

Interviews with Nash Candelaria and Andrea O'Reilly Herrera

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1. INTRODUCTION

During my stay at the Hispanic Research Center (HRC) of Arizona State University, from January to June 2011, I had the chance to meet two of the three authors that I was investigating for my Doctoral thesis: the New Mexican novelist Nash Candelaria and the Cuban American writer and scholar Andrea O'Reilly Herrera.

The interview with Nash Candelaria took place at his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on May 31st, 2011. The author, together with his wife Doranne, welcomed me along with Professor Gary Francisco Keller and two staff members of the HRC. This visit was actually made possible thanks to the priceless support provided by Dr. Keller, who allowed me to take part in the trip held at various locations in New Mexico (Acoma, Albuquerque, Chimayó, Santa Fe, Taos and Zuni, among others) from the 28th of May to the 5th of June 2011, as part of his research project *San Francis and the Americas/San Francisco en las Américas*.¹

The first three questions of the interview were emailed to Nash Candelaria in advance, so that he could have more time to reflect on the answers, which were given to me on a printed sheet the day of our meeting. The remaining questions, however,

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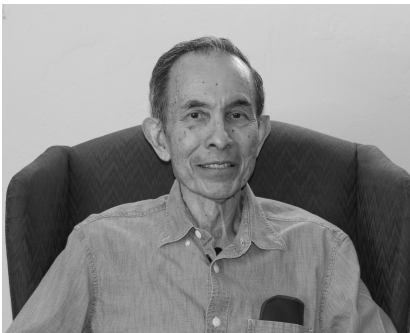
were asked in the author's living room. He replied with a weak and calm tone of voice, that offers clues to his age and his poor health, but also gives an aura of authority to his words.

The interview with Andrea O'Reilly Herrera was held at a café in downtown Phoenix, Arizona, on April 21st, 2011, where the author was picking up paintings by Cuban-American artists for the exhibitions of *Cuba Transnational*, which she was curating at the time.² More than a formal interview, ours was a long and pleasant talk, which was also attended by the author's friend Prof. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky and his wife, who joined us at our table at a later time. Our conversation began in Spanish, soon after, however, O'Reilly Herrera spontaneously switched to English, still using some Spanish sentences and terms, which I kept in my transcription.

With great enthusiasm and cheerfulness, at the end of our meeting, the author invited me to visit her in Colorado, where I eventually reached her in June of the same year. I was then able not only to visit the exhibitions of *Cuba Transnational*, but also to spend two unforgettable days with her, in her house nestled near Colorado Springs.

I still remember the moment when (during an afternoon talk), I was telling her of my mother's unique ability in cooking, decorating, sewing, adjusting, and embroidering (always with great precision and love) to which the author exclaimed: "She is an Artist!". Since that day, I have not stopped considering the results of the sweat and of the masterly skills of my mother and of many other women in the world, as works of Art.

1.1. Interview with Nash Candelaria



Nash Candelaria has been described as the historical novelist of the Hispanic people of New Mexico. His five novels, hailed as landmarks in Hispanic literature, include *Memories of the Alhambra*, a seminal novel in Chicano literature; *Not by the Sword*, an American Book Award winner; *Inheritance of Strangers*; *Leonor Park*; and *A Daughter's a Daughter*. His short stories have appeared in a number of literary magazines and anthologies as well as in two collections: *The Day the Cisco Kid Shot John Wayne* and *Uncivil Rights and Other Stories*. He and his wife live in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Mara Salvucci: In my dissertation I will analyze and compare three different novels that I defined “multigenerational” because they illustrate the lives of at least three generations of the same family. Together with *A Daughter’s a Daughter* I will study two other works, one by a Andrea O’Reilly Herrera –a Cuban American contemporary writer, and another by the Puerto Rican author Edward River who died in 2001. My aim is to find common traits and differences among these novels and, thereby, among literatures by different U.S. Latino groups. Do you see any relationship between your writing and the works of other Latino writers in the U.S.?

Nash Candelaria: I read very little of other Latinos work. I don’t, even unconsciously, want to borrow ideas. What I am aware of in general is a common second language, the religion of many (Catholicism), meeting prejudice, and making their way in an *Anglo* world, the mainstream. As for differences, American Latinos have ancestries from different countries with different histories: Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico and others, including the long-term Americanization of old-time Latinos in New Mexico.

I read more of the work of another New Mexico Latino writer, Rudolfo Anaya, than of other Latinos. He grew up in a small town in New Mexico, didn’t speak English until he attended school (6 years old?), worked professionally as a public school and university teacher, and knows the culture from the inside. I know the culture from the outside growing up in urban California, had parents who did not speak Spanish to me and my sister, wanted us to be mainstream Americans, and I worked in advertising mostly for companies in Silicon Valley. I observed the New Mexico Latino Culture on summer vacations to Albuquerque visiting relatives who mostly lived on small farms. Rudy writes about the culture. I write as an outside observer dealing more with the history of Latinos in New Mexico and with making their way in an *Anglo* world. For example, my father once took me when he visited friends – I was 10 or 11 – and he described me as “muy agringado”, very gringoized, with a mixture of apology and pride.

M.S.: You started writing your first novel to impart some Chicano heritage into your children. What is the role of memory in determining individuals’ identity, in a world that “moves too fast” (quoting the final sentence of *A Daughter’s a Daughter*)?

N.C.: It’s very important to know where we come from in order to see ourselves in the present and then move forward into the future. Looking to the past and learning family history gives us a greater sense of what we come from than the individual memories of one person’s life. Too often what we are told by family and current social

attitudes is false, either negative or positive. For example, it was the propensity of many New Mexicans in the past to describe themselves as Spanish, ignoring their *mestizo* identity. Whatever the source, memory is important in determining identity but must be examined with a hard eye for the truth.

