethical form of mourning.

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* exemplifies the Derridean ideal of ethical mourning through its heterogeneity and use of multiple narrative voices. Yuniors is well-versed in the same speculative genres that Oscar reads and uses these genres and allusions to bear witness to Oscar's life. Science fiction critiques society via metaphors, so the genre can be regarded as poetic in style; sci-fi shows, as Derrida puts it, the mask as mask. Díaz, Oscar, and Yuniors use science fiction motifs to relate to Dominican history and to illustrate the pressures of

⁹⁰ Of course, I believe our narrator, Yuniors, would claim that the De León/Cabral curse began like it did for all Dominicans with "the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola. . . and we've all been in the shit ever since" (Díaz 1). Later, when relating Abelard Luis Cabral's story, Yuniors begins his chapter by stating that Cabral's comment against Trujillo began the family curse, and at the same time, in a footnote, states "There are other beginning [of the family curse] certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards 'discovered' the New World—or when the U.S invaded Santo Domingo in 1916—but if this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who am I to question their historiography" (211).

hybrid immigrant identities. Yúnior employs such language to mourn without claiming to capture Oscar. Mourning a deceased friend, claims Derrida, necessarily evokes an unresolvable conflict of loyalty—for Yúnior, this conflict arises because when Yúnior loses Oscar, he also loses part of himself. Derrida would argue that he loses the emotional world—his own world—which has been constituted around Oscar, who is now lost. The allusions to sci-fi and speculative fiction, and the inclusion of these genres' conventions, accomplish mourning through poetic language. In "The Truth that Wounds," Derrida suggests, "There is in every poetic text, just as in every utterance, in every manifestation outside of literature, an inaccessible secret to which no proof will ever be adequate" (164).⁹¹ Yúnior's story, as bearing witness, reflects this concept.

Yúnior's commitment to carry Oscar's world manifests in how he describes Oscar's artistic tendencies, his origin story, and his many heartbreaks. Monica Hanna states that the novel traces Oscar and Yúnior's development as artists, and observes that Yúnior devours the other characters in order to tell their story. She claims, "Metaphorically consuming these characters and even going too far as to speak for them, and thus in a sense, embody them, allows Yúnior to forge a connection and create an affiliation with this family through his writing. Writing and narrative consumption become ways of forging community" (Hanna 90-91). Hanna views this consuming in loving terms: "Consumption becomes a transformative experience, a loving gesture that imagines figures deemed ugly and irrelevant into a position of significance as a source of nourishment" (91). She posits that part of Yúnior's motivation arises from his dictatorial wish to control the narrative, but this devouring can be read as more selfless, a need to share this family's story in order to mourn the passing of his friend.

⁹¹ Additionally, Nora Strejilevich states, "The witness attempts to create bridges between 'here' and 'there' through the narration of what might not be told as theory but as insight. It is for this reason that a poetic voice might be needed to tell the story" (704)

Yunior's Cannibalism

Yunior devours Oscar's entire life, but Oscar remains an Other who exists, in a sense, because Yunior has refrigerators full of his work. For Derrida, the Other who lives only in us is actually not an Other who lives. Derrida opposes Freud's belief that the lost other is "a devouring of the other" (Deutscher "Mourning the Other, Cultural Cannibalism, and the Politics of Friendship: Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray" 163). Penelope Deutscher, who explores mourning through Montaigne, Irigaray, and Derrida, expands this idea of cannibalistic mourning, such as Yunior's need to interiorize Oscar's world to tell his story. Considering friendship as consuming love can be read in two ways, one of which is Irigaray's perception of cannibalistic love as unethical. Deutscher explains:

In recent work, Irigaray has formulated an ethical ideal for love and friendship in which the cannibal becomes the emblem of what she condemns as the appropriative, in which the loved other is transformed into 'my property, my object,' s/he is reduced to 'what is mine,' into mine, meaning what is already a part of my field of existential or material properties." (Irigaray qtd. in "Mourning the Other" 161)

Alternatively, Derrida interprets devouring as a conflict of the unavoidable task that friendship encounters in its private cannibalism. Derrida's concern in his eulogy to Paul de Man centers on questions of how, who, and what to mourn, as well as what friendship means. In the face of death, both speaking and silence are impossible, Derrida argues. He also states that de Man demands a "resistance and excess" in his memory (Derrida qtd. in "Mourning the Other" 162). Derrida discusses the impossibility to name, limit, or thematize his loss. Derrida, as Deutscher indicates, refuses to think of de Man as "the perfect listener," but rather as an

interrupted conversation. Deutscher explains Irigaray's problem with this kind of interiorization: "Cultural cannibalism, to use Luce Irigaray's metaphor, is the unethical reduction of the other to the status of 'me' or 'mine'" ("Mourning the Other" 162) Derrida expresses the need for cannibalism since it is only "in us" that the other lives. Derrida, however, believes that the other is irreducible, even when interiorization takes place in mourning; as Deutscher explains, "Mourning, suggests Derrida, is also impossible. He emphasizes what he can't know and say of de Man, the friendship...The other resists my knowledge and memory of him or her" ("Mourning the Other" 162). Yuniors struggles between devouring the other and providing Oscar and additional characters a voice.

Critics have variously noted how Díaz complicates genre and explores identity (his interest in Dominican mainstream and queer masculinities), along with his attention to diasporic identity. Daniel Bautista argues that Díaz's use of science fiction and speculative genre conventions are extensions of magical realism. The protagonist's United States upbringing makes him an outcast with Dominicans, and his sci-fi, comic book, fantasy fanboy ethos distances him from Americans. Bautista maintains that science fiction brings Oscar solace while rendering him an outsider, which furthers his interest in the genre fictions because they reflect immigrant, outsider experiences. Simultaneously, the speculative genres Oscar reads help him connect to the magic and superstition of his past; thus, the regular allusions to American and British comic books, sci-fi, and fantasy illustrate Oscar's identity as a Dominican-American. Bautista calls Díaz's mix of cultural capital "comic book realism," a fusing of genres and popular culture with the Dominican's beliefs in magical realism ("Comic Book Realism"). Díaz's postmodern aesthetic—blending genres—challenges the grand narrative of hegemony and patriarchy. In Paul Jay's interview with Díaz, he claims that Díaz connects Trujillo's masculinity

to the identities of Oscar, Lola, and Yuniór. Noting that Díaz weaves comedic elements within the Dominican Republic's violent history, Jay asks why his novel is popular. Díaz responds by indicating contemporary audiences' extensive knowledge of narrative through movies, TV, and other technologies. Díaz also discusses the challenge posed by his novel to Trujillo's grand narrative of masculinity. The narrative, according to Díaz in this interview, undermines hyper-masculinity through Yuniór's inability to form intimate relationships outside of purely sexual, misogynistic ones. Ignacio L. Calvo's "A Postmodern Platano's Trujillo: Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*, More Macondo than McOndo," however, questions Diaz's intentions to subvert stereotypes of masculinity and narrative, claiming that Diaz's narrative is not nearly as subversive or challenging as Diaz intended. Clavo examines magic realism and Trujillo narratives' Bloomian "anxiety of influence" in Diaz's writing. Calvo illustrates the gap between Diaz's claims in interviews against what Diaz's text actually does. For instance, while Diaz states his resistance to writing as a cultural informer, Diaz's use of footnotes to explain moments of the book that would be obvious to a Dominican audience illustrates Diaz's performing otherness. Calvo points out Diaz's Macondo identity as a Dominican American who wishes to move away from the traditions of magic realism, but again, Diaz's text undermines his intentions with its use of magic. Furthermore, Diaz's engagement with Trujillo narratives have an influence on his writing, so rather than subvert or question masculinity, Diaz performs masculinity through his text.

