MAKING HOME OUTSIDE THE HOMELAND: THE IMPACT OF TRANSNATIONAL AND GENDER IDENTITIES ON THE DEFINITION OF HOME IN ANA MENÉNDEZ'S *IN CUBA I WAS A GERMAN SHEPHERD*

Author:
Amanda Riccitelli

Faculty Sponsor:
Ellen Friedman
Department of English

ABSTRACT

Ana Menéndez's *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* centers around the stories of a displaced Cuban diaspora living in a fictionalized Miami, Florida. As these immigrants and their children come to realize their own identities, they demonstrate their internal shifts through their depictions of what home is. Using Birke and Butter's article as the framework for the five dimensions that construct a home (spatial, material, social, emotional, and cognitive), this paper explores how these characters construct home with their transnational identities. However, even among the Cuban diaspora, there are divides in how the dimensions are prioritized. In the short stories "The Last Rescue" and "The Perfect Fruit," Menéndez highlights a gendered divide in the definition of home for transnational migrants, and how fragile that definition is.

INTRODUCTION

Immigrant stories are ones rooted in displacement and the search for identity. These themes are ones that Ana Menéndez explores in her collection of short stories *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*. She specifically centers her short stories on the diaspora community of Cuban immigrants living in a fictionalized Miami, Florida. In describing the lives, loves, and losses of these men and women, Menéndez highlights the diaspora's members' experiences of home and displacement. In so doing, she demonstrates a difference in how the men and women of her stories define home. After migrating from Cuba, home is an essential commodity to the diaspora as they establish a new sense of identity and safety in Florida. In her short stories, especially "The Last Rescue" and "The Perfect Fruit," Menéndez highlights a gendered divide in the definition of home for transnational migrants.

DIASPORA

Alinia, Wahlbeck, Eliassi, and Khayati in their article "The Kurdish Diaspora: Transnational Ties, Home, and Politics of Belonging," define a diaspora as "a transnational social phenomenon where a complex social process can be observed characterized on the one hand by dispersion, dislocation, feelings of social exclusion and a homing desire, and on the other hand … by movements, mobilizations and politics for location, "home" making (imaginary or real) and belonging" (54). Diaspora can be clearly applied to immigrant populations, more specifically those who share a common motive for migration as well as a shared homeland. Though, Alinia et. al. posit, ""homeland" has to be understood as an idea … [t]he perception of the "homeland" … [is] often significantly influenced by some type of traumatic collective history" (54). For the Cuban migrants in Menéndez's Florida, this "traumatic collective history" is the uprising and dictatorship of Fidel Castro and the widespread unrest in Cuba. While these immigrants share this national trauma identity, their diaspora is defined by their "dislocation and relocation in relation to an idea of a homeland" (Alinia et. al. 54). They share trauma, but are brought together by their immigrant status.

When the diaspora has moved away from the homeland, they have to leave one home behind in favor for a new one. But how is this new home created, and what even constitutes a home? Dorothee

Birke and Stella Butter in their paper "Un/Making Homes in Anglophone Cultures," establish "five dimensions of home:" the spatial, the material, the social, the emotional, and the cognitive (31). This paper will examine how Menéndez represents these dimensions of home and the gendered divide of said representation. The material dimension is centered around the material elements of a home, things like interior decoration or beds or pots and pans. The social dimension identifies home with interpersonal relationships. The emotional dimension highlights the "ideal of home [as] associated with 'a sense of belonging or attachment'" (qtd. in Birke and Butter 31). The cognitive dimension refers to "the idea of home as a site of familiarity" (Birke and Butter 31). Finally, the spatial dimension of home is defined by the physical space of the home, which Birke and Butter state "can range from a small to a large unit, from the body to the planet as home" (32). However, a key point in understanding the spatial dimension that they quote is that the "scale is not a 'fixed, nested hierarchy of bounded spaces of differing sizes, such as the local, regional, national, supranational, and global'" (32). Since the spatial dimension of the home is not a nested hierarchy, I propose that for the diaspora community -- specifically the Cuban diaspora -- the definition of their spatial home is transnational. For the characters of Menéndez's stories, the national home is Cuba, but the regional and local homes are Florida and Miami respectively. Their definitions of home exist across borders just as they do. As quoted in Maya Socolovsky's article "Cuba Interrupted: The Loss of Center and Story in Ana Menéndez's Collection *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd,*" "I live outside of Cuba but still consider myself part of the nation" (235). For the Cuban diaspora, living within the nation's borders is not a prerequisite to identifying it as home. Beyond these wider spatial definitions, the home is separated into individual homes and immediate families, but the diaspora community as a whole share this spatial definition of where their home is. It is because of this transnational definition of home that makes defining and establishing identity so difficult. When there is no nested hierarchy of the physical home, there is an element of displacement.