M.S.: It is fairly unusual for a male writer to focus very closely on female characters and make them the principals in a novel. Could you tell me how you came to conceive *A Daughter's a Daughter* in this way?

N.C.: I wanted to write about the change of New Mexico Latinos' situations and attitudes over three generations. My first attempt featured one young female and two males of older generations. After finishing it I found that it didn't work for many reasons, but I still wanted to tell the story of three generations. To me the change in the roles of women was one of the biggest and more important changes in this country during my lifetime. The examples of strong women I knew or knew of in the family occurred to me. The widow of the first Candelaria in New Mexico survived the 1680 Pueblo Revolt when the Spanish settlers were driven out of New Mexico to exile in El Paso-Juarez. When she was in her 60s she rode a burro from Albuquerque to Mexico city to verify a grant of land that her father had received from the Spanish government – a tough lady.

In my genealogical research I found reference to a document sent to the United States government signed by my Candelaria grandmother. She signed it to establish ownership of family land after the Mexican War of 1846-1848. She was 19 years old. Evidently her husband could not write and probably read and she took over. When we lived for a short time in Albuquerque in the early 1930s my mother used to drive my sister and me to visit her mother. Her sisters-in-law were astounded. Women weren't supposed to go out unescorted by a man. And they didn't drive cars or smoke cigarettes in public. Shameful. My father worked for the U.S. Postal Service as a mail clerk, handling mail on trains. When he was on a trip for 3 days my mother took over as head of the household – an independent woman.

I grew up with a sister a year and five months younger than me. We were very close when growing up. And, of course, I've been married to my wife for 55 years. I learned that we had much more in common than we had differences. From all of this I saw that women could be independent and strong even in a macho Latino male culture. Putting that all together I saw that the story of three generations of women was the

right way to tell the story. Women and men were members of the same species after all, though some male writers didn't seem to understand that.

M.S.: Juan Bruce-Novoa died only about a year ago. What memories do you have of your interview with him, over 30 years ago?

N.C.: What I remember of that interview is, one, that I got it into print – which is always nice for a writer. Second, that I talked a little bit about the history of my family, plowing up the Río Grande. They were farmers, as opposed to any other type of profession or workload, whatever you want to call it. I'm not sure – sometimes my memory starts to fail – but it seems to me that I talked a little bit about culture towards the end and, I don't remember the specifics, but I'm sure my attitude is pretty much still the same.

M.S.: When someone (like me) interviews you, what attracts you most about the experience?

N.C.: As a writer you have a certain amount of public, maybe a small readership, and you always want to be read. You can always write for yourself, if you want to, but it is nice to be read and I particularly feel good about being interviewed for someone working in the academic area, doing their work. One of the most surprising and pleasant aspects of my writing is when someone from the university, who is interested in some aspect of it, writes to you and asks a question.

M.S.: Just this month, you have been the featured author of one of the most popular New Mexico's magazine. Isn't it amazing for you to compare the reception of your latest works with the difficulties that you endured to self-publish your first novel in 1977?

N.C.: Getting recognition in New Mexico takes a little doing. It takes time to know the people and for the people to know you and my writing is not quite well known here in the state. So to be interviewed for the *New Mexico Magazine* was a big pleasure and was really important, because the magazine is part of New Mexico Tourist Bureau and it gets out not only to people here in the state but also to people outside, in the rest of the country, who are interested in the culture and in what goes on in aspects of New Mexico life.

M.S.: Would you say that your literary career reflects the general development of the Chicano literature and its entry in the U.S. mainstream system?

N.C.: I'm not sure, I still think that Mexican-American literature has a long way to go to be recognized, as much as I think it should be. Of course that is why I wrote the kind of things that I did, because so many people don't know about the long history of Latinos here, in this state and in this country. When the focus is on people and activities so much of it is on recent migrants, which is fine, someone might say we are *manitos* (little brothers).

As a matter of fact, while doing some genealogical research I found that back in 1700, at the end of the Pueblo Revolt when the Native Americans rose up against the Spanish settlers, some of them went to Mexico and the father of the first Candelaria widow went back to live in Northern Mexico too. So we are very closely related by blood but not by history: so much has happened to Mexico and to this state, I should say, in its time that has been part of Spain, part of Mexico (most recently) and then part of the United States by what I call a "conquest".

M.S.: When interviewed by Juan Bruce-Novoa in 1980, you stated that any good piece of literature is revolutionary and universal in itself. Do you think your works transcend ethnic boundaries and speak of universal values and aspirations?

N.C.: I write with the intent to be read by everyone, though my works have not been widely read yet. I think any good piece of literature should be universal, it should speak to things at the heart and of things that every human has in common. I think whatever you read that is good stuff, in my opinion, touches on that. Some of my favorite writers are like that and they are non-Latinos, like William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. I think the universality is very important, as opposed to trying to find the popular mood, the popular attitude and worrying about becoming a best seller. I can recall reading sometime ago in a magazine, that someone had looked at the best sellers of previous 25 years or so and they didn't recognize any of the books or of the authors, they did not live and last. Hopefully, my work will, at least for a little while.

M.S.: In your memoir *Second Communion* you write: "we are all walking living relics of history. Carrying within us attitudes, scars, pains and the desire for revenge that can take generations to dispel" (109). How has your writing helped you process past traumas and cope with the inevitable march of history?

N.C.: I'm not sure about today, things are going so fast. You look at Twitter, Facebook, iPhones, they are all getting beyond me, they are moving too fast, we forget things and people don't really know what happens. I think knowing where you come from is important, particularly if you belong to a group that had to suffer racial prejudice. Unfortunately, I've known some New Mexicans (family and others) whose feelings have been such that they take on what other people try to identify them with instead of having their own true identity. I find that sad, I think you should know where you come from, it gives you a solid foundation of where you are now and allows you to move forward into the future.

