

Caudal Autotomy and Regenerative Properties in  
Cuban Refugees:  
How Carlos Eire's Memoir Reflects Philosophical and  
Psychoanalytic Notions of Place and Topographical  
Experience from the Historical Vantage Point of *El Exilio*  
during The 1960s

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*Cancionero del Banyan*

The wind frustrates itself, held  
in its oval leaves, sifted

through tendril, ropelike  
roots of the mighty banyan,

stumps of elephant feet, tough  
gray skin. This tree doesn't bend

against strong wind or hurricane.  
This one survived Andrew

in Coral Gables, where the Cubans  
live now. Like sons, they grow

backward into the ground, sprout  
more trunks. Eternal. How like exile

to leave such marks on these spots,  
these places where life continues.

in exile, a father's hand clutching  
any dirt it can call its own.

Virgil Suárez

Dedicated to my father, Juan Carlos Zorrilla, *a mi adorada Yeya, y a nuestro Ángel de la guarda*. Thank you for your innumerable sacrifices in the name of freedom and opportunity, thank you for this remarkable life you have blessed my mother and I with, and thank you for making me Cuban-American. Being a part of this family's *relajo* is my pride. You make the face of my soul *sonreír de oreja a oreja*, forever beaming with gratitude and love. Thank you.



**Caudal Autotomy and Regenerative Properties in Cuban Refugees:  
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They roamed freely and with no sense of loss then, these boys and girls, watching the burly grips of their fathers swing machetes lithely into backyard coconuts for an evening drink. Their mothers in airy cotton, frying dinner with their hair tied back inside, while the *charanga* tunes echo from the radio across the foyer dripping in seafoam green. Nights were for meals, for *visitas* from grandma, and for catching the flickering *cocuyos* that managed to sneak through the netting that encapsulated the wicker-furnished garden. When the sweet coastal breeze or mountain fog rose with the sun, so too did these boys and girls. Drifting into their routines of school, playtime for *beisbol* or *canasta*, homework, and cooling off in the pool amidst the burning *mamey* and juicy *toronja* hues, completed the painting to another normal day in a child's Cuba. And, surely, the collective daily life on the Island was not always idyllic, utopic, or glamorous, but for a child at home, home was enough; to simply be blissfully surrounded by the familiar breadfruit trees and *yuquitas fritas* stands that lined their youth, these boys and girls had no want for revolution. The fireworks that greeted January 1st 1959 roared as loudly as the thousands of guerrillas marching into Havana and, led by a fearless and charismatic bearded Fidel Castro, forced military dictator Fulgencio Batista to flee from power. Soon, the boys and girls of Cuba were shot-off into the frenzy of transition. No longer did they have their schools to go to, their parks for playtime, or their pools, for innocent childhood had been seized by the State. Desperate to preserve their sons and daughters from work camps and Soviet ideals, parents plopped their cherished ones inside of a *Pecera* at Havana's airport. With nothing more than a defunct passport and a screened bag, Cuba's children caught one short flight to Neverland, with



no guarantees of ever coming back home to resume life as it was.

Approximately 14,000 unaccompanied minors embarked on planes administered by *Operación Pedro Pan* towards Miami, Florida during the years between 1960 and 1962, a covert exodus that, to this day, is the largest-ever of refugee children in the Western Hemisphere. Some minors were able to flee Cuba with their parents or other relatives, but for the Lost Boys and Lost Girls, their displacement would be repeated by transitioning from shelters, to foster homes, and to boarding schools, until a distant relative in The United States claimed them. The more fortunate cases would be reunited again with their parents in a matter of months or years, while others remained as orphaned wards of the Nation until the age of eighteen.

Carlos Eire, now the T. Lawrason Riggs Professor of History & Religious Studies at Yale University, was once (and still is) an exiled child refugee that came to The United States from Cuba at the brink of turning twelve, through this aforementioned aerial escape route with his teenage brother Tony. Although his primary academic focus has led him to publish numerous distinguished texts on the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, his identity as a Cuban thrust out of place before reaching puberty inspired the memoirs *Waiting for Snow in Havana* (2003) and *Learning to Die in Miami* (2010). Meditative, humorous, profound, and heart wrenching, the memoirs have received accolades such as “The National Book Award in Nonfiction in The United States” in 2003, and have also subsequently been banned in Cuban, distinguishing Eire as an official enemy of the Regime. Lauded for their evocative poetic prose teeming with detail, spiritual mysticism, and a profanity or two, *Waiting for Snow in Havana* and *Learning to Die in Miami* are some of the most venerated pieces of Cuban exile literature. Carlos Eire, along with notable Cuban writers Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, Reinaldo Arenas, Virgil Suárez, Cecilia Fernández,



Mirta Ojito, and Margarita Engle, have garnered respect and readership from the Lost Boys and Lost Girls- now well into their adulthood -due to their potent reminiscence that compels the reader to go back in time, and by extension, to go back in place.

For those that comprise the Cuban diasporic community of exiles and refugees that have come in waves during the decades of The Castro Regime from the Island, memory, and literature and art borne from that memory, have become some of the diaspora's most powerful tools for reconnection to a homeland that has been politically or socially forbidden to return to—that is, of course, until the most recent attempt by President Barrack Obama to thaw relations between The United States and Cuba. Nevertheless, while exiles now have the option to board a plane or cruise-line to their country of birth and to the origin of their culture, the need for recounting the place-in-memory through creative expression, and sharing the collective struggle through personal accounts is integral for the displaced person that feels as if they are *ni de aquí, ni de all*; neither from here, nor from there. Delving into exile accounts as an exile is not only a practice of catharsis and nostalgia, it is also a practice that puts the psychological self back into the past-place (even if the self has been physically uprooted from the site of said place), while keeping the bodily self in the present. The hope is that, upon relinquishing oneself to a reflective remembrance that is composed of individual and authorial narrative, the exile can begin to heal and move forward, feeling “at home” in a place that is not necessarily home, but is the foreseeable end to the journey.

This could be why Cubans in The United States, and other groups borne from a mass-exodus, have formed tight-knit ethnic enclaves that have brought forth a psychological sense of community, but also a physical site that encloses said community's culture. Rather than



completely renouncing the homeland, Cubans have actively sought to not acculturate into mainstream North American societal ventures, choosing to open up *rinconcitos* that serve *tostadas* and *croquetas de bacalao* with the same name as their family legacy left behind in Cuba, or choosing to go into political positions that have had critical roles in deciding foreign policy with Cuba. Accounting for roughly 4% of the 18% of Hispanics and Latinos in the nation, large populations of Cubans reside in Baldwin Park, East Pasadena, Hazleton, Hialeah, Palmdale, Oshkosh, The Triangle, Temple City, Tampa, and Westchester, although it is no surprise that the two largest Cuban ethnic enclaves in the country are both called “Little Havana” (one is in Miami, the other in North Hudson, New Jersey). Intriguingly, the “Little Havana” of Miami, Florida and the majority-Cuban population of South Florida as a whole, has informally deemed the region “North Cuba”, both by outsiders and by its own Floridian constituents, a term that separates the physical space between Cubans and “the rest of *los gringos*.” In a similar vein, Floridians tend to joke that “as you go more North in Florida, the more Southern you get,” referring to the disparity between the vibrant makeup of South Florida and the languid drawl of rural, white, and “southern” Northern Floridians.