Within the novel's postmodern aesthetic that resists hegemonic discourse, Díaz employs a mixture of languages reflecting the Dominican diaspora: street Spanish, Dominican terms, slang English (including African American dialect), literary allusions, and the use of footnotes written in high and low discourses. Elena Machado Sáez contends that Díaz's use of languages

from the Dominican-American diaspora, instead of the dominant nation, attempts to seduce readers into collusion with “the heteronormative rationale used to police male diasporic identity” (523). Sáez describes Díaz’s novel as “foundational fiction for the Dominican American diaspora” (“Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora: Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Foundational Romance” 523). Her essay investigates definitions of diaspora, and she illustrates how Oscar resists assimilating into Dominican culture. Sáez sees Yunior’s task of classifying Oscar’s identity as resulting from the Dominican diaspora. Yunior’s narration ultimately ignores Oscar’s “queer Otherness” (Saez 524). The story about Oscar is really a story about Yunior himself, and it exemplifies heteronormative masculine power.

While these critics all address Otherness, my discussion will explore Yunior’s role as someone who bears witness: Yunior’s story is about himself insofar as Oscar inhabits him. The story is Yunior’s because he narrates it and because he mourns—the loss of Oscar, the loss of Lola (as his lover), and the history of losses enacted by colonial and postcolonial powers in his homeland with the U.S. backing of Trujillo, who has inherited and intensified the violence of prior ruling generations. Yunior confronts these lost worlds—what he describes as part of the *fukú*—through his writing as bearing witness to loss. The *fukú*, then, represents a curse of loss. Anne Garland Mahler discusses the *fukú* curse and its connection to the no face man. Focusing on Díaz’s political argument, Mahler asserts that Diaz uses of the *fukú* curse as a metaphor for colonial power. Díaz’s portrayal of violence illustrates the power of tyranny, and Yunior demonstrates the capacity of the written word for bearing witness.

Yunior’s storytelling undermines postcolonial power. Mahler’s illustrates the connection made by the novel to colonial power and Díaz’s attempt to unmask those hierarchies: “Díaz employs the curse of the *fukú* to represent the perpetuation of colonial hierarchies in the

Dominican Republic” (120). She continues, “Díaz constructs his superhero, who creates a zafa—or counterspell—to the evil forces of the fukú, as a writer who uses the pen to shed light on the existence of violent structures of power that have been concealed” (Mahler 120). Mahler argues that Díaz supplies a layered critique of colonial power through a narrator who reveals his dictatorial control as storyteller and by revealing Trujillo as the result of American colonialism on the island. As such, Díaz’s critique targets unchecked power, as the U.S. has bolstered imperial power under the guise of spreading democracy. As Mahler explains, “Thus, according to Yunió, the military occupation [of the Dominican Republic in 1916 and then again in 1965] represents yet another manifestation of the fukú, or the curse of colonialism that continues to haunt Dominicans” (121). By tracing Oscar’s curse back to Spanish colonialism in the Americas, Yunió bears witness to Oscar’s world in accordance with Derrida’s mourner who carries the world of the other. By telling this story, Yunió strives to vocalize Oscar’s entire history to the best of his abilities while also admitting his limitations.

By fusing comic book conventions with postcolonial allusions, Yunió disturbs the line between villain and hero in his effort to undermine hegemonic power on the island. Díaz’s use of the *Watchmen*’s Rorschach⁹² exemplifies the instability between good and evil and prompts the audience to question the morality of heroes; however, in *Oscar Wao*, this faceless man is violence personified.⁹³ Mahler traces the “No Face” idea through Díaz’s *Drown* to emphasize the

⁹² Rorschach, who wears a shape-shifting mask, holds morals in such an extreme black and white that his own morals become debatable. Rorschach blurs moral lines because of the extreme violence he uses in the face (no pun intended) of criminals. He grows more cynical in his crime-fighting and resolves that he has been too “soft on scum. Too young to know any better. Molly-coddled them. Let them live” (Moore 192). With his resolve of being too soft on crime by letting the criminals live, he ends up becoming increasingly violent in his crime-fighting. He ends up becoming judge and jury and executioner to the criminals he captures.

⁹³ The faceless man can be thought of as the violence perpetuated by Trujillo’s regime in that many people (faceless) lost their lives to violence and oppression. The faceless man appears at moments of extreme violence, otherwise, as well. During Oscar’s first beating, he thinks he sees the faceless man. Oscar even states that at times it feels like three people are beating him, instead of just the two henchmen.

“No Face” as representative of colonial oppression. Mahler studies the fukú curse as imperial power, arguing that writing serves as the opposition to hegemonic power; therefore, the fukú and Oscar’s writing (as well as his actions) transforms him into a superhero. By contrast, the zafa provides the counter-spell to the curse; while the fukú takes land, power, and luck away, the zafa functions to remember what has been lost. Extending the writing-as-opposition argument, Yuniór’s writing (both his own and the voice he gives to the Cabral and de León families) acts as the zafa against hegemonic power and against forgetting the lives people have lost.

Fuck You: Yuniór’s Zafa

The fukú represents violence and the curse of the Caribbean islands through colonialism and American intervention. Di Iorio explores the humor Díaz evokes with the fukú, beginning with the amusing play on “Fuck You” (“Laughing Through a Broken Mouth in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” 73). Since, as Díaz observes, the arrival of Columbus coincides with the arrival of the curse, Europeans have been fukú-ing the island. As Di Iorio notes, the history Díaz gives the word traces it as “a widespread blight in the Americas,” unleashed with the arrival of Europeans on the island (73). Furthermore, the fukú “is a hilarious critique of Europe’s conquest of the Americas, the U.S. military presence in the Caribbean and the Third World is not left untouched or rather un-fukúed” (Di Iorio 75). Yuniór uses the fukú to critique Trujillo, who Yuniór calls the “hypeman” of the fukú, and colonialism, including U.S. intervention and its backing of Trujillo. By connecting the fukú and colonialism, Yuniór gives voice to the seizure of land, power, and luck. Through Yuniór, Díaz critiques these forces using a zafa; Yuniór mourns by conjuring a presence for what is missing, by bearing witness to the fukú that creates losses, and by sharing the story with others.

Yunior's zafa—his telling of the story to counteract the curse of the fukú—represents his act of ethical mourning. As Jennifer Harford Vargas outlines, zafa comes from the Spanish word “to let go of” and “is presented in the novel as a form of protection that enacts a liberatory function through the oral word combined with the physical action” (“Dictating a Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form as Ruin-Reading” 204). The zafa, Vargas continues, “is not Yunior’s ‘book’ per se but the narrative techniques and formal structures in the book that enact a mode of ruin-reading,⁹⁴ which reveal the apocalypse of authoritarian power and interrogate repressive forms of power that dictate marginalization” (“Dictating a Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form as Ruin-Reading” 205). The narrative techniques and structure of the book reveals how Yunior enacts ethical mourning by telling this story.⁹⁵ The polyvocal narrative allows Yunior to carry the others’ worlds by giving them voice beyond death and by supplying a means to mourn colonial powers in the Dominican Republic. Yunior carries Oscar and his family’s worlds throughout the narrative and devotes an entire chapter to Lola, along with describing the intricate history of the Cabral family. He interweaves historical commentary through footnotes, offering new manner of relating the story without attempting to thematize it, an almost impossible task.⁹⁶

Yunior relates his friend’s story, the history of the Cabral-de Leóns, and the history of the Dominican Republic; in so doing, he bears witness to these events by generating a presence to atrocities no longer present. Yunior’s mourning reaches beyond Oscar to cover the Dominican

⁹⁴ Ruin-Reading arises out of reading apocalypse, which unearths the varying forms of power that produce inequity and subjugation that are regularly denied. Ruin reading, then, is a way to look at “structures and conditions that enable or bring about apocalypse” (Vargas 200). Díaz contends that we must look at moments of ruin bravely to “see” and “act” to undermine those structures of powers that keep marginalized people oppressed.

⁹⁵ While zafa, translated as “letting go,” works against Derrida’s concept of mourning as never letting go, the zafa, precisely, is a story that must be told. Yunior’s use of the zafa. confronts the postcolonial situation and cycle of violence that Oscar’s family and their homeland has gone and continues to go through.

⁹⁶ Jennifer Harford Vargas explores Yunior’s narrative technique and the difficult task he has. She argues “Yunior mobilizes oral sources, footnotes, and silences to mimic the dissemination and repression of information under dictatorship and to dictate a story against dictatorship without being dictatorial” (“Dictating the Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form as Ruin-Reading” 214).