One of the interesting things in these days is that you read so much on the news about the Hispanic vote, about the politics, about the increase in the population, but the Hispanic vote has been here in New Mexico for a hundred and fifty years. We have now a governor who is a female Hispanic, the first in this country. When you look at people around here, it always amazes me to see the spread of what I call the color identity, that ranges from someone like me, with my dark look, to some first cousins I have blond and pale like what I call *Anglos* here. When you see photographs of someone with a Spanish last name in the news, sometimes it turns out that they look like everybody else. That's happening except inside, they still have their memories I'm sure, their family lore, their family pride.

M.S.: Would you define your literary voice “interlingual” borrowing Juan Bruce-Novoa’s famous definition of the Chicano language?

N.C.: I think languages are very important. Unfortunately, I don't fit them all myself. My parents belonged to a generation that wanted to move out to the mainstream and to the broader world. They did not speak Spanish to me or my sister at all when we grew up in Los Angeles. They did speak it among themselves occasionally, when they wanted to keep a secret from us. As a result I grew up “1.1 lingual”, as I call it, I handle a little Spanish. I have been too busy in my life to ever delve into it in any greater depth although I do have great sympathy for those who can speak it well.

M.S.: What literary genre do you think *A Daughter’s a Daughter* belongs to?

N.C.: I never really thought about it. When I write I have a general idea of what I want to say. I don't work from close outlines, I only have a good idea of what the story is and generally how it would end, and then it just happens. I'm not

conscious when I write, it is almost like meditating at times, it just flows and comes from wherever. As for *A Daughter's a Daughter*, I didn't think of it as a historical novel but as a contemporary novel, particularly in the last part of it with the granddaughter.

What I really was looking for was the change that is going on in the Hispanic New Mexican people, as well as throughout the South West and the Mexican Americans. So I looked at it as a Hispanic and Mexican-American story, first. Maybe, second, as a feminine story, because of my appreciation and knowledge of several really strong important women in my life, that triggered the idea. To begin with, when I had the idea of doing three generations and their changes, I wrote another novel which never got published. It has a young woman as the modern woman, then two males of older generations. When I put that together it didn't work for a lot of reasons, so I had to rethink what I wanted to write.

That is when it occurred to me that I knew of these strong women that were involved. The first Candelaria woman, who was a widow, left with her children and run a family household who led them (after the Pueblo Revolt) to El Paso, Texas, to exile. Then she came back and resettled with her sons. Then there is my grandmother Candelaria, whom I saw when I was a small boy, during our visits. She signed an official paper of some kind to get permission from the American U.S. government for a land they had lived on for 200 years. She signed it in a time when women probably didn't write and her husband obviously or apparently didn't write. She was the brain, she was a strong woman.

My mother was a very liberated woman for her time, she was a Chicana flapper back in the 20s, she smoked cigarettes in public and she drove a car, while her sisters-in-law thought: "Wow, what a hussy this woman is!". Also, my father worked in the railway Postal Service, which meant he would go on a train to work between Los Angeles and either Tucson or Phoenix. He would be gone for maybe three days at the time. While he was gone, she was the head of the household and she took over the responsibility.

Then of course I grew up with a sister who is a year and five months younger than me. So I knew what women were like as real people not as some writers write about them. One of the sad things about one of my favorite writers, Hemingway, is that he couldn't write women characters worth a damn. He just didn't understand women. He probably had the old *macho* attitude that a lot of Latinos had and some still do have.

M.S.: Burciaga's famous mural "The Last Supper of Chicano Heroes" appears in your novel. What does it do for it? How do you think visual art and literature interact in *A Daughter's a Daughter*?

N.C.: The mural that the young protagonist sees on the wall of the dining room, actually exists at Stanford University. I knew it thanks to a fellow who is a kind of house father for the dormitory, who showed me around one time. I guess like everything you see hereabout, it flows into your mental hard drive and it is stored there and it comes out sometimes, without you realizing that you have seen it or thought about it.

I like painting and I'm interested in good art, although I think music moves me more. I identify or feel the emotional impact of music more. The idea of my first novel came to me while listening to "Recuerdos de la Alhambra", being played on the guitar. It just touched me. When I wake up some mornings, and I'm not talking or doing anything, our popular music comes into my mind and I can't turn it off sometimes. It usually goes back to history, looking at various stages of my life as are reminded by certain songs.

M.S.: In your essay "Literature of the 19th Century Chicanos" you urge Chicano fiction writers to imagine themselves into the past, in order to fill in the gaps of U.S. history and to give voice to the voiceless, making room for the "losers". Is there still the same need today? Would you still use the imaginative potentials of fiction to fill in any historical gap?

N.C.: I think so, that is why I wrote the historical books that I did write. When you look around in Santa Fe there are still in some places some antagonism between old time New Mexican "Spanish" (some of them would say), versus the more recent migrants from Mexico. That is a problem at times that shows a lack of understanding, because we are really related, we are part of the same race, we are just the lucky ones that happened to be on the north side of the border.

M.S.: The mysterious skeleton at the end of the novel intrigued me. What do you think about it now that your novel is published?

N.C.: That is probably something for a critic to look at and decide. I thought of it like the necessity to finally come around to the secret of this buried man, who had been killed by his abused wife when he was assaulting her. I guess there could be some kind of a connection to the land itself, no longer being a farm, like it had been for generations. It was going to become a development, which is what happened to a lot of the property that my own family owned, one time.

That is just another part of change: history gets buried, not always dug up, and it gets overlaid with new things whatever they happen to be. Unfortunately, sometimes

we don't save things that need to be saved, that is why I admire so much some European cities. They go back for hundreds of years and still have some of the things and the buildings that could get bulldozed and paved over in this country, because of a general attitude and lack of real sensitivity towards art, I think. There are people who really appreciate it, but this country, in general, is run by money. It is more materialistic and writers feel that. In Europe, authors probably get attention even though they don't get much money; while in this country, unless you make a lot of money on a book, you get ignored or can be. You are not read by many.

