

Diasporic Postmemory, Mariel and Chantel Acevedo's *A Falling Star*

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ABSTRACT

Diasporic postmemory, understood as the fusion between the experience of postmemory and the affirmation of diasporic subjectivity, offers a valid theoretical framework for examining the cultural production of second-generation Cuban-American writers whose works recreate and reframe the stories and images of a traumatic past (in which the writers were not directly involved) as a strategy for interrogating and validating present-day Cuban-American identity. It is within this dynamic that the phenomenon emerges of works centered on making the Mariel exodus that traumatic past –but in this case a past that also happens to be silenced and suppressed– through which the second generation will attempt to affirm its identity. A representative text is Chantel Acevedo's 2014 novel, *A Falling Star*, which is analyzed in this essay through the critical perspective of diasporic postmemory. The essay presents how the novel scrutinizes the verbal and visual components of generational transmission that have caused the history of Mariel inherited by the second generation to be both lacking and inadequate, thus becoming an obstacle for present-day identity affirmation. In this way, the novel “recuperates” Mariel by reaffirming it as an indispensable component of Cuban-American diasporic identity and postmemory.

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RESUMEN

La posmemoria diaspórica, entendida como la fusión entre la experiencia de la posmemoria y la afirmación de la subjetividad diaspórica, ofrece un marco teórico válido para aproximarse a la producción cultural de escritores cubano-americanos de segunda generación, cuyas obras recrean y re-enmarcan historias e imágenes de un pasado traumático (en el que los autores no tuvieron participación directa) como estrategia para interrogar y validar la identidad cubano-americana del presente. Así pues, dentro de esta dinámica surge el fenómeno de las obras centradas en el éxodo del Mariel como ese pasado traumático –pero en este caso también un pasado silenciado y suprimido– en el cual la segunda generación intenta afirmar su identidad. Un ejemplo representativo es la novela *A Falling Star* (2014) de Chantel Acevedo, que se analiza en este estudio a partir de la perspectiva crítica de la posmemoria diaspórica. Se demuestra cómo la obra examina componentes verbales y visuales en la transmisión generacional, causantes de que la historia del Mariel heredada por esta segunda generación sea inadecuada e incompleta y que, por ende, se convierta en un obstáculo para su afirmación identitaria en el presente. Así, la novela “recupera” el Mariel al reafirmarlo como parte indispensable de la posmemoria y de la identidad diaspórica de la segunda generación cubano-americana.

Palabras clave: posmemoria, diáspora, subjetividad diaspórica, posmemoria diaspórica, éxodo del Mariel, segunda generación, *A Falling Star*, Chantel Acevedo

In “The Turn to Diaspora,” Lily Cho has asserted that diasporic subjects are not born diasporic, but instead become so by shifting towards the past: “Diasporic subjects emerge in turning, turning back upon those markers of the self –homeland, memory, loss– even as they turn on or away from them” (15). Diasporic subjectivity –inevitably conditioned by intergenerational negotiations, reinterpretations, and imaginings in relation to memory and history– highlights the inherent relationship between generational acts of transmission and identity formation. Diasporization thus translates into a complex and paradoxical process that uncovers and recuperates the past, but that simultaneously also involves the ongoing task of engaging with the network of

personal, familial, historical and socio-cultural connections that are so determinative in the forging and continuity of individual and collective identities. Memory work has become the symbolic marker of the diasporic paradox: it denotes what was, but also what still continues to be. In its movement backwards in order to continue onward, memory work is comparable to detective work according to Annette Kuhn (4), who notes that the associations of individual memories always extend beyond the personal:

Memory work makes it possible to explore connections between “public” historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and “personal” memory. In these case histories outer and inner, social and personal, historical and psychical coalesce; and the web of interconnections that binds them together is made visible. (5)

Therefore, it would seem that interacting and negotiating with the past, as mediated by memory work and the lens of diasporic subjectivity, is essential for the construction and continuity of the self.