Alinia et. al. state that "[f]amily, community, home, homeland, belonging and nation need … to be renegotiated and redefined in the light of dislocations and relocations across different generations, genders, times, spaces, and contexts" (54). This statement not only identifies the nuance in the diaspora experience and its relationship with home, but also the impact of specific factors like gender on the transnational experience. Alinia et. al. also mention that "a comparison of experiences … of men and women, shows that they experience differently the old and the new homes, which in turn can lead to divided allegiances" (54). The researchers confirm that there is a gendered divide in the immigrant experience, and in the spatial definition of home especially. Birke and Butter further establish this gendered divide in the experience and definition of home, they mention that there is "a well-established tradition in home studies [that] is … invested in the issue of identity politics: feminist studies have made important contributions to the analysis of home as a gendered sphere" (33). The home and its association with the domestic sphere have classically labeled the home as a feminine space. Because the home is coded as a female space, men's definition of home relies on their connection to the feminine/female. This means that the social dimension of home is the most crucial of the five dimensions for men. The immigrant experience and the diaspora create an artificial limit on access to interpersonal relationships, which throws the male definition of home into a particularly fragile state. In contrast, since the home is already a female space, women more strongly connect to/rely on the material dimension of home.

"THE LAST RESCUE"

Ana Menéndez's short story "The Last Rescue" clearly depicts how the male construction of home crumbles alongside the relationship with the female. In the beginning, the main character Anselmo is confident and comfortable in his relationship with his wife Meegan. Because his perception of the relationship is still stable, the material and cognitive dimensions of the home are established: "The room felt safe and familiar even in the soft darkness that had gathered like drapes in the corners. The shapes and shadows of the night stood where they always had and Anselmo knew this was the dresser, that hulking piece the chair, the figure crouching in the corner only his shoes and cotton pants" (Menéndez 143). His bedroom is "safe and familiar," fully realizing the cognitive dimension. He knows and identifies the material elements of the room. Anselmo feels secure in his home. However, this sense of security does not last. His home is divided not only by gender, but also by the transnational. Anselmo's identity as a

member of the Cuban diaspora creates a divide between himself and Meegan. As his father explains, "[a] Cuban man can never marry an Americana ... An American man with a Cuban woman, this was possible. She would love him and comfort him like no Americana could, cook hot lunches for him and listen to the details of his day. But an Americana would never understand a Cuban man" (Menéndez 145). The Cuban diaspora and transnational experience, in the opinion of Anselmo's father, cannot be understood by anyone outside of the diaspora. The father's explanation also firmly places the woman in the home. The woman is the one to "cook hot lunches … and listen to the details of his day." The woman is meant to be a support structure and maintain the home for the sake of the man. It is on this assumption that the man's definition of the home relies so heavily on the social dimension. If the woman is home, it is the man's relationship with her that grants him access to the home. The transnational divide can prevent the man from building a relationship with the woman and therefore prevent him from having a home. Anselmo himself supports the idea of the transnational divide between those of the Cuban diaspora and the people outside of it: "Later Anselmo decided that when you are Cuban, you never sleep well. You have suffered more than other people" (Menéndez 145). For Anselmo, the transnational divide is rooted in the trauma of the diaspora.