M.S.: The protagonists of all your novels struggle to find a balance between tradition and renewal, past and progress. Do you think that the recurrent image of the Río Grande – which you depict as a symbol of change but also as a connection across generations – can effectively illustrate this struggle? What is your relationship with this river that has been so meaningful for many other Chicano writers, such as Rolando Hinojosa?

N.C.: I don't know what the feeling exactly is but, to me, it represents my identity. I have always thought that when my bones get taken care of, maybe they should be cremated and allowed to flow in the Río Grande, which, as you know, flows to the Gulf of Mexico and kind of seems universal to me: the flow of the river, the water and the rain when it comes back to this country.

1.2. Interview with Andrea O'Reilly Herrera



Andrea O'Reilly Herrera is a Professor of Literature and Women's and Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. She is a President's Teaching Scholar and is a recipient of the Thomas Jefferson Award. She was also selected as a Fulbright Distinguished Chair in American Studies and completed a residency in Lublin, Poland in 2006.

O'Reilly Herrera is a published poet and the author of a number of critical essays on writers ranging from Charlotte

Brontë and Marguerite Duras to Cristina García; and editor of the essay collection *Family Matters in the British and American Novel* (Popular Press, 1997) and the literary collection *A Secret Weavers Anthology* (White Pine Press, 1998), which features the work of contemporary Latin American women writers.

Her publications include a collection of testimonial expressions drawn from the Cuban exile community and their children residing in the United States (*ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora*, University of Texas Press, 2001); a novel (*The Pearl of the Antilles*, Bilingual/Review Press, 2001); an edited collection of essays (*Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced*, SUNY Press, 2007) and the co-edited textbook *The Matrix Reader: Examining the Dynamics of Oppression and Privilege* (McGraw Hill, 2008), which presents an intersectional approach to the study of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Her most recent work is a monograph titled *Cuban Artists across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House*, which focuses on the traveling art exhibition CAFÉ (University of Texas Press, 2011), and a play based on her novel *Pearl of the Antilles*, which was selected as a semi-finalist in the “Stage-play” category of the 2005 Moondance International Film Festival.

Mara Salvucci: *Leí que la inspiración del libro salió del dibujo, esto es muy interesante para mí.*

Andrea O'Reilly Herrera: *La cosa es que yo siempre he querido escribir este libro, desde cuando era una niña siempre dije, “Voy a escribir una novela”. Y todo el mundo quería saber qué novela, y yo decía “I don’t know, pero va a salir, no sé cuándo”. Yo estaba muy cerquita de mis abuelos los cubanos. Mi abuelo murió cuando yo tenía 19 años y después mi abuela. En 1986 yo estaba embarazada de mi hijo y tres semanas después de su nacimiento, en marzo, ella murió. Me sentía muy triste. Tenía muchas fotos de cuando ella era joven y quería pintarlas, pues una noche me levanté y empecé con una foto de mi abuela, de cuando ella tenía 16 años. Al día siguiente mientras estaba sentada en una mecedora con mi hijo, empecé a escribir la novela, en ese momento. El cuadro de mi abuela (que ahora es la cubierta de la novela) fue la inspiración.*

M.S.: **How long did it take to you to write the whole novel?**

A.O.H.: It took me about two years to complete the first draft. I was never formally trained as a writer, but I had been writing fiction and poetry since childhood and had wanted to be a writer for as long as I could remember. I didn’t know in advance

what the plot of the novel would be. I could see certain images, so I just started writing out these moments or scenes. Before long, the story began to take shape. Originally I had thought that Lilly and Margarita would return to Cuba at the end of the novel, but somehow this ending didn't make sense, in part because I had not been back to Cuba. One night I went to bed thinking about the ending and I found the solution in my dream. While I was in graduate school working on my PhD, I entered excerpts from the novel in a literary competition. They invited well-known writers to judge the entries and two years in a row my excerpts were selected for the fiction award. Until then, no one knew about the novel. Winning those awards gave me confidence, so I began looking for a literary agent, but had no luck as most agents told me that they already had their "quota" of Latina writers. So I decided to send my manuscript out on my own.

Eventually a small independent press in western New York expressed interest in publishing *Pearl*; however, there was a catch: the press relied on grants to publish new work. After waiting for more than two years, I began to grow frustrated, so I contacted the editor at the press. He wanted me to wait, but there was no telling when they would secure the funding to publish my book and several others, so I asked for permission to send my manuscript to another press for review. He agreed reluctantly and recommended that I send *Pearl* to Bilingual Review Press. It took Bilingual Review almost two years to get back to me; I can still remember what I was doing when I received the phone call letting me know that they had decided to publish my novel. While we were negotiating my contract, I asked them if they would consider using the painting of my grandmother for the cover and explained that it was the genesis of the novel. To my great happiness, they agreed!

M.S.: The way you wrote the novel reminds me a lot of the youngest character Lilly who finds her grandmother's notebook, puts together words and pictures and finally rewrites or maybe invents her family's story.

A.O.H.: *Esa es la cosa*. Claudia Sadowsky-Smith, a literary critic who has written on *Pearl*, was the first to figure out *que Lilly puede haber inventado todo el cuento*. *En verdad, su madre Margarita, nunca le habló de Cuba; pero hay cosas que Lilly sabe*. Many of the readers want to know if this is true (i.e. That Lilly invented the story), and I always say, "No sé, I have no idea."

M.S.: So Lilly might be the narrator of the whole book.

A.O.H.: It's possible. If this is true, Lilly is accessing certain information, which turns out to be accurate, through her imagination and intuition.

M.S.: Maybe an adult, grown up Lilly.

A.O.H.: *Sí, puede ser.*

M.S.: It is not that important to know.

A.O.H.: But it's important to believe this is possible. There are certain kinds of knowledge that we all possess and can access, but that cannot be explained empirically.