Republic as a whole. As Sam Durrant explains, postcolonial writing demonstrates how the unrepresentable part of history is not the atrocity itself (the camps of the Holocaust, for instance), but forgetting that the victim's humanity allowed the atrocities to happen (denying that the humanity of Jews made the Holocaust possible). Similar to Derrida's logic, Durrant states that the danger lies in fictionalizing history. Yuniór does his part to avoid this danger by including historical events in footnotes, not allowing them a place where they might become part of the "story." According to Durrant, "Postcolonial narrative is thus confronted with the impossible task of finding a mode of writing that would not immediately transform formlessness into form, a mode of writing that can bear witness to its own incapacity to recover history" (6). In order to confront these stories and bear witness to them while mourning Oscar's death,⁹⁷ Yuniór writes a zafa.

This zafa attests to the difficult mission of writing to respect the past and the lost other without increasing the power of the fukú. Yuniór acknowledges early on that his fukú narrative might not be the best means of storytelling. He is "not entirely sure Oscar would have liked the designation, fukú story" (Díaz 6). The story describes the fukú in the lives of the Cabral-de Leóns while providing the zafa counter-spell, which fulfills certain goals of ethical mourning. Monica Hanna explores Yuniór's complex role as narrator: he redirects attention from his place in the narrative, revealing very little about himself (not even his name, which is given only as a nickname or suffix). According to Hanna, Yuniór "embeds himself in the text and manipulates Oscar's story" (93). This view of Yuniór, however, speaks to his impossible task of bearing

⁹⁷ For another reading of Oscar's death, see Lyn Di Iorio Sandín's "The Latino Scapegoat: Knowledge through Death in Short Stories by Joyce Carol Oates and Junot Díaz." Sandín argues that Latino characters' death represents an ambivalence about identity; in these stories, the scapegoats are from the U.S., not from the origin country. These scapegoats represent Latino assimilation only after giving up "...language, affinity, and attachment to origin" (15). Sandín establishes and explains the essay's use of Rene Girard and Homi Bhabha's mimetic desire and mimicry, respectfully. Reading Oates and Díaz's protagonist, Sandín argues that the characters desire what their dominant role models desire, which leads to violence, and in these stories, death

witness to all of these losses. The reader must question Yuniór's reliability because bearing witness requires doubt. For Derrida, bearing witness necessitates testimony, a repeating of what was witnessed. However, repetition invites distortion. As Durrant claims, bearing witness cannot assume a rigid form. Derrida comments on testimony, "that *as soon as* it is guaranteed, a certain *as theoretical proof*, a testimony *can no longer* be guaranteed *as testimony*" ("Sovereignties in Question" italics in original 68). As a counter-spell rendered through stories, *zafa*, works the same way as testimony in the Derridean sense, or as Durrant states, in that there is always the possibility of fiction. Derrida argues that bearing witness, is accomplished best through poetic language, which avoids Durrant's concern that the writing "would not immediately transform formlessness into form" (6).

Tasked with sharing the history of the Cabral-de Leóns, Yuniór reflects on his duty as storyteller and worries about his ethical role in this act of mourning. When he inserts himself into the story, he intertwines his voice with that of other characters. For instance, in discussing his first real connection to Oscar, Yuniór contemplates what was spoken and hints at the metaphorical nature of his role as a friend obliged with keeping "an eye on somebody like Oscar" (Díaz 171). Yuniór remembers how Oscar greeted him: "Hail, Dog of the Gods" (Díaz 171).⁹⁸ This opening cleaves the two. Derrida asserts that once a dialogue begins between friends, the two know that it will eventually end. In other words, behind two people meeting lies a melancholy in knowing their relationship cannot last; therefore, Yuniór recounting his first meeting with Oscar signifies that he understands—consciously or not—that this moment begins his mourning. Derrida describes this phenomenon in his eulogy to Hans-Georg Gadamer when

⁹⁸ The greeting shows Oscar's pedantry and also shows the novels mix of high and low art. As Yuniór points out, it took him a week to figure out that the greeting meant: "God. Domini. Dog. Canis." In other words, "Hail, Dominicanis." (171).

he states, “I had a feeling that what he would no doubt have called an ‘interior dialogue’ would continue in both of us, sometimes wordlessly, immediately in us or indirectly” (“Sovereignties in Question” 136). This dialogue continues after the death of a friend.

Yunior’s narrative—what we are reading—serves as his way to continue the dialogue. Of course, Yunior does not realize that he will continue to carry Oscar’s world. He states, “I assumed keeping an eye on somebody like Oscar wouldn’t be no Herculean chore” (Díaz 171).⁹⁹ Mourning can become such a chore since Yunior must navigate between appropriating the story and bearing witness. Through dialogue, he further illustrates their connection when he shares that the two exchanged letters, movies, and books. Reflecting on their friendship, Yunior remarks, “That’s all it should have been. Just some fat kid I roomed with my junior year. Nothing more, nothing more. But then Oscar, the dumb-ass, decided to fall in love. And instead of getting him for a year, I got the motherfucker for the rest of my life” (Díaz 181). Indeed, Oscar becomes an integral part of Yunior’s identity.

Dialogue begins a friendship. Discussing Hans-Georg Gadamar, Derrida explains how dialogue intertwines him with Gadamar since conversations have stops; these pauses spark a dialogue that continues when the other person is away as well as when they are together. In Derrida’s words, “I was sure that a strange and intense sharing [*partage*] had begun. A partnership, perhaps. I had a feeling that what he would no doubt have called an ‘interior dialogue’ would continue in both of us” (“Rams” 136). Derrida maintains that when one person dies, their dialogue persists in the living person, similar to his notion of “carrying the world of the other.”

⁹⁹ Yunior’s phrasing is interesting: by using the double negative here (*wouldn’t be no*), he predicts his future task. In the colloquial language it means that it would be no Herculean task, but literally, it means that it would.

In this sense of continued dialogue and world-carrying, Yuniór presents Oscar's world and must also carry the worlds of others. In mourning Oscar, Yuniór manages to tell the story of the Cabrals and the de Leóns. Dr. Cabral's story contains silences and gaps, a result of the doctor's fears of Trujillo. Yuniór contemplates Trujillo's erasure of the Cabrals' history: "none of the Abelard's books, not the four he authored or the hundreds he owned, survive...All of them lost or destroyed. Every paper he had in his house was confiscated and reportedly burned. You want creepy? Not one single example of his handwriting remains" (Díaz 246).

Despite the lack of written evidence that Cabral existed, his story gets told. Yuniór shares details and conversations from the doctor's life, and in this manner, manages to keep his memory alive; indeed, he carries this world and bears witness to it. He admits the problematic nature of his testimony, stating, "But hey, it's only a story, with no solid evidence, the kind of shit only a nerd could love" (Díaz 246).

The lack of evidence necessitates testimony and bearing witness. Derrida contends that testimony requires an act of faith. An aspect of witnessing means, "I affirm (rightly or wrongly, but in all good faith, sincerely) that that was or is present to me...and although you do not have access to it...you have to believe me, because I engage myself to tell you the truth" ("Poetics and Politics of Witnessing" 76). Yuniór acknowledges this act of faith in his storytelling. The very idea that all evidence of Cabral is gone—that the reader has no way to verify this narrative—presents the story as an act of testimony and bearing witness.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Yuniór's storytelling blurs fact and fiction in what Nereida Segura-Rico calls *metatestimonio*, a genre

¹⁰⁰ This idea that Yuniór is bearing witness to events he was not present for further complicates an interpretation of Yuniór as narrator. In Derrida's thinking, the person who bears witness was there to witness something: "The one who testifies is the one who will have been present. He or she will have been present at, in the present, the thing to which he testifies" (74). Here, we have Yuniór taking up a "present" witness, presumably, he heard the story from Oscar's mother and other family members who did see what happened to Dr. Cabral. In the silence—lost records of his life—Yuniór gives him a voice and relays his story.

concerned with “the illocutionary aspects of the testimonial, that is...the issue of who talks and for whom...This function allows these texts to call attention to their own status as fictions while at the same time blurring the division between fiction and reality” (175-76). Through the use of footnotes, Yunió provides reality and facts, but in his narration of the Cabral and de Leóns, the line between history and fiction fades. In “Testimonio: Origins, Terms, and Resources,” Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez explain that *testimonio* writing “entails a first personal oral or written account, drawing on experiential, self-conscious, narrative practice to articulate an urgent voicing of something which bears witness” (525). For Reyes and Rodríguez, in *testimonio*, “the aim is to speak for justice against all crimes against humanity. The truth of the survivor story may not be empirically, scientifically, or legally true. Nevertheless, the speakers are aware that the very manner in which they tell the story may hold for them a harrowing reality of reliving the oppressive experience” (527).

