Let me begin with summaries of recent events that provide a framework for my reading of Latino memoirs below.

Wednesday, February 20, 2002

The New York Times reports that Governor Pataki, showing off his “much-improved Spanish,” visited Santo Domingo accompanied by Fernando Mateo, a Dominican citizen and president of the New York State Federation of Taxi Drivers. Later in the day, Andrew M. Cuomo, one of the Democratic candidates for governor of New York State, also arrived in the capital of the Dominican Republic. It is reported that this year’s race for governor of New York seems to be taking place more on the Caribbean island than on the other island, Manhattan, far away.

Monday, November 19, 2001

An article in The New York Times reports the appearance in Puebla, Mexico, of Representative Richard Gephardt and Senator Tom Daschle, the two top Democrats from New York. Although presumably intended as a demonstration of support for bilateral U.S.-Mexico talks on trade and immigration that were about to be held, political analysts note that the visit reflected the Democrats’ ongoing efforts to build support among the increasing number of Latino voters in the U.S. Before Gephardt and Daschle head back home, they meet with local, poblano families who lost relatives in the September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

Tuesday, June 19, 2001

The New York Times carries a story about Andrés Bermúdez, a formerly undocumented Mexican citizen turned successful tomato grower from Central California who was campaigning in his native town of Jérez in the state of Zacatecas as a candidate for mayor of the municipality. Although Bermúdez admits that he “thinks like an American,” he also confesses his commitment to “his homeland,” meaning Mexico. An estimated fifty percent of the state population has migrated north and the state receives approximately $1 million a day in remittances from citizens of Zacatecas who now live in the U.S. Several days later, on July 2nd, it is reported in the same dailies that Bermúdez has declared victory, becoming the first resident of the U.S. to serve as a Mexican mayor.

Several years ago, Gustavo Pérez Firmat published a popular book entitled Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way (1994). Conceived as an exploration of bicultural Cuban-American identity, the study establishes that the hyphen connecting Cuban and American represents a balancing act between the two cultural poles. Instead of remaining still, the hyphen moves up and down like a seesaw, with one side corresponding to Cuban culture and the other to American culture. Although the image was envisaged to explain the various degrees of biculturalism or the partaking of two cultures specifically among Cuban-Americans as they transit from their native to their adopted culture, it can be easily extended to the three generations of “Cubans” coexisting in the United States. From this point of view, the first generation, which was fully formed before its arrival on U.S. shores, rests on one end of the seesaw, the one standing for Cuban culture. Having left the island as exiles, this first generation has presumably maintained an exilic perspective throughout the three or four decades since it settled in the U.S. Its efforts to hold on to the native culture have been sustained by the vitality of the ethnic enclave in South Florida that allowed the conservation of transplanted cultural codes, practices, traditions, and rituals. The subsequent generation, which the writer designates as the “one-and-a-half” generation, using a term first coined by sociologist Rubén Rumbaut, is composed of those who left Cuba as children or young adults. This is the generation that exhibits a bicultural outlook, the one that lives “on the hyphen,” or poised at the center of the seesaw fulcrum as it achieves a balance between its native and adopted cultures. Finally, since the sons and daughters of the “one-and-a-half” generation are depicted as more American than Cuban, the model predicts the eventual loss of the Cuban side of the hyphen. Needless to say, this generation will come to rest on the other end of the seesaw.