M.S.: Your positioning in the American cultural context is multifaceted because you are a professor, a literary critic, an editor, a poet, a novelist, a play writer, a curator of art exhibitions, plus an ethnic woman writer.

A.O.H.: *¡Y un poco loca!* [laugh]

M.S.: It is a very complex positioning in the U.S. mainstream. Do you think it affects your writing and your work?

A.O.H.: I can answer your question in a couple of ways. The kind of positioning you are referring to is actually not unusual in Cuba, as opposed to the U.S. In fact, it's typical. Many of the artists in *CAFÉ*, the art exhibit I write about in *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House* are, in addition to being artists, musicians, writers, poets, and/or dancers. I don't have any explanation for why this is true, but in this regard I am very Cuban. I'm also an amateur musician and an untrained artist. For me music and painting and writing are all linked together. Most Cubans I know understand this and think it's perfectly normal, but for most Americans it's not. Even though I was born in the U.S., I was not raised or acculturated like a typical American. Even though I was conceived in Havana, I was born the first week of January '59 [in Philadelphia]; but I was raised in the United States like a Cuban, so my consciousness was always Cuban—something that took me a long time to figure out. As a result, I always feel like an outsider, even though I am an American.

My desire to know about everything Cuban reaches back to my earliest childhood. In the introduction to my edited collection of testimonials expressions

Remembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora I recall following my grandfather around his garden, begging him to tell me stories about life on the island. I could never hear enough stories about Cuba. When *Pearl* finally came out in print, a very dear friend of mine, a Cuban poet and critic, read it and said, “Andrea, how did you know?”, “How do I know what?” I asked. “You know something that I can’t explain,” she said. “Well,” I responded, “We all heard so many stories about Cuba and I saw photographs”. “No, no, no,” she replied, “you don’t understand... you are the only writer I know outside of Cuba who has written about *that* Cuba – *la Cuba del pasado* – a past world that has disappeared, but you were never there”. “I don’t understand it either”, I said, “all I know is that ever since I was a child, I could see these moments; so I just wrote about what I ‘knew’”. I tend to be very visual, so I was just painting with words what I could ‘see’. I didn’t know if *Pearl* would ever get published, but I had to write this book, if only for myself. I thought about it for years, but as it turned out, I couldn’t actually write it until my grandparents died. *No sé por qué*, it wasn’t a conscious decision.

A long time ago I made the choice between either becoming an academic or an artist. I decided very consciously that I didn’t want to make my living as a writer or as a visual artist. I didn’t want to be pressured to have to produce work according to popular demand or taste. So I write freely and don’t worry about the reception of my work. I’m not concerned about how successful my novel is or how many people are reading it. *Para mí no importa, en verdad*. All I care about is being part of what I see as a larger dialogue regarding Cuba and its diaspora, so my focus is on people like you who are interested in my work and the ideas and questions I am struggling with in my writing.

In some sense then my decision to become an academic was *útil*, although I must say that I love teaching and feel privileged to work with young people. Many of my peers and mentors in graduate school told me that the kind of writing and creative work I hoped to do would not be regarded as rigorous or academic, and that most English departments didn’t value creative work if you weren’t hired as a creative writer. Early in my career a press expressed interest in publishing my dissertation, but my heart wasn’t in that project. I wanted to write about Cuba and the diaspora. As it turned out, I was very fortunate because the university where I now teach values and supports all of the work that I do on Cuba, including my creative writing.

M.S.: Wasn’t your doctoral dissertation about nunnery?

A.O.H.: Yes...oh my God, you know more about me than I know about me! After the press offered me a preliminary contract, I began revising my dissertation, but

I was miserable. A very good friend and colleague asked me, “What do you really want to be doing?” I told her that I wanted to work on *Remembering Cuba*, but everyone was telling me to publish my dissertation and put this project on the back burner. Most of my colleagues insisted that it was an opportunity I shouldn’t pass up and that my work on Cuba wouldn’t have any currency in academic circles. In response, my friend encouraged me to follow my instincts. It was exactly what I needed to hear, so I turned down the opportunity to publish my dissertation and began to focus all of my attention on gathering testimonials. So I consider myself to be very lucky to be where I am because I can do all of these crazy things, including curating art exhibits and producing my play, and my colleagues support me. I’m exactly where I should be. I am completely content where I am because I love my students and colleagues, and I am supported in doing work that is meaningful for me.

M.S.: As your friend told you, you depicted Cuba in a better way than a Cuban could have done, maybe this is because you have a privileged insight of the Cuban and U.S. culture, as you are an insider and an outsider at the same time.

A.O.H.: I’m not certain that I can depict Cuba better than other Cubans, however as I mentioned early on, I believe that it’s possible to intuitively access a body of knowledge that you can’t access in any other way. In the past I referred to it as a kind of ancestral memory, but a colleague reminded me that this has negative connotations in other contexts. But it’s like drawing knowledge from some collective consciousness, rather than empirically. For example, I hadn’t read a lot of Cuban literature at the time that I was writing *Pearl*. I had read the work of some Spanish and Latin American authors, but my primary influences when I was working on the novel were William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf and Emily Brontë. Quite awhile after *Pearl* was completed, I read something by Nicolás Guillén for the first time, and I discovered that I had used some of the exact same images that were in his work. The same thing happened as I read other Cuban writers such as Alejo Carpentier – there were clear connections with other Cuban writers who preceded me, but whom I had never read. It was very strange. I like to think it was a sign that I was on the right path.

M.S.: To me this is something similar to transculturation, *transculturación* by Fernando Ortiz, a contemporary version of it.