In her influential scholarly work on postmemory, Marianne Hirsch has drawn attention to the close link between memories and present-day cultural connections, emphasizing the powerful and symbiotic relationship between what is remembered or reclaimed from the past and what is experienced in the cultural realm of personal and collective reality. Underscoring that second-generation memory is best understood through the optics of postmemory, Hirsch declares that “postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created” (1998: 420). Initially explored within Holocaust studies, postmemory has branched out into numerous other areas over the last two decades, and has coincided with what Hirsch defines as a particular turn-of-the-century cultural moment that necessitates remembrance; postmemory is about “looking backward rather than ahead, and of defining the present in relation to a troubled past, rather than initiating new paradigms [...] it reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture” (2013: 205). In light of this dynamic, Hirsch is compelling when explaining why postmemory, as a second-generation phenomenon, is so fundamentally linked to exile: “The children of exiled survivors, although they have not themselves lived through the trauma of banishment and forcible separation from home and the destruction of that home, remain marked by their parents’ experiences: always marginal or exiled, always in the diaspora” (1997: 243). While Hirsch’s interchangeable use of the terms exile and diaspora can be

problematic, it can nonetheless be argued that, in correlating postmemory and diasporic experience, Hirsch validates the degree to which the “continuity” of second-generation diasporic subjectivity so openly relies on negotiating with the “rupture” brought about by the political, deterritorializing and traumatic experience of exile. Thus, second-generation memory work, as examined through the lens of both postmemory and diasporic subjectivity, constitutes the filling in of a temporal and spatial remove from the first generation that is marked less by “remembering” and more by the need to “reconnect and reembody an intergenerational memorial fabric that has been severed” (Hirsch 2013: 209). Carried out by means of the already fragmented array of stories and images of the past, this reconnection and re-embodiment are linked to the realm of the fictional in that postmemory’s reach to the past is “mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (Hirsch 2013: 205).

The interconnections between postmemorable and diasporic lives can be explored most readily in second-generation cultural production whose aim is to in some manner represent a recuperated, recreated, reframed and/or reimagined past that is deemed integral to the representation and carrying on of the present-day diasporic self. This dynamic is most immediately dependent upon the second generation’s familial connections to the varied signs of rupture and trauma of the previous generation which, as noted, can very well be exilic: “Second-generation fiction, art, memoir, and testimony are shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma” (Hirsch 2013: 211). In this way, the symbolic acts of expression of the second generation rely on familial transmission; and yet, given the nature of the trauma itself, the familial is inevitably inserted in a wider sphere that takes into account the more public features of (trans)national collective memories. It is why Hirsch emphasizes transgenerational memory alongside intergenerational memory: “National/political and cultural/archival memory, in contrast, are not inter- but transgenerational; they are no longer mediated through embodied practice but solely through symbolic systems” (2013: 210). The postmemorable/diasporic self can thus produce and represent symbolic acts of diasporic postmemory by utilizing the personal (what Hirsch would label the “familial”) as a means of connecting with the broader network of national and cultural stories and images (what Hirsch would label the “affiliative”): “affiliative postmemory would thus be the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation, combined with structures of mediation that would be broadly appropriable, available, and, indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission” (2013:

214). Ultimately, the familial facilitates the affiliative, and this memorial structure has been employed repeatedly across symbolic representations of diasporic postmemory, including second-generation Cuban-American fictional writing.

Cuban-American cultural production over the last three decades has explored the “story” of exile by engaging explicitly with how the second generation creates personal “histories” of the Cuban-American experience through the interconnections between memory and imagination that are at play in both the verbal narratives and visual representations of their parents’ generation. Many second-generation writers –most born in the United States, writing in English, and separated temporally and spatially from the “trauma” of the first generation’s exile– grapple in their fiction with the dual task of revisiting and recapturing that exilic past and, without displacing or appropriating it, exploring its significance within the wider frameworks of their diasporic present. Taking this into account, I offer that postmemory –specifically diasporic postmemory– provides a most appropriate avenue for better examining and understanding second-generation Cuban-American writing. That the second-generation Cuban-American writer has repeatedly turned to the recourses of the “familial” narratives of the past to achieve “affiliative” connections that depict the broader complexities of the Cuban-American trajectory lends further support, in my estimation, to why representations of the past in Cuban-American writing are so integral to the continuation of Cuban-American diasporic identity and to the affirmation of diasporic subjectivity. Hirsch has argued that postmemorial work

strives to reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. Thus, less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory that can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone. (2013: 210)

Hirsch’s declaration can be read as a commentary not only about postmemory, but also about diasporic experience. It can therefore be argued that a persistent engagement with the past as an almost obligatory duty, a *devoir de mémoire*, marks the diasporic experience represented in much second-generation Cuban-American cultural production; or, what is the same, that the work of much second-generation Cuban-American writing is, in effect, diasporic postmemorial work.