My essay takes issue with the thrust of this vision derived from Pérez Firmat’s analysis of the “one-and-a-half” generation, arguing that the playful metaphor of the seesaw, with its three-part movement, tells only part of the story of contemporary, postmodern Hispanic or Latino autobiography. As Edna Acosta-Belén and Carlos E. Santiago affirm in a recent article entitled “Merging Borders: The Remapping of America,” the US Hispanic heritage, the increasing presence of Latinos in the United States, and “the existing transnational links that (im)migrant groups maintain with their Latin American or Caribbean countries of origin” present “new challenges and changes in our conventional interpretations of the history and culture of the Americas, both North and South” (29). Although presently large numbers of immigrants from Latin America still get on the seesaw and move up and down until they come to rest on the end corresponding to American culture, “the increasing global interconnections, interdependence, and economic integration among nations and regions” of the hemisphere (Acosta-Belén and Santiago 29) behoove us to take a closer look at that moment in which the seesaw, having achieved a precarious balance, is located at the center of the fulcrum and seems to be still.
As one of the forms that have been frequently cultivated by Latino writers, autobiographical narratives reveal some of the ways in which Latin America and the Caribbean are brought into play as the writers address issues of cultural identity at the heart of the genre of ethnic autobiography. These narratives imply that Pérez Firmat’s seesaw becomes something else, perhaps a balance beam that provides more support and the possibility of indefinitely maintaining equilibrium, or better yet, a solid bridge—a recurrent image in Latino fiction and criticism—that spans and provides passage between distant ends. Given that the seesaw, despite its festiveness, reinforces the notion of translacional processes as a hydraulic movement (Rosaldo) that causes one culture to go down as the other goes up, some critics have advocated the search for alternative metaphors that would allow us to explain dual identification processes taking place in zones of cultural contact where there is a strong Latino presence. In his introduction to Mike Davis’s book, *Magical Urbanism*, Román de la Campa has observed that this dual identification process is sustained by the Latino use of the Spanish language in addition to English, their mixed racial makeup, which defies the one-drop definition of “racial Otherness,” and the rich history of inter-continental migration (XVII).

For Hispanics, the search for alternative images entails placing Latino autobiography within but also beyond the context of ethnic literature in the US. A substantial number of Hispanic autobiographical narratives take the reader, like the news reported by The Times above, on a rutted ride south of the border or a rickety ferry across the Florida Straits. The *Latino America* in the title of this essay is meant to imply, then, both Latino USA and the Hispanic experience framed in a hemispheric context. As it connotes in the Spanish language, this *América*, along with the qualifying *Latino*, encompass both Northern and Southern hemispheres.

Although *Life on the Hyphen* enhances our understanding of the experience of the “one-and-a-half” generation, it rests on a model of cultural assimilation that echoes past theories applied to other times and migrations, adding little to our knowledge of contemporary migrant experience. Its tripartite movement is still based on rather static notions of acculturation and the prescribed time frame needed to accomplish it. It is a model dependent on regulated, orderly, and predictable movements of peoples that settle in one place long enough to go through the process described by Pérez Firmat and others before him. It is also dependent on clearly drawn boundaries and grid lines that do not accommodate the constant influx of migrants from Latin America and the cultural replenishment that comes with it nor circular migration. Through its remarkable emphasis on cultural adjustment, it generally sidesteps other categories of analysis such as race, gender, and class that have proven to be critical to the full incorporation of Latinos in the host society. And it pays no heed to changing demographics in major U.S. cities. Mike Davis notes that “New York City has as many Puerto Ricans as San Juan and as many Dominicans as Santo Domingo [and] Los Angeles now has a Salvadorean population equal to or greater than San Salvador” (7). In general terms, “U.S. Latinos are already the fifth largest ‘nation’ in Latin America, and in a half-century they will be third only to Brazil and Mexico.” Estimates like these allow Davis to conclude: “Because contemporary U.S. big cities contain the most diverse blendings of Latin American cultures in the entire hemisphere, they seem destined to play central roles in the reshaping of hemispheric as well as national U.S. identities” (15).

Rather than trying to map the up and down movement of the seesaw, anthropologists have been grappling with the coordinates of a different cartography that would replace it with alternative metaphors. Among those who have tried to advance alternative visions is anthropologist Roger Rouse, who has critiqued the strict separation of domains inherent in such views as Pérez Firmat’s, which even if tolerant of incongruities and contradictions, especially with regard to the “one-and-a-half” generation, still treats them as “temporary features peculiar to transitional situations” (11). Rouse’s critique is the outcome of a study of a Mexican community from the central state of Michoacán, now living in Redwood City in Silicon Valley, that has created what Rouse calls a “transnational migrant circuit” in which the “continuous circulation of people, money, goods, and information” has “closely woven together” the various settlements thousands of miles apart (14). His ethnographic study demonstrates that it is possible to maintain ties with two distant social orders and environments, and that “the simultaneous engagement in places associated with markedly different forms of experience” has resulted in “neither homogenization nor synthesis” (14). Other anthropologists have come to similar conclusions in their studies of Dominican, Puerto Rican, and West Indian migrants (Duany, “Quisqueya”; Guarnizo; and Sutton, respectively), while still others point out, in general terms, “the complex and interlocking forms of interdependence … emerging between the United States and Latin America, involving the movement of capital, modes of industrialization, trade, migration, and growing inequality” (Bonilla X).