Anselmo's jealousy and insecurity drive an even bigger wedge in the divide between himself and Meegan. This divide leaves him feeling insecure in his home, as the social dimension slowly crumbles. For instance, Anselmo is envious of Meegan's ability to sleep peacefully and easily, stating that it was "[a]s if she didn't feel anything she claimed to feel and instead vanished every night into a space that was hers alone" (Menéndez 145). In her sleep, Meegan vanishes to a home "that was hers alone," one that Anselmo has no access to. Meegan is his home, but he does not have full access to that home, and in the face of that he is insecure. The more he questions what he knows and what he does have access to from Meegan, the more insecure he grows; "[w]orse was Meegan's talking in a way Anselmo had never heard" (Menéndez 149). Meegan is not acting in the ways that Anselmo is used to, she is breaking from the routine, exposing elements of herself that she has kept from him. Even standing in their room while she lay sleeping in the bed alters his perception of Meegan: "He'd never watched her from this perspective and she seemed smaller, like someone he didn't know" (Menéndez 152). His wife is slowly morphing into someone he does not know. Just as Meegan is changing before him, so is his perception of the material dimension of the home, "[t]he room shrank around him; the dresser seemed closer than before" (Menéndez 150). Anselmo loses familiarity with the home at the same rate that he loses familiarity with his wife. When he begins to get lost in doubting her fidelity to him – "Anselmo knew he had made too much of that first meeting with Mark, was making too much of last night's conversation with the new pilot. … But why was she talking to Mark again?" (Menéndez 155) – the bedroom only further twists into something unrecognizable. Now his bedroom resembles his home less and less, "[i]n the darkened room, everything looked blue, as if underwater. The lights sparkled above him like a harbor. In the mirror, a bony hand was shaking its finger back and forth" (Menéndez 156). This is the earliest and clearest instance of the dissolve of the cognitive dimension of the home. Anselmo's home is no longer familiar, and no longer safe.

Anselmo is a pilot and spends his days in the air, enforcing an embargo to keep supplies from entering Cuba. He is trapped straddling the border between Cuba and the United States. Outside of his home, he does not have anything to ground him. But his crumbling relationship with Meegan leaves him adrift, "[s]he floated and he reached for her. Finally it was he who came sobbing, begging forgiveness, falling. And now he was falling again. She talking to Mark last night as if nothing had happened. Why hadn't she mentioned the tennis?" (Menéndez 160-161). Meegan is out of reach and it leaves Anselmo plummeting. Due to his inability to connect with and reach his wife, Anselmo is left without the safety of a home to fall back to. In the end, Anselmo is "tired and alone in himself" (Menéndez 155). He is alone without his social dimension of home. Notably, Anselmo is "alone *in himself*" (emphasis mine), not alone in his home or alone in his bedroom. Anselmo is alone within the confines of his own person, because without Meegan, his sense of home disappears. His only home left is his physical person.

"THE PERFECT FRUIT"

A contrast to "The Last Rescue" is Ana Menéndez's short story "The Perfect Fruit." This story centers on a woman instead of a man – in this instance, that woman is Matilde, Anselmo's mother. "The Perfect Fruit" is set just before Anselmo proposes to Meegan, and as such is a precursor to "The Last Rescue." As established earlier, men rest their definition of home on the women in their lives. "The Perfect Fruit" signals that Anselmo has shifted the primary female relationship in his life away from his mother Matilde and to his partner Meegan, a shift that Matilde is painfully aware of. This shift is demonstrated first not in his move out of his parents' house, but in his rejection of his mother's food, "[p]lease eat, Matilde said the last time. You're hardly eating. And … she watched him push the flan around the plate" (Menéndez 52). Earlier this paper stated that women rest their definition of home primarily on the material dimension. Matilde, who spends all her time in the house – in the home, centers her expression of home on her cooking and food. This comes, in part, from her trauma experiences in Cuba, when food was not a reliable resource: "At night, alone in the big house in Havana, Matilde cried for her skinny baby. What if he died without ever meeting his father? She stopped eating. The shelves in the stores were never more than half full now" (Menéndez 57). Her lack of food made her living situation insecure. Home is not safe without sustenance. When she finally immigrates to Florida, the material dimension of food and cooking establishes safety within her home. The food made in the kitchen of the home is the backbone to her social relationships with the other members of her family. She shares home with them through her cooking. Anselmo's refusal to eat her flan – especially since it was a favorite of his as a child – is a clear rejection of his mother's offering of home. What is also significant about Anselmo's refusal to eat flan is the fact that flan is a traditional Hispanic desert. Meegan is American, not Cuban. By not eating the Hispanic food, Anselmo also rejects his transnational heritage. He is attempting to ignore the transnational divide in his relationship by ignoring his transnational heritage. In so doing, he drives himself further away from his mother and his childhood home.