The events of the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the ensuing exile of first generation émigrés have generally occupied the traumatic past with which Cuban-American diasporic postmemory has had to contend. The rupture, marked by the sudden loss of

homeland, home, language and incalculable other markers of self and identity, is the source of all the fragmentary traces –verbal and visual– that populate many narratives of second-generation writers who seek to carry that past forward, while also negotiating its meaning and role within the broader spectrum of present-day Cuban-American identity and reality. In diasporic fictional representations, this past is both affirmed and interrogated through a direct symbolization that privileges memory over history, but yet strives for an affiliative connection that paradoxically goes beyond the familial by employing the family narrative as a way of inserting the diasporic Cuban-American subject within the wider web of collective Cuban-American national and cultural history. In this process, verbal transmission is as important as visual transmission. The image, specifically the photograph, is essential in Hirsch’s conception of postmemory:

The key role of the photographic image –and of family photographs in particular– as a medium of postmemory clarifies the connection between familial and affiliative postmemory and the mechanisms by which public archives and institutions have been able both to reembody and to reindividualize cultural/archival memory. (2013: 215)

Hirsch may just as well be describing the relationship between the image and diasporic representation, a relationship portrayed in many second-generation Cuban-American fictional texts where ties between the fragmented stories and images of the past, alongside the broader present-day interrogations of Cuban-American identity, are evident. The interweaving of stories and images, particularly the photograph, have become “rich metaphors or figures that present an enactment of the story of exile” (Alvarez Borland 2009: 32). From Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* to Ana Menéndez’s *Loving Che*, verbal and visual inter- and transgenerational transmissions have played a key role in how Cuban-American ethnic writers –who, like their protagonists, enact second-generation postmemory– have explored an exilic past perceived as pivotal for the present self. As that past’s visual representation, images can complement, clarify or complicate the scattered stories that have been transmitted, thus becoming essential to the metanarrative that nurtures and conditions diasporic postmemory.

A more recent case study for the exploration of diasporic postmemory in Cuban-American fiction –both in terms of the negotiations with a traumatic past, as well as the affiliation between the verbal and the visual in the enactment of postmemory– has been the emergence of second-generation fiction looking back at the Mariel exodus of 1980 as the past traumatic moment of rupture with which to contend. This is striking given the exodus’s significance as a major event in Cuban-American history, but especially given the contentious and divisive reactions prompted by Mariel, particularly amongst

exiles of the post-1959 generation. Well documented is the rejection of Mariel exiles by Americans at large, but also notably by first-generation Cuban exiles who saw their model minority status threatened by *marielitos* who had a racial and social makeup that contrasted greatly with their own, who were regarded as untrustworthy for having lived under communism for two decades, and who were stereotyped as criminals or mentally ill. For many, Mariel remains a dark and suppressed chapter of Cuban-American history—a traumatic moment indeed, but one which, unlike the trauma of the first generation's exile, has largely been tabooed, almost as if rooted in a “*de eso no se habla*” context that second-generation Cuban-American writers have recently transformed into the impetus for their fiction. Aside from, or perhaps in tandem with, the renewed interest in Mariel generation writers from Reinaldo Arenas to Guillermo Rosales, the documentaries *Mas allá del mar* (2009) and *Voices from Mariel* (2011), and the autobiographical *Finding Mañana: A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus* (2005) written by Mariel exile Mirta Ojito, it is the fictional works about Mariel written by second-generation Cuban-American writers removed personally, spatially and temporally from the exodus that garner the most interest from the critical perspective of diasporic postmemory.