Among the many Latino memoirs and autobiographical essays that have been published recently, three have been selected to illustrate the transnational, hemispheric context underscored in this paper. I will comment briefly on each, paying attention especially to their engagement with discourses, referents, and metaphors originating in their respective Latin American and Caribbean countries of origin even as they are deployed through a linguistic medium and generic form apparently at odds with those referents. This is not to imply that all of the Latino authors are living examples of the process described above. What needs to be highlighted is, first, the intertextuality that transpires in each case and, second, the fact that some Hispanic idiosyncratic forms find their way into the narratives, providing bridges that connect the two seemingly remote worlds.

Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990) stands as the book of memoirs that, more than any other, places the reader entirely into the dynamic field of the transnational described by Rouse, where the free circulation of heterogeneous cultural codes and icons predominate. The book consists of narratives, poetry, and stories from the oral tradition associated with the author’s childhood in a small town in Puerto Rico as well as in a Hispanic neighborhood in Paterson, NJ, in the mid 50s. The narrative is filled with her family’s “petite histoire,” coming-of-age stories, the growing awareness of Puerto Rican patriarchal society, and bitter memories of racial discrimination. While none of the thirteen essays or chapters are island-based, the rest are rooted in Paterson. The back and forth travels between the island and the mainland were motivated by the numerous absences of her father, a Navy officer, who was frequently on duty. Every time he went away, the family moved back to the island.

Ortiz Cofer’s intimate knowledge of forms of literary expression from the Hispanic Caribbean tradition, on the one hand, as well as, on the other, of Anglo Saxon literature come together in a genre typical of US ethnic literature—memoirs. Her close familiarity with both worlds mirrors the physical to and fro journeys that were an integral part of her childhood. As an English writer with an evident presence
in the book, Virginia Woolf provides the Puerto Rican writer with the tools to sift through her life and hold on to her more meaningful memories. She also provides Ortiz Cofer with a role model representing feminist writing, as opposed to the feminine oral tradition provided by her Puerto Rican heritage. Not only does Silent Dancing opens with an epigraph from A Room of One's Own, but the introduction remits us to Woolf's reflections on "moments of being," inspired by Woolf's own memoirs. Thus, the beginning of Ortiz Cofer's memoirs engages a feminist Anglo Saxon tradition not at all foreign to the writer, as she was partially raised in the U.S.

At the same time that Woolf's musings are a source of inspiration and direction for the young Puerto Rican writer as she sets the stage for her memoirs, the mold they provide is packed with Ortiz Cofer's reminiscences of a rural town in Puerto Rico where the women in her family often gathered around her maternal grandmother to tell stories from the Hispanic oral tradition, stories that marked the beginnings of her literary education. Her grandmother's stories also revolve around feminine characters in their quest for a dignified life.

Given Ortiz Cofer's life experiences, the bi-focal vantage point combining Puerto Rican and Anglo Saxon traditions does not result in apparent contradiction. In an interview she gave at Ramapo College some time ago she said: "I am both a product of my mama's house [and] of my love for literature which began with Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, and Keats...[W]e are in danger when people think that they have to eliminate something before embracing something else ..." And she added: "Unlike my parents, I was not always straddling, I began crossing the bridge, traveling back and forth without fear or confusion" ("I am Latina" 2). In these and other statements, her narratives, and her poetry, Ortiz Cofer acknowledges the back and forth movement that has characterized her life. As she indicates in a poem, the movement has become a "habit" that makes her carry the idea of home in her back (138).