A.O.H.: Maybe this is part of our collective consciousness or our collective inheritance. I don’t know how to explain it because it doesn’t make sense in a traditional

western context. Clearly, it is not a western approach to knowledge. Rather, it is about giving currency to your dreams, your intuition and your imagination. Some days ago, while teaching my Latino/a literature course, I was trying to explain the concept of magical realism to my students. I was telling them that there is a type of magical realism that occurs in certain political situations, such as a massacre at a train station and then the next day in the newspaper it officially didn't occur. This is the form of political magical realism that Gabriel García Márquez described in his speech when he won the Nobel Prize for literature. But in a lot of Mexican or Chicano writing or in Caribbean literature what critics refer to as magical realism is something different. It is accessing a different kind of knowledge or consciousness that, as I mentioned before, can only be accessed through intuition.

My mother, for example, is Cuban, but after having lived in the United States for over 50 years, she has also become very American in many ways. However, when I talk to her about my dreams or even visions or premonitions, she takes this very seriously and completely accepts the possibility that you see things ahead of time, or you have the same dream as somebody else. She accepts these possibilities as completely natural or normal. So that's what this is about; it is not political. So I encourage my students to read this literature with an open mind, even if they don't believe that what they are reading is possible, and I encourage them, as the British poet Coleridge said, to "suspend" their "disbelief." Only in that way you can believe that Lilly is accessing information that she has not acquired in any ordinary manner.

M.S.: Apart from the magical realism moments there are disquieting sections, like in the beginning, this ancient woman on the mountain, looking at the celebration in the town. This creates a gloomy atmosphere for the reader.

A.O.H.: That scene was the first one that I could "see." As I was telling you, I had no idea what the plot or story was before I began writing *Pearl*. I had to allow the story to unfold, and this moment turned out to be the first scene. I sketched it out years before I started the novel. It is a kind of parable that traces the history of Cuba and the revolution, through its different waves. So there is some historical truth in the vision. For example, when the rebel soldiers came out from the mountains, the *Sierra Maestras*, they were dressed like monks, with these long beards and rosaries around their necks.

Only later does the reader realize that Tata is the old woman on the mountain. Everybody wants to know when Tata was born. I usually reply, "I have no idea, you have

to ask her”. Clearly, Tata is a visionary; she sees nearly everything. This scene was always at the beginning of the novel, but somebody who read my manuscript later suggested that it was confusing; he encouraged me to move it to the end of part one when Rosa is dying. I followed his advice even though deep inside I felt certain that it was the wrong decision. Then I dreamed that I needed to move it back to where it was originally.

Much later, while reading the writing of other Latin American authors, I learned that the dream sequence at the beginning of a work is a common convention in Latin American fiction, so I felt validated. A lot of people still tell me that they don’t understand the dream sequence and find it confusing, so explain that it foreshadows what will eventually unfold. Of course if you don’t know Cuba’s history, it will be mysterious. Nevertheless, I still feel certain that this sequence had to remain at the beginning of the novel; then the narrative becomes more chronological and there are more identifiable events, dates, etc. This form, therefore suggests that the two worlds – the ordinary and the world on the mountain top—are something distinct and sometimes collide.

M.S.: And what about Casandra, the mulata?

A.O.H.: Tell me what *you* think of Casandra.

M.S.: I relate her to figures that I have found in other novels, representing the “otherness”, the Indian side that everybody wants to suppress and hide.

A.O.H.: She, like Tata, is indigenous, so she represents a race of people who were virtually eliminated in Cuba by the Spaniards; however, she also references two important literary models: *The Odyssey* and *The Oresteia*, the Greek trilogy recounting the fall of the house of Atreus. In *The Oresteia*, Cassandra is a very important figure as she is the one who is telling the truth, but her curse is that no one can understand her. That’s where her name comes from. In *Pearl*, Casandra is Pedro’s mistress, which is very common in this historical context. It is unclear who is the father of her child. In fact, it is probably not Pedro, I didn’t want to decide.

Obviously, Casandra is exploited and harassed. She is a victim of her circumstances; but Rosa is a victim, too, though clearly not in the same way. All the women are victims of a post-colonial, patriarchal system, though race and class divides them. When I first began to give life and volume to Casandra, she was cast in an adversarial role with Rosa. That they would be enemies was predictable, so I later decided

to overturn this paradigm of women in adversarial positions and thereby comment on this structure that turns women against each other at the same time that they are all being victimized and oppressed. Even though Casandra has almost no power, I wanted to draw connections between her and Rosa. So Casandra had to be something different, even though she was part of a world that is still haunted by the legacy of colonialism, patriarchy, and slavery. I very much wanted to look at women and their positions in this kind of culture and situation, in this kind of society, remnants of which still exist.

M.S.: I was very intrigued by this multigenerational frame in which women are connected to each other.

A.O.H.: Of course I am not the only writer who has implemented this structure or framework. Many writers have investigated the manner in which traditions are passed down through generations. Many writers have explored this theme – the transmission of gender roles. When you talk about gender and patriarchy, it is always about what men are doing to women, but I was also interested in taking a look at what women are doing to women. Take for example Rosa and Rafaela’s relationship. Rosa doesn’t really talk to her mother when the latter is alive; it’s only after Rafaela has died that they have an open conversation, even though the reader is aware that Rafaela continues to withhold information from Rosa and fib to her daughter. So, even in death, Rafaela is perpetuating or advocating a traditional patriarchal mode of gender behavior.

M.S.: History books are written by men.

A.O.H.: Yes, primarily, and I’m interested in looking at women’s lives and of course the ways that their lives parallel the “big” history.

M.S.: So you need the multigenerational approach to convey the wider picture.

A.O.H.: Absolutely... and to see what is transmitted through all these generations. My critical work also focuses on this subject. While I was collecting testimonial expressions for *ReMembering Cuba*, I discovered that Cubans continue to transmit their cultural mores through different generations in the diaspora; in over fifty years not much has changed. For instance, during one of his classes Jeffrey [Rubin-Dorsky] had six contemporary female writers – including me and another Cuban writer

[Ana Menéndez] – come to campus and work with the students in his class. We also brought in Isabel Álvarez Borland, who is a well known Cuban American literary critic.

