

**Learning to Drink Two Kinds of Milk: Understanding Representations of Cubanía  
in the USAmerican Context Through Carmelita Tropicana's Performance in  
*Milk of Amnesia/Lече de Amnesia***

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This essay explores the work of Cuban-born artist Alina Troyano in her role as the performance persona Carmelita Tropicana. Her play *Milk of Amnesia/Lече de Amnesia* was commissioned by Performance Space 122 and is based on her return trip to Havana in 1993 during the height of Cuba's Special Period. Carmelita moves through the colonial legacy to the contemporary moment to reveal how those on the island and those in the greater diasporic community (particularly individuals living in the United States) conceptualize and propagate Cubanía as it relates to racial, sexual, and bi-cultural identity.

**Learning to Drink Two Kinds of Milk**

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## Introduction

To perform is to adopt a different sense of self; a character that while distinct from quotidian existence (or at times the performance of said inhabitation), has the capacity to reveal a greater truth about the person performing and their relationship to the larger social reality. To repeat a certain type of performance—be it character, gender, race, citizenship, or sexual orientation—is to fortify the truth of what and who is performed. Repetition more likely ensures that the staying power of performance, ephemeral and for the most part intangible, will be conveyed, understood, and hopefully accepted.

Cuban American<sup>1</sup> performance artist Alina Troyano began performing in New York's downtown arts scene in the early 1980s, particularly in the WOW Café Theatre and Performance Space 122. In her book cataloging the work of Troyano and other prominent female artists during that fecund period of New York theater history, Kate Davy writes, "WOW provided a space for theater artists...to produce work at a time when women were overwhelmingly absent from the creative domains of playwriting, directing, and designing in NY's mainstream theater venues" (2). Whereas much of the preceding years had been dedicated to offering space and opportunity for men's projects, individual and collective, the 1980s saw an upstart in the number of women who took to the stage, many of whom began presenting one-woman shows and work they themselves had written. Operating under an antiauthoritarian stance and a certain "sloppiness factor," the WOW Café in particular offered a space where women could "unleash desires that had been too long reined in: the

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<sup>1</sup> Alina Troyano could also be categorized as American Cuban, Cubamerican, or Cubanglo. In his theory, Gustavo Pérez Firmat uses the term "cubanglo," which blurs the line of when "Cuba" ends and "anglo" begins, like "Cubamerican" (see following footnote).

desire for voice, imagination, and sex free from censure and the strictures of gender and race” (Davy 2-3). It was here that Troyano found her voice, as well as overwhelming community support, as a woman named Carmelita Tropicana.

Through repetitious (re)presentations of her campy, queerly assembled, hyperfeminine, irreverent performance persona Carmelita Tropicana, Troyano has fused these two women (Alina and Carmelita) into one singular body. In the play *Milk of Amnesia/Leche de Amnesia* (in this paper referred to as *Milk of Amnesia*), Carmelita must straddle USAmerican<sup>2</sup> and Cuban culture—geographically, socially, and emotionally—to define her sense of self and to historically, racially, and sexually situate her body. In *Milk of Amnesia*, Troyano includes a monologue about the creation of Carmelita Tropicana. She needed an outlet for the ridiculous, the explicitly sexual, the humorous self, and her own queer desire. Only under the guise of a “performance persona” could Troyano find a way to present this body in a way that would be deemed acceptable and hopefully, embraced. An audiotape is heard with the following recording:

I guessed I wouldn’t do theatre, [u]ntil I came to the WOW theatre and got cast in Holly Hughes’s *The Well of Horniness*. We were asked to do it on the radio. I had a dilemma. Would my career be stymied if people knew I was the one who screamed every time the word *horniness* was mentioned, or that I was playing Georgette, Vicky’s lover, or Al Dente, Chief of Police? Maybe I needed a new name.

As if by accident, the pieces were falling into place...[I]t wasn’t me. I couldn’t stand in front of an audience, wear sequined gowns, tell jokes. But she could. She who penciled in her beauty mark, she who was baptized in the fountain of America’s most popular orange juice, in the name of Havana’s legendary nightclub, the

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<sup>2</sup> For this paper, I refer to USA/U.S. American culture as “USAmerican.” I use the term to emphasize that “American” culture, which is often used to refer to U.S.A culture, cannot be used as it collapses the rich diversity of non-U.S. cultures found in the Americas, and North America in particular. Similar to Firmat’s “cubanglo”, I think USAmerican blurs USA within the larger context of American.

Tropicana, she could. She was a fruit and wasn't afraid to admit it. She was the past I'd left behind. She was Cuba. *Mi Cuba querida, el son montuno...* (58)

With this explanation, Troyano is transparent about how Carmelita fills the gaps she could not overcome in her daily existence as Alina. Carmelita de-stratifies notions of temporality: she at once exists and performs in the present, while invoking the past of the island Troyano left behind. As part of what Gustavo Pérez Firmat names the “1.5 generation,”<sup>3</sup> Troyano exists in a space that is not marginal to USAmerican nor Cuban culture, but rather, circulates within and through both. The name “Tropicana” as “the fountain of America’s most popular orange juice” and “the name of Havana’s legendary nightclub” highlights this double sense of self. Throughout the play, Carmelita at times steps out of character to emphasize how this irreverent cubanita (“little Cuban woman”), while embodied *carne y hueso* (“meat and bone”), is still ultimately a construction. The truth of who she is lies in the space between both these women, the meandering between USAmerican and Cuban.

It is impossible to know if Troyano knew what would follow when she first took the stage as Carmelita. As Troyano’s career progressed, as Carmelita gained strength and certainly volume, the woman known as Alina Troyano started to fade into the backdrop. The name of her anthology, *I, Carmelita Tropicana: Performing Between Cultures* highlights that Troyano *is* Carmelita and claims space, physical and figurative, as such. Though the book cover and title page list Alina Troyano as the author, the details of *Milk of Amnesia* say the play is “[w]ritten and performed by Carmelita Tropicana” (52). Is Carmelita the one who writes and performs, but Alina the one who anthologizes and sequences? Is Troyano the

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<sup>3</sup> According to Firmat’s theory, “one and a halfers” are those who are born in Cuba but come of age in the United States. As someone who left the island as a child and spent her most formative years in the United States, Troyano is a one and a halfer.

thoughts behind Carmelita, but Carmelita the voice she lacks? This double sense of self that Troyano/Carmelita inhabits is indicative of larger questions of two cultures (in this case Cuban and American) and their corresponding identities existing within the same individual body. Though performance, by nature of the medium, is at once fleeting and ephemeral, it would seem that Carmelita is the one who stays. Carmelita is the one who is anthologized, recorded, sought out, and remembered rather than the actor performing. Throughout this analysis, I will mostly focus on the words, actions, and invocations of Carmelita as performance persona but will also incorporate what I consider might be Troyano's artistic/authorial intent.

The inscription at the beginning of *Milk of Amnesia/Leche de Amnesia* explains that the play was “commissioned by Performance Space 122 with funds from the Joyce Mertz Gilmore Foundation, and is based on Carmelita Tropicana's 1993 trip to Cuba sponsored by the Suitcase Fund: A Project of Ideas and Means in Cross-cultural Artist Relations” (52). As a performance artist of Cuban heritage, presumably Troyano was invited so Carmelita could tap back into her roots, remember and reencounter the land and the culture she came from. And the play parallels this intensely personal journey. *Milk of Amnesia* is based on the premise that Carmelita Tropicana has forgotten all her memories of Cuba and needs to return to the island if she hopes to regain them. Over the course of the performance, audience members and readers are asked to determine the where, when, and how of memory's construction, and how it continues to affect an individual's evolving identity.

*Milk of Amnesia* is a one-woman show, invoking interesting questions as part of the process of the play is to establish individual as well as collective or communal identity. The

three main characters of the play are 1) the writer, whose voice is heard only through audiotope recordings, 2) Carmelita Tropicana, and 3) Pingalito Betancourt, Carmelita's female-to-male drag character. Other important characters include when Carmelita adopts the voice of Arriero, a horse brought to the New World from Spain, and Pig, a small cochinito ("baby piggy") living in a Havana apartment during the Special Period. Troyano as performer and Carmelita as character span across multiple voices, even animal, to give a more fully rounded vision of the Cuba she encountered in 1993. The early 1990s, also known as the "Special Period," were a time of severe economic deprivation on the island and Carmelita depends on these different voices to illuminate the difficulties Cuban people were experiencing during this time.<sup>4</sup> As Troyano adopts these different voices, compartments, and identities, it becomes apparent that the performing human body is a site of much malleability. Through her variety of embodiments, audience members and readers alike begin to understand the depth and richness of individual identity.