They paraphrase Anzaldúa, echoing Derrida’s assertion that poetic mourning reveals the mask as mask, and that the *testimonio* is “an act of removing a mask previously used as a survival strategy” (Reyes and Rodríguez 527). For Derrida, mourning requires poetic language that refuses claims to facts or thematization. Yunió admits (or at least, admits the possibility) of his narrative manipulations; in other words, he reveals the mask as mask. He knows the reader might question his narrative choices, but he maintains that he tells the truth: “Not believable. Should I go down to the Feria and pick me up a more representative model...But then I’d be lying” (Díaz 284-285). This direct address to the reader reflects a quality of *testimonio*: “Is not to be kept secret but requires active participatory readers or listeners who act on behalf of the speaker in an effort to arrive at justice and redemption” (Reyes and Rodríguez 527). Yunió

addresses multiple readers and merges elite and popular culture, inviting the audience to actively participate in reading the text.

Yunior's task of bearing witness is complicated ethically, as his story resembles an elegy, which can deny the other's otherness. The traditional elegy turns the lost other into the writer's subject, prompting ethical and political concerns. This kind of substitution denies the lost other's alterity. Thomas Clewell addresses these concerns by studying a long tradition of mourning, including Peter Sacks' work on elegies. As Clewell explains, "Freudian mourning involves less a lament for the passing of a unique other, and more a process geared toward restoring a certain economy of the subject" (47). Elegies have helped poets progress from bereaved misery to resolution. Resolution emerges from the poet's use of language that distances the original lost object and the written signs that express its passing. Examining Peter Sacks, Clewell notes that "This distance is essential to the work of mourning, according to Sacks, because it helps the grieving poet understand the difference between the dead and the living, a profoundly simple difference between those who no longer speak or write and those who do" (49). The elegy offers the lost object a transcendent life through language that lives on, according to Clewell. The elegy, however, can also be considered as the other speaking in the survivor because, as Derrida stresses in *The Work of Mourning*, the elegy requires the survivor to resume the dialogue begun when the two met. Yunior, then, writes an elegy that respects a story he cannot ethically relate, as symbolized by the blank pages, which form a presence in absence. Where Abelard Luis Cabral was silent in the face of Trujillo's massacre of the black islanders, Yunior leaves a space for events to which he cannot bear witness. Yunior exercises multiple strategies to relate this story and mourn ethically, including having others speak for themselves. For instance, he assigns

Lola her own chapter even though her story barely involves Oscar's. This way of storytelling contrasts Dr. Abelard's silence.

Oscar's story contrasts that of his grandfather in the silences occupying the narrative. Abelard Luis Cabral botches his ethical imperative to speak against the brutal killings of thousands by remaining silent in the face of it. In his parlor gatherings, he forbids "contemporary politics (i.e., Trujillo)" (Díaz 214). Furthermore, he ignores the atrocities of the dictatorship. He attends parties but refuses to speak. During the "perejiling [of] Haitians, and Haitian-Dominicans, and Haitian-looking Dominicans to death," Cabral "acted like it was any other day" (Díaz 215).¹⁰¹ His silence fuels the family's fukú curse, which is silence and the call to bear witness.¹⁰² Seeing his homeland acquiescing to a brutal dictator, he remains silent. Yuniór discloses that while many feared Trujillo's regime, some did speak out: "Trujillo was certainly formidable, and the regime was like a Caribbean Mordor in many ways, but there were plenty of people who despised El Jefe, who communicated in less-than-veiled ways their contempt, who *resisted*. But, Abelard was simply not one of them" (Díaz 226). Dr. Cabral's silence becomes his complicity. Unlike his friends who share stories of Trujillo's brutality, Abelard refuses to even speak his name. Only when he receives an explicit invitation to a state party so that Trujillo can

¹⁰¹ Trujillo rejected the idea of Haitians removed from the borderlands; he ordered them killed. When soldiers encountered Haitians, the soldiers would present a sprig of parsley and ask the Haitians to pronounce the name, *perejil* that requires rolling the "r" otherwise known as trilling the 'r' sound. If the person was unable, they were assumed to be Haitian and shot, bayoneted, or hacked to death with a machete. Michel Wucker's *Why the Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians, and the Struggle for Hispaniola* reviews some estimates from the tragedy. Haitian President Élie Lescot estimated 12,168 deaths after the massacre; in 1953, the Haitian historian Jean Price-Mars states 12,136 deaths and 2,419 injuries—these are their injuries referred to in Yuniór's footnote: "Abelard kept his head, eyes, and nose safely tucked into his books...and when survivors staggered into his surgery with unspeakable machete wounds, he fixed them up as best he could without making any comments as to the ghastliness of their wounds" (215). In 1975, Joaquín Balaguer, the Dominican Republic's interim Foreign Minister at the time of the massacre, guessed 17,000 deaths. Bernardo Vega, the Dominican historian, puts the number as high as 35,000.

¹⁰² A note on Abelard's call to bear witness: it might be that while staying silent, he was actually keeping records and waiting for a moment when he could speak up without repercussions. I should add that silence about "contemporary politics" was a decision to protect himself and his family, as it is hard to know if he will be denounced by someone he thinks of as an insider.

meet his daughter does Abelard resist. As Yuniór comments, “the Brave Thing became easy” when it was his child (Díaz 217). However, when his friends discuss “the latest Trujillo Atrocity...Abelard listened to these horrors tensely, and then after an awkward silence would change the subject. He simply didn’t wish to dwell on the fates of Unfortunate People” (Díaz 227). Despite this personal gesture to contest the regime, he does not speak against it. In contrast to Abelard’s silences, Yuniór collects these stories to disseminate them. Therefore, if Yuniór’s storytelling is the *zafa*, Abelard’s silence perpetuates his *fukú* demise. In a suggestive turn, Abelard’s words—when he finally releases a disparaging remark against the regime—lead to his fall.

A complicated relationship between silence and words emerges in Abelard’s story. On the one hand, he remains silent, and therefore complicit in the horrors of Trujillo’s regime. On the other, his words, the joke about bodies in his trunk, result in his doom.¹⁰³ Abelard jokes while drinking with some Trujillo henchmen, but, significantly, his joke comes at the expense of the people he should be mourning. He asks the men to help him move furniture on his roof to his trunk and quips, “I hope there aren’t any bodies in here” (Díaz 234). Lyn Di Iorio maintains that the joke has the henchmen laughing from a place of superiority because they have no regard for their victims’ humanity. Di Iorio adds, “Humor, in effect, according to Freud, is a kind of defense against trauma, and of course, this fits Abelard’s comment very well, as it is black humor in defense against Trujillo’s attempt to control him and rape his daughter” (“Laughing Through a Broken Mouth” 82). However, because the joke represents an attempt to ingratiate himself to the henchmen, it insults the dissidents killed and put in trunks. The *fukú* and the *zafa*

¹⁰³ Mahler argues that Abelard’s fall comes because of “a book that Abelard was writing as an exposé of the supernatural, other-worldly dark powers behind Trujillo’s regime” (129). However, Trujillo’s secret police found the book and destroyed it, along with all of Abelard’s books, only after the joke sparked their finding the book.

circulate in this confusion between silence and words. Yuniór explains that Abelard's fate may be understood by two theories: one of simple bad luck and the other of Trujillo's curse on the family. Yuniór questions, "An accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide yourself... We are traveling in silences here" (Díaz 243). Yuniór seeks to tell Abelard's story, but because of Abelard's silences, that story remains unclear. Even Abelard's own family remains silent about what happened, partially because they are uncertain about the events. Yuniór highlights the difficult task of speaking these silences, of bearing witness to the past.