The three of us [Isabel, Andrea and Ana] had dinner together one evening. I was ten years older than Ana and Isabel was ten years older than me; we were all raised in middle-class families. Ana was born and raised in the United States; I was conceived in Cuba but born in Philadelphia; and Isabel grew up in Cuba and then came to the U.S. as an adolescent. At that dinner we realized that we were raised or socialized as females in the exact same way. We could hardly believe it and were laughing from the start. Nothing about our upbringing was significantly different despite a twenty year span. So as a Cuban American woman, across borders and across generations, I'm very interested in the way women teach other women how to behave, and how they inadvertently become the guardians of systems that actually oppress them.

M.S.: I'm not sure if this is my impression or if it is true: I have noticed that some sentences in the novel are in English but sound Spanish.

A.O.H.: That is very interesting.

M.S.: Especially in the letters, when *tía* writes “imagine!” I have Cuban friends and they use that a lot, “¡*imagínate!*”

A.O.H.: It's amazing, nobody has ever said that to me. When I was writing the dialogues as well as the letters in *Pearl*, I kept saying the lines out loud because I wanted to imitate the conversations I had heard growing up, as well as the letters that were read to us from relatives who had remained in Cuba. I was very consciously trying to figure out how all of the women at the Havana Yacht Club would have spoken to each other and what they would have said, for instance. Some of the words or expressions wouldn't work in English, such as “¡*Qué barbaridad!*” (which in English would be literally translated as “What a barbarity!”).

M.S.: Sandra Cisneros wrote that, “What a barbarity!”

A.O.H.: Yes, in *Caramelo*, I love that book! She was trying to express the same idea – that some things just cannot be translated. Some things just sound ridiculous when you translate them! But I was also trying to imitate as faithfully as possible how these women would speak. I recalled our own dinner table. Everyone would be talking

at the same time; I was passionate and emotional. So as I was writing I just opened my ears and I could hear the conversations and the debates. Even in English I was trying to imagine, “How would so-and-so phrase this? What words would they use to say this?” So, what you have observed is just wonderful!

M.S.: Did you speak Spanish with your family when you were a child?

A.O.H.: My mother didn’t speak Spanish to us, but we had lots of different people living with us from *Pedro Pan* for example [*Operation Peter Pan*] and relatives who didn’t speak English. So we learned Spanish from everyone but my mother, although she would talk to the others in Spanish. I asked her about this once, when she was visiting me after I had moved to Colorado. We were sitting outside on the porch and our Colombian neighbor came over and started speaking to my mother in Spanish. She replied in Spanish and afterward my daughter said, “I have never heard Nana speak Spanish before”. It was the first time I actually realized that she had never spoke Spanish to us either.

My mother first came to the U.S. as an adolescent during Machado’s violent regime in the 1930s, and she had a horrible time because she didn’t speak English. It occurred to me some time later that her decision to speak to us in English (as opposed to Spanish) may have been a result of her experience. I suggested this to her recently and she replied, “I had never thought about that, but it is probably true”. So we all learned Spanish by ear. My father, *pobrecito*, learned Spanish in the same way. He was Irish American and he would say things in Spanglish like, “*quiero un poco de juicy*”. His parents had died and most of his relatives were still in Ireland, so he learned Spanish out of self-defense because almost everyone in the house spoke Spanish. Even many of my mother’s relatives in Miami didn’t speak English. They came and they have never learned English. So we all learned Spanish by listening to their conversations.

M.S.: Do your sons or daughters speak Spanish too?

A.O.H.: One of my daughters loves Spanish and taught it for three years. My son and my other daughter took Spanish classes after they graduated from college and they love it too. They can understand a lot, in part because their paternal grandfather only spoke Spanish – he was *atalán*. My former husband grew up speaking Spanish too, so my children would hear Spanish all the time in our house.

When my readers come across the Spanish passages in *Pearl* (in the green Morocco notebook), many get annoyed and frustrated. Some of the passages actually come from my grandmother's grammar school notebook, which I transcribed, or they come from newspaper articles from *El diario de la marina*, which she clipped and saved. In response, I ask people to consider who's reading the notebook. Who's looking at it in the novel? It's Lilly, of course. So imagine, what would you be feeling if you were her, facing this impenetrable wall of language? If you can't understand it, then you can feel identified with Lilly, and then you can begin to imagine what it would be like to discover that the door of your past is locked too. So as a reader you need to ask yourself why writers incorporate foreign languages into their works. It's not gratuitous, it's not to make you angry.

As I mentioned earlier, you cannot always translate everything – especially when it comes to experience and culture. As a reader-outsider, you are always in the act of translating. Ultimately what you are translating becomes something different and new. Metaphorically, this act of translating represents a way of negotiating cultures linguistically. So in some sense incorporating Spanish into the novel represents Lilly's attempt to negotiate two languages and two worlds.

M.S.: Immigrants usually experience the same thing, the other way around, with the English language.

A.O.H.: Yes, language is essential not only to identity formation but to the struggle to assimilate into a foreign culture, so for immigrants it can represent one of the ways they are caught between two worlds, two cultures.

M.S.: In *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced* you mention the concept of “mnemohistory” by Jan Assmann. He says that “we are what we remember” and that memory is a constant interplay of history, imagination, dreams and nostalgia. How do you think individual and collective memory interact in a novel or in the real world?

A.O.H.: What I love about Assmann is that he is not so much interested in determining the “truths” of history but rather in what ideas or memories are embraced and passed on. When I was teaching in Lublin as a Fulbright scholar I realized, after talking with my students, that Poland “disappeared” or was erased as a nation for something like a hundred and twenty-seven or a hundred and twenty-eight years. There was a diaspora and groups of Poles scattered all over Europe or immigrated to the United States. A

huge community settled in France, and a lot of my students were the grandchildren or great-grandchildren of those people. What is amazing is that they carried their culture with them and preserved some collective consciousness (which incorporated individual ideas and a sense of collective memory).