Ninety miles from the Island, South Florida naturally houses Cubans and tropical flora and fauna alike, marking South Florida as a transitional and liminal space between mainland Cuba and mainland United States, the perfect climate to breed a diasporic mindset that seeps its toes feasibly in two distinct cultures, and in two distinct sites. Although more humid, more harshly sunlit, and much more flat, South Florida’s landscape mirrors that of Cuba in a manner than no other place in The United States can, which is perhaps why so many Cubans decided to plant themselves in South Florida, or have emigrated back to South Florida from their initial



refugee outposts, as many Cuban exiles had to move further North to seek employment in factories and other forms of cheap labor in abundance. Painting their homes in corals and peaches, decorating with seafaring appliquéés and sand tiles, and adorning their *jardines* with sweet jasmine blooms, fuchsia bougainvillea petals, and slender *plátano* trees, the displaced can make-believe to be in-place without much to leave to the imagination or to the potency of nostalgia. The mosquitos have the same bite on freckled flesh, the iguanas have the same longing to bask, the frogs have the same melody to serenade the moist night, and the lizards have the same power to regenerate their slithering tails no matter the land where they last left a part of themselves. Like *un lagartijo* (the most cogent and emotionally charged symbol in *Waiting for Snow in Havana* and *Learning to Die in Miami*), Cubans have remained resilient despite having to forcibly leave a part of themselves behind on their homeland. And yet, when their new “selves” replace the former, or their new “tails” substitute the severed, is the part that remained on the Island destroyed, or does its spirit live on in them forever?

The theoretical matrix of “Place,” encompassing philosophy and psychology to ascertain the causes and effects of human topographical experience, has been building upon itself since the publication of Aristotle’s *Physics* in 350 B.C.E, in which Aristotle first introduces his interpretation of *topos*. Later, Descartes, Proust, and Heidegger would be among various intellects that would dabble with the notion of “Place” as is, and the ways in which place affects and structures our existence in the world. Memoirs such as *Waiting for Snow in Havana* and *Learning to Die in Miami* are exemplary literary case studies to invoke an analysis grounded on the vast profundity of contemporary place-theory; specifically how Eire’s autobiographical writings can complicate these musings on the importance and the significance of “Place” on



personhood, due to the act of being exiled from Cuba as a child and never being able to get back to Cuba as an adult, and due to the act of remembering a place as home in the present without knowing the place itself as it is today. Moreover, these Cuban memoirs have contemplations of childhood as a foundation, with *el barrio Miramar* and the budding ethnic enclave of Miami's "Little Havana", but they shift temporally and meta-textually, often flashing-forward to different places in Eire's teenage years in Chicago or as he is writing the text in Connecticut, to serve as a contrast or as a present-day focal point from these foundational childhood places. There are even moments when the notion of "Place" is further entangled by the numerous temporalities in Eire's memoirs due to the narrative lapses into anachronic imaginary places—such as The Void of Oblivion—that his own meditations leave him to go wander astray into, or his own traumas cannot let him escape from. Edward S. Casey and Jeff Malpas—although neither has written on the Cuban refugee or political exile's psyche—have been two of the latest philosophers to research the concept of place, drawing their conceptual analyses from phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches to make sense of the human relationship and development of self and identity through topographical experience.

Beginning with the very titles of the memoirs, *Waiting for Snow in Havana* and, more explicitly, *Learning to Die in Miami* establish the recurring themes of death and resurrection in Eire's works. Inextricably linked to the topographical aspects of place, these latter stages of life are paralleled with the broader political and cultural temporally fixed spheres in these landscapes, and the author's own personal experience with them in and out of place. "Snow" in Havana is ironic, as it will never be possible for it to snow in a Caribbean island situated above the equator. Superficially, the first layer of the symbol of "snow" as it is presented in the title can be





interpreted simply as the author waiting for something that will never occur. As far as what that *something* may be, one can infer that Eire is referring to a radical change in Cuba that never seems to happen, the most apparent being the fall of the seemingly interminable Castro Regime. With further inspection however, the phrase “waiting for snow” is mentioned in the text to reflect Eire’s naiveté as a young boy growing up in Cuba, who assumed from what he saw in the movies that it always snowed in The United States, and that it was always “better” in The United States because it snowed there. The title can be read with a sarcastic undertone then, acknowledging that this notion of “snow” making another place better than ones homeland was an illusion, a comforting fallacy that Eire gave himself to better grasp the gravity of being separated from his parents and birthplace as an eleven year old. The physical characteristics of “snow” incorporate both themes of death and resurrection that Eire relies heavily upon to articulate his reflective sentiments and to analogize the occurrences of his life before and after becoming a refugee. Winter’s frost and flakes wilt and wither shrubbery and trees, causing lakes to ice over and animals to disperse into hiding for survival; snow is the coming of death. However, its ability to appear breathtakingly beautiful as it falls to the ground and suffocates fields with heavy blankets of white give snow a purifying look, a look that can fill one with wonder if one is able to forget the aftermath of snow on nature during the peak of winter. Nevertheless, once snow melts away, it brings forth signs of new life and returned life during the spring, giving the image of “snow” an innate significance of resurrection.

Because of Eire’s own academically religious background and deeply spiritual upbringing, both memoirs are replete with various symbols and allusions to a Christ-like cycle of life, marking the move between Havana and Miami as his first “death”, while referring to this



move as the moment in which he, out of the locus of his control, is forced to become a man. The constant references to certain sites in these places being “Hell” and others as being “Eden” or “Heaven” fortify the trope of death and resurrection, but one that is particularly poignant is that of Eire’s literal linguistic and nominal biblical epic, morphing from “Carlos”, to “Charles”, to “Chuck”, and reverting back to “Carlos” again, a wholly changed person and yet not. The penetrating and severe effects of exile and displacement on the individual’s psyche and grasp of self is stated by Jeff Malpas in *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (2010):

“Understand how the separation from places and possessions may almost literally be a separation from the parts of oneself. And not only from oneself—one of the most interesting aspects of these observations is the emphasis on certain objects as bringing with them important intersubjective associations. It may well be the case, in face, that the development of a sense of identity of self can be mapped in terms of the development of a sense of identity of others” (184).