In his effort to share Abelard's story, Yuniór expresses his deep mourning for Oscar. Yuniór closely studies the family's history in his desire to bear witness to his friend. He strives to convey precisely the world of Oscar and his family, along with his Dominican history, and his friendship, part of which involves Oscar's writing. However, Yuniór might not be able to capture all the histories needed to bear witness. According to Durrant, "the work of mourning is ultimately a recognition of the impossibility of retrieval—and it is the impossibility that renders the work of mourning interminable" (8). Yuniór's attempt reflects his continual effort, his need to retell these stories from his perspective and from those of the people he interviews. Furthermore, Yuniór concentrates on the ethics of sharing the story with its inclusion of other voices, as evinced in his extensive research on Dominican history. If Abelard's silence toward Trujillo curses the family with a fukú, then Yuniór's story provides the zafa on behalf of the Cabrals.

Yuniór takes great care to respect Oscar's story, the Abelards' history, and the conflicts the Dominican Republic has experienced. From the opening, Yuniór juxtaposes Oscar's personal fukú and that of the D.R. In the initial description of Oscar, Yuniór quotes Beli: "You should

have seen him...He was our little Porfirio Rubirosa” (Díaz 12). In the footnote, he explains that Rubirosa was a famous Dominican playboy who married and divorced Trujillo’s daughter yet managed to remain in the dictator’s good graces. The comparison illustrates Yuniór’s attempts to tell the story accurately by using Beli’s words. His inclusion of this minor detail also demonstrates his effort to bear witness to the horrors the D.R. underwent. Beli makes the comparison because Rubirosa was a handsome celebrity, but his connection to Trujillo reminds the reader that Trujillo’s violence—that fukú—permeates the stories Yuniór tries to tell.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, this comparison reflects Yuniór’s use of history to bear witness to the Dominican Republic’s story. In Yuniór’s footnote to Rubirosa, he includes information about the Haitian genocide and the Trujillato’s murderous regime.

Yuniór’s mourning, then, reaches beyond ethically mourning Oscar and extends to bearing witness for postcolonial power in the Dominican Republic. Seth Moglen supplies a useful lens for analyzing Yuniór’s mourning for Dominican people and his need to narrate the history of the island. Moglen’s melancholia resembles Derrida’s ethical mourning. According to Moglen, melancholia serves a better purpose in politics by providing a “psychic means of honoring” the hopes, dreams, and social possibilities denied by “derided identities” (“On Mourning Social Injury” 152). Even in later works, Freud suggests that “melancholic identifications” inhabit parts of the ego (152). Moglen shows how critics have built on these ideas and advocates for melancholia, or hybrid ideas of melancholic mourning, as a way to honor lost objects. Moglen supports a mourning that permits grieving social injustices while allowing

¹⁰⁴ Also, it seems shocking that Beli, who almost died from a brutal beating by the Trujillo thugs, could later on compare her young son to a favored man in the regime. She is getting at Rubirosa’s seductive ladies-man reputation, but ignores his violence. The comparison also addresses Dominican machismo here. As Oscar grows up and becomes obese, he loses any kind of seductive quality of “Dominicanness.”

us to honor and remember aspirations denied in the past. Yuniór ethically mourns his friend and his country, exposing the past through footnotes, storytelling, and through remembering the fukú through the zafa. While Yuniór's storytelling methods are not unique, his content reflects *testimonio*.¹⁰⁵ He bears witness to Oscar, his family, and the Dominican Republic's history that was cursed with the fukú of postcolonialism. As Lauren Jean Gantz explains,

If fukú is trauma, then Yuniór's zafa is a form of testimony—his attempt to assert the reality of the horrors perpetuated by Trujillo and the reality of their after-effects. In constructing this zafa-testimony, Yuniór engages in what trauma theorist call narrativization: the conversion of fragments of experience and memory into a (more or less) cohesive narrative, allowing the traumatic event to be integrated into the psyche and worked through successfully. (127)

Yuniór's ethical mourning—his narrative construction with an amalgam of facts, fiction, storytelling, and history—represents his goal of bearing witness to Oscar's passing.

Yuniór's bearing witness provides the history of imperialism in the Dominican Republic alongside Oscar's family history. Noting Derrida's charge that the survivor carries the world of the lost other, Yuniór's narrative manipulations employ poetic language to juxtapose Oscar's story alongside that of Oscar's homeland. Trenton Hickman observes that despite hating Trujillo, Dominican-American writers still use that history to inform their work. Hickman states, "the Dominican-American literary representations of the Trujillato facilitate what Dominick La Capra calls the 'working-through' of trauma for the Dominican-Americans that will help them avoid the mere reiteration or residual 'acting out' of the traumatic past" ("The Trujillato as

¹⁰⁵ In questioning the need for objective truth in testimonial, Nora Strejilevich advocates for an approximation of truth, stating "Since abuse, persecution, annihilation, and suffering are all true, testimonial discourse should focus on its capacity to transmit these certainties, thus enhancing its role, while confronting the assumptions that limit its power. In short, testimony should tress just truthfulness, not objectivity" (709).

Desideratum in Dominican-American Fiction”158). In other words, to avoid repeating the past and reinforcing Dominican identity through Trujillo, Dominican-Americans can define an identity against Trujillo with stories that serve as more than cautionary tales. Yuniór’s narrative,¹⁰⁶ precisely, goes beyond cautionary and depicts the story of a family and his friend who has passed. Simultaneously, Yuniór’s story represents the whole island. Hickman argues that Beli, for instance, “acts as a metonym for the Dominican-American community and their struggle for survival” (162). Beli’s skin color distinguishes her from many lighter-skinned Dominicans; her blackness augments her extraordinary beauty, which challenges the racism of Dominicans. La Inca makes sure she attends an elite school, and she gets expelled only when she is caught having sex with a lighter-skinned boy. Hickman writes,

Though Beli is just one *dominicana*—in fact, a *prieta* whose dark skin has caused her to be excluded from the most tony social clubs in Santo Domingo and elsewhere—Díaz’s novel has her stand in for all Dominican-Americans, miraculously surviving the *trujillato* to emigrate to the United States and start anew instead of succumbing to the brutality of Trujillo. (163)

This claim is only part true. As someone who challenges Dominicaness in her skin color and sexuality, Beli represents Dominicans and contradictions within the island. Oscar, however, serves as the representation of Dominican-Americans: he suffers brutality throughout his life, inherited from the *fukú*, but grows up in America and engages with American popular culture. Yuniór’s narrative reveals the need to bear witness to these brutalities in order to avoid them in the future. Tracing Oscar’s story back to his grandfather illustrates Yuniór’s attempt to work

¹⁰⁶ Yuniór includes his own missteps toward Oscar, Lola, and himself. At the end of the narrative, he prepares to pass on the storytelling and the *testimonio* to Oscar’s niece, Isis (daughter of Lola de León). He has saved Oscar’s works.

through these traumas in overarching historical-political terms as well as on the personal level. Yuniór's zafa seeks to eradicate the curse upon the Cabrals, de Leóns, and the island.

Yuniór has multiple opportunities to cut ties with Oscar and the de Leóns but stays connected with them nonetheless, demonstrating his persistence in telling Oscar's story. Oscar's suicide attempt brings Yuniór back into his life. Yuniór has reservations, however, and claims, "I guess if I'd been a real pal, I would have visited him up in Paterson like every week, but I didn't" (Díaz 192). Yuniór could have continued to ignore Oscar and his family but decides to visit instead. During the visit, Oscar reminds him about the fukú, blaming it for his suicide attempt. Yuniór replies, "I don't believe in that shit, Oscar. That's our parents' shit" (Díaz 194). Oscar states, "It's ours, too" (Díaz 194). Oscar reminds Yuniór that the curse requires bearing witness. If a curse is something one lives with, then Yuniór's curse is the responsibility to carry both Oscar's world and the history of the Dominican Republic.