This analysis of Carmelita Tropicana's play *Milk of Amnesia* will focus on understanding how the performer spans time, cultures, and countries to understand Cuba's

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<sup>4</sup> In Spanish, "El período especial en tiempos de paz" (Special Period in Times of Peace, for short referred to as el período especial and in this paper, Special Period) refers to the economic crisis that began in Cuba, primarily as a result of the dissolution of the USSR in 1989. In 1991, the Cuban government adopted "war-time" austerity measures to combat the crisis: they began allocating food based on a ration card system, and families scarcely (if ever) had access to basic necessities such as meat, milk, or eggs. Access to important resources like petroleum was also very limited and this resulted in a widespread decline of the use of buses and automobiles. Many Cubans resorted to bicycles or just walking to get around the island. In these years, Castro also legalized the possession of U.S. dollars meaning that traidores ("traitors") became trae-dolares ("dollar bringers") and gusanos ("worms," names given to people who left the island post-revolution) became mariposas ("butterflies"). Many Cubans on the island depended on the money and resources family members living abroad brought them (Morad 2). Throughout the play, there are references to the widespread scarcity throughout the island and the measures individuals took to overcome and survive.

history and the 1993 moment in which she reencountered the island. For Carmelita to regain her memories of Cuba, she must also come to terms with her own identity and through performance, she is given the space to explore her cultural, racial, and sexual self. The play suggests that understanding one's private perceptions of self allows an individual to more comfortably foray into the public domain, claiming space for themselves, whether as part of the hegemonic majority or, like the queer Latina Carmelita, as a non-normative, minoritarian subject. She goes as far back as the colonial encounter, the moment Cuba was "discovered," to ask questions about public and private land ownership. She relies on performance strategies of camp and *choteo* to exaggerate, spectacularize, and ask questions about Cuban identity on the island, and in the Greater Cuba diasporic community. Through this analysis, I will focus on colonial legacy, an evolving Cuban ethos, the racialized body, and developing queerness. This analysis will illustrate how Carmelita's performance brings together humor, critique, and personal insight to embrace the bi- or multicultural body and move from a place of confusion and shame, to a loving embrace of self and individual identity.



## Performance on the Page

Inherent to the analysis of a performance as literary text is a discussion on attempting to reconstruct and understand the “liveness” of lived performance through its written word form, which by nature of the medium lies “dead” on the page. Many performance studies scholars and theorists comment on the experience of performance as a site of interaction, in Taylor’s words an “act of transfer,” wherein the performer(s) pass on social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity that is unavailable or not fully understood in any other context aside from the actual space of performance. For Taylor, performance and the need of physical immediacy takes on a powerful political implication. She writes, “[i]f performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity” (xvii). Performance becomes the place where those who have historically been on the fringe of a society that values writing and physical preservation of knowledge can regain their power and understand that their sociocultural identity is important, relevant, and worthy of safekeeping. In *Milk of Amnesia*, Carmelita allows space for the non-normative minoritarian subject to live, breathe, and speak, often loudly. The performance is an act of resistance against a society that claims only the hegemonic majority should claim space, be seen, heard, or listened to.

One of the main ways Carmelita works to establish space for herself as a minoritarian subject is through camp and *choteo*, strategies of what José Esteban Muñoz terms “disidentification.” According to Muñoz, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not

conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). Carmelita works through camp—its humor, pastiche, theatricality, and exaggeration—to make queerness accessible and non-threatening, while at the same time drawing attention to the ridiculousness of certain sociocultural constructs that need to be critiqued. She uses choteo, a strategy of humor and pastiche more specific to cubanía (“Cuban-ness”) to illuminate facets specific to Cuban/Cuban-American culture (on the island and in the diaspora) that should be scrutinized. In describing choteo, Muñoz includes Fernando Ortiz’s explanation of how the Locumi/Africanist etymology of the word signifies a range of activities including spying, playing, talking, tearing, and throwing: all of which are important themes in Carmelita’s performance (132). For another Cuban scholar, Jorge Mañach, choteo is “a performance style about the ‘cubano de la calle’ (the average Cuban on the street)” and “an attitude hardened into a habit” (Muñoz 136). When Carmelita plays the character Pingalito, she relies on choteo to show how the Cuban “everyman” carries habits and perspectives from Cuba to the United States. In outlining the similarities between camp and choteo, Muñoz states:

Choteo is like camp in that it *can be* a fierce send-up of dominant cultural formations. Choteo, again, like camp, can be a style of colonial mimicry that is simultaneously a form of resemblance *and* menace. Both strategies possess a disidentificatory potential insofar as they meditate between a space of identification with and total disavowal of the dominant culture’s normative identificatory nodes (136).

Both modes of disidentificatory resistance rely on a sense of comedic exaggeration, of pastiche and parody to question “dominant cultural formations.” While on the one hand eliciting laughter from an audience, with time to percolate, both camp and choteo reveal at

times striking or disheartening truths of the societies and relationships they represent. In *Milk of Amnesia*, Carmelita relies on these strategies to critique heteronormative desire, colonial legacy, and the evolution of a national Cuban ethos.

To best enter the analysis of *Milk of Amnesia*, it is important to understand how the piece is presented in the context of theatrical experience. According to the stage directions, the stage is divided into two main spaces. The left is the dimly lit “writer’s space” and is described as “simulat[ing] a backstage area where the artist will change clothes, put makeup on, and read” (Troyano 52). As a backstage/writer’s area, this visually signals to audience members Carmelita’s construction. Audience members can literally see the performer as she changes costumes and make-up to put on different characters. She is, in this way, “exposed” to her audience. The “dimly lit space is the private space” and this acknowledges that throughout the play, as Carmelita finds herself and establishes her identity, a private, individual, reflective space is necessary. The right side of the stage is “the public space” (52) and is “painted white, resembling a white cube...a defined performance space” (57). Within the delineated public/performance space, there is a mike and mike stand, indicating that it is only through performative acts and displays that an individual such as Carmelita has a voice and can hope to communicate and forge community with others. In this way, the tension between public and private self/identity can be gleaned not just from the play’s content and Carmelita’s monologues, but also from how she interacts and comports herself while in the private versus public stage spaces (which, as a reader, can be understood through available stage directions).

*Milk of Amnesia* begins in darkness and the lone voice of the “writer” character is heard on an audiotape. It begins: “Years ago, when I wasn’t yet American I had a green card. On my first trip abroad the customs official stamped on my papers ‘stateless’” (Troyano 52). With this introduction, the play lets us in on some key understandings: 1) the voice, at this point unattached to a body, was at some point in the past *not* American; 2) now, in the present in which she is being heard (a future moment from when the recording was actually made), she considers herself at the very least American and, as we come to find out and could be expected knowing anything about the performance artist, probably American and some other cultural/national identity; and 3) the implication is that to be non-American is to be “stateless,” or, American-ness is at least the basic qualification of grounding or, one might say, establishing “home.”

As a body, the actress is first introduced/encountered through Carmelita’s female-to-male drag character, Pingalito Betancourt. He wears a prototypical Cuban guayabera, a pair of broken glasses (taped together at the bridge with conspicuous white tape, even his fabrication seems to be falling apart), and a dark bowler hat that has the bus route “M15” (which he used to drive in Cuba) written on a piece of paper and taped on the hat’s side. Pingalito’s costume establishes him as a “cubano de la calle.”<sup>5</sup> Once Pingalito’s monologue is complete, “the actress takes off Pingalito’s costume revealing white shorts and white T-

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<sup>5</sup> Guayaberas, though their origin remains a mystery, are often worn throughout Cuba as a lightweight and functional shirt with large pockets that some theorize, were valuable for agricultural workers to carry enough cigars with them to make it through the day. In 2010, the Cuban government established the guayabera as the country’s official formal dress garment, and many political leaders/officials in Cuba, including Raul Castro, can often be seen wearing them for public occasions (“Guayabera shirt now official Cuban formal dress code”). Pingalito’s bowler hat puts him in visual conversation with USAmerican as well as global actors and famous people that made the bowler hat part of their aesthetic. He is at once wearing the most “Cuban” of garments, while nodding to larger USAmerican and global traditions of formal fashion wear.

shirt, which will be Carmelita's costume" (Troyano 57). The "white cube" of the performance space and the white shorts and T-shirt Carmelita wears emphasize from the onset that the body and the space one inhabits is in actuality a blank canvas, a place where all facets of one's identity—sexual, racial, national, or cultural, for example—can be inscribed through performance. The whiteness of both the cube and her costume can be seen as the whiteness of USAmerican identity, the whitewashing homogeneity that in some ways, precipitates Carmelita's loss of her memories of Cuba. As questions of desire for and emulation of USAmerican culture arise throughout the play, the fact that Carmelita begins the play and acts through a kind of whiteness will become important to understand her eventual embodiment and acceptance of *cubanía*.

## **Dismantling the Colonial Legacy**

As previously mentioned, Pingalito Betancourt, Carmelita's female-to-male drag character, is the first character of the play that audience members meet in the flesh. In the section addressing sexual identity, I will comment further on his somewhat startling presentation of heteropatriarchal masculinity but for now, suffice it to say that he represents the embodiment of male cubanía and, perhaps most importantly, the ability of Cuban culture to travel transnationally. Although he is most clearly read and inscribes racialized gesture/spoken language as Cuban, he represents part of the diaspora that has made home in Miami. When he hears about Carmelita's tragic accident wherein she lost her memories of the island, he "rush right over, hoping a familiar face can trigger something in the deep recessed cavities of her cerebro, cerebellum, and medulla oblongata" (Troyano 54). To assist him in the attempt of reviving Carmelita's memory, he brings with him "audiovisual aid number one, a placemat [he] pick up in Las Lilas restaurant of Miami entitled 'Facts about Cuba'" (Troyano 54). This placemat becomes important in the Taylorian sense in that it is a physical artifact, includes "factual" information about Cuba, and is found somewhere outside of Cuba.