This understanding of the phantom limbs that grow from the trauma of displacement is crucial, for it sets a psychoanalytical foundation to ground the author’s own caudal autonomy and regenerative properties as both memoirs progress- and jump from -different temporal and spatial vantage points.

Born and introduced to us in the beginning of *Waiting for Snow in Havana* as Carlos Nieto, this Carlos details a life of privilege as a light-skinned sandy-haired son to a prestigious judge under Batista’s command, a polio-stricken mother who was comfortable given her ability to not work, and a younger brother to Tony, whom he deeply revered. The author recounts his childhood in the outlandish neighborhood of the Island’s wealthy elite, telling tales of *vecinos*



with chimpanzees and tigers as pets, of attending birthday parties where attendees were given gifts just for showing up, and of buying hot dogs from *el Chino*'s cart. These anecdotes, while hilarious, also served as stark contrasts from the rest of Cuba's population, which was predominantly comprised of impoverished dark-skinned persons who worked on sugar fields or as servants to the rich. The author contrasts the stories of his own worry-free youth as Carlos Nieto with the ill-fated backdrop of a country that was corrupt and systemically oppressive thanks to Batista and the legacy of Spanish colonialism and slavery. Emphasizing that Cuba was not perfect in spite of it being paradisiacal *for him*, the author iterates that he and his family were sympathizers of Castro because they believed in his promises of social betterment and positive change for all. This ability to separate emotionality from reality when homesick and *nostalgic* is striking, as Edward S. Casey in *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (2000), notes:

“All that we need to notice is that the poignant power of the phenomenon—which can virtually paralyze those under its sway—has everything to do with memory of place. That the place in question is normally that special place called ‘home’—‘there is no place like home,’ according to nostalgia’s primary axiom—testifies emphatically to the strength of the internal bond between place and memory.” (201)

That is, of course, until *La Revolución* renders Carlos Nieto and his family from humans to *gusanos* for being displeased about the seizure of all personal and private assets by the Government, and the gradual shift towards Khrushchev-controlled communism. The author reaffirms, both in his “Confessions of a Cuban Boy” and later in his “Confessions of a Refugee Boy”, the symbols of resurrection and redemption when admitting that he and his family “had it coming” and that The Revolution was a “death” for their collective sins of extravagance, while



simultaneously being aware that, while change to the status quo was vital, it did not have to cause such suffering and *desengaño*. Soon, Carlos Nieto the student and the Catholic is not allowed to attend his school or to celebrate Christmas, Carlos Nieto the cinema aficionado is banned from watching *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*, and Carlos Nieto the lover of treats cannot get his favorite shakes because the store front has been snatched by the State. These are a succession of relatively miniscule deaths in comparison to losing ones home, but the author describes a sense of feeling, at age nine, the start of a loss of self and identity *within* place. He—and the other *gusanos*—were, in effect, *displaced* while in-place, for he loss of possessions, and the loss of spaces in Cuba that were intrinsically linked to community and family bonding, began to sever the sense of identity that the author had fostered within Church, within La Salle, or within the Old Miramar Yacht Club. When the author describes his mother limping away from angry mobs of people screaming *paredón* at her, or when the author begins to realize at the age of nine that his family and friends are being “disappeared” by the Government and put into electroconvulsive shock therapy or on death row on nationally broadcasted television, or when the author details his Afro-Cuban maid Caridad threatening to “hex you and your whole family. Changó and I will set a whole army of devils upon you” (4), it becomes evident that this political and cultural displacement separated disillusioned dissenters or opponents of Castro as subhuman “worms.” The displacement was not only a forced and physical one away from the Island, but also a displacement that manifested itself through tension and hatred encouraged by the Government. It was no longer the question of whether or not you were born in Cuba, but rather, the question was whether or not you were “Cuban enough” to stay. In *Waiting for Snow in*



*Havana*, the author describes this temporal displacement in-place as being in “Limbo,” again playing with the motifs of death, and in this instance, with purgatory.

In the last weeks of the author’s first life as Carlos Nieto, he offers the reader a concrete manifestation of this psychological and topographical sensation of being in “Limbo” through breathtaking and compelling imagery of two encounters with parrot fish, and coincidentally, two of his last encounters with the habitats of Cuban wildlife and his childhood neighborhood:

“The Aquarium of the Revolution has been set up at a splendid seaside house in Miramar, not far from where we live. The pink house is right up against the sea, and the pool is filled with saltwater... The parrotfish we rescued seems smaller and duller when viewed in the company of others. These fish are unreal. Colors I’ve never seen. Patterns and shapes I’d never imagine, not even in an eternity. And all these fish are out there, all the time, along with the sharks and the moray eels and the stingrays and the lobsters and crabs. All the time, swimming with sharks. I ask myself: who owned this house? What was it like to live here, day in and day out, with your own pool, right by the turquoise sea? What was it like to give up all of this? What would the former owners of this house think of the Aquarium of the Revolution? What would they think of the sharks in their pool? What would it be like for them to come back right now, with their memories still intact? Would the sight of the shark pool dissolve all their memories, like acid? Not that long ago, I tell myself, children surely must have used the pool. Not that long ago, a man and a woman must have kissed in that pool. Someone must have. Who wouldn’t kiss, right there, at the edge of the turquoise sea?” (312)



This stream of consciousness form of rhetorical philosophical inquiry is both done in-place by Carlos Nieto and thus in the past, but it is also done out of place as the author reflecting back on it from the present, and incorporates the inner turmoil and conflict of living in “Limbo,” of living in a theoretically familiar place that has been radically altered by transcending forces of power. While Carlos is in awe of the beauty of what the Aquarium contains and thinks of it as the first thing that he has seen that “makes the Revolution look halfway good” (313), he also grapples with the reality that a family was evicted from their home to make space for these “sharks,” that this was a private space before it was repurposed for the public, that there was a history that belonged to that pool and that family before it was taken over by sharks. Malpas approaches the ways in which places are appropriated and acculturated in *Place and Experience*, the causes to the effects that Carlos saw that day when he went with his father, his brother, his cousin, his friend, and his “adopted brother” Ernesto, the bully and molester that lived under the same roof as him, his own “shark”, whom he lived to salvage a parrotfish: “These structures order and reorder space in ways that establish and constrain the actions and lives of the individuals who inhabit that space—indeed, inasmuch as they order and reorder space, so they also order and reorder the possible forms of subjectivity in that space... Embedded in the physical is a landscape of personal and cultural history, of social ordering and symbolism” (186-187). The scene at the Aquarium is later juxtaposed with another involving parrotfish:

“But this fast-moving storm of shapes and colors within the turquoise water was a good miracle. It moved and moved without stopping. Sometimes it split in two and the halves circled around to form a whole again. And in the meantime, as the halves danced with each other, the contrast between the cloud and the turquoise sea grew even more intense.