Since ethical mourning, unlike Freudian mourning, never ends, Yuniór becomes haunted by Oscar after his death and continues to carry Oscar's world through his writing—the story Díaz authors. In the chapter "A Superficial Note," Yuniór discusses his impetus to write about the Cabral's history. He has a dream in which Oscar, wearing a mask in a room full of books, holds one book up with blank pages. Yuniór notices "that behind his mask his eyes are smiling. Zafa" (Díaz 325). This juxtaposition of blank pages and zafa reinforces Yuniór's need to tell the stories that have been missing: both Oscar's and his family and that of the D.R. Yuniór mentions the "páginas en blanco" several times.¹⁰⁷ Mahler views the blank pages "as a metaphor for these

¹⁰⁷ These blank pages contrast to Oscar's final writings: a letter he sent to Lola about a manuscript on its way, where he states, "This [the manuscript] contains everything I've written on this journey. Everything I think you will need. You'll understand when you read my conclusion. (It's the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA.)" (Díaz 333). Oscar, like Yuniór, understood the need for a zafa—a story to share with others, a testimonio to counter Trujillo's brutality, a way to bear witness to their family's losses. The manuscript, according to Yuniór, never arrives. Yuniór, however, manages to create pages full of Oscar's journey.

silences [silences in the face of hegemonic and imperial power], which allows for the perpetuation of tyrannical leadership” (131). In other words, Díaz uses the blank pages metaphor to represent wresting the pen away from the dictators in order to inscribe a narrative of autonomy. This metaphor further illustrates the narrative levels Yunió visits in bearing witness.

Yunió works to fill the blank pages by relating the stories about the Dominican Republic and Oscar. Oscar’s family has been silenced from the moment his grandfather was imprisoned and his writings destroyed. Yunió writes against postcolonialism and Trujillo’s imperial power, but the blank pages also mourn for the lost other. One context for the blank pages revolves around the de León and Cabral family, who have missing stories, blank pages in their history, and appear doomed to repeat those histories. These empty sections embody just part of the curse the family carries; the blank pages can symbolize Abelard’s missing manuscript that Trujillo destroys. They also represent the presence of absence or totalitarian control over the narrative of the Dominican Republic’s history—the blank pages of history that Trujillo erases. Therefore, the pages also evoke the need to tell what is missing. When Oscar appears in Yunió’s dream with blank pages, Yunió knows he needs to fill them:

Joaquín Balaguer was a Negrophobe, an apologist to genocide, an election thief, and a killer of people who wrote better than himself, famously ordering the death of journalist Orlando Martínez. Later, when he wrote his memoirs, he claimed he knew who had done the foul deed (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a *página en blanco*, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death. (Díaz 90, fn 9)

Balaguer left his pages bare, but Yunió believes he must fill his own pages to create the anti-blank pages—the presence for the absence. Yunió completes the pages with Oscar and his

family's story and the history of the Dominican Republic. He does so precisely because the lost worlds of Oscar and the D.R. haunt him.

Yunior's responsibility to mourn ethically begins when he first meets Oscar and manifests in the need to tell his story properly, by respecting the events and people involved.¹⁰⁸ Part of this responsibility reflects his desire for accuracy, but he must also maintain a balance between letting the other (Oscar) speak while using poetic language. Vargas discusses Yunior's narrative in terms of his dictatorial need to control the narrative: "As the primary narrator and storyteller, Yunior loosely functions as a dictator in both senses [political and narrative] because he controls and orders representation and because he collects, writes down, and reshapes a plethora of oral stories that have been recounted to him" ("Dictating a Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form as Ruin-Reading" 202). However, this recounting of stories can be understood as poetic language. Yunior manipulates the stories he hears from his many sources, and at times, he presents them as the speaker's narrative. He admits walking between an accurate story and one that follows the spirit, if not the letter, of events. Yunior remarks, "I know I've thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be the true account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. Can't we believe that an Ybón can exist and that a brother like Oscar might be due a little luck after twenty-three years" (Díaz 285). Yunior thus reflects his values in his storytelling. He appears to view fantasy, sci-fi, fact as equally valid ways of telling the story. For example, he describes Trujillo in accurate, historical terms and as the Evil Lord Sauron.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ He meets Oscar through Lola, of course. His mourning for Lola—who is still carrying her own world—is different. Phenomenologically, heartbreak has similar feelings and resembles mourning in that the lost love is a person who is now a part of the heartbroken. The heartbreak, much like mourning, feels like a world, the world of the other, is lost, but that person still lives and carries their own world.

¹⁰⁹ In describing Trujillo as the "hype-man" of the fukú, Yunior declares Trujillo "our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid" (2, n. 2). Sauron is the Dark Lord of Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*. Arawn is an evil sorcerer in Lloyd Alexander's *The Chronicles of Prydain* series. Darkseid, enemy of Superman, is a super-villain in the DC universe. Yunior alludes to him when he connects Beli's destruction to Trujillo's "Omega Effect" (Díaz 80).

As Derrida emphasizes, “all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language” (“Poetics and the Politics of Witnessing” 66). He attempts to define poetic experience: “These ‘things’ that are not only ‘words’: the poet is *the only one who can bear witness to them*, but he does not name them in the poem. The possibility of a secret always remains open, and this reserve is inexhaustible” (“Poetics and Politics of Witnessing” emphasis in original 66-67). The possibility of inaccuracies always exists, as does that of lying. If Yuniors is a dictator, as Vargas argues, I would qualify that role as different from a political dictator who leaves pages blank to erase history; rather, Yuniors dictates the narrative to tell the story beyond the story. He infuses historical events with poetic language so that he can, as Derrida suggests, undermine the idea that the story he tells is the whole truth. As a witness to those who endured these histories, Yuniors admits his limitations in storytelling by subverting his own narrative voice.¹¹⁰

Yuniors manages to confront his role of witness with nuance by affirming his problematic role as writer. As Vargas observes, the novel “employs folk orality, paratextual footnotes, and blank pages to critique dictatorial relations” (124). She also adds, “Yuniors recounts his story through a wide variety of named and unnamed oral sources, thereby forging an oral, hearsay hermeneutic that functions as a narrative structuring principle and as a means for reading dictatorial power” (Vargas 214). While Yuniors controls the narrative, he leaves room for other voices in these named and unnamed sources, which constitute the worlds he must carry in his witnessing. He acknowledges his role as narrator and is cognizant of the connection between writers and dictators:

¹¹⁰. The story, itself, marked as a story reveals that the story is about storytelling. We know that what we read comes through Yuniors and therefore is his story. Derrida, while talking about poems and poetics, can be applied to the narrative. He states that “[The poem] speaks to the other by keeping quiet, keeping something quiet from him. In keeping quiet, in keeping silent, it still addresses...Revealing the mask as a mask” (“Poetics and Politics of Witnessing” 96). The narrative, like a poem, reveals itself as a story, and, as a story, it cannot provide a full account of what was witnessed, and it admits that. In other words, Yuniors is aware of his narration and aware of his blank pages, but he understands that his story still addresses, still bears witness.

What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they've had beef. Like the Fantastic Four and Galactus, like the X-Men and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, like the Teen Titans and Deathstroke, Foreman and Ali, Morrison and Crouch, Sammy and Sergio, they seem destined to be eternally linked in the Halls of Battle. Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like.* (Díaz 97)

Yunior recognizes that he resembles Trujillo because he dictates the story and controls people's lives through his narration; he also realizes that bearing witness can become violent. In his self-awareness, Yunior realizes that, as Maher posits, the fukú he writes is a metaphor for postcolonial power, illustrated by Lola's comment that the island is full of Trujillos. Yunior accepts the violence in his narrative, stressing that the written word holds a power over the story; bearing witness is also inherently a violent act.

Two ideas come to mind in examining Yunior and Oscar's friendship: one from Luce Irigaray who deems cannibalistic love unethical, and the other from Derrida who reads friendship as a private cannibalism. Reading Derrida's perspective in "On Friendship," the situation can be interpreted as a confrontation of the inevitable task that friendship faces in its private cannibalism. Yunior seeks to undermine this power by blending genres and by complicating the distinction between villain and hero. Mahler analyzes Díaz's use of the *Watchmen* hero Rorschach¹¹¹ and compares him to the no face man. In contrast to the no face man, Yunior turns Oscar into a superhero—someone who writes endlessly and who will achieve his goal of

¹¹¹ See: FN 90

becoming the Dominican Tolkien. As the story's dictator, Yuniór offers a voice to those excluded from the island's history; he creates and carries Oscar's world dating back to his grandfather. In doing so, Yuniór creates the zafa.