In part because of the United States embargo ("el bloqueo," the blockade) and in part because of the Cuban government's own restrictions on what material goods individuals can leave the island with, the circulation of goods between the U.S. and the island has remained limited since the 1960s. The majority of physical items and money travel from the United States to Cuba (Morales 2013, Henken 121, Haney & Vanderbush 3-5). Diasporic Cubans like Pingalito and by extension the community he serves (namely the audience he performs

for) rely on once-removed artifacts, created and disseminated in the United States with the hopes of supporting a “nostalgia market” that harkens back to the island left behind. This “once-removedness” is in many ways how Cubans who leave the island, and the subsequent generations born in the United States, are able to experience the island. The primacy of physical proximity is no longer an option as many decide to live abroad (though many still visit relatives or friends who remained), and Cuban identity starts to become something constructed from, what Muñoz terms “exilic memory” (76). The idea of the placemat coming from a “Las Lilas restaurant” in Miami also highlights how once moving to and taking root in Miami, Cubans were starting to establish businesses, commodify Cuban culture, produce and circulate “once-removed” physical goods for a USAmerican market/audience.

When Pingalito starts to read the “facts” from the Las Lilas placemat, he immediately places Cuba within its colonial legacy. He recites the found information: “How many of you know Cuba is known as the ‘pearl of the Antilles’ because of its natural wealth and beauty? And the first thing we learn as little children is that when Christopher Columbus landed in our island, kneeling down, he said: ‘Ésta es la tierra más hermosa que ojos humanos han visto.’ This is the most beautiful land that human eyes have seen” (Troyano 54). This “fact” works on a few levels here: 1) Pingalito evokes the “pearl of the Antilles” image which may be the most well-known or widespread vision of Cuba in the Western imaginary; 2) he with fellow “little children” begin to learn about the history of their patria through the anecdote of colonial discovery and thus begin to equate national pride with a sense of colonial

discoverer's pleasure; and 3) language, the use of Spanish, a colonizer's language, and the expectation of translation.

As suggested by Roberto Fernández Retamar in his essay "Caliban," Cuba becomes part of the Western imaginary through Columbus' notebooks and the depiction of the carib/cannibal image of indigenous populations (6). The people Columbus encounters become, and continue to be, eroticized as culturally "other" even as they are forced to assimilate to the colonizer's culture. Most notably this assimilation can be seen through the imposition of the Spanish language. Indeed, Pingalito's "fact two" explains, "Spanish is the official language of Cuba," with no reference to other types of spoken languages that may have existed, were absorbed, or exterminated before this widespread colonial imposition. As Retamar claims, "[A]s descendants of numerous Indian, African, and European communities, we have only a few languages with which to understand one another: those of the colonizers. While other colonials or ex-colonials in metropolitan centers speak among themselves in their own language, we Latin Americans continue to use the languages of our colonizers" (5). This fact alone, Retamar suggests, diminishes the value of Latin American/Caribbean culture as it can thus be imagined as a sort of European imitation, a not-quite-there exposition of *le petit bourgeois*. Though the point is not explicitly addressed in this moment of the play, if one thinks through the colonial-linguistic relationship, readers/audience members may begin to question what influences converged for Carmelita to be presenting this play primarily in the English language. They may also wonder why, for when she does use explicit Spanish as in the recounting of Columbus'



“exact words” when landing in Cuba, she finds it necessary to include an English translation to make it more accessible for a USAmerican audience.

Even as Spanish makes its presence known and accounted for throughout the play, the majority of the theatrical narrative is presented in the dominant language of a second “colonial” type force on the island: the United States. Retamar himself in the introduction of the anthology Caliban & Other Texts states “Cuba, which for sixty years, from 1898 [the start of US military occupation during the Spanish-American War] to 1958 [Fidel Castro’s Revolution] was, to put it a bit bluntly, part of the [United States] empire” (xv). The United States, first through military occupation, then by the Platt Amendment and a growing tourism industry, saw Cuba as the “pearl of the Antilles”—an island ripe for economic exploitation.<sup>6</sup> Speaking and knowing English, in some senses was, if not necessary, most definitely helpful on the U.S.-dominated island during those years. As Cubans immigrated to the United States, English became even more important: children born to Cubans in the United States were more likely than ever before to speak English, sometimes at the expense of learning their maternal tongue (Rusin, Zong, and Batalova).

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<sup>6</sup> “All through the 19th century, the United States saw Cuba - in Thomas Jefferson's words - as ‘the most interesting addition which could ever be made to our system of States.’ It alternately offered to purchase and threatened to seize the island from Spain. In 1898, the United States intervened in Cuba's war for independence, arriving in the guise of an ally but remaining in the role of conqueror. The U.S. military occupation ended only after Cuba ratified the Platt Amendment, whereby Cuba relinquished claims to self-determination and national sovereignty and authorized the United States to intervene for ‘the protection of life, liberty and property.’ U.S. armed interventions followed in rapid succession. The military occupation of 1898-1902 was followed by another occupation in 1906-1909, an armed intervention in 1912 and another military intervention in 1917 through 1921. During these decades, U.S. meddling in Cuban internal affairs knew virtually no limits” (Perez 2015).

As is the circumstance for many immigrant communities that settle in the United States, there are a variety of confluences that may make it more difficult for U.S.-born children to acquire or retain their maternal language, especially considering how the tension between the language of home and that of school may generate psychological stress (Ponce de León-LeBec 105). The influential Chicana, lesbian, activist, mestiza-consciousness proponent and poet-scholar Gloria Anzaldúa writes of her own relationship to Spanish and other ancestral languages, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself...Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate...my tongue will be illegitimate” (81). Language has a direct relationship to individual identity and as cubanos on the island and in the diaspora can attest, as Carmelita and Pingalito present on the stage, the relationship between English and Spanish is an important one to understand as the tension, the dance between these two states of being, becomes part of the daily life of the Cuban American individual.

Pingalito’s Columbus anecdote is not the only instance wherein Carmelita makes reference to Cuba’s colonial history. At one point in the play, she adopts the voice of Arriero, a horse born in Spain and brought to the “New World” to invoke a temporal pastness of Cuba’s discovery and the subsequent domination and decimation of the native population. As Schneider postulates, “Time, engaged *in* time, is always a matter of crossing, or passing, or touching, and perhaps always (at least) double...The effort is to provoke an *in time* experience bearing some relation to ‘living’” (37). Arriero’s voice allows Carmelita to implicate the history of “discovery” and colonial rule within the present she portrays; she

crosses, or positions herself across time to suggest that colonial history is still very much alive, affecting and effecting in present USAmerican and Cuban reality.

Through the personification of the horse and offering a sense of affective engagement, Carmelita places herself and audience members in situ of colonial encounter. Opening the “horse monologue” with “sounds of a stampede [and] horses neighing,” this moment within the play gestures to the “fleshy or pulsing kind of trace [history reenactors] deem accessible in a pose, gesture, or set of acts” to make reference to the living past (Schneider 37). “When I turned two my master told me I had been sold to a conquistador. A conquistador, what a strange and exciting sound. The day came when I had to leave Spain and become a stallion. The stallion of a conquistador” (*Troyano* 62). Arriero expresses excitement as the “New World” promises to bring adventure. With the word “stallion” and the repetition implicating Arriero as the “stallion of a conquistador,” the horse’s voice foregrounds the masculine, alluding to how this period of colonial discovery and subsequent conquest was above all a man’s enterprise. For Arriero, like many male Spaniards of the fifteenth century, the journey overseas was an enticing, exotic alternative to the Old World life, an opportunity to transport a certain kind of masculinity—horseback riding and ready to fight—to new lands.

Arriero’s anecdote foreshadows the unfair, brutal treatment of living cargo—first the animals that would help secure dominance over the native Cuban population (like dogs and horses) and later, starting in 1522, the enslaved human cargo brought over as the native population dwindled (Henken 27). “I should have known from the voyage from Spain to Cuba what was to happen. All of us animals herded into a tiny ship...the rats I had to

stomp on. But the worst was the boredom. Nowhere to go. Couldn't stretch my legs" (Troyano 62). The foreboding tone, "I should have known," indicates how all that was to come in the New World would be death and destruction. "The boredom" Arriero refers to parallels (but does not equate) the subsequent loss and forced renunciation of African culture many enslaved individuals faced when they arrived to Cuba: the existence they were allowed was one with little latitude in regard to sociocultural and religious traditions, unless of course, they were those held by the Spaniards themselves. For many who would eventually make it to the island, forced or otherwise, there was a sense of entrapment inherent to the dehumanizing process of commodifying human individuals: once there it would become exceedingly difficult to leave or return to one's homeland.

Arriero's voice encapsulates the sense of wonder Columbus expressed when first arriving to Cuba. The anecdote, which Pingalito recounts, is echoed through Arriero's voice as he describes when he first landed: "I couldn't believe my 340-degree peripheral vision. Grass everywhere. And trees with fruit: guanábanas, mangoes, mameys. And the natives were so friendly they walked around smoking, offering us cigars" (Troyano 63). The description Arriero offers of landing in Cuba is similar to that of many colonial "discoverers" when they first landed in "New World" lands. Though some of the native population did not receive the Spaniards with kindness (particularly Hatuey and his followers who had left Haiti when the Spaniards began to brutally colonize Hispaniola and knew what was to come), many did not know the subjugation they would soon face under colonial rule. As in most of these colonial encounters, what faced the indigenous population was brutal domination and widespread death by disease and forced labor.