Texts like Cecilia Rodríguez-Milanés's short story collection, *Marielitos, Balseros and Other Exiles* (2009), or Chantel Acevedo's novel *A Falling Star* (2014), place Mariel front and center as the suppressed past that must be recuperated for the sake of the Cuban-American present, and which the second-generation writer goes about interrogating, reimagining and reframing. Rodríguez-Milanés and Acevedo align themselves with the postmemorial task of creating texts whose momentum and *raison d'être* derive from the silences, omissions and absences of the past, and from the commentary they can make on those very elements in order to recapture and reframe the past in the present. Yet, precisely because of the tenuous relationship of Cuban America to Mariel, that diasporic postmemorial commentary is rooted in an exacerbated exploration of the interplay between the stories and images that must be recovered at the personal or familial level, and what is available in the public domains both discursively and visually. Thus, in the process of moving from the familial to the affiliative, second-generation Cuban-American works about Mariel challenge and reconsider the inherited history of Mariel that has been passed down to the present day, while also scrutinizing the verbal and visual components of intergenerational transmission that have made that inherited history both lacking and inadequate. Acevedo, in particular, engages in an exercise of diasporic postmemory that explores the synergetic relationship between verbal transmission, public images and familial photographs necessary for the full reassessment of Mariel in the diasporic present.

Chantel Acevedo's 2014 novel, *A Falling Star*, showcases the challenges to present-day identity construction when the visual representations of the past are incomplete and are not accompanied by verbal transmission, but instead by omission and silence. Set in 1990, ten years after the chaotic events of the Mariel exodus in which over 125,000 Cubans migrated to the U.S. in a span of a few months, the novel centers on how two separated sisters who arrived in the U.S. via Mariel –14-year-old Daysy and 10-year-old Belén– try to make sense of an experience that they do not or are barely able to remember. In this way, the sisters mirror the second-generation writer, and become the embodiments of the affiliative connections the novel will attempt to establish as mediated by the familial.

With images as their only postmemory narrative, the sisters cannot rely on parental verbal transmission. In fact, the stories of Mariel are rooted in silence for them—a silence that in the novel operates on two levels. Foremost, it sets up the central dynamic of the novel's plot: how the sisters are separated during the chaos of Mariel, and how baby Belén is believed dead by her parents who, in turn, keep her existence secret from older sister Daysy. Secondly, the silence about Mariel symbolically echoes the silence of the exodus within the wider parameters of Cuban-American history. Relying on static images –namely historical photographs connected to the exodus and personal family photographs that offer clues to uncovering what their parents have wanted to bury– both sisters (and the novel itself) go about actively filling this vacuum of silence surrounding Mariel by prompting verbal communication about the exodus. Despite “photography's promise to offer an access to the event itself, and its easy assumption of iconic and symbolic power” (Hirsch 2013: 206), in Acevedo's novel the photograph's power is limited, needing verbal transmission –specifically, the “language of family”– in order to generate the fullness of affiliative postmemory about Mariel thirty plus years after the exodus. As Hirsch notes: “the language of family can literally reactivate and reembody a cultural/archival image whose subjects are, to most viewers, anonymous” (2013: 213). *A Falling Star* thus seeks to fill the anonymity of the photographs the sisters are trying to decipher and, on an extra-textual level, release Mariel from the shadows of Cuban-American history.

As a second-generation Cuban-American writer, Acevedo highlights both the visual and verbal dimensions that constitute diasporic postmemory and identity formation. As the novel's omniscient narrator states: “Daysy had no clear memory of her life in Cuba, nothing substantial at all to hold onto. She only remembered images here and there, like a quilt made of scraps” (20). As Kuhn observes: “Family secrets are the other side of the family's public face, of the stories families tell themselves, and the

world, about themselves” (2). Given the truth that Daisy’s parents are keeping from her, which prompts not speaking about Mariel, the visual becomes a determinant marker of the past. Yet, with images as the only narrative, the visual becomes the sole repository of a personal and historical truth that can be only partial at best. To speak of postmemory without an adoption of what has been verbally communicated is to challenge the very connections that diasporic postmemory yearns to achieve. In the fictional world of Acevedo’s novel, much like in the Cuban-American reality outside of it, images are not enough to achieve what Hirsch would label the “fullness” of postmemory (1998: 422); this “fullness” is only possible through the symbiotic relationship between the visual and the verbal.

