Spirit in the Cities

Searching for Soul in the Urban Landscape

Kathryn Tanner, editor

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La Habana—The City That Inhabits Me

A Multi-Sites Understanding of Location

Ada María Isasi-Díaz

"Who are the Cubans here?" The authoritarian voice belonged to the government official who headed the project we were visiting. I raised my hand, as did the couple that was hosting our group and the driver of our bus. "Come with me." I got up, but our host, smiling discreetly, said to me, "Not you. He means those of us who live here." I did not feel embarrassed, but I had a sense of being displaced, without a place to call my own. Born and raised in La Habana, Cuba's capital, I have lived feeling that I left my heart there, just as the song says, when I became an *exiliada* at age eighteen. I have lived for decades thinking of the day when I will be able to live again in Cuba. If all of this does not qualify me as a Cuban, what does? What will?

"That is Don Luis," I said to myself. Stopping the car, I jumped out, saying, "Don Luis, what are you doing here?" Six months earlier the

parish had thrown him a goodbye party. He was retiring and was going to do what he always said he would do, move back to Puerto Rico. "*Pues*, things did not turn out the way I expected—and here you have me, back in Rochester, New York."

I had just finished giving a low-key critical analysis of the U.S. economy to a friendly group. I had been asked to give the information needed to those who were gathering signatures opposing congressional plans to end the welfare laws. The third person to ask me a question said, "You speak about the U.S.A. that way because you are not an American." That night I thought to myself, how much more American can I be? I vote in general elections, in primaries and in local elections; I pay city, state, and federal taxes; I enjoy the privileges of living in New York City, I carry a U.S. passport, and my economic fate is tied to that of the United States. But she is right, I admitted to myself in the safety of my bed, in one sense I am not an American. This is not where my first loyalties lie.

Maggie has cut my hair for the last fifteen years. She is beginning to retire. She now works a month, then spends the next one in Puerto Rico where she is building a house. "I hope to be able to move back home for good in two years." Maggie has lived in New York City for more than twenty-five years. Yet her real home has always been her country of origin, that little island in the Caribbean that they call "the island of enchantment." Maybe I will retire to the island where I was born!

At the airport in La Habana, after going through the immigration checkpoint, I notice a group of uniformed persons looking over each one of us going by. Feeling somewhat uncomfortable by what I consider government surveillance—they are from the Ministry of Health—I lower my eyes and try to pass unnoticed. "*¿Se siente bien? ¿Quiere que le tome la presión?*" No, I do not want my blood pressure taken; I am feeling fine. Hearing me answer in Spanish, she says, "*¿De dónde eres?*" I am not prepared for the question. It sticks in my throat, but I finally stutter, "*Soy Americana*," thinking that will exempt me from any tests. "*Pero, ¿dónde tú naciste?*" I tell her I was

born in La Habana. Her whole attitude changes, and drawing me in with a very intimate tone, she says, "*No digas eso; tú eres cubana.*" I want to cry. She is right: I am not an American; I am a Cuban who lives in New York. I want to embrace her and kiss her and broadcast far and wide what she has said. I look at her, and holding back my tears. I say, "*Tienes razón, tienes razón!*" You are so right!

Lupe writes, "I am back from our yearly trip to Texas. Once we are back here in Michigan, we always say that it is too far to keep driving there. But there is something that almost forces us to go. It is as if we need to touch the land where we were born to have the strength to keep living far away from it. I don't know; maybe we are getting old and sentimental, but though right now we are saying we cannot do this again, I know we will. Maybe next time my niece can come and help us with the driving. That way we can show her all the places back there that we are always talking about. That would be so nice!"

I am with a group of students in the Plaza de la Revolución, posing for a picture where Fidel stands to review military parades and speak for hours. All of a sudden I see a man I know from back in the United States walking toward me. We embrace. "What are you doing here?" "I brought a group of students for an immersion experience," I reply. "And you?" "I just had to come at least for a few days. I simply could not stand any longer being away from La Habana."

September 11, 2001. I feel deep sadness. I am not angry; I am just sad. I am so distraught about this human race to which I belong. I am sad.

September 14, 2001. The Manhattan bridges are open, and I drive to work in New Jersey. Coming back, I am anxious to get to the point in the highway where I can see the city: first the Empire State Building and then, looking south, the Twin Towers. I slow down and pull to the side to take a good look. There is the Empire State. Further south: just smoke.

October 25, 2001. Today was the first time the smoke over southern Manhattan was light enough for me to see the gaping hole in the horizon where the Twin Towers used to be. Great sadness comes over me. "How could they do this to this city?" No, wait. I did not say "this city." I said "my city"!