Using Arriero, Carmelita more explicitly draws the violent connection between the native Taínos, in particular the *cacique* (indigenous chief) Hatuey and the *peninsulares* (Spaniards coming from the Iberian Peninsula). It was Hatuey's belief that the Taínos were being prosecuted because they did not worship the Spaniard's god. "Hoping to protect themselves, Hatuey and his followers proceeded to give honor to the Spanish God by dancing around a basket of gold and jewels, thinking that since the Spanish so lusted after these things they must be their God" (Henken 24). These efforts proved futile and as punishment for organizing native resistance, Hatuey was burned alive on February 2, 1512 (ibid). Carmelita relays the infamous episode and Hatuey's heroic last words by implicating Arriero as a witness to the scene:

That day...we saw the chief Indian Hatuey. There was smoke in the distance. I didn't want to go because I know where there's smoke there's a fire, but Gonzaga saw some of his fellow priests and we had to go. There was a crowd gathered, so much commotion we couldn't hear but I rotated my left ear and heard a priest say to Hatuey, 'Repent, repent, and if you will—you will go to heaven. If not, hell.' Hatuey looked at the priest and said, 'If heaven is where the Spanish Christians go, I'll take hell.' And the flames took Hatuey. Right there. I saw it. And so much more. I saw so many Indians die, so many. So many dead Indians from disease and overwork. I thought of my mother's farewell words, 'Arriero, from now on you will be counting stars in the New World.' No mother, not stars (Troyano 63).

For many, Hatuey is an inspiring symbol of resistance. He refused to submit to the Spaniard's religious doctrine even in the face of a most agonizing, torturous death. By using Arriero's voice, Carmelita honors his legacy and insists that a true holistic understanding of Cuba is not possible without some mention of the indigenous Taíno population and their widespread death at the hands of Spanish colonizers. The last lines, relaying what Arriero's mother had said to him and his imagined response, highlight that though it was thought that the New World would be a place to count bright, shining, exciting opportunities and future

potentialities, the only thing that existed in such abundance were the countless bodies of dead Taíno natives. The shortness of the last line, a mere four words, at once refutes the imagined wonderment of natural visual beauty and ends abruptly, like the lives of so many Taínos. Without further explanation, the disheartening reality Arriero encounters and his resulting sadness and disillusionment are effectively captured.

Carmelita foregrounds the colonial encounter, both through Pingalito's anecdote and Arriero's testimonial, because it is representative of the first site of tension between public and private conceptions of land and home space. When the peninsulares came to Cuba, their main goal was to take land that was "public" property of the Taínos and Siboneys to privatize it for their own end. Columbus and subsequent groups of Spanish conquistadores hoped to claim demarcated sections of Cuban land as belonging to the Spanish crown, and transform what was once a public, free island into a private colony of the motherland.

Nowhere in the play does Carmelita make explicit reference to Castro's 1959 Revolution. Making explicit reference to the Revolution could easily polemicize audience members or readers and fall prey to kitschy artistic (re)presentations that too overtly state their cause, sociopolitical leaning or suggested intervention. Instead, Carmelita uses the example of the colonial encounter and the resultant tension between public and private land to comment on the nationalization of private land under the socialist revolution. According to Henken, "[T]he seizure of major industry, utilities, banks, schools, apartment buildings, and department and wholesale stores were [sic] made quickly, most taking place in a period of less than three months between August 6 and October 14, 1960" (144). Castro's revolution would continue taking private Cuban citizen's land, their residential and

commercial real estate, in the process of legalizing national policy that in effect outlawed private property (Henken 99). In the colonial encounter public became private; Carmelita uses that to comment on the opposite process, of the private becoming public, after 1959. In both these instances, outside forces (Spanish peninsulares and “los rebeldes,” Castro’s “rebels” fighting for the revolutionary cause) claimed total domination of the Cuban people. While many at first supported Castro’s rise to power, when his socialist initiatives started taking away citizens’ civil liberties, individuals began to question if the Castro regime was really what they wanted or what was best for the country.

Using the colonial encounter to comment on Castro’s Revolution allows Carmelita the opportunity to present a more inclusive artwork that is less likely to ostracize a certain sect of individuals based on their political beliefs. During the Revolution, friends and families were sometimes split apart because of their differing stances on Castro. Instead of proclaiming she is for or against Castro, during the performance she puts forth the notion that there is a way to overlook these differences to fight for a different cause: supporting a country that is clearly struggling, in many ways directly because of United States policy. At the end of the play, Carmelita is at an artist’s house, sharing her last meal with other artists and one in particular, Pedro Luis Ferrer. She recounts:

He will play me his songs, but first he tells me, “The embargo is killing us.” (Stepping out of Carmelita character and addressing the audience.) I agree with Pedro Luis and I want to leave you with a song by him called “Todos por lo Mismo,” a song that says it best:

*Everybody for the same thing,  
Between the pages of colonialism  
Capitalists, homosexuals, atheists, spiritualists, moralists  
Everybody for the same thing* (Troyano 71).

Carmelita takes the political statement, “The embargo is killing us,” out of her mouth and into that of Pedro Luis Ferrer. She tells audiences the political truth through the words of another, a Cuban who is living the devastating consequences of the U.S. embargo on the island. As she does at another earlier point in the play, Carmelita “steps out of character,” transforming from her performance persona into just a woman, on a stage, saying something important to an audience, and hoping to be heard. Rather than take an explicit stance for or against Castro, Troyano/Carmelita talks about the effects of the regime: how the United States refuses to trade with Cuba and is in effect destroying their economy and hopes of alleviating their financial desperation. She is able to circumvent the polemical conversation to one that is perhaps more important, raw, and emotionally unsettling as the United States continued to let the country suffer because of the political leadership. Carmelita brings in “everybody,”—“[c]apitalists, homosexuals, atheists, spiritualists, moralists,” among others—who she hopes will question the U.S. embargo and its devastating consequences.



## Defining a New Cuban Ethos

Within the play, Carmelita works to portray a sense of the evolving Cuban ethos as it is changing both on the island and in the Greater Cuba community. Carmelita uses food imagery, through the presence or lack thereof, to illustrate how the Cuban ethos could have once been conceived as bountiful, rich and vibrant, to how it developed and could be understood in the contemporary 1993 moment. In the second “writer” voice recording, Carmelita recounts a high school essay she was asked to write on the nature of the American character: “I thought of fruits. Americans were apples, healthy, neat, easy to eat, not too sweet, not too juicy. Cubans were mangoes, juicy, real sweet, but messy. You had to wash your hands and face and do a lot of flossing. I stood in front of a mirror and thought I should be more like an apple. A shadow appeared and whispered: Mango stains never come off” (57). Through these lines, a clear distinction is made: whereas USAmericans and the corresponding culture/apples are never really an overwhelming undertaking, Cubans and cubanía/mangoes are juicy and all-encompassing.

This monologue comes towards the beginning of the play and because a “shadow” reminds Carmelita that mango “stains” never come off, it could be inferred that she feels in some ways ashamed by her cubanía, a cultural identity that is all but impossible to completely erase. By suggesting that after indulging in cubanía/mangoes, “[y]ou had to...do a lot of flossing,” Carmelita makes it a point that to disregard or shed cubanía is a work-intensive process. Though Carmelita may have forgotten her memories of Cuba, she can never undo how the culture has shaped who she is. Like a mango, the Cuban ethos could have in past times been marked by its richness, succulence, and abundance and Carmelita must learn to

embrace this bounty. (In fact, Arriero's anecdote about the plentitude of "exotic" fruits he saw when he first arrived highlights this same ethos of abundance.) The richness of cubanía, it appears, for as much as it is plentiful, is still susceptible to how the times change, the cracks in individual memory, and the introduction of competing cultures.

The main food imagery of the play, the one that inspires the name of the play, surrounds milk and the different kinds of milk Carmelita remembers from Cuba and encounters in the United States. From the opening "writer" voice recording, audience members learn that when Carmelita arrived in the United States, she attended school at "Our Lady Queen of Martyrs," an interesting name for a school considering Cubans who left the island in a sense "were dead" to the island and those who remained as they left because their beliefs grated against the Castro's socialist aspirations. The voice recounts: "I never drank my milk. I always threw it out. Except this time when I went to throw it out, the container fell and spilled on the floor. The nun came over. Looked at me and the milk. Her beady eyes screamed: You didn't drink your milk, Grade A pasteurized, homogenized, you Cuban refugee" (53). "Grade A pasteurized" and "homogenized," USAmerican milk is top quality and uniformly similar in its consistency and "safeness." Because she cannot appreciate the USAmerican milk, this moment identifies Carmelita as a refugee. Through this interpolation, Carmelita's status and role as an outsider becomes that much more apparent. By identifying her for what she "truly" is, the implication is that Carmelita may then be able to transform into something different, may find a way to Americanize her wild Cubanness.

The encounter with the milk in the lunchroom highlights how, once again, USAmericanness can be associated with a kind of homogenous, lackluster culture in

comparison to the sweetness/abundance of Cuban culture. Called out by the nun, Carmelita is shamed for being non-USAmerican and for her unwillingness to subject herself to the blandness of USAmerican identity. As Cespedes writes, “The milk, a whitewashing elixir that forces down the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, symbolizes the coercion she feels to abide by U.S. assimilationist dictates. Clearly, the Grade A pasteurized, homogenized milk denotes the cultural and linguistic amnesia Carmelita experiences in the United States...[I]n addition to this cultural-linguistic amnesia, the sweet condensed milk [of Cuba and Carmelita’s childhood] is a marker of a historical amnesia regarding Cuba” (153). The “whitewashing elixir” catalyzes Carmelita’s amnesia in part because of its homogeneity, its blandness, its lack of taste, color, or texture. The milk of Cuba is condensed, abundantly sweet and like the mango, packed with flavor.