On another level, Julia Kristeva has theorized that visual excess can lead to verbal silencing, noting that the “new apocalyptic rhetoric has been realized in two extremes, which seem to be opposites but which often complement each other: the profusion of images and the withholding of the word” (139). In *A Falling Star*, this “withholding of the word” is intensified not because of a profusion of images, but precisely because the absence, silence and incompleteness related to them has disconnected and isolated Mariel from the larger arena of Cuban-American history and culture. Thus, I argue that Acevedo’s novel is also making a case for how the Cuban-American story must reach its fullness and completeness by moving beyond the images and imaginings of Mariel in order to acknowledge and engage with the exodus as a key piece of Cuban-American exilic and diasporic history. In doing so, the novel offers an implicit message through the explicit experiences of its protagonists: that Cuban-American exile history, and by extension Cuban-American diasporic identity, are incomplete without the story and stories of Mariel.

It is in its unique reaffirming of Mariel as an indispensable component of second-generation Cuban-American diasporic identity and postmemory that Acevedo’s *A Falling Star* leaves its mark. Through a fragmented internal order in which chapters oscillate between several female protagonists and across different time frames –pre-Mariel Cuba, the Mariel exodus itself, and present-day 1990 in the U.S.–, the novel’s central plot revolves around the migratory experience and aftermath of the del Pozo family. Disillusioned with the Cuban regime, Magda Elena and her husband Angel are concerned for the future wellbeing of their four-year-old daughter, Daisy, and of another daughter on the way. Impacted by the economic hardships experienced in 1970s Cuba, the del Pozos are especially distraught over the government’s authoritarian actions. Magda Elena’s disillusionment reaches its boiling point when her good friend and neighbor, Solamaris, is accosted for keeping a secret library in her home, a room

covered wall to wall with books of all types and languages. Representatives from the neighborhood's Committee for the Defense of the Revolution confiscate the books and burn them publicly outside Solamaris's home. This action becomes the plot's central catalyst, as that very day Magda Elena gives birth to baby daughter Belén and also makes the decision to leave Cuba: "Belén del Pozo was born [...] her tiny face red, as if lit by a fire from within [...]. That night, her core aching [...] Magda Elena whispered to Angel, 'We have to leave this place.' The pile of books outside still smoldered, and the smell of burnt paper was thick in the house. 'Not just this apartment. All of it, this country'" (93). Notably, it is books, essentially the deleted stories that they symbolize through their burning, that will echo in ironic juxtaposition years later when Magda Elena's daughters seek access to their own personal stories beyond images. In thinking about these deleted stories of Mariel that the novel seeks to recuperate, we are reminded of Diana Taylor's questioning of the "repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge" as being absent from "the archive of supposedly enduring materials" (19). Indeed, to deny the sisters these stories is tantamount to denying their very reason for exile, and it is this subjectivity, which they cannot remember but also cannot live without, what serves as the central axis of Acevedo's novel and its own engagement with diasporic subjectivity through affiliative postmemory.

Soon after the book burning, the del Pozos take refuge in the Peruvian Embassy when word spreads throughout Havana that thousands are doing the same. Solamaris and her baby son, Leo, also take refuge there. Situating her central characters within the historical series of events that gave way to the Mariel exodus, Acevedo moves the novel's plot forward while simultaneously explaining and translating Mariel for second-generation readers. Through the affiliative connections it seeks to achieve through its protagonists' familial experiences, *A Falling Star* conveys the chaos and violence at the embassy, including the acts of repudiation that the Cuban government organized against fellow Cubans who wanted to leave the island. Similarly, the novel makes it a point to highlight the sociopolitical portrait of Mariel exiles: "Around her were faces that were young, black, white. There were people from the countryside, and even some still wearing their government uniforms. All were seeking escape. These were the very people the revolution had aided, and now they were turning their backs on it" (116-117).

The historical trauma of Mariel as first experienced in the grounds of the Peruvian Embassy becomes symbolically exacerbated in the text's fictional realm when Solamaris's baby, Leo, dies in his mother's arms amidst deteriorating conditions at the embassy. For Solamaris, whose despair had led to a previous suicide attempt, whose

lover is jailed and whose prized library has been destroyed, losing her child is the final blow to any mental stability. Once the embassy is emptied and the people promised passes to leave the country through the port of Mariel where American ships will transport them to Florida, Magda Elena loses all contact with Solamaris. It is only weeks later at the port that Magda Elena sees Solamaris from afar, calls out to her, but is not acknowledged by her withdrawn friend, who is instead obsessively scribbling a text on the dock only to be ordered by force to erase it: “Not that too,’ Magda Elena whispered as she watched Solamaris erase what she’d written, reminded now of Solamaris’s books, more words lost to the flame” (Acevedo 249). Yet again, the novel stresses the connections between verbal communication and exilic history, both as a way of understanding Mariel’s full scope and also as a means of underscoring its relevance in the formation and articulation of second-generation diasporic postmemory.