Truth, beauty, goodness, and eternity were out there dancing with the sharks and all the other creatures that feed upon one another—and sometimes upon humans—with sharp teeth or stinging venom. Love was there too, unencumbered by self-centeredness, possessiveness, doubts, or jealousy. Trouble-free love, squirming inside a wondrous sea—a sea already too beautiful to take in. Was this a farewell vision of everything that was beautiful in my birthplace, all wrapped into one?” (336).

I apologize to the reader for the inclusion of these two unusually lengthy block quotes, but they are too intrinsic for the purpose of this analysis to shave down. The author masterfully intertwines the good and the bad of the historical backdrop and sociopolitical climate of Cuba with the swarming school of parrotfish amidst a looming group of sharks, foreshadowing the ominous result of “dancing” with the sharks and the “contrast” between the clouds and the sea. Carlos is able to absorb the natural beauty and what makes Cuba beautiful to him, but the author in retrospect also realizes that what made his Island beautiful could be problematized given the laws of nature, and given the laws of humanity. When Carlos Nieto is about to board a plane to depart from his first life and die in Miami, he and his brother await in *La Pecera*, the “fishbowl” like waiting area in which parents could tearfully watch their children leave home without them, and where *compatriotas* could heckle and threaten the fledgling *gusanos* for becoming traitors. Carlos wonders in that defining moment as he is on the edge of Limbo, and when looking back on it as well from Connecticut: “We were in the aquarium, the real Aquarium of the Revolution. Were we the sharks or the parrot fish?” (379).

Apart from the handful of flash-forwards that Eire provides in *Waiting for Snow in Havana* to illustrate the drastic and shocking changes to his life that followed leaving home



alone and with uncertainty at almost twelve years old with his fifteen year old brother, the memoir ends with Carlos' childlike awe and curiosity as he looks at Havana from the sky for the first and last time, enraptured by the greenness of royal palms, the engulfing mysterious sea, the tangerine sunset over Cuba, and his realization that his beloved homeland was in the shape of the animal that he loathed and feared most- *el lagartijo*, the lizard. It is Carlos' last glimpses of Cuba that leave the reader entranced and mystified by the naiveté of a child who has not yet come to terms with the fact that, upon landing on United States soil, *everything* changes. Like Carlos, the reader is left in *Waiting for Snow in Havana* to wonder about what is to come next after reading the dazzling accounts of Cuba as Garden of Eden and as Limbo.

In *Learning to Die in Miami*, published about seven years after the first installment to his memoir, Eire has gone from labeling himself as a “Cuban Boy” to a “Refugee Boy,” and Carlos Nieto has just died in deep South Floridian swampland at a camp tucked away from the public eye for airlifted Lost Boys and Lost Girls. The catalyst to this first major death— of which there are many, both major and minor, as the second memoir poignantly details —is one that is dichotomous. Carlos is at a temporary shelter (a place-holder) in the *middle of nowhere*, the truly rural, pre-urbanized South Florida, where the nuns that are feeding him chicken sandwiches do not speak his language, and where “freckle-faced” girls spit at him behind a barbed-wire fence and call him a “spic, gave [him] the finger, and told [him] to go back home” (17). This death comes from an overwhelming loss of hope and comprehension of the world around him, an understanding that is barred by the precariousness of his situation and by cultural differences. This death also comes from an understanding that is physically limited to an enclosure much like a detention center. His displacement is rash and sudden, but the additional burden of not having





his desperate mother to hold him, and in having a father who has chosen to stay behind to guard his precious art collection, makes Carlos feel not only that he has been abandoned, but also that in some complicated way -he has abandoned himself. At the age that Carlos departs from home, he is at the brink of puberty and in a crucial developmental stage. In the early adolescent years, one begins to tease notions of identity and of purpose, but this process is ruptured and delayed by Carlos' own "tail" being severed by *El Exilio*. This death of Carlos' identity comes from, not only loss, but also not being able to regain the place in which identity has been bound-to. As Malpas contends: "And inasmuch as our lives would themselves seem to be inseparably and intricately bound to the places and spaces in which we find ourselves, so the fragility of those places is indicative of a corresponding fragility in our own lives and identities." (188).

Hereafter, Carlos Nieto becomes *Charles* Nieto; the persona that is resurrected after the author decides to bury Havana and his Cuban origin behind in his "past life." With this resurrection into what the author refers to as *The Twilight Zone*, also comes the formation of the "Void of Oblivion." This Void is a "place" that encompasses a myriad of ever-evolving meanings that becomes more and more expansive and convoluted as Charles "sucks it up" and represses his emotions elicited by the trauma of transitioning from privileged and ignorantly blissful Cuban boy to an unwelcome refugee on alien land. Although the author implies that his ability (and, by extension, the ability of other exiles) to regenerate and to be resurrected constantly from these deaths convey the ardor of his resilience, his death and resurrection from Carlos to Charles unfurl just how symbiotic the relationship is between the experience of being in-place and the construction of the psychological self. Carlos being torn away from his homeland and the only place that he has associated himself with causes Carlos to tear himself



away from this place-bound self, a schism that occurs partly as a consequence of not being in his homeland and as an unhealthy coping mechanism. Edward S. Casey in *Remembering: A Phenomenological Case Study* (2000) expands on the mental disembodiment that grimly trails displacement:

“To be disembodied is not only to be deprived of place, *unplaced*; it is to be denied the basic stance on which every experience and its memory depend. As embodied existence opens onto place, indeed *takes place in place* and nowhere else, so our memory of what we experience in place is likewise place-specific: it is bound to place as to its own basis.”  
(182)

In Miami, Charles is bounced around from distinctly contrasting “home” situations, an instability that becomes emotionally detrimental and taxing for himself and for his brother. The author sheds light on the disparities as the foster care and social work system sought to provide a nurturing temporary stay for these 14,000 unaccompanied- and vulnerable -minors. Charles is fortunate that, upon leaving the makeshift shelter at The Homestead Air Reserve Base, he is cared for by the warm and empathetic Louis and Norma Chait, who spoke no Spanish but were “of the Chosen People, eternal exiles” (26). The Chait’s foreign customs and tongue make it more feasible for Charles to let go of Carlos, who is desperate to “bury” his former self and his Cubanness, for this identity was a wholly painful reminder of desolation and disillusionment. Charles, for one, felt inferior as a Cuban to the Americans. Coming to The United States meant being stratified and becoming an outcast in a racial hierarchy that he had never noticed before in Cuba. It was the first time that the author would have to face the reality of his bloodline and birthplace, discriminated on his ethnicity rather than his skin color:



“This a truly superior country, I thought... It was 1962, after all, and we were in South Florida. Racial segregation was still legal. And we Cubans tended to be viewed by the locals as non-white intruders, even if we had blond hair and blue eye. The lower you were on the social scale, the stronger the biases against us tended to be, but prejudices against Hispanics permeated the entire culture, from top to bottom, in a much more open way than nowadays.” (17).