While Carmelita portrays the Cuban ethos as one of abundance, by the time she returns in 1993, the situation is much different. Cubans during the Special Period dealt with a constant state of need; everything was scarce. Within *Milk of Amnesia*, Carmelita comments on this reality in one of her monologues: “The special period—that’s what the government calls it. No gas, no electricity, no food. I look out the window. Cubans are all on bicycles. They look like skinny models. Francisco says when there is no gasoline and the buses are not running he fuels his body with water and sugar” (Troyano 60). No eggs, bread, milk, or meat. Where there once was abundance, sickly sweet in the form of ever-available condensed milk, now there is mere sugar water, “the great Cuban energizer” as Carmelita calls it. In an audiotape recording, the following joke is heard:

Did you hear the one about the eggs and the fried steak? There are these eggs running through the Malecón Boulevard in Havana. And they’re running because

they are being chased by a million hungry Cubans. And these eggs are running and the Cubans are after them. And as the eggs are running they pass in front of a fried steak that is sitting on the wall of the Malecón, looking very relaxed. And the eggs yell at the steak, “The Cubans are coming, the Cubans are coming! Aren’t you afraid they’ll come get you?” The steak says, ‘No way, these Cubans don’t know what a steak looks like’ (Troyano 64).

Inherent to the camp and choteo and the way they provide sociocultural critique is the “strategic and disarming use of humor” (Muñoz 119). In this instance, Carmelita for the moment foregoes bodily presentation of self, gesture, accent, or audience-performer interaction and relies only on the voice telling the joke.

On the level of camp, the joke works through pastiche and parody because for a USAmerican audience, “The Cubans are coming!” echoes the famous words of Paul Revere during the American Revolutionary War. Rather than an invading British army force, however, the eggs are fearful of the “million hungry Cubans” trailing fast behind them. As the joke is presented in English, “running eggs” implies the serving style of “runny” eggs, fortifying the strength of double-meaning words/phrases. Through choteo, the joke also illuminates just how scarce food has become on the island, as collectively the “Cuban people” do not even remember what a steak looks like. “Fried steak,” a popular Cuban dish, and “the wall of the Malecón<sup>7</sup>” resoundingly situate the joke in Cuba/Cuban culture as it is a food (that during times of regular access to meat) and a place that would be familiar to many

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<sup>7</sup> The Malecón is a 5-mile boardwalk/seawall that lines the coast in Havana from the harbor in La Habana Vieja to the Vedado neighborhood. For many it becomes a place to walk, feel close to the sea, watch the sunset/rise, fish, or gather with friends, family, and loved ones.

cubanos (and certainly all habaneros<sup>8</sup>). At the sociocultural level, it seems, Cubans are losing memory of what it felt like to not be in a constant state of hunger and need.

As the Cuban national ethos seems to have changed from a state of abundance to one of scarcity, the play illuminates how private need becomes publicly manifest. For many Cubans on the island, they relied on relatives abroad to bring whatever food and goods they could to help them survive. Carmelita is at first unaware of the measures people take to combat the island's scarcity. When she is preparing for her trip to Cuba, she is at first surprised to see how other voyagers dress themselves:

These people are so dressed: skirts on top of pants on top of skirts. The gentleman in front of me, an octogenarian, has his head down. I don't know if it's age or the weight of his three hats. I discover my people are a smart people. They can weigh your luggage, but they cannot weigh your body. The layer look is on (Troyano 59).

Young, old, even an "octogenarian" as she notes, prepare themselves with the physical burden of carrying weight of all the goods those in Cuba do not have access to. The private need of individuals and families on the island becomes publicly manifest on the physical bodies of travelers. The first time Carmelita tries to go to Cuba, there is confusion over her visa. The "immigration guy" in the Havana airport thinks Carmelita is making fun of him so she is "returned, back to El Norte" (Troyano 60) before she even has time to truly experience the island. This first failed attempt, however, teaches Carmelita about how to more effectively pack and bring goods to the island. She learns through observation.

The second time Carmelita prepares for the journey to Cuba, she properly plans her hat and the items she brings to the island. She publicly presents to the fellow voyagers that

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<sup>8</sup> "Habaneros" is a term used to refer to people from Havana.

she understands the state of need of those in Cuba and has planned accordingly. Though this is a moment of humor within the play, this method of bringing goods to the island really took place and Carmelita works to highlight the verisimilitude. In a campy presentation of her hat and its abundance of goods, Carmelita states:

Soy una tienda ambulante. In my Easter bonnet with toilet paper on it. I'm a walking Cuban department store. Tampons and pearls, toilet paper, stationary supplies. What a delight. *(The actress steps out of the white cube and, dropping Carmelita's Spanish accent, addresses the audience.)* Now this is the part where you think it's performance art, a joke. Truth is stranger than fiction. *The New York Times* in 1993 had a photo essay of women with these hats. And when I went back the competition got tougher. Next to me was a woman with a pressure cooker on her head. A pressure cooker. These people are going to survive. *(As she returns to the microphone, she resumes the Carmelita persona)* (Troyano 60).

While this moment is interesting in the campy sense, it accurately portrays the exaggeration of clothes and goods people incorporate into their travel attire. As Shugart explains of the camp aesthetic, it is a “[s]tyle of the exaggerated, ostentatious, outrageous sort...rendering it a spectacle. Duplicity inherent to artificiality is embedded in the aesthetics of camp, but it is not a duplicity that is sinister or malicious; rather it is festive, vitalizing, typically affectionately nostalgic, and intensely experiential” (34). Cubans and those traveling to the island get inventive with how they can maximize the physical goods they bring with them. “In [her] Easter bonnet with toilet paper on it” is reminiscent of Irving Berlin’s song (performed on Broadway and in multiple films), “Easter Parade,” and showcases that the “frills” (from the song’s lyrics) are transformed into toilet paper that on the island, might for some be considered luxury. Invoking the song is both “festive” and “affectionately nostalgic” of an earlier 20th-century US American culture that Carmelita feels comfortable

enough to adapt for her own purposes. Carmelita relies on camp here, and the reality of the situation lends itself well to be “rendered [as] spectacle” in the public eye.

Importantly, however, Carmelita also takes a moment to step out of character, not wanting spectators to believe that the exaggeration she portrays does not accurately depict the situation as it really was. Here, Carmelita “drop[s] Carmelita’s Spanish accent” and ruptures the illusion of her fictive persona that the audience has by this point grown accustomed to. Using a more Anglicized form of speech and referencing a real publication, the ever illustrious *New York Times*, Carmelita makes the account seem more truthful and authoritative. “Truth is stranger than fiction,” she says, and though presented in the form of a fictionalized performance/artistic (re)presentation, from the body of Carmelita, Troyano wants to ensure that audiences understand these observations are grounded in reality. Whereas the Cuban ethos used to be one of abundance, in the 1993 moment Carmelita was faced with intense private need, a scarcity so severe that travelers to the island became public markers of the foods and goods that were unavailable on the island.

## Reading the Racialized Body

Pingalito Betancourt is the first character of the play that audience members meet in the flesh and he is encountered in the public/performance space.<sup>9</sup> As the stage directions read: “Pingalito, a cigar-chomping Cuban man, enters as a mambo plays. He greets the audience. He is on the cube and brightly lit.” With this entrance, there can be no question as to Pingalito’s *cubanía*. Almost since the start of colonization of the island five centuries ago, cigars have been part of the “world mystique” of Cuba. Today, cigars are almost synonymous with Cuban culture and occupy an especially prominent place within the island’s tourism sector as “exceptional artifacts and objects of particularly high quality” (Valerio 1). Cigar smoking and more generally tobacco consumption have long been considered and targeted in advertising as “male acts,” and generally perceived as subversive/gender-defying when publicly carried out by females (Nielson 291).

Pingalito is not merely cigar smoking, but “cigar-chomping,” amplifying a sense of male aggression inherent to an understanding of the Cuban man as boisterous and unapologetic. In lieu of a light musical entrance tune, a brashy, characteristically Cuban mambo plays, rupturing the tranquility of the lone “writer” audio recording heard right before his entrance (coming from the dimly lit interior/private space) and marking the staged encounter as culturally “other.” Whereas the play begins in darkness, this Cuban man in all his eccentricities is not to be missed; he is “brightly lit” on the already visually striking/stark white cube.

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<sup>9</sup> Though this section focuses on the racialized body, I include an analysis of Pingalito that details reading him as racially Cuban as inextricable from reading his masculinity. I will elaborate on how this masculinity is indicative of a heteronormative structuring of desire in the following section.



For audience members familiar with Carmelita's work, Pingalito is a well-known character having previously been introduced in another one of her works, *Memories of the Revolution* (from 1986-1987). For those who have never encountered him before, knowing that *Milk of Amnesia* is a one-woman show would indicate that the "man" before them is in reality Carmelita herself. Pingalito, as a female-to-male drag character, highlights the fabrication of not just performance persona, but constructs of masculinity and male cubanía. By acting the part, with the aid of performance techniques taken from camp and choteo, Carmelita is able to present a convincing (re)presentation of male cubanía, suggesting that it can be reduced down to and understood through a bowler hat, conspicuously waving around a cigar, sexually suggestive moments of humor, a deeper voice, and an unabashed and rambunctious sense of self.

Perhaps most pressingly, Pingalito's performance and monologue highlight what will be an ongoing theme throughout *Milk of Amnesia*: construction and perception of racial identity. In describing the beloved Carmelita, Pingalito establishes his views on her identity. "I think what, above all, is Carmelita? I tell you. Cuban. One hundred fifty percent. So I decide to tell her some facts about Cuba. See if it jiggles something" (Troyano 54). Of course, Pingalito's claim of Carmelita as Cuban through and through is in direct contrast to the opening line of the "writer" recording, the first words audience members hear: "Years ago when I wasn't yet American I had a green card" (Troyano 52). In this way, Pingalito introduces the first visible tension in establishing Carmelita as Cuban, American, or some hybridity. He claims Carmelita's racial as well as national identity as distinctly Cuban and though he seems resolutely sure about this as a fact, the tension suggests the ensuing journey

Carmelita will go through to regain her memories and in that way reestablish her own cubanía.