And the challenge to this diasporic postmemory –namely the discourse of silence that will cause Magda Elena’s daughters to rely exclusively on photographic images for their personal histories– is prompted by the terrible events that transpire aboard the vessel carrying the del Pozo family. Burdened with an excess of passengers and confronting large storm swells, Magda Elena and her family need to be rescued by two other vessels in the dark of night. In the panic and difficulty of transferring to another boat, Magda Elena suddenly loses her grip on baby Belén. No longer able to see or feel the baby and facing their own loss of life, Magda Elena, Angel and Daysy reach U.S. shores without Belén, believing that she has drowned. However, the reader discovers that baby Belén has fallen into the arms of a blind man who stuffs the child in his shirt to protect her from the elements and who ends up in the second rescuing vessel. It is coincidentally the same vessel carrying Solamaris, who having lost all contact with reality, claims the baby as hers thinking it is Leo, in no way knowing that it is Magda Elena’s daughter. Upon arriving in the U.S. –and never again connecting with the del Pozo family– Solamaris registers under the changed name of Ana and registers baby Belén under the new name of “Stella.”

And so begin the divided and unanchored lives of sisters Daysy and Belén/Stella. Magda Elena and Angel end up in Hialeah, and Daysy is raised with no conscious knowledge of having and losing a baby sister. For her part Solamaris (now Ana) ends up marrying and moving to Pittsburgh with an American man named Michael Quinn, who adopts “Stella” and raises her as his own thinking she is his wife’s biological daughter. The young Belén/Stella, a gifted child who from a young age is able to read and analyze adult texts, cannot get the answers she needs from whom she thinks is her mother. Too tormented by her own demons and her uneven relationship

with sanity, Solamaris/Ana, herself the paradoxical figure of verbal communication through censored books and censored writing, is unable to provide any verbal affirmation about Mariel. This becomes further evidenced when Solamaris takes her own life as witnessed by the young Belén/Stella, thereby also killing the vital source of verbal connections to the past so yearned for by the young child, who must now rely on books and newspaper articles about the exodus, particularly its images, to assemble her own past and imagined life-story, to begin her own postmemorial journey.

Each del Pozo daughter –14-year-old Daysy in Hialeah, and 10-year-old Belén/Stella in Pittsburgh– takes on postmemory’s task despite lacking one of its essential components. As Patricia Hampl notes: “memory itself is not a warehouse of finished stories” but it is also “not a static gallery of framed pictures” (311). Both are the fuel for postmemory, and their simultaneous employment as impacted by memory’s tenuous layers and the inevitable markers of the imagination, are at the heart of Acevedo’s agenda for both making a case about diasporic postmemory and validating Mariel within Cuban-American history. The novel’s layout –centered on female voices, but also alternating between the life-stories of Daysy and Belén/Stella in 1990, and also of Magda Elena and Solamaris in 1980 and pre-Mariel Cuba– enable the story itself to mirror the fragmented past that its second-generation protagonists (and even readers) are attempting to reconstruct and reframe in order to reassemble and make sense of their fractured presents. Thus, the affiliative connections of postmemory as mediated by the familial ones are projected through both an intra- and extra-textual framework that explicitly connects Mariel to the identity processes of the Cuban-American diaspora experience.

Rather than a rejection of parental memories more typical of second-generation exiles, the young sisters exhibit an unfulfilled yearning for them. In the chapters dedicated to Daysy and Belén/Stella we encounter two young Cuban-American girls who, without any verbal transmission from their parents, take refuge in the images and the imagination that will offer some connection to their Mariel story and history. And yet, the novel’s very structure suggests that the verbal transmission the young women’s postmemory requires is all around them and needs to be actively unlocked, as the chapters centered on Daysy and Belén/Stella are literally surrounded by the story of Mariel that they seek to know: in the form of the chapters dedicated to Magda Elena and Solamaris and the history/story of Mariel.