All we ever talk about is Oscar: Yuniór's Ethical Mourning

The zafa succeeds because Lola and Yuniór appear to break the curse's streak. It takes Yuniór ten years to realize he had to write the zafa; "I woke up next to somebody I didn't give two shits about, my upper lip covered in coke-snot and coke-blood and I said, OK, Wao, OK. You win" (Díaz 325). He writes the narrative and now lives in New Jersey and teaches at a community college. He is married, and he no longer chases after women and cheats. He writes in his spare time and appears to have escaped the fate of others, like Dr. Cabral, who fell back into silences and did not speak out. Lola, we learn, is also married and has a daughter. Her fate contrasts her mother's dealings with men and relationships. When she and Yuniór run into each other, they illustrate the ideal of ethical mourning as carrying the world of the other. As Yuniór notes, "All we ever talk about is Oscar" (Díaz 327). Oscar haunts them because he became part of their world; now they must always carry him. Furthermore, Yuniór has kept all of Oscar's writings, and he anticipates the day Lola's daughter will come asking about her uncle.

Yuniór's narrative manages to bear witness and ethically mourn; he refuses to forget Oscar and memorializes him in writing. Much like Rosa mourns through a poem in remembrance of her friend, Yuniór authors a book for his. Yuniór is much more concerned with the entire world of Oscar, and he carries it inside because part of that world—the Dominican Republic—is part of himself. Now, Oscar forms a critical part of his identity and will forever be a present absence, which the book commemorates. Furthermore, Yuniór has expanded his mourning

beyond just his friend to include the Dominican Republic. As narrator, he manages to fill in the blank pages—pages that have been kept bare by imperial, hegemonic, and colonial powers—through the footnotes, addressing his reader, and through his subject matter. In other words, Yuniór ethically mourns his friend, remembering Oscar in Oscar’s absence by telling his story; he does the same for the Dominican Republic. He reminds the reader, as a Watcher, the dangers of powers left unchecked and the need to vigilantly retell the story. The book’s meta-storytelling reveals Yuniór’s role as mourner and witness bearer: the audience never reads Oscar’s book because, as Mahler aptly highlights, “there is no end-all cure against the fukú; a definitive antidote cannot be had” (134). Indeed, mourning never ends; whether mourning a lost loved one or a lost homeland, one can never silence the lost object. In “The Truth That Wounds,” Derrida explains what the survivor strives for:

When one reads the poem, when one attempts to explain it, to discuss it, to interpret it, one speaks in one’s own turn, one forges other phrases, poetic or not. Even when one recognizes...that on the side of the poem there is a wounded mouth, speaking, one still always risks suturing it, closing it. Hence the duty of the reader-interpreter is to write letting the other speak, or so as to let the other speak. It is this that I call... counter-signing... One writes some other thing, but that is in order to try to let the other sign: it is the other who writes, the other who signs. (166-67)

Yuniór realizes that alongside his narrative, the other has a story to tell. In trying to honor those stories, he attempts to let those others write, as when he gives Lola her own chapter and retells Beli’s history, or when he uses the story of this family to provide the history of imperialism in the Dominican Republic. This book then works as a zafa, a counter-spell to the

fukú, because it refuses to close the story. Oscar's book, like Schrodinger's cat, is always about to arrive. Yuniór realizes that his work carries the possibility of suturing this history of family and country, but the story remains open, waiting for Oscar's book while offering Yuniór's narrative that does not claim closure. As Yuniór informs us, "If you are looking for a full story, I don't have it" (Díaz 243).

CONCLUSION: REMAINING INCONSOLABLE BEFORE HISTORY

Latinx

Ana Menéndez, Elías Miguel Muñoz, and Junot Díaz demonstrate how the impossibility of mourning informs the need for *testimonio* stories. By bearing witness to postcolonial and dictatorial oppression in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, these authors display an ethical aesthetic of “impossibility” and the legitimacy of fiction as a political act. Many Latinx scholars view immigrants through the lenses of acculturation or assimilation. The problem, however, is that many confuse Latinx and Latin American literature, leading to the failure of some criticism to produce nuanced interpretations. For instance, Karen Christian indicates this confusion between Latino/a and Latin America; she quotes *New York Times* writer Andrei Codrescu, who “declares that ‘North American Latino fiction is a poor cousin of its Southern Hemisphere relation’ (Codrescu quoted in Christian 8). Christian reveals the flaw in this assessment, stating “such broad descriptive endeavors are rarely successful, for U.S. Latina/o culture has never been monolithic or homogeneous” (8). Using ethical mourning as a way to read these stories of loss requires the reader to understand what was lost and how the loss informs the subjectivity of the characters or aesthetics of the work. This kind of reading illuminates the difference between Máximo losing his wife after losing his homeland and Yunion coming to understand his homeland in the face of his friend’s death. These characters share loss, but very different losses; we learn as much about their identity by what is missing as we do by the links that comprise who they are.

Ethical mourning provides a new understanding of nostalgia in stories of Latinx exiles. For example, Dalia Kandiyoti claims that most scholars critique nostalgia for idealizing a conservative vision of the past. This past used for sale is manufactured (the simulacra—a past based on a non-existent idealized past). Other scholars, such as Mariyln Halter, suggest that identity is purchased through commodities. Kandiyoti argues that Cristina García and Ana Menéndez critically examine nostalgia consumerism without dismissing it. These authors indulge the original meaning of nostalgia as a painful return home. However, I perceive this past not in terms of nostalgia—of a painful return home—but as an ethical mourning for home. Reading these stories through ethical mourning offers a means for Latinx scholarship to approach writers from Latinx backgrounds in the U.S. and their or their parent’s relationship to homeland and loss. In other words, I argue that we should examine what is missing (Cuba or a loved one) more closely to understand how the loss informs how one positions themselves in the new world.

In other instances, ethical mourning can expand how we read Latinx literature of loss as a meditation on postcolonial violence beyond its place among other Latinx or Latin American writers. For instance, Daniel Bautista’s “Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Diaz’s ‘The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao’” explores the novel’s place among other works of magical realism; in “‘Movin’ on up and Out’: Lowercase Latino/a Realism in the Works of Junot Diaz and Angie Cruz,” Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez state that Junot Diaz and Angie Cruz share an anxiety between assimilation and maintaining Latino/a identity. My analysis using ethical mourning argues that these works can be considered symptoms of mourning that respect the past in order to live in the present. While these novels present varying subjectivities and losses, they all share in that they have experienced loss. Judith Butler reminds us that we can

share the experience of loss; she states, “Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’ for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody” (20). At the same time, more particular to the Latinx experience, my selected authors and narratives share a collective loss since they deal with lost homeland.

Examining ethical mourning in these works can help us think of them as symptoms of collective mourning—of the need to mourn in order to cope with loss. Ultimately, these writers demonstrate the impossibility of mourning. This study posits an ethical responsibility to retain the loss object, thing, or loved one. The manner loss is presented in these works requires us to consider the meanings of loss and living with loss. Ahmed explains the importance of loss because it shapes our identity. She states, “Each of us, in being shaped by others, carries with us ‘impressions’ of those others. Such impressions are certainly memories of this or that other, to which we return the sticky metonymy of our thoughts and dreams, and through prompting either by conversation with others or through the visual form of photographs. Such ‘witness’ also shapes our bodies, our gestures, our turns of phrase” (*The Cultural Politics of Emotions* 160). Indeed, if, as Ahmed states, we carry impressions within us—an idea similar to Derrida’s—then, I argue, we carry places in us; places, too, leave their impressions on our body and shape our identity.¹¹² While these characters and writers all deal with loss in personal ways that are unique to them and their characters, they share the impression left on them from the places of their or their parents’ exile.