Pingalito continues to invoke questions of racial identity as he lists the “facts about Cuba.”

Fact two. Spanish is the official language of Cuba and it’s a beautiful language. You talk with your hands, you talk with your mouth. My favorite expression when you want to find out the color of someone you say: ‘Óyeme ‘mano ¿ y tu abuela dónde está ?’ Tell me brother, where is your grandmother? Which brings us to fact three.

Three-fourths of all Cubans are white, of Spanish descent, and a lot of these three-fourths have a very dark suntan all year round. When they ask me, ‘Pingalito, and where is your grandmother?’ I say, ‘Mulata y a mucha honra.’ Dark and proud (Troyano 55).

Fact two, though presented as one about the Spanish language, ultimately turns to a question of racial identity as Pingalito’s favorite expression is related to “find[ing] out the color of someone.” The implication here is that to be a descendent of someone of color is something to be hidden, only revealed after a certain amount of prying. The subsequent fact three explicitly addresses the question of color and how some Cubans may deny or feel embarrassed by a racial lineage that does not implicate them as pure “Spanish descent” (white) Cubans. Rather than embrace a non-white lineage, Pingalito explains, some Cubans claim they merely have “a very dark suntan all year round.”

In his essay “Chico, what does it feel like to be a problem? The Transmission of Brownness,” Muñoz theorizes around feelings inspired by non-white racial identities. More specifically, Muñoz expands the categorization of (the non-white racial identity) “Hispanic” or Latinx to the more broadly encompassing category “Brown.” Spinning off W.E.B. Du Bois’ provocative question opening The Souls of Black Folk, Muñoz posits that though

different in degree, feeling brown can be compared to feelings inspired in African Americans as both brown and black communities are often positioned as “problematic” populations. Though the Cuban context may not as overtly articulate the “problematic” nature of blackness, the island has a long history of tense relations between lighter- and darker-skinned Cubans. During the 1898-1902 U.S. military occupation, Cubans were attempting to develop their essence of being and this quest inevitably provoked questions of racial identity: “[The] assertion of Cuba’s Latin heritage against the Anglo-Saxons affected construction of *cubanidad* (the essence of the Cuban nation). “True Cubans” were considered to be whites of Spanish origin, Afro-Cubans were pushed to the fringe of *cubanidad*, as a kind of bastard people, part African and part Cuban” (Helg 129). In his lines, Pingalito follows this train of thought, implying Cuban people would prefer to be associated with white, Spanish, and not non-white ancestry. In describing the lessons he learned as a Black Puerto Rican, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva makes clear that racism exists even among Latinxs: “We must understand that our Latin@ communities are also internally fractured by race and that, therefore, the “enemy” for us [Afro-Latin@s] here is not just White gringos” (447-448). Bonilla-Silva refers to the other “enemies” as the black-denying and white-identifying Latin@s. Just as in other Latinx communities, within the Cuban context there are similar instances of black-denying and white-identifying Cubans who hold reservations about embracing dark-skinned ancestry.

As the play is ultimately Carmelita’s coming to terms with her own *cubanía* (through reestablishing her memories of this racial identity) in the USAmerican context, one may wonder, does Carmelita not want to associate with her *cubanía*? Would she rather be

conceptualized as pure white American, without the hint of Brownness? Pingalito seems to answer this by recounting how he answers where his grandmother is: “‘Mulata y a mucha honra.’ Dark and proud.” Rather than present any kind of shame or shyness about a dark mulata grandmother, Pingalito embraces her and what her legacy represents for his own racial identity. The non-exact translation<sup>10</sup> to “dark and proud” implicates Pingalito in his current U.S. geographic location and the likelihood that his stance is influenced and informed by the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s that had lasting impact on African Americans claiming proud ownership of their dark skin (Solórzano-Thompson 87). Muñoz postulates that rather than the obvious associations of feeling apart or separate as a “brown” problem, “feeling like a problem is also a mode of belonging, a belonging through recognition...a mode of minoritarian recognition” (Muñoz 441). Pingalito frames Carmelita’s ensuing journey with an overt acceptance, a celebration even, of non-white racial identity. For Pingalito, an individual’s racial lineage should be proudly and publicly portrayed for all to see and acknowledge.

By the end of the play, it appears that Carmelita takes Pingalito’s advice and rather than feeling ashamed of her cubanía, she celebrates her bicultural identity. “We are all connected, not through AT&T, e-mail, Internet, but through memory, history, herstory, horsestory. I remember” (Troyano 69). Carmelita embraces the interconnectedness of humanity and understands that to be true to herself is to be true to the different cultural/racial/national identities that reside within her singular body. She celebrates with a poem:

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<sup>10</sup> A more exact translation of “mulata y a mucha honra” would have been “mulatto and with a lot of honor” or “mixed race and with a lot of honor.”

*I remember*  
*Que soy de allá*  
*Que soy de aquí*  
*Un pie en New York (a foot in New York)*  
*Un pie en La Habana (a foot in Havana)*  
*And when I put a foot in Berlin (cuando pongo pata en Berlin)*  
*I am called*  
*A lesbiche cubanerin*  
*A woman of color*  
*Culturally fragmented*  
*Sexually intersected*  
*But I don't split*  
*I am fluid and interconnected*  
*Like tie-dye colors I bleed*  
*A Cuban blue sky into an American pumpkin orange*  
*Que soy de allá*  
*Que soy de aquí (Troyano 69-70).*

Carmelita's poem celebrates her double sense of self. Using both English and Spanish, she intermixes the languages much like how she has come to understand her own identity as "fluid and interconnected." "Que soy de allá / Que soy de aquí" translates to "That I'm from there / That I'm from here," suggesting that she sees herself as existing in two distinct places, temporally and geographically crossing cultures and countries to accept who she is. She makes explicit reference to both New York and Havana, drawing attention to how she needs both these cities to fully understand herself and the forces that have shaped her. Carmelita identifies with her Brownness as she calls herself "a woman of color" and that while "culturally fragmented...[she doesn't] split." Carmelita, like Pingalito, is able to embrace her ancestry as she celebrates both her USAmericaness and her cubanía.

### Claiming Space for Queerness

As presented, Pingalito is the embodiment of male cubanía and presents most explicitly what Carmelita is not: heterosexual and masculine. It becomes apparent that these facets of his identity grant him a position of authority and gestural overtness that might not be available for a more minoritarian subject. Pingalito, in a prototypically head-strong, masculine assumption, believes that he knows best how to cure Carmelita: “[T]he doctors have their methodologies for curing amnesia, and I have mine” (Troyano 54). His remedy is to try and trigger Carmelita’s memory by embodying another male figure, Carmelita’s abuelo (grandfather), the typical head-of-household in predominantly patriarchal Latinx family structures. “Her grandfather who smoke a cigar would take her for a drive in his Chevrolet driving with a foot on the brake, stopping and starting, stopping and starting, stopping and starting. She would get so carsick” (Troyano 54). In trying to stimulate her memory through physical mimicry, Pingalito plays with the buttons on Carmelita’s hospital bed to bring the legs and torso portions of the bed up and down. A subtle nod to the sexual possibilities of the encounter, Pingalito recounts how he is “playing her like an accordion,” taking charge of Caremlita’s bed and its movements.

Pingalito embodies a type of masculinity that was sickening to Carmelita in the past and reiterated, is sickening in the present. According to Schneider, “[t]he stickiness of emotion is evident in the residue of generational time, reminding us that histories of events and historical effects of identity fixing, *stick* to any mobility, *dragging* (in Elizabeth Freeman’s sense) the temporal past into the sticky substance of any future” (36). For Schneider, the “pastness” of the past is never complete, but always partial, or one could say, in the

act/process of becoming. Pingalito evokes Carmelita's past and her relationship with her grandfather, showcasing how audience members rely on performance to, in a sense, fill in the gaps of that which is not explained in the present moment but can only be understood through affective engagement. He drags the past into the present and foreseeable future. Ultimately kicked out because of health/safety concerns ("Something about my cigar and an oxygen tank," Troyano 54), one could read Pingalito's extraction from Carmelita's bedside as the inevitable effect of overwhelming Cuban male-ness: to avoid destructive and/or sickening consequences, he must be removed. As established, a male presence will not be the deciding factor in rehabilitating Carmelita.

Though audience members may be aware that Pingalito is a female-to-male drag character, he represents the socioculturally constructed heterosexual "Latin lover" exported to USAmerican mainstream markets in the 1950s (Solórzano-Thompson 90). Pingalito uses this public perception that eroticizes Cuba and the Cuban male to call attention to the socially acceptable and publicly presented heteronormative desire exemplified by the lighter-skinned, middle class male. At the same time, Pingalito's character begins to suggest how this desire is transnational in nature as he is a Cuban man living in Miami. The island and his cultural identity continue to structure his desire regardless of geographic location. Part of establishing his own masculine identity depends upon other cultural referents to bolster his perception as a publicly lauded male persona. He calls himself the "Cuban Antonio Banderas" and compares his "Destiny" to that of Stanley Kowalski from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. By invoking a well-known male actor and a performance character, the hypersexual Latin lover (Banderas) and the violently masculine (Kowalski), Pingalito suggests in subtle

metatheatrical fashion that the work of actors, professional imitators, is sometimes the best way to present lived reality, particularly the publicly propagated and prototypical heteronormative masculinity. Inherent to this representation of masculinity is an accompanying objectification of women.