The Daysy chapters reveal that she keeps a journal about her vivid dreams, which the reader discovers –through alternate chapters about Mariel– are actually suppressed memories about her Mariel experience as a four-year-old, and are in

fact connected to the traumatic loss of her baby sister. That Daysy believes her memories to be only haunting dreams echoes the close connection between memory and imagination, highlighting that the past is not static and always lends itself to continuous evaluation and reevaluation. But, as Rafael Miguel Montes observes, this second-generation negotiation feeds off the parental narrative “in order to begin the process of interrogating memory” (82). Absent this familial narrative, like in Daysy’s case, all that remains is a displayed consciousness as a dream diary that lacks the connections so vital for identity affirmation. In an effort to make sense of one dream, Daysy “described the dream to her mother over breakfast [...]. She described too the desperation she felt in the wake of the memory, as if the moment had not resolved itself in the past, but rather, had only paused for a moment. [...] ‘No es nada’ Magda Elena said without meeting Daysy’s eyes” (7). Indeed, the memory can never “resolve itself in the past.” Without Magda Elena’s story, the memory can never translate into full postmemory, and can never become an object of the negotiation and recuperation so important for Daysy to understand her history, her story, and herself. The same dynamic takes place at an extra-textual level, where the familial facilitates the affiliative and where the diasporic subject also yearns for fullness and continuity. As Isabel Alvarez Borland points out, Cuban–American second-generation identity construction requires the active engagement of several narratives as this generation sets “about the task of constructing a U.S. identity that very much needs to take into account their Cuban heritage” (1998: 9). Acevedo’s novel cements the fullness of Mariel as an indelible part of that heritage. Thus, even within the superimposed layers of the novel, Daysy’s own narrative in her dream journal is incomplete without the narratives of Mariel articulated in Magda Elena’s and Solamaris’ chapters, and which the family is keeping from her.

That images can operate as important elements of postmemory but are incomplete without the verbal narrative is most poignantly exemplified when it is Daysy’s Alzheimer’s-stricken grandfather, Gregorio, who interrupts the familial discourse of silence about the past and accurately points out that a baby in an old family photograph recovered by Daysy is in fact Daysy’s baby sister. At first doubting the revelation, but then realizing how much it coincides with what she had previously dismissed as dreams, Daysy begins to fill in the narrative of Belén –essentially the narrative of Mariel– to make sense of her own life, of her own reality beyond dreams: “But when Abuelo told the story of Belén, Daysy felt unease. This story had come out of nowhere, had been so earnestly told, as if Abuelo were his old self again, and now, it troubled Daysy’s imagination” (19). As the catalyst for the eventual reconnection

between Daysy and her still-alive sister, the photograph also operates as the element of symbolization that dually references Daysy's own needs for identity fulfillment, as well as the broader needs of Cuban-American identity and the affiliative connections with Mariel that reside outside of the text. As Hirsch emphatically states about photographs: "In seeming to open a window to the past, and materializing the viewer's relationship to it, they also give a glimpse of its enormity and its power. They can tell us as much about our own needs and desires (as readers and spectators) as they can about the past world they presumably depict" (2013: 216).

It is only through confronting her parents, specifically her mother Magda Elena, and finally hearing their story about their Mariel experience, that Daysy learns the truth about having a baby sister who (everyone still thinks) died tragically in the Florida straits. In embodying the joint presence of life and death as noted by Roland Barthes (80-82) and Susan Sontag (69-75) respectively, the del Pozo family photographs can now wholly interact with verbal transmission to produce a more complete, rearticulated –and literally reframed and recast– representation of Mariel with Cuban-American second-generation fiction as its vehicle. More than needing the verbal, the now "full" photographs prompt a less-repressed verbal transmission that promotes a more flexible and comprehensive exploration of Mariel's past, whose memories can now be "exchanged, shared, corroborated, confirmed, corrected, disputed—and, last but not least, written down" (Assmann 36). And so, finally able to make explicit connections between her dreams, her locked memories, the photographs and the verbal story conveyed to her about her arrival in the U.S., Daysy ponders all that she has been allowed to forget, and places herself on the same plane as her grandfather: "Neither one of them has a comprehension of the affairs that had governed their lives, Abuelo having forgotten them on his own and Daysy having been allowed to forget" (174). In this way, to remember Belén, to remember Mariel, is to remember herself, to fill in the gaps of her present, and to more completely embody her Cuban-American identity.