Socolovsky states of Menéndez's stories that "Cuba haunts and menaces domestic spaces … narrates itself through allegory, and produces ghosts that … creates an uneasy narrative" (247). "The Perfect Fruit" is set in the domestic space of Matilda's house, specifically the kitchen and the backyard, and within this space she is bombarded with memories of Cuba. As her social dimension of home shifts, she retreats to the spatial, as represented through the material. Anselmo is leaving the social dimension of home, and her relationship with him is undergoing a dramatic shift. In this moment of upheaval of her home, she is brought back to her previous moments of upheaval: Cuba. As stated at the beginning of this paper, Cuba is still part of the spatial dimension of home for the Cuban diaspora. Matilda is clinging to her memories of home as her current one shifts. Cuba is represented materially in the story through the bananas in the backyard. The banana trees had been planted by her husband Raúl, a man she met and married in Cuba, who immigrated to the States before her and who she followed to Florida. The banana trees were not in the backyard when they moved to the house, they were planted there, just like how Matilda and Raúl planted their roots in Florida after moving from Cuba. As Matilda adjusts to the presence of the banana trees, "they passed into a deep part of memory that was almost like forgetting" (Menéndez 51). She almost forgets the banana trees like how she almost forgets her experiences in Cuba in favor of a new life in Miami. The unexpected fruit bearing of the trees distresses her, "[m]ore yellow. Ruining the lawn that Matilde had come to count on, that had soothed her" (Menéndez 58). Not thinking about Cuba gave Matilde control over her life, she hid from her trauma in favor of living in her present. But the upheaval of her home is forcing her to face her memories of Cuba – she can no longer hide from it: "she couldn't stop thinking about the bananas. They were everywhere. Disordered, growing. All these years she'd patted her life back into place. Now she felt that familiar falling away, the old panic of not understanding. She wanted her peace back, her dishes lined up end to end, the yard green and fresh" (Menéndez 65-66). Matilde cannot stop thinking about Cuba. She has spent so long repressing her trauma and it is all unleashed at once. Cuba is her home, and so is Anselmo, but both have separated themselves from her. One she left, the other left her.

CONCLUSION

According to Alinia et. al., "home is both a mythical place for diasporic imaginations as well as a locality of lived experiences" (54). For the Cuban diaspora in Ana Menéndez's stories, the "mythical place" is the

Cuba they left behind, while their "locality" is found in Miami. To understand the immigrant experience and the immigrant story, a story steeped in identity and displacement, it is essential to understand what and where home is to the immigrant. Their transnational identity and experiences color their definition of home, no matter where they live. On top of their transnationality, the gender identity of members of the diaspora also impact their experience and definition of home. Understanding the nuanced definition of home, especially in regard to transnational and gender identities, leads to a deeper reading of immigrant identity stories and what it means to belong.

WORKS CITED

Alinia, Minoo, Östen Wahlbeck, Barzoo Eliassi, and Khalid Khayati. "The Kurdish Diaspora: Transnational Ties, Home, and Politics of Belonging." *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 53-56.

Birke, Dorothee and Stella Butter. "Un/Making Homes in Anglophone Cultures." *Proceedings of the Conference of the German Association of University Teachers of English*, vol. 37, 2016, *Anglistentag 2015 Panderborn Proceedings*, edited by Christoph Ehland, Ilka Mindt, and Merle Tönnies, pp. 31-35.

Menéndez, Ana. *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*. Grove Press, 2001.

Socolovsky, Maya. "Cuba Interrupted: The Loss of Center and Story in Ana Menéndez's Collection In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2005, pp. 235–251.