After skirting around the topic of colonial legacy in his “Facts about Cuba,” Pingalito transitions to a topic he can more actively engage/speak about in the public sphere, one that is clearly marked by a heteronormative structuring of desire: the beauty of “the human landscape.” Pingalito begins, “Óyeme ‘mano. Esas coristas de Tropicana”<sup>11</sup> (Troyano 54). He slips into a vernacular Spanish (“óyeme ‘mano” translating to a “listen here, brother”) to establish his choteo act and more clearly emphasize his role as a “cubano de la calle.” He references the famous Havana nightclub the Tropicana, the same cultural landmark that inspired Troyano’s own adopted stage name. The club, notorious for the beautiful women who sing and dance to entertain the high-paying foreign tourists, is a place where women’s bodies are relished and objectified, becoming sites of sexual intrigue and public consumption.

In his monologue, Pingalito compares beautiful Cuban female bodies to often public, ostentatious emblems of USAmerican wealth and consumerism. Aside from their sensuous physical bodiness, Pingalito tacks on a sense of allure and intrigue by imagining them as objects from the dreamed-about land of prosperity:

With the big breasts, thick legs. In Cuba we call girls carros and we mean your big American cars. Your Cadillac, no Toyota or Honda. Like the dancer Tongolele. I swear to you people, or my name is not Pingalito Betancourt, you could put a tray of

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<sup>11</sup> “Esas coristas de Tropicana” translates to “[t]hese Tropicana chorus girls.” Coristas or “chorus girls” were the hired dancers/singers that populated Havana’s Tropicana nightclub.



daiquiris on Tongolele's behind and she could walk across the floor without spilling a single drop. That, ladies and gentleman, is landscape. For that you give me a gun and I fight for that landscape. Not oil. You gotta have priorities (Troyano 54-55).

In many ways, primarily through the economic blockade, the US and Cuba maintained in antagonistic opposition through foreign policy (Haney and Vanderbush 6). Many Cubans on the island thought about the chance to move to Miami/the United States as an opportunity to better their economic position, particularly in the 1990s when Cubans hoped to escape the stifling austerity measures. Within the space of the USAmerican imaginary, Cubans on the island were attempting to flee, escape, and/or claim status as political refugee and make their life in the United States. There were, of course, individuals who wanted to stay on the island, loved their life in Cuba and were willing to stay through the economic slump to see what changes the Fidel's revolution would bring, but for a USAmerican audience few people would be thinking about those individuals. Images of Cubans in the USAmerican media included those shuttled to the U.S. on the 1960s Freedom Flights or those piling into overcrowded boats during the 1980 Mariel boatlift. Cubans in the United States who had family on the island would obviously be more up-to-date with the reality of quotidian life in Cuba, but for the average USAmerican, their perception was heavily skewed in one direction, understanding the United States as the dreamed-of but often difficult-to-attain land of possibility and prosperity.

According to Solórzano-Thompson, “[Pingalito] implies that patriotic feelings are to be manifested as carnal desires and not territorial conquests...[H]e has cited the revolution without actually naming it” (87). This tongue in cheek reference is typical of the choteo style. Audience members are left to wonder what could possibly be happening in the

contemporary moment of Cuba's history that would make him think of guns, fighting, and patriotic priorities. He conflates admiration of female beauty with Cuban nationalism and pride, suggesting that to fight for the female divine would be a more worthy cause than a never-ending battle against "El Norte" and the ever-insidious "capitalismo." His proclamation, "I swear to you people, or my name is not Pingalito Betancourt," is another rhetorical strategy of invoking a sense of "truth-telling" on stage. Pingalito, as certifiably Cuban, claims to know what the priorities of Cuba/its citizens/the government should be in the 1993 contemporary moment.

Because Pingalito is Carmelita's female-to-male drag character, inherent to understanding the presentation of Pingalito's very public heterosexuality, is recognizing the private, underlying, unspoken lesbian desire. Within Pingalito's description, he references 1950s pop culture by including the exotic dancer Tongolele. As a character herself, Yolanda "Tongolele" Montes presents interesting questions of bicultural/U.S.-Latina identity as a U.S.-born actress known primarily for starring in Mexican films and her widespread fame throughout Latin America and Spain. He speaks of Tongolele and knowledge gained only from intense observation of her as a carnal object. As Carmelita's sexual orientation unfolds throughout the play, audiences realize that it is not just through a man's eyes that admiration for the female body can be conjured. Pingalito's invocation of lesbian desire is just the first drop that will later cascade into Carmelita understanding her queerness. While Pingalito is representative of the hypermasculine heteronormative, because he is understood to be Carmelita, the queerness of his desire cannot be overlooked. The way his sexual longing is packaged (in a constructed male body), however, Pingalito's sexualization of the female is

more easily accepted and understood. It is through his transformation into Carmelita that sexual orientation becomes the site and the recognition of that which is non-normative.

In her book *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman explores how individual queer bodies may be similarly affected (and thus organized), particularly in relation to understanding time's passing and the way communities coalesce through shared historical encounters. Freeman puts forth the following notion:

By 'time binds,' I mean something beyond the obvious point that people find themselves with less time than they need. Instead, I mean that naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation: binding is what turns mere existence into a form of mastery in a process I'll refer to as chronornativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity. And I mean that people are bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective, through particular orchestrations of time (3).

Though Freeman talks about chronornativity in capitalist society, the concept still applies to communist/socialist Cuba. "Time binds" individuals and communities together who have to undergo the same historical conditions as they strive for the highest quality of life they can attain. Castro's Revolution, though purporting to make living conditions standard across the country, ultimately still enacted a social hierarchy (according to some, by racial delineations) that meant individuals had to organize and coalesce around initiatives that would make life more livable. We experience how Carmelita joins the others traveling to the island in bringing goods that are unavailable on the island. In another instance at the Colón Cemetery Carmelita shares a bottle of Bayer with two elderly couples she meets: "we decide to divide the one hundred thirty-five aspirins into four seniors" (Troyano 63). Though Carmelita has grown up in the United States, she still understands that on the island, the way to organize

with other cubanos is to share the wealth, divide the resources, and make do as well as one can with what one has.

According to Morad, for Cubans in the 1990s, the most common verbs used to understand their reality were *luchar* (fight for survival) and *resolver* (resolve, bring to closure, finding ways around a problem). In that light, chrononormativity within the Cuban context during the 1990s meant that people were organized to *luchar* and *resolver* but above all, to *sobrevivir* (survive) their difficult and overwhelmingly stark realities. For many, this meant taking advantage of the loosening restrictions on private industry to take part in the “necessary evil”: the growing tourism sector. As Morad explains in his theoretical/ethnographic text, “By following the references to tourism in Fidel Castro’s speeches during the 1990s, one notes a gradual softening of tone, but always very cautious and reserved. Fidel also kept referring...to ‘healthy tourism,’ a remark to which some of my informants replied: ‘When he says healthy, he means heterosexual’” (2). Immediately following Castro’s revolution, homosexuals were labeled as anti-revolutionary, enemies of the imagined *alto fin* (“high end,” often implies a sense of moralism). Their lives were relegated to private homes. They hid for fear of harassment from police or other Cubans (Morad 18-20).<sup>12</sup> Heterosexuality and exhibitions of said desire, on the other hand, were not denigrated in the public realm and were in some instances relied upon as a means of survival.

Using choteo, Carmelita is able to critique the linkage of heterosexual desire and the growing tourism industry by detailing what one can assume to be an instance of sex tourism.

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<sup>12</sup> The years immediately following the revolution were particularly difficult as those perceived as non-conformists or non-revolutionaries, including homosexuals, were recruited and sent to UMAP (Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción, Military Units to Help Production) labor camps to cure and “correct” their behaviors (Morad 22).

In Special Period Cuba, this type of semi-legal sex work is commonly known as the realities of what a jinetera (or jinetero)<sup>13</sup> undergo in an attempt to get by. She draws attention to this type of work and, though normalized for many cubanos, emphasizes how jineterismo could be destructive for young girls on the island. Relying on camp, Carmelita uses reiterative, performative acts that signify the female gender in attempt to bolster her own representative femininity as she sets up the exploration of heterosexual femininity in tourism.

Carmelita takes a simple act, a “socially established” meaning and marker of the feminine, to portray for audiences a representation of traditional heteronormative femininity. Stage directions read, “The taped voice of writer is heard as the actress goes to the dimly lit space and puts on lipstick” (Troyano 60). Carmelita needs to retreat to the private space to partake in this representation/feminine construction. Judith Butler writes, “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (191). Through putting on lipstick, Carmelita is able to tap into preconceived constructs of heterosexual femininity, legitimizing her performance of the feminine. After she paints her lips, the following anecdote is heard through one of the “writer” taped recordings:

A girl about fourteen asks me for my pintalabios. I part with my Revlon number forty-four “Love that Red” lipstick. I eat at La Bodeguita with two Cuban artists, a meal of fried yucca, fried pork, fried bananas...the new currency is the dollar...[Later,] at the hotel lobby...who do I see coming in, Pintalabios, Revlon number forty-four, looking good with a man. What is she doing with that man and

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<sup>13</sup> A jinetera/o is a woman or man who engages in quasi-legal activities as a means to make money in Cuba. Some associate the term almost exclusively with prostitution and for the most part, no one will proudly/willingly call themselves a jinetera/o even if they recognize the shady legality of the work they do.

my lipstick? She looks down when she sees me. I'm pissed, but with a swig of beer, reconsider, maybe the lipstick got her a steak dinner (Troyano 61).