Every time Charles opened his mouth in his predominantly white classroom at Everglades Elementary School, he immediately felt alienated from his peers and humiliated due to not being able to hide his thick accent—so thick, in fact, that Charles had believed for most of his life that Desi Arnaz, a Cuban Hollywood star, spoke in “proper, unaccented” English, which any fan of *I Love Lucy* can attest to being obtusely, if comically, false. Reading in his American textbooks passages that Cubans were savages that lived in straw huts and were in third-world poverty made Charles recoil at the notion of being Cuban even further, sparking within him an unparalleled motivation to perfect his accent by emulating the voices of the characters on *The Beverly Hillbillies*. The author in retrospect, from writing his memoir in the present, deems Cuba the cave in Plato’s Allegory, making the refugees “from the world of illusion. What crazy bastards, those cave dwellers” (51). The “real” world was not only the world of The United States, but also the world of accepting one’s position as a refugee. The language of darkness, of caves, of abysses, and voids, later on becomes paramount in *Learning to Die in Miami*.

Moreover, Charles is convinced that Cuba, and by extension, being a Cuban, is to be automatically “lesser” than Americans because of the materials of this new place. As Charles is bewildered by the sight of entire rows dedicated to cereal boxes in supermarkets, unimaginable



flavors of soda pop, the flickering neon lights of gas stations, the ingenious ball return at the Westchester bowling alley, and even the garbage disposal in the Chait's kitchen sink, he sees these signs of American progress as signs of Cuban regression. In *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, the reader is given snapshots of life under Soviet Communism on the Island. Not only are we privy to the businesses that shut down, but we are also given accounts by Carlos of food rations (and subsequent imprisonments of family friends who were found "guilty" of giving a neighbor extra milk), the change of currency, and the poorly manufactured gasoline imported from the Soviet Bloc that dripped goop onto the asphalt streets of Havana. The capitalistic and materialistic empire that was The United States led Charles to conform to the misunderstanding that Cubans really were savages. Detesting his roots, Charles goes to many lengths to finally shed his "tail" and regenerate a new one with no existing records of *Carlos Nieto*. However, much to his dismay, he is unable to shake the Cuban out of him. This "recalcitrant Cubanness" frustrates Charles in extreme proportions, causing him to break into a fit of crying when exasperatedly attempting to convey to no avail that he did not eat poultry during his twelfth birthday dinner, and it begins to widen the tear between the dimension of place and of "The Void of Oblivion." Charles' furor awakens, passing the first Stage of Grief (denial), obfuscating his ability to grasp a sense of self by overwhelming him with hatred for The Fatherland. While the author never explicitly refers to his birthplace as a Motherland or as a Fatherland, Cuba is gendered and rendered paternal in this phase of Charles' trauma, as his rancor and melancholy are indelibly associated with his father. An earlier instance of this self-loathing being invoked is when Federico, the only other Cuban boy in the Chait's neighborhood, defaces a neighbor's pool:



“Whatever one lone Cuban might do is a reflection of what any Cuban is capable of doing. One jerk, two jerks, six million jerks. It’s a geometric progression unlike any other on earth: One bad Cuban makes all Cubans look bad, especially on foreign soil. ‘*Coño que mierda,*’ shouted Carlos from his grave, not even caring that one single utterance of the word *coño* was enough to transport him from the planet Vertigo to hell, forever and ever. When your own people betray you, the only right thing to do is to spew forth the worst words of all, even to shout them as loudly as possible, again and again, until the sound of them fills the whole earth and makes the mountains crumble. When your own body betrays you, it’s one thing. A big nose, or buckteeth, or vertigo are not your fault. You can chalk it up to biology and a crummy set of genes. But when your own people betray you, it’s a whole different ball game, because they make you hate yourself with a passion, simply for being one of *them.*” (68-69)

The inability to completely shed *Carlos Nieto* enrages Charles when he catches himself realizing how much he missed the taste of salty *tostones* and the sound of Spanish when family friends from Cuba, The Becquers, pick him and Tony up for a weekend at their “house” (essentially a “shotgun shack” [73] in the projects for families of Cuban exiles, situated in what would later be known as Little Havana). It is also the first time that Charles witnesses the reality for Cuban refugee families who “have willingly embraced poverty for the sake of freedom and consider it a blessing of sorts to find themselves at the bottom of the heap, and an even greater blessing to know that they will climb their way back to the top, no matter what” (73). Witnessing how he, his brother, and his mother will inevitably live as refugees once-reunited bursts Charles’ “bubble”, created partly because of his stay with the well-to-do Chaites and partly because



Charles did not want to emotionally come to terms with his status as an exile and his identity as a Cuban:

“I went back to the Chait’s after that weekend at the Becquers’ shack feeling odd, less sure of who I really was. Carlos had taken over Charles a bit too intensely. Charles had also realized that maybe there’s a level of comfort among your own that can’t be duplicated among foreigners, no matter how nice they are to you. Squalor has its charms, under the right circumstances, with the right folks.” (75)

However, although it becomes more viable for Charles to suffocate Carlos while living with the Chait’s and while becoming more accustomed to *Gringolandia*, the Void debuts at full-throttle while the Chait’s have left Charles to babysit while they go on a date together.