Though Ortiz Cofer narrates an individual's journey into a land where cultures overlap and cross-fertilize giving rise to new creolized versions, her experience is far from being unique among Puerto Rican migrants. What she does is to personalize and fictionalize the most recent Puerto Rican migrant experience. Given the neocolonial links between the two countries, migration from the island has continued unabated since it first gained momentum in the 50s. At times increasing in circularity, by 1990 migration to the continental U.S. had peaked to 44 percent, an all-time high that has called attention to discourses on national identity in Puerto Rico. If almost half of the population has either moved permanently or, since 1965, increasingly goes back and forth through an imaginary "revolving door" (Rodriguez 105), the metaphors that have served in the past to describe national identity within the borders of the island have had to be discarded and replaced with other metaphors. Whereas in the past such images as the "jibaro," the highland subsistence farmer that formed the backbone of the Puerto Rican agrarian economy in the 19th century, or the "país de cuatro pisos," José Luis González's four-story country standing for the mixture of races and cultures, had furnished powerful metaphors for the articulation of national identity, at present it is the "guagua aérea" or "flying bus" that Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez first envisioned that has emerged as a preeminent symbol for the nation (Duany, "Imagining" 262). The metaphor of the airbus, as Jorge Duany has written, "captures the current state of flux in Puerto Rican culture, floating between the two islands of Puerto Rico and Manhattan" ("Imagining" 263). Far from portraying the up and down movement of the seas, the airbus, with its constant commuting, traverses carefully guarded airspaces, carrying people, identities, symbols, and languages horizontally across nations.

While Silent Dancing places us in the field of the transnational, Pérez Firmat's memoirs Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming-of-Age in America (1995), bring us back within the boundaries of the ethnic enclave, that of the Cuban community in Miami. After all, Pérez Firmat's exile condition precluded the possibility of a return to his native land. As the son of exiles who left the island for political reasons, Pérez Firmat narrates the story of an extended family that had everything to gain from consenting to a new life in exile, but whose failure to do so prevented it from succeeding as a unit. The family's residence in the United States is initially understood only as a temporary arrangement since the circumstances that motivated its departure from Cuba were expected to end with the imminent fall of the revolutionary regime on the island. Hence the title, "next year in Cuba," which became the obligatory toast at end-of-the-year exile parties. The temporary arrangements, though, had to perforce become permanent, but not without a high cost to the family. Due to its lack of orientation and grounding, the family loses its harmony and cohesiveness. One of the siblings gets in trouble with the law, and all lose vital connections to the family home. The narrator himself feels trapped in the predetermined life he imagines he is leading and blames the family's bad luck to their parents' yearning for an eventual, if unfulfilled, return to Cuba. He increasingly comes to resent the lack of provisions for an immigrant life in the United States.

Furthermore, the ontological search for an identity is cleverly superimposed to the narrator's love life, torn between a Cuban woman, his faithful spouse, and an American woman who epitomizes all that had been kept from him since his arrival in the States. The cultural predicament at the core of the narrative is resolved, therefore, when the narrator begins a new life with this woman, who stands for everything in America that had been denied him. However, his conversion is far from being complete, as the narrator also holds on to some of the symbols that define his Cuban self.

The narrator's personal dilemma is made to fit the larger argument concerning the need to move on and face the future, even if it implies coming to terms with a different culture. Interestingly, the deliberate, intentional decision on the part of the Cuban-American narrator to move ahead and embrace his new wife and new life is facilitated by two factors. First, by the alleged discernible difference between native and adopted cultures, each with a discrete set of attributes, which makes the crossover ever more tempting and desirable. And more importantly, through the reaffirmation of one of the discourses on Cuban national culture first articulated in the 1930s, a decade that gave rise to various elaborate explanations on the subject of the Cuban nation. At the time, Fernando Ortiz, an ethnologist and prolific writer, pointed out that Cuba was a land of "migratory birds," one of several images he put forward to describe Cuba as a land of immigrants. Ortiz also used the word ajiaco, a kind of stew made of diverse ingredients, to summarize the transculturation process resulting from the contributions of also diverse peoples to the forging of a syncretic culture. The shifting grounds, then, from which Cuban culture emerged are no different, Pérez Firmat argues, to the ones on which Cuban-Americans stand. As the writer remarks: "Cuban-American culture heightens and draws out certain tendencies inherent in mainland island culture—most prominently, the tendency toward hyphenation" (Life on the Hyphen 16). Like Ortiz Cofer's memoirs, then, Pérez Firmat's narrative leads to selective Latin American discourses on national identity that serve unexpectedly, in this case, to support his judgment about the malleability of
Although fascinating, it is not due to the revisionist history provided by Anzaldúa that she has been recognized as a writer, but to theories on identity she has been elaborating since the early 80s along with other Latina and Black feminist writers. Anzaldúa provides a theoretical framework for women of color—the new mestiza—that takes into account the many facets of their identity—gender, race, class, and sexuality. Having initiated the debate on the hierarchy of oppressions in a previous book, This Bridge Called My Back (1981), edited in collaboration with Cherrie Moraga, Anzaldúa continues in this book to map multiple identities, this time under the rubric of “the new mestiza.” The notion of multiple identities transforms the borderlands from a geographical place into a psychological space where identity categories open doors, giving rise to diverse alliances. With the category of gender no longer subsuming all others as in classic Western feminism, the race, ethclass, and gender markers contained in the term mestiza situate us in a shifting terrain where individuals can be simultaneously outsiders and insiders with regard to various communities. As a Chicana lesbian, Anzaldúa is both an outsider and insider to Chicano culture, with its patriarchal traditions that masculinize women and homosexuals. As Chicana, her affiliation with other categories besides woman makes her an outsider and insider with respect to the feminist movement. And so on.