In the introduction to my new book, *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House*, I drew inspiration from quantum physics as well as Assmann's concept of mnemohistory, such as the concept that the focus isn't so much on where an object is, physically, but rather on where it could be. So I'm not terribly concerned with whose story is true or who has the "strongest" story. I'm more interested in the stories that travel across time... the collective "truths", which are sometimes in contradiction, that are embraced by the community and preserved from generation to generation. In effect, I am rejecting a linear or binary way of thinking or knowing. I am also unconcerned about finding definite or conclusive answers. In fact, I am never concerned with what "the answer" is, but rather with all the possible answers and all the possible answers could be in contradiction. Does this make sense?

M.S.: Absolutely. This last idea reminds me of the CAFÉ exhibit, inspired by a conversation among three Cuban diasporic artists—Leandro Soto, Yovani Bauta, and Israel León—who realized that you can perpetuate the ritual of making a coffee, wherever you are in the world, and it is still a Cuban way of having coffee.

A.O.H.: Yes, absolutely, but the ingredients and the environment in which the *café* is made are subject to change, so there is always something new and something old, something that moves or changes and something that remains constant or stable. It is a balance of multiple things that are frequently in a paradoxical relationship, and you are contemplating all of them in motion, everything that is there.

M.S.: In that moment and in that place.

A.O.H.: Exactly! So the central metaphor informing *CAFÉ* makes perfect sense to me. Years ago I studied with the Cuban theorist Antonio Benítez-Rojo – he was my mentor and guide, he supported everything that I did. He was the first person who articulated the possibility of paradox and harmony. One day, when I was studying with him in a workshop at the University in Miami, he was discussing this topic and he described it as a particularly Caribbean sensibility. I raised my hand and said that it reminded me of juggling. You have all these notions and ideas in the air at the same time

and they can be contradictory or paradoxical; they don't always go together. But they are all in the air and the trick is to just keep them there, without trying to separate out one thing or the other. The most important thing is that they are all suspended in the air, at the same time. He replied, "That's it. You got it!".

Two of my closest Cuban friends corroborated this idea. They are physicists and as we discussed literature, they would talk about quantum physics and draw parallels. Through them I began to see the beauty of physics and how literature resonated with the principles and tenets they described. Our conversations influenced me a lot as well. In effect, they articulated a way of expressing not an identity (because I don't use that word) but a consciousness or "way of being" that according to Antonio was particularly Caribbean. What I hoped to do in my last book on Cuban Diasporic art is try to propose a much more inclusive and open way of thinking about who belongs, and what constitutes Cubanness or a Cuban consciousness and, in this particular instance, a Cuban artist. It is a theoretical framework that you could use to analyze *Pearl*. Of course a lot of people are uncomfortable with this idea, in part because it's safer to think in a binary manner. But when you think in binaries, you immediately politicize these questions for you either belong or you don't belong, you are either here or you are there.

M.S.: How is your relationship with the Cuban community in Miami right now?

A.O.H.: It depends on who I am with and where. The reception to my work in Europe is completely different than the reception here. Some Americans and Cubans are very uncomfortable with my work, especially my theoretical perspective. Americans tend to read Cuba from a position that is informed by race, class and gender politics in the United States, or they tag my work as too politically conservative and extol the regime with little first-hand knowledge or experience of life under a totalitarian regime. Other people – including some Cubans – think I don't have the right to speak about Cuba because I wasn't born there. This raises the issue of what I refer to as the hierarchy of authenticity, which questions who can speak about Cuban culture, who can claim the pain or the sense of loss or displacement. When I put out the call for submissions for *ReMembering Cuba*, the immediate responses I received were from people born outside Cuba—the "lost generation" that I speak of in one of my essays in *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced*. Yet, some Cubans have told me that I have no right to "appropriate" their culture. So if you raise these kinds of questions and if this is your criteria for determining who is authorized to speak, I already know you are missing the point.

M.S.: Have you ever been to Cuba?

A.O.H.: You know, any effort I have made to go to Cuba has been thwarted; I'm guessing it's because of my books. But some day – when the time is right – I will get there.

M.S.: Couldn't you go there as a tourist?

A.O.H.: I don't want to go illegally. More fundamentally, I don't want to go to Cuba as a tourist. I want to go as I am – *una cubanita pasada por agua* – and present my work. I hope, considering some of the changes that are occurring now, that it is going to happen one day soon.

M.S.: I heard that Cristina García is censored in Cuba. Is it the same for your works? Can you buy your books in Cuba?

A.O.H.: Honestly, I don't think you can.

M.S.: What does the Cuban diaspora mean for you?

A.O.H.: Many of the artists I interviewed for my last book see the creative possibility in the diasporic condition. They have used their art to create a space in diaspora that reflects a history of movement, integration, synthesis and transformation, things that have always characterized Cuba – beginning with the Spanish colonization, the immigration, out-migration and multiple exiles, before Martí and until now. Movement has always informed Cuban history and has shaped the Cuban consciousness. So when you talk about absorbing new cultural elements, all of these artists see that as natural because Cuban culture is receptive and eclectic, it is an *ajiaco* (to use Ortiz's metaphor). To understand this you first have to know the history of the Caribbean. You are rooted nowhere and everywhere.

M.S.: A close Cuban friend of mine often says, "Home is my family and my friends."

A.O.H.: Yes, I agree; I would add that home is like a tent – you can make your home wherever you are. In this sense, the journey is the thing in itself.

NOTES

¹ *San Francis and the Americas/San Francisco en las Américas*. Hispanic Research Center, Arizona State University. Web. 10 April 2013.

² *Cuba Transnational*. Web. 10 April 2013.