For her part, and given the suicide of Solamaris/Ana, Belén/Stella is left without any direct verbal path to assemble her life narrative. And yet it is the words expressed to her by whom she always thought of as her birth mother that feed the young girl's need to know more about her past and herself, as Belén/Stella confesses: "My mother said I came back to her at sea. She said I appeared out of nowhere, like a falling star, and that I had changed from what I once was, and that I saved her" (177). As the embodiment of the novel's title, and of Mariel itself, Belén/Stella is the symbolic fulfillment of all that Solamaris lost in Cuba; she is also the central link through which

the del Pozo family will become reunited with a past that is still very much alive and integral to the fullness of their present-day reality. At one point in the novel it is mentioned that: "Sometimes, Stella felt her existence was unreal, as if she were only something her mother had imagined" (55). But the novel in turn affirms that Belén/Stella is real, as is the trauma of Mariel, both for those who lived it and as part of the Cuban-American story.

In the novel, this bringing Mariel into the present takes place with the discovery that Stella is actually baby Belén. On a trip to Miami with her adoptive father, Belén/Stella sees the del Pozo family in a television interview commemorating Mariel's tenth anniversary. Now offering verbal transmission of their experience on a broad scale, the family becomes fixed in the child's mind. This eventually leads to Belén/Stella subsequently recognizing the del Pozos at a restaurant and requesting to know more about their story in order to understand hers. Even without knowing they are her blood family, the parental/familial narrative will complement the visual. Eventually the two families agree to meet at the del Pozo home and it is there, through a series of photographs on the wall in conjunction with their accompanying story, that the truth is revealed: that Stella is actually Belén, who is still alive, and that the del Pozos are her biological family: "*Mira, mira. Look! My baby, look at her,*" and she held up pictures of Belén for Michael to see. Here she was propped up on a sofa, too young to smile. And there, another photograph of Belén in Daisy's lap, her chubby round belly in contrast with her sister's slender body. In all the photographs, the birthmark was visible" (Acevedo 229).

A Falling Star does not venture beyond the moment of realization except to indicate that the del Pozos and Michael will make the necessary arrangements so as to both be involved in the young girl's life. In doing so, the novel reaffirms the present moment beyond any conjectures about the future. The fact that this present is anchored on all sides by the narrative of Mariel makes this assertion all the more poignant. We are thus reminded of Benedict Anderson's links between the history of the nation and the individual self, through which "both are seen as narratives of identity and personhood that sprang from oblivion, estrangement and loss of the memory of home" (Boym 242). In the novel, Belén/Stella –as the personification of Mariel– is both a figure of rupture and affiliation in Cuban-American history. Given that the events that make up the novel's present take place in 1990, and are thus themselves part of the past with which the reader must negotiate at the present moment, the text seems to be calling attention to the degree to which diasporic identity construction, both personal and communal, must acknowledge, seek out and contend with the narratives of the past if it is to be

fulfilled. It should be noted that the novel does not approach the socio-political and inter-generational conflicts that led to the rejection and ostracism of so many Mariel exiles. Instead, in its signaling of the silence with which Mariel has been treated – a silence both alienating and paralyzing– the novel seems to be extending an invitation to reach out to Mariel, to no longer try to hide it or pretend that it is dead. Like Belén/Stella, Mariel is alive; and its symbols, images, and suppressed memories are not enough. As the novel itself validates through its discourse of diasporic postmemory: “Stella belonged to herself. She wasn’t Daysy’s, or Magda Elena’s, or Michael’s. She was her own creature, an unattainable presence, the physical embodiment of an answer that Daysy needed to the question, ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where do I belong?’ But the reach of Daysy’s longing and soul-searching ended here with this flesh and blood girl, who was neither meaning nor symbol in the end” (234). And, in the end, *A Falling Star* makes a forceful case for bringing Mariel to the forefront precisely by recuperating its flesh and blood, by not depending solely on static images, and by recognizing that imagination and memory always need stories to construct a story. This is essential to Cuban-American diasporic postmemory, and it may also be the only way to understand and to explain Mariel as a vital human chapter in the Cuban to Cuban-American trajectory.

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