The feminist and racial aspects of Anzaldúa’s conceptual structure are intertwined in the word mestiza, which provides yet another thread originating in Mexico to her tapestry of the borderlands. An ostensible source of inspiration for “the new mestiza” is a theory on universal miscegenation formulated by Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos in 1925 in his book La raza cósmica (“the cosmic race”). Vasconcelos predicted that the diverse races of the world would mix more and more, until a new type of human, composed of parts of each existing race, would emerge (Monsiváis 40). His prophesy rested on the idea that the mixed race of the mestizo would eventually prevail over time and become the race of the future. Understandably, Vasconcelos’s utopian theory, which can be properly assessed only within the historical period that gave rise to it and as part of the continuing search for symbols to express Latin American national identities, appealed to Anzaldúa (and to the Chicano movement as a whole) in her claim for an identity embedded in her mixed race: “En unas pocas centurias, the future will belong to themestiza” (Borderlands 80). Anzaldúa’s sense of dual affiliation, surfacing throughout her book of memoirs, is summarized in the following lines: “I am an extended bridge/that links the white and wetback worlds/the past pulls me back/the present pushes me forward/May the Virgin of Guadalupe protect me/Ay ay ay I am Mexican from this side” (Translated from the Spanish by Acosta-Belén and Santiago 37).

My reading of Ortiz Cofer’s, Pérez Firmat’s, and Anzaldúa’s autobiographies highlighting their telling reference to Latin American national discourses, theories, myths, and utopias shares common ground with a handful of other critics intent on tracing links and influences that cut across the Americas. Popular culture has provided fertile soil for these comparisons. Historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr., for example, has made ample reference to the impact of Cuban popular music in the US through the 30s, 40s, and 50s as the beat of the rumba, mambo, and cha cha cha took over dancehalls in major cities. He has traced its influence over time and notes that in the 1930s it was the rumba that inspired such popular songs as “Rumba on a Cloud,” “The Rhumba Jumps,” “Doin’ the Rhumba,” “Rhumboogie,” “Blame it on the Rhumba,” and “When Yuba Plays the Rhumba on the Tuba.” In the 40s, it was the conga’s turn and such compositions were written as “The Can-Can Conga,” “Kindergarten Conga,” “Boogie Woogie Conga,” “That Happy Conga,” “Goin’ Conga,” and “I Came, I Saw, I Conga’ed.” The mambo, according to Pérez, “swept U.S. dance floors” in the late 40s and early 50s, with Perry Como proclaiming that “Papa Loves Mambo” and Rosemary Clooney singing the “Mambo Italiano.”