Though the rest of the island is dealing with immense scarcity, as a tourist, Carmelita does not experience this stark reality. Her trip is filled with luxuries—namely hotels and meals with meat (!)—that the Cuban people at this moment can neither afford nor procure (for political, legal, or logistical reasons) for their own consumption. Within this anecdote, Carmelita links food scarcity with the pervasive lack of consumer goods, particularly feminine beauty products. This girl, given the moniker “Pintalabios” (“lipstick”), is able to overcome both these scarcities: the lipstick she takes from Carmelita creates the opportunity for her to eat a substantive meal, maybe something she hasn't been able to enjoy for a long while. In the retelling of the story, Carmelita reduces Pintalabios to a single, for some everyday, object of femininity. At fourteen, she can still in some cases be considered merely a child, and yet she becomes the site of a heteronormative structuring of desire that is amplified and rewarded in the arena of tourism. When Pintalabios is able to paint her lips, to conform to an idealized vision of femininity and also *adult* femininity, she becomes desirous enough for an unknown man to invite her to dinner. The exchange of sex for food is made possible through the reiterative gender act (putting on lipstick) that foregrounds femininity. Sex work is presented in an honest and uncritical light and though Carmelita says she is first pissed off, she, like other cubanos, ultimately understands that this is a matter of survival. During this difficult moment in Cuba's history, it is understood that people do what they need to, even if that means relying on one's body and its sexual potentialities.

While Carmelita's performance in *Milk of Amnesia* explores and critiques the heteronormative standard, she does not shy away from using camp and choteo to explore

lesbian desire. According to Cespedes, “Through her performance, Troyano weaves a complex analysis of sexuality that not only includes the commodification of women’s bodies through Cuban men’s sexism (that is, Pingalito) and the national dependence on tourism, but also situates queerness within these scenes” (154). Part of Carmelita’s journey in attempting to regain her memories of Cuba, is to also reencounter, love, and accept herself as a queer Latina subject even though Cuba (and Latinx cultures more broadly) too often overlook and dismiss queer subjectivity. When Carmelita returns to her childhood home, she is flooded with a particular memory of something that happened to her when she was a young child and still living in her Havana home:

It was by the mango tree that I had an epiphany. I was poking at the ground to see how my mango tree was doing when I heard her footsteps. She had long hair tied into a ponytail, red lips, and dreamy eyes like a cow. I ran to her and jumped on her and kissed her creamy cheeks...We looked at each other for an instant. I ran and hid by the mango tree. My heart was beating fast, I was sweating. I knew then that that was no ordinary kiss. That kiss would mean a lot more in years to come (Troyano 65).

The mango tree here takes on double significance as both the physical place where this encounter occurred, as well as a signifier for ripe, juicy, budding queer sexuality. Earlier in the play, Carmelita equates Cubans with mangoes, an example of the overflowing and overwhelming nature of Cuban cultural identity. In this instance, she returns to the notion of mangoes to emphasize another uncontainable and irremovable facet of identity: her own queer identity.

The mango tree of encounter and the lesbian desire inspired at this site are inescapable, messy and have lasting consequence. Within this memory, Carmelita evokes temporal differences and queer futurity. She knew “then” in the past and at a remarkably

young age that the kiss was exceptional and would “mean a lot more in years to come” as she continued forming and understanding her sexual identity. Carmelita’s memory speaks of her individual instance, the first perhaps, of noticing non-heteronormative desires. As presented, Carmelita is unsure how to feel about the encounter. Shy about how the physical encounter affected her, in fact exciting her, she “ran and hid by the mango tree.” Putting the play within the larger context of understanding queer desire in the Cuban community, it is interesting to note how Carmelita’s experience may reflect those of others on the island, navigating their public versus private existence and at times hiding their sexual presentation or desires. Being ashamed or confused about queer desire, “hiding in the closet” or “putting on a (heteronormative) show,” could be considered a universal experience throughout the LGBTQ community. Carmelita, at first unsure how to feel about being attracted to women, later learns that there is a whole community of others much like her. By retelling this experience and ultimately showcasing how she has come to love and embrace her non-heteronormative desires, Carmelita puts her individual instance in conversation with other queer cubanos, as well as implicates the larger transnational/global conversation surrounding queerness. Rather than feel ashamed, Carmelita suggests that an individual’s true sexually-identified self should not be neglected, but celebrated.

During Cuba’s Special Period, the queer/gay community started to gain more visibility. “Thanks to the island’s opening to tourism and foreign influence, and the increase in open discussions in the Cuban press and media about tolerance toward homosexuality, gay Cubans started feeling less intimidated by the authorities. As a result after nearly two decades of repression, gay men became once again a visible part of street life in downtown



Havana” (Morad 25). As Troyano’s trip to Cuba was in 1993, she may have witnessed how cultural and governmental attitudes toward the homosexual population were changing, allowing greater freedom for queer Cubans. Her memory, which one can assume took place when the queer community was still fighting pervasive anti-gay sentiments, becomes a placeholder for the instances other homosexuals in Cuba may have felt ashamed, unsure, and shy about their queer desires. It is important that she recounts and recovers this memory, putting it center stage, because one’s sexual identity is inextricable from the holistic understanding of self. She needs this memory because it connects her to other queer Cubans and claims space for the minoritarian subject to speak without censure. She relays this memory because the feelings it evokes during her performance continue to evolve and flourish with the support of those surrounding her in the New York theater community, as well as the audience members who show up for her performances, applauding and embracing her as a fuerte (“strong”) queer Latina.

## Conclusion

At the end of *Milk of Amnesia*, Carmelita does accomplish her goal: she finally remembers her *isla querida* (“beloved island”). “My journey is complete. My amnesia is gone. After so many years in America, I can drink two kinds of milk. The sweet condensed milk of Cuba and the Grade A, pasteurized, homo kind from America,” she says in her last monologue (Troyano 71). Was it the views of Havana, visiting her old house, conversations with cubanos she met, experiencing the lived reality of those on the island, or some combination thereof that made her remember? Perhaps it was the act of performance, the embodiment of constructed *cubanía* through the voice and body of Carmelita that made her remember. According to Elin Diamond, she believes performances are cultural practice that “conservatively re-inscribe or passionately reinvent the ideas, symbols, and gestures that shape social life” (2). By performing her *cubanía*, Carmelita reinvents what “to be Cuban” and “to be Cuban outside the island” means. She uses markers that are distinctly Cuban—her style of exaggeration, accent, Pingalito’s costume—and those that are clearly affected by USAmerican culture, most notably her intermixing of English and Spanish. Carmelita falls on the “passionate” side of Diamond’s performance spectrum, as she tries to convey for (what can assumed to be mostly) non-Cuban audiences the *riqueza* (“richness”) of the island’s culture and how it continues to shape her.

Carmelita performs a variety of Cuban personas that are not assimilated and forgotten in the mass of “homogenized” USAmerican culture. As she learns to “drink two kinds of milk” Carmelita finds that Cuban and USAmerican cultures can co-exist peacefully and while both are still affected, she still maintains facets that are Cuban through and

through. In her seminal work, Diana Taylor invokes the notion of preservation/memorialization of knowledge gained through performance and insists on the necessity of understanding performance as a temporal lineage. What one performer does or enacts through their behavior is not only in conversation with the origin source of the behavior, but also with those who have done it before, do it currently, or will continue to do it in the future. Behaviors represented through performance are not only transnational in nature, congealing to create the understanding of a singular bi- or multi-cultural identity, but also transgenerational, spanning history, memory, and that which has yet to be written. Carmelita, through her performance of *cubanía*—learned on the island, recovered there, and brought to the United States mainland—forms community with Cubans on the island and in those in the Greater Cuba diaspora. She puts herself in conversation with past, present, and future cubanos, both those on the island and the descendants of cubanos born in the United States who will have to contend with maintaining their sociocultural identity even as it becomes further removed from the island itself.

Carmelita's performance in *Milk of Amnesia* attempts to heal those wounded through the historical divides, in particular members of the LGBTQ community, through performing a reality that is more inclusive and accepting of the non-normative. In Schechner's work, when outlining "restored behavior" of performance, he states: "Restored behavior offers to both individuals and groups the chance to rebecome what they once were—or even, and most often, to rebecome what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become...[it can be] a projection of 'my particular self,' or a restoration of a historically verifiable past, or—most often—a restoration of a past that never was" (38). "The past that

never was” in the Cuban context is a place that was always accepting and embracing of the homosexual and queer community. In the play, Carmelita comes to terms with her own queer identity and through performance invokes a Cuba that could have been, and perhaps will be in the future, more open to non-normative sexual desires.

*Milk of Amnesia* is a play based on fact: Alina Troyano did travel to Cuba in 1993 as part of a cross-cultural exchange between USAmerican and Cuban artists. Her fictive performance, and the persona she creates to embody the journey, depend on gestures, ideas, vernaculars, and movements to evoke her Cuban identity. Through this performance, Troyano herself is able to embrace her distinct sociocultural identities, learning that if her irreverent Cuban side can drink two kinds of milk, then so can she. As a journey through Cuba’s colonial legacy to the Special Period of the early 1990s, *Milk of Amnesia* creates a space where everyone and everything is interconnected. Through her performance the audience is left with a strong and unequivocal understanding that only by embracing ourselves, our neighbors, and our histories, inherently interconnected, can we hope to reach our fullest potential.

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