This study perceives the immigrant or exile or hybrid experience as a model for ethical mourning, a mourning that lingers like an aroma after food has been eaten. The immigrant or

¹¹² Yuniors comes to mind as someone touched, changed by his friendship with Oscar and confronting his relationship to the Dominican Republic. Yuniors takes on Oscar’s vocabulary steeped in comic book phrases and sci-fi metaphors.

exile lives on the borderlands between (at least) two cultures, and they take from the old place as much as they take from the new one, leading them to create a new place in the U.S. As Máximo, Rosa, and Mario illustrate, forgetting the homeland is impossible because it lingers even as they attempt to integrate themselves into their new home. The narratives reveal how the characters are eventually compelled to mourn ethically. For instance, Máximo is not just a Cuban in Miami; his final joke illustrates how much what was lost—what he ethically mourns—informs him. He might be a mutt in America, but he was a German Shepherd in Cuba, and that pure breed lingers within him. The joke also points to a particularly Cuban exile characteristic: the lingering pain he feels of being well off in Cuba and having to start over in the United States. In other words, he still bears the scars of his Cuban identity, and those scars represent a presence of the things he has lost, as his cooking leaves an aroma allowing his deceased wife a presence. Ernesto refuses to forget his brother and a time before dictatorship. Matilde can only confront her husband when she allows her memories to pierce through a veil of denial and pain.

***Testimonio* as Bearing Witness**

By expanding the definition of *testimonio* and considering how it intersects with bearing witness, we can read these works, not for capital T, Truth, but for a truth that helps the reader hear the other's story. By hearing the other's story, the reader can (as *testimonio* desires) move others to action, or at least, help them better understand each other. As Justin Ross Sevenker states of *The Greatest Performance*, "I am convinced that the novel is testimonial and seeks to incite public reaction against the injustices that it represents" (189). This idea of truth's problem has been explored within *testimonio* and mourning. For instance, Irizarry states, "For many Latin American Studies scholars, content, rhetorical gesture, and narrative voice rather than truth-value

indicate a narrative's validity as *testimonio*, not as a 'true' text" (265). In its incredulity to truth, *testimonio* resembles the idea of testament that Derrida connects to bearing witness. In bearing witness to Paul Celan, Derrida states that he will look at "a poetic experience of language" ("Sovereignties in Question" 66). Just as *testimonio* values rhetorical gestures and narrative voice, Derrida states that bearing witness "must not essentially consist in proving, in confirming a knowledge, in ensuring a theoretical certitude, a determinant judgement. It can only appeal to an act of faith" ("Sovereignties in Question" 79). In this sense, the Latinx narratives discussed in this dissertation voice truths about Cuban Americans and Dominican Americans who experience loss and mourn that loss. In other words, these works bear witness to loss through dictators and injustice. In doing so, as Detwiler and Breckenridge state, these writers "have chosen to appreciate how *testimonio* does, in fact, represent the complexities and injustices of a rapidly changing world" (5).

Recognizing literature as testimonial can provide readers with a presentation of grief.¹¹³ Durrant provides some useful insight into the importance of literature that bears witness to grief. He argues that a literary truth does not need to be a factual one: "narratives consist not in the presentation of factual information but in the attempt to demonstrate a 'true grief,' a grief that acquires a certain materiality or historical weight despite the insubstantial, fictional context" (24). Certainly, these stories all involve people who endure grief even if that grief is presented through fiction. The significance of telling these stories and reading them rests in Durrant's point that "the true work of the novel consists not in the factual recovery *of* history, nor yet in the psychological recovery *from* history, but rather in the insistence on remaining inconsolable

¹¹³ For other sources on literature as *testimonio* see: Guerra, R. J. (2008). *Literature as witness: Testimonial aspects of Chicano self-identity narratives*. (Ph.D., University of Nebraska—Lincoln). And Beverley, J., & Zimmerman, M. (1990). *Literature and politics in the Central American revolutions*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

before history” (emphasis in original 24). According to Derrida, remaining devastated in the face of loss happens because what is lost is incomprehensible. A world is gone that we must carry, after all. For these writers, they bear witness to the dictatorships of their homeland and to the suffering those regimes caused even while they remain powerless to change the political situation. Ernesto, for example, is said to be “weary of language, weary of words and the memories they try to trap and kill for viewing” (Menéndez 201). Dealing with the loss of his brother leaves him inconsolable because words cannot capture his brother’s death and world that he must carry. Comparing Ernesto with Yuniór, the latter attempts to capture that world with his use of footnotes, history, and Oscar’s family’s stories. Both narratives, however, like all the narratives in this study, include attempts at respecting the loss of the other while telling the lost other’s story. The narratives can be seen as using poetic language to bear witness and provide *testimonio*: they resist an attempt at making truthful claims, they are undoubtedly works of fiction, they use fictional characters, but they provide narratives that insist on “remaining inconsolable *before history*” (Durrant 24).

The Remainder

According to Žižek, the Lacanian Big Other designates explicit symbolic rules as well as unwritten ones. He offers the example of Robert Ebert’s movie rules—for instance, during a car chase in a foreign land, a fruit stand will get run over, or the grocery bag rule, in which someone whose life is falling apart will drop their grocery bag while leaving the store, spilling the contents out to represent their chaotic life circumstances. A further note to the grocery bag rule is that a stranger will help them pick up the bag’s contents and that person will help put the shopper’s life back together. These examples, according to Žižek, signify how the Big Other

regulates our speech and actions. While not stated outright, disobeying them can have serious consequences. One of those rules is mourning and melancholia. The dominant opinion is: “Freud opposed normal mourning (the successful acceptance of a loss) to pathological melancholy (the subject persists in his or her narcissistic identification with the lost object). Against Freud, one should assert the conceptual and ethical primacy of melancholy” (“Melancholy” 658). In mourning, a remainder occurs that fails integration through mourning, “and the ultimate fidelity is the fidelity to this remainder” (“Melancholy” 658). Mourning kills the lost object (again), while melancholy stays faithful to the lost object. The very idea of the remainder that one holds onto reflects Derrida’s notion that the lost other remains in (inside, a part of) the survivor. This idea extends beyond lost loved ones and includes lost ideas and homeland. As Žižek indicates, this idea of maintaining attachments to the lost object can be used in multiple ways: from the queer one—gays should remain attached to the repressed same-sex libidinal economy to the ethnic one: where the ethnic group might lose their culture as it is subsumed by the capitalist tradition. Žižek states, “The melancholic link to the lost ethnic Object allows us to claim that we remain faithful to our ethnic roots while fully participating in the global capitalist game” (“Melancholy” 659). Máximo struggles with ethically mourning his past while being forced to participate in the capitalist game; he elucidates ethical mourning as a process that continues while he copes with the loss of his homeland and his wife, and he does so by forming a community at Domino park with his friends and through his jokes while also witnessing his community being sold and consumed by gawking tourists. Máximo must deal with his lost homeland in order to better process the loss of his wife before he can make connections with his domino table friends.¹¹⁴ Matilde, on the other hand, must deal with losing her homeland and the

¹¹⁴ The domino table does help him get over the first two losses. As much of this dissertation argues, these events have no clear distinctions and rather inform each other.

possibility of losing her son. When confronted with this kind of loss, rather than let her mourning overcome her and ignore her husband's infidelity (which she comes close to doing), she confronts her losses and allows them to transform her present. Ernesto, for his part, spends the entire party listening to words that have lost meaning to him but realizes, at the end, that he must use words as best he can to bear witness to his brother's death.

These acts of ethical mourning are different for Rosa and Mario who mourn homeland while never fitting in to the United States. They create a poem merging their lives in a beautiful act of ethical mourning that articulates a strategy to carry the other. Rosa's poem reflects Derrida's idea: "According to Freud, mourning consists in carrying the other in the self. There is no longer any world, it's the end of the world, for the other at his death. And so I welcome in me this end of the world, I must carry the other and his world, the world in me" ("Rams" 160). She makes Mario a part of her world in the merging of their worlds as Mariposa. Yuni6r also carries Oscar's world and all of the Dominican Republic within him as his attempts to share Oscar's world. All these characters mourn differently and express their loss in diverse ways precisely because loss informs the present.

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