Although the author describes the Void as a place of indiscernible abstracts and suspenseful ambiguities, the reader can infer that the Void is the “placeholder” and palpably spatial out-of-body experience of enduring a panic attack. Yet, given the language that Eire uses to personify the emotional manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder, the Void is rendered as a place of *internal* exile; this is a mental exile, borne from Charles’ repression of Carlos, and all of the historical, cultural, and familial baggage that Carlos brings on board with him to The United States, which are tightly shut in *The Vault of Oblivion*. Here rests the remains of Carlos, purposefully locked away as a toxic coping strategy, but one that the author contends was all he could manage to do given his need to remain strong-willed and the societal imposition of *machismo*, a hypermasculinity that lingered beyond the shores of his island and onto the terrain of the States. Reaffirmed by Louis Chait when Carlos first breaks out in tears on his twelfth birthday, Charles submits himself to a physical and emotional numbing. He entombs away his



*Cubanness*, yes, but he also entombs away his profound sense of being abandoned by his people, which is only exacerbated by the abandonment of his father, *King Louis XVI*, or Antonio Nieto. An abandonment that first sunk its invasive roots in the fertile soil underneath Carlos' lush childhood in Miramar, his father decided to take in an "urchin off the street and adopting him" (310) by the name of Ernesto. For reasons that remain opaque, Ernesto is chosen to live with the Nietos, and is given preferential treatment by Carlos' father (who is, ironically, a judge), even when he outwardly displays violent and sociopathic tendencies when "rough-housing" with Carlos and his brother. Eventually, Ernesto begins to sexually molest and prey on the two Nieto brothers, who both felt as if they could not come forward to their own father, a fear that stemmed from being labeled *maricones* and from their father choosing Ernesto over them. The trauma of being a rape victim and being the victim of a parent who chose an extensive art collection to hoard, instead of pursuing an escape from Castro's Regime and a reunion with his two sons, transcended Charles' attempts at drowning Carlos. This fear was entrenched in abandonment, and particularly, in being alone in ones out-of-place and out-of-home. In tandem with the young memoirist's "Vault of Oblivion," the Void relinquishes itself on Charles whenever he is left by himself, or whenever he anxiously perceives danger in an unfamiliar setting or situation. In this first instance that the Void swallows Charles whole, his inexperience with panic attacks leaves him with no other choice but to call the Chaitis and interrupt their couple's night out. Charles' inability to communicate with the Chaitis what has happened to him due to the language barrier, and Charles' own sense of self-guilt, only encourages Charles to continue to inappropriately heal by resorting to methods of repression and internalization.



Casey in *Remembering: A Phenomenological Case Study* refers to a quote by the 1980s Art Columnist for The New York Times, John Russell, to ascertain why displacement can be profoundly perturbing and mentally detrimental: “Where am I?, is, after all, one of the most poignant of human formulations. It speaks for an anxiety that is intense, recurrent, and all but unbearable. Not to know where we are is torment, and not to have a sense of place is a most sinister deprivation” (195). Casey claims that this is why, often in our remembering of a place that elicits both the sensation of nostalgia and the sensation of anxiety, we refer to these sites and spaces as our “old haunts” (195). The act of being haunted parallels with the act of The Void engulfing Charles, but as long as he is accompanied in the predominantly White and Jewish Westchester of the 1960s, the shock of losing a sense of Fatherland and father can be, more often than not, safeguarded in The Vault of Oblivion.

Until, of course, the fiasco of The Cuban Missile Crisis and The Bay of Pigs broaden the expanse of the Limbo in which The Lost Nieto Boys fleetly dwell in, barricading their mother yet again from entering The United States. Just as Charles begins to become comfortable with his life in the Chait household (he even begins to dream about having a Bar Mitzvah), enjoying American customs such as “trick or treating,” and with being asked whether or not he has ever ridden a donkey or if he had ever used a toilet prior to coming to Miami in school (99), a social worker uproots the brothers and drives them down Coral Way to central Miami. Blocks from The Orange Bowl and west of the Coral Gables enclave that would be known as Little Havana, Charles and Tony come to live in a foster home. Run by a Cuban couple, the home is smeared with mold, dusted by detritus, smelling of the putrid decay of rotting *platanos* and mice, and is occupied by both older orphans and juvenile delinquents of Cuban descent, who unlike Charles





and Tony, were not raised to be *demasiado finos* (128). Lucy and Ricky Ricardo (as they are jocularly dubbed) are swift in their calculated murder of Charles and in their attempted homicide of Carlos. Infuriated that they came from a privileged background, these new foster parents subjected the Nieto children to near-starvation, thievery, neglect, and routine beatings. They showed no remorse in their outward displays of abhorrence for the two boys. Socioeconomic status contributes again to their “othering” amongst persons of the same nationality and cultural background, just as the Nieto boys endured in the midst of boisterous breadfruit boyhood wars and warring revolutionaries condemning the existence of the “less-than-Cuban” *gusanos*.

As much as Charles tried to strangle his Cuban persona, it naturally and forcibly leaks through in the Spanish-speaking Cuban foster home, where scorpions and cold *café con leche* greet him warmly in the mornings and *malas palabras* lull him to bed at night. Negligence is the parenting method that his new folks know best, and their lack of care for properly nourishing or caring for Carlos and Tony leave them with no choice but to resort to becoming salesmen on Flagler Street. Here, they peddle the Cuban satirical magazine, *Zig-Zag*, to exiles in need of an anti-Castro *broujaja* and voyeuristic Americans. The refugee slums of Little Havana and Downtown Miami become a fountain of unwelcome remembrance of being a Cuban exile, but the few nickels that came from touting door-to-door produced much of the only food that the boys would devour throughout the week before their next laboriously hungry hike atop humid asphalt. Remembering and camouflaging back into the skin of a Cuban was a tactic of survival. As J.E. Malpas in *Place and Experience* contends: “When we come to give content to our own concepts of ourselves and to the idea of our own self-identity, place and locality play a crucial role—our identities are, one can say, intricately and essentially place-bound” (177). The only



time and space where Charles can duct-tape and bind Carlos' soul is in the classroom, where he begins to swoon over the English language through Miss Eastman's records of Broadway musical shows crooning in a Citrus Grove Junior High portable:

“I learn these lyrics because I want to, because they bring me closer to the roots of the new language I've fallen in love with. These words set to music make me feel American. Nothing else has the same hypnotic power, the same ability to fool me into thinking that I could shed my former self completely and leave it behind, flapping, like a lizard's trail when it's pulled off. Lizard trails eventually stop their spastic dance and rot away. That's what I want to happen to Carlos. Living in the *Palacio de las Cucarachas*, being surrounded by Cubans at home, and being called Carlos at school only makes me wish more fervently for a total immolation of my former self... Why couldn't *The Music Man* belong to me, or I to it? Why couldn't I have been born in River City, Iowa or Gary, Indiana? Why couldn't I be named Harold Hill or Meredith Wilson? Why couldn't I just simply erase my past and start all over again, or just give myself a new name and birthplace? Who'd be able to tell? Do I look any different from any other white American? No. Have I ever been branded on the forehead like a slave? No. But I'm branded on the tongue” (159-160).

Enduring the gang-violence that their roommates perpetuate, domestic abuse, and nearly dying due to a bunk bed being purposefully unscrewed, Carlos trudges through with no hope of ever being reunited again with his family, and with high hopes of adopting an American accent.

Writing, literature, history, and Hollywood fuel Carlos with a zany frenetic pulsation, pumping



through him the will to retain the other, to retain Charles, even though Carlos must (temporarily) make an outward appearance.