In literary criticism, Pérez Firmat (the author of Life on the Hyphen and Next Year in Cuba) has edited a collection of essays entitled Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?, in whose introduction he recounts an anecdote about the Nuyorican musical group Los Amigos as an example of a transcultural product. The group took the old Irving Berlin tune “Cheek to Cheek,” rewrote some of the lyrics, infused the tune with a salsa rhythm, and called it “Bailando peqalto,” an idiomatic expression that resembles “cheek to cheek.” Transcending the anecdotal character of the comments just made, the essays in the book explore some of the effects of similar contacts, adopting several different approaches, ranging from one that uses a wide-ranging notion, such as historical consciousness, that can be applied to the literature of the two hemispheres, to another that is able to pursue direct influences or shared sources, to yet a third that concentrates on texts that already embed an inter-American or comparative dimension.4 These are texts that, in the words of the critic, “place themselves at the intersection between languages, literatures, or cultures” (4). We need more scholarship that explores these kinds of connections. Surprisingly, though, none of the essays in the book examines Latino literature as an unmistakable manifestation of the latter type of texts that contain cross-cultural perspectives. Although some changes are beginning to take place that attempt to modify the fragmented way in which we tend to look both at the US Latino experience and at the Latin American and Caribbean experience (Acosta Belén and Santiago 29), the inclination thus far has been to treat Hispanic literature as a branch of U.S. ethnic literature within narrow national boundaries.

Meanwhile, the impact of the literature written by Hispanics is beginning to be felt in the Latin American and Caribbean countries that provide continuous contingents of migrants. One of the problems it raises has to do with the place this literature occupies within the
boundaries of national literatures in Latin America and the Caribbean. Latino writers who maintain a fluid sense of cultural citizenship and an ambivalent attachment to two or more nations certainly require some adjustments to orthodox thinking about national literatures. Cultural critics have seen this development as a challenge, and some have proposed bold resolutions. With regard to Puerto Rican literature in the US, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones is among just a handful of critics that has incorporated "the Puerto Rican diaspora into the redefinition of national identity" (Duany, "Imagining" 261). Since bilingualism is so pervasive among Puerto Ricans, Díaz Quiñones questions the designation of Spanish as the island’s only official language. In a similar vein, Efrain Barradas favors the dissolution of the link between national literature and language, arguing that the weight of the history of the migration forces us to ponder alternative paradigms (27). With respect to Cuban-American letters, Ambrosio Fornet deems the literature written in another language by individuals who claim a Cuban identity as a challenge to island critics. In Mexico, Carlos Monsiváis acknowledges the "considerable" presence and influence of Chicano culture in the country. And he asks rhetorically: "In the future, will Mexico be a nation of Chicanos, of Mexican Americans?" (41) While critics are far from being in agreement about the niche corresponding to Latino literature and art in the national imaginary, the fact that this question is being addressed at all, in countries that are deeply nationalist, is by itself significant. Evidently, the challenges are being felt transnationally, across the Americas.

Notes

(1). An earlier version of this paper was presented at an American and International Studies Faculty Colloquium at Ramapo College on April 3, 2002. It is partly based on my book, La autobiografía hispana contemporánea en los Estados Unidos: a través del caleidoscopio (Mellen Press, 2001).

Works Cited


Fornet, Ambrosio. "La literatura cubana actual y los desafíos de la crítica." Lecture given at the Bildner Center, City University of New York, September 14, 2001.


The American continent/s (it is perceived as a single continent in Latin America and as two in the United States) has functioned as a receptacle for the population of every other continent. Its aboriginal population could be described as the first (Asian) immigrants, since they arrived not from humanity’s cradle but from northeast Asia, and did so twenty thousand years after much of the rest of the planet had been settled. The other immigrants arrived even more recently. Sixty million Europeans, eleven million Africans, and five million Asians arrived in the Western Hemisphere after 1492, with close to one-third of the Europeans (or 18.5 million), half of the Africans, and one-sixth of the Asians going to Latin America. These transcontinental migrations shaped the ethnic geography of the Americas. However, in the context of Latin America, the most tangible result of Pentecostal growth has been a more conspicuous assertion of the region’s religious diversity. This effect, in turn, deepens the fracture of any Christendom whatsoever. In their respective articles, Daniel Levine and Fortunato Mallimaci explore the implications of a religiously plural society for the consolidation of democracy. In the last third of the twentieth century, in a context of high unemployment and the growth of the informal economy, social inequality, an explosion of criminality and violence, the decline of traditional religion, and the rapid spread of Pentecostalism and religious pluralism to create a competitive market for religion, the link between national identity and Catholicism has been broken.