Constant denial, being in a space devoid of parental fissures, and the passage of time cause Carlos to believe that his origins are “figments of his imagination,” and that his parents are “essentially dead” (169). Again, this notion of literal and figurative deaths of identity and personhood, and in this case of being a Cuban son, is echoed by Casey’s interpretation of the term *old haunts*, though in this case, the old haunts are Carlos’ family and heritage.

There are moments in *Learning to Die in Miami* however, when Carlos is at peace with his displacement, for he briefly forgets that he has been exiled. This psychological visage burgeons from nature in Miami that mirrors that in Cuba, and that mirror the sensation of being held by his mother. These are the “giant trees” and “guardian angels” in Coral Gables, with “trunks of a tangled sinewy mass, a jumble of hundreds of smaller trunks all woven together, each shouting its age, boasting of a superior longevity, laughing at me and every other human being” (113). The way that these trees both remind Carlos of the park he frequented in Havana and their enveloping aesthetics give him the illusion of being pressed to his mother’s chest, *acurrucado* and comforted in her embrace. This is the Miami River where Tony and Carlos “borrow” a rowboat and slosh their way silently upriver in the moonlight, a calm so potent it disregards the dangers of swamp monsters or a seething owner, a calm so engulfing that it can only be beautifully illustrated by his mother’s embrace:

“I don’t have my ear pressed against her chest. I don’t hear the air going in and out of her lungs, which has the same rhythm as the waves that crash against the Malecón. And I certainly don’t hear the sound of that heartbeat, that eternal heartbeat, the sound above all



others, the pulse of the entire universe echoing in her and in me. But I feel the very same calm, the same dissolving of boundaries between me and the pulsating source of life, the same exact sense of total well-being, the certainty that I was born for this moment, which, of course, is eternal. If you can't see yourself or anything else around you, and all you hear is the sound of oars dripping in the river, where do you begin and end? Where are you, and where is the world? Isn't the world in you, and aren't you in the world, each in the other, completely?" (201-202).

These are the brief instances in which Carlos is attuned to his body being out-of-place, a limitless realm where the natural and the supernatural flourish and transcend beyond city boundaries or geographical coordinates. Composed of images and experiences that are intrinsically place-bound, these kaleidoscopic collages of maternal affection, banyan canopies, and the soft whisper of a gentle stream are compounded with demon-slayers and amorphous souls, soothing Carlos with their ability to be familiar and unfamiliar all at once, for who can be displaced in a dream?

Packed and boarded onto yet another plane with *The Imitation of Christ*, new clothes generously donated by a social worker, and cheese that reeks of Charles' "former self" (209), the Nieto brothers are displaced yet again and brought to live with their *Tío Amado*, *Tía Alejandra*, and cousins in Bloomington, Illinois. The author describes the sensation of finally arriving to "the land of snow" as being high on "marijuana *and* cocaine, together" (219), romanticizing the picturesque Hallmark Christmas card that is Bloomington. For Charles, the "true" United States depicted in cherished film reels is the one that embodies Corn Belt suburban aesthetics and demographics; North America is where it is supposed to snow, and this weather condition symbolizes purity and societal progress that was subjectively lacking in Havana (hence, the title



of Eire's first memoir). Charles Nieto dies and is resurrected as *Chuck Nieto*, and finds in his new iteration neither mangoes nor *maduros* nor *arroz con pollo* on Main Street—and, finally, no lizards. Instead, Chuck encounters alleys, maple trees, blondes, multicolored leaves, racial integration, cardinals and blue jays, and familial warmth to replace barren parental attachment. Evidenced throughout both memoirs, the potency of the author's deniability is intensified by the emergence of Chuck, given that Bloomington in 1963 had neither other Cubans nor any features that resembled the Island. He refers to Bloomington as "The Promised Land" and "The Corn Belt Jerusalem" (242), considering himself saved from the clutches of The Void, racism, and stereotyping. It comes as no surprise then, that the chapter following Chuck's first snowfall is entitled "Beyond Number," marking the snowfall as a pivotal moment in Chuck's development and psyche, and as the "ultimate mercy" (245). The chapter, which reads less like a narrative and more like a poem in list-form, is one of the most critical in *Learning to Die in Miami*, for it contextualizes the apple pie Midwestern suburbia that has possessed Chuck. Casey notes how we are possessed by place: "Places possess us—in perception, as in memory—by their radiant visibility, insinuating themselves into our lives, seizing and surrounding us, even taking us over as we sink into their presence" (200). "Beyond Number" whooshes through the seasons and Chuck's first year in Bloomington, compressing fragments of memory, feeling, and growth in self-reflective verse. The most poignant and heart wrenching of these verses from the mind of a thirteen year old are those that conclude the chapter, encapsulating the harrowing profundity and scope of this placial possession:

"Thinking that what's really scary is not the book [*Imitation of Christ*], but the world around you, not because your life is bad, but precisely because your life is so good and



everything you hold dear could be gone in an instant, including that toaster that you use so much, and the table on which it sits, and the house in which you find yourself, and the people in it...

Never, ever dreaming of those you once loved the most” (254).

The chapter, which enumerates the many ways in which life in Bloomington has been full of “perfect things” Chuck “loves being attached to,” ends with Chuck feeling a happiness close to ecstasy because he no longer is haunted by memories of his past life in Cuba or former selves as a Cuban Boy or as a Refugee Boy. The Fatherland is no longer attached to the Father, and the Father is no longer attached to Chuck physically or emotionally. He has buried his anxieties and pains deeply enough in the frosted Vault of Oblivion to comfortably live amidst repudiation, numbness, and being part of the only household in town that speaks Spanish. Carlos and Tony have been “redeemed from bondage, and from a tropical existence” (222), and invariably, from nostalgia or topographical similarities that trigger the abysmal abyss of The Void. Chuck’s possession is so intoxicating and tenacious; it could even be characterized as disillusionment, a self-administered amnesia to treat grief, an engrossing coping mechanism to fabricate a more tolerable reality.

In fact, the perceived emplacement and homesteading instilled by this possession is so compelling for Chuck that, after 1307 days apart, he characterizes his reunion with his mother in Union Station, Chicago as a “thick menacing haze” enwrapping “space and time” (278). And, next to her deathbed, even forty years after this initial embrace, the author ascertains that he was not glad his mother joined him in *Los Estados Unidos* (277). For the arrival of his mother meant relinquishing Charles and Chuck, relinquishing independence, and relinquishing idyllic



Bloomington. Carlos' mother, whom he coins Marie Antoinette, has gone through an earthquake, a hurricane, an emergency surgery, mob attacks, and various embassies to get to her two precious sons, but her arrival marks, above all else, the ultimate end of childhood for the Nieto brothers. Their mother's status as a handicapped refugee woman and "spic" with few marketable skills and even fewer words in English to formulate a sentence, and their father's absence and absentmindedness, demotes Tony and Carlos to being the sole caretakers of their mother. This duty requires Carlos to work over sixty hours a week while in school, in a factory where his fellow workers were all "better off in Cuba, before it became *Castrolandia*" (281), and for Tony to become a high school drop-out, to make ends meet. Carlos describes this death as one that was not sweet, one that did not end with a welcome resurrection. Although it is not clear whether or not the present-day author is narrating this passage, and not the author at thirteen years old, he describes the mortal flame that incinerated Chuck as "still burning" him up (295). The outsider may perceive Carlos' reaction to his mother's devotion as- at best -immature or frigid, but Malpas would characterize this reaction as a Wordsworthian longing for that which Bloomington represented for Carlos:

"The Wordsworthian longing for a secure dwelling-place, one that would not succumb to decay and desertion, is a longing that, while it can be seen to arise out of a keen awareness of the significance of place, also represents and implicit denial of that significance- to seek an escape from the transience and fragility of place is to seek an escape from place itself" (188).

For Chuck, Bloomington represented not only what he had assumed was an iconic American landscape and lifestyle, but also a place where he could disassociate from his former selves and



his former loved ones. Unlike Miami, which was inconveniently Cuban in its geographical characteristics and in the characteristics of its people, Bloomington was distant enough to allow Chuck to acculturate, despite this process of acculturation being psychologically detrimental in the long run, and presumably far-fetched. It was distant enough particularly from his most tormenting demons, those being his father and Ernesto. In “Beyond Number,” the reader is given a keen glimpse at this Wordsworthian longing, as Chuck notes that he fears that the pristine balance and order that life in Bloomington has blessed him with will shatter instantaneously, driving him to categorize the arrival of his mother and uprooting as a sort of destructible quaking force to his meticulously developed alter-persona.

Nevertheless, despite the author’s own harbored bitterness over having to shiftily transition into life as a refugee family at hurricane speeds, in *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, Carlos Nieto legally changes his name to Carlos Eire. The adoption of his mother’s surname is an integral move for the author, for it marks his ability to retain his Cubanness, maintaining the legacy of the parent who never stopped *luchando* for her children and gave them what she thought was best (even if, according to Carlos, it was not always for the best). In this way, Carlos is able to reflect on who he is as a Cuban when referring to his national origin and birth from a Motherland, not a Fatherland, even as he equates his father as being in a place that was inherently out of touch with reality, hence the aptness of the nickname Louis XVI. Casey in *Remembering: A Phenomenological Case Study* signifies the Fatherland as a damnation spurned from nostalgia: “what does matter is that the phenomenon of nostalgia bears mainly on place, the nostalgic person is condemned... to think continually about the Fatherland. In being nostalgic, we are all in the position of these dis-placed conscripts” (201).





As *Learning to Die in Miami* draws to a close, Carlos rushes through the narrative scenes of his bleak young adulthood in Chicago, pausing to reflect during anachronistic vignettes. These scenes include: his mother's body ravaged by polio and Hepatitis C; his worn-down apartment where his mother houses an ever-trickling stream of Cuban refugees; his brother's pill-popping and boozing addiction; his brother's diabetes and schizoaffective anxiety disorder, his victimization from sexual harassment one late night heading home alone. In all of these moments, Carlos notices the consuming presence of his father's absence:

“Yes, damn it, my brother's long sad downward slide and my mom's response to it are tightly and inextricably intertwined with my father's gross non-occurrence. He's a lot like God, my Louis XVI, insofar as he can't be seen but can certainly be felt or simply intuited by reason. But he's totally unlike God, insofar as he never, ever, sends anything good your way. All he can do as a father is haunt our memories and serve as a convenient scapegoat: the efficient cause of everything that's ever gone wrong in our lives.” (283).

Being displaced does not mean becoming detached from the ones remembered in-place, for memory transcends the physical boundaries that contain sites, and Carlos realizes at this final resurrected version of himself that carrying his father in-name with him would only increase the burden of a tangible, visceral, paternal presence and a corporeal absence:

“Very funny. Especially when you know that caterpillars are also *gusanos*. Everyone knows what happens to caterpillars.

But Louis XVI wouldn't laugh at this pun, or get involved in any of the things that need to be done to get us out of Cuba. He did nothing except open his hands and let us fly away. Nothing. He did nothing. There's no denying that, no.



*Nada.*

And we flew away from Limbo, *gusanos* in hand, and he stood there with his hands in his pockets, and we never saw each other again.

And sixteen years after that farewell, after he had already been buried for two years, I turned his surname into a middle initial, N, and began using my mother's surname, Eire, so that it could be the name I would pass on to my children, none of whom had been born yet. I knew he would be proud of me for doing it.

It was the correct thing to do. As right as putting on your shoes before your pants. As right as always wearing socks, no matter what. As right as defending Empress Maria Theresa's reputation. As right as taking an urchin off of the street and adopting him.

As right as letting us go" (309-310).

To be sure, this is an exceptionally long block quote, and I apologize again for its inclusion.

However, to chop it up would be a disservice to the reader, as the quote encompasses a significant and holistic transition in Carlos' emotional and logical maturation. Carlos' phantom limb of a father figure, the squirming severed lizard tail of his youth, could finally be put to rest once he died, surrounded by his feverishly cherished art collection and adopted son. The Cuban Government's seizure of his childhood home in Miramar subsequently thereafter and the pillaging of the prized Nieto legacy- that which had not been pillaged for himself by Ernesto – furthered Carlos' own acceptance and ability to let go of his father's slimy trail and psychologically scarring detritus.

Perhaps this is why the author concludes both of his memoirs with imaginary places, spaces that exist only in his head and his heart, situated in the map of his dreams. One is



illustrated by a “tangerine sunrise, a swirling cloud of parrot fish in the turquoise sea” (382) with waves that never cease, foaming in perpetuity. The other is a Christmas tree farm dotted with perfect snowflakes that never melt, with perfect evergreen branches that remain intact, gleaming into the limits of eternity. These imaginary places have no end and no beginning, no fragmented family or ruptured political structure, no sense of loss or loss of hope. They are comprised of the authors’ most cherished experiences with nature, formed in a past-life on a lizard-shaped Caribbean island or in the landlocked Midwest, existing in the infinite. Ultimately, his sense of belongingness and his notion of home transcend topography, but his identity- and all that it connotes -remains: *Soy Cubano. Cubanus sum* (223).

*Y colorín, colorado, esta tesis se ha acabado.*



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