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*Para Ana Velford**
Lourdes Casal

Pero Nueva York no fue la ciudad de mi infancia
But New York was not the city of my infancy
no fue aquí que adquirí las primeras certidumbres
it was not here that I grasped truth for the first time
no está aquí el rincón de mi primera caída
the corner where I first fell is not here
ni el silbido lacerante que marcaba las noches.
or where I heard the piercing whistle that signaled night.
Por eso siempre permaneceré al margen,
This is why I will always remain at the margins,
una extraña entre estas piedras,
a stranger among these stones,
aún bajo el sol amable de este día de verano,
even under the kind sun of this summer day,
como ya para siempre permaneceré extranjera
just as I will always remain a foreigner
aún cuando regrese a la ciudad de mi infancia.
even when I return to my childhood city.
Cargo esta marginalidad inmune a todos los retornos,
I carry this marginality that is immune to all returns,
demasiado habanera para ser neoyorkina,
too much from La Habana to be a New Yorker,
demasiado neoyorkina para ser,
too much a New Yorker to be,
—aún volver a ser—
—even to be again—
cualquier otra cosa.
any other thing.

*This poem was originally published in a literary magazine called *Areíto* (New York) 3, no. 1 (verano 1976): 52. It was later published posthumously in *Palabras juntan revolución* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1981).

Displaced or "Multi-Sites" Persons

As we move ahead into the twenty-first century, where do we turn to find elements with which to create a *proyecto histórico*—a historical project—that will move us from terrorism to biblical neighborliness, from frustration to possibilities, from unfulfilled wants to the resources we need to satisfy them? The future that we need to create to make these moves possible is indeed utopian—not utopian in the popular sense of a chimerical dream, but in the sense of being a reality that "is not but yet will be." The *mujerista proyecto histórico,* or feminist historical project, referred to here is precisely that: a utopian project that seeks to embody the preferred future of many Hispanas/Latinas living in the United States.[1] This *mujerista proyecto histórico* works as a motivator and organizing framework for our hopes for fullness of human life-liberation, which is the criterion and hermeneutical lens of all *mujerista* praxis. Our *proyecto* refers to a reality we are working to create: a concrete reality in a given place, with specific contours and content, having as its guiding principle the firm commitment that no one will be excluded.[2] The goal of our *proyecto* is to change radically, little by little, the oppressive society in which we live into a society from which no one is excluded.

When I refer to a Hispanas/Latinas *proyecto histórico,* I am talking not only about a vision of a preferred future but also about a whole spectrum of "utopian work," which in many small ways has already started: formulating utopian plans, delineating utopian processes, enabling utopian projects, creating utopian spaces and institutions. I am referring here to projects that include among their goals contributing in specific and effective ways to the material well-being of the poor, which will not happen apart from a radical change in the economic structures of most of our world. I am referring to programs and institutions that are run and administered in ways that contribute to the empowerment of Hispanas/Latinas, including us not only in their implementation but also in conceptualizing them. This means that the way society operates will include the way Hispanas/Latinas "do things," which does not obviate our cultural values and ways of understanding reality. Hispanas/Latinas' utopian projects are those that are conceptualized as ways of enabling our fullness of human life-liberation in a way that does not exclude others or is not at the expense of others.

There are many elements at play in a utopian project, in a *proyecto histórico.* Here I want to concentrate only on one, a key one: the social human person who needs to relate to others and needs to be keenly aware that we live and move and have our being within and in relation to the rest of creation, in relation to the cosmos.[3] I want to concentrate on the human person who understands herself in relation to her community and to those beyond her community, a person who needs and is creating a different world. Basing my reflection on the reality of lived experiences and understandings embedded in the stories above (and they are but a handful of a possible flood of stories), I want to talk here about the Hispanic/Latino people—particularly about Hispanas/Latinas—as "displaced" people.[4] For economic or political reasons, either as migrants or refugees, Hispanas/Latinas have had to leave our places of origin—abroad or in the United States—to look for another place to call home.[5] Little by little we learn that once we leave home we never settle down completely. Hispanas/Latinas are always on the move, creating a constant "from there to here" that results in living in many places but never fully being at home. This "from there to here" is also part of our multiple, shifting identities, a fluid social ontology[6] that is one of the constitutive elements of *mestizaje/mulatez*, the racial-ethnic-cultural-historical-religious reality that is the locus of the Hispanic/Latino community in the United States.[7]

Several clarifications are needed about using the word "displaced" in relation to Hispanas/Latinas. What shall we say about the largest group of Hispanas/Latinas, the Mexican American women who are not physically displaced, who live in the United States, the country where they were born and where their families have lived for generations? What about other Hispanas/Latinas, the second, third, and fourth generations born in the United States? All these, in my view, are displaced persons, for I am using "displaced" not as a category but as a heuristic device to describe how Hispanas/Latinas are displaced from our cultures/countries of origin as well as from what is normative in the United States.

As a heuristic device, displaced points to our permanent condition of living in the interstices of society. It reflects the condition of dissonance that we struggle to turn into a positive element in our thinking and way of acting. Otherwise we would have to submit to understandings and practices that exclude us. "Displaced" refers to the sense of not belonging that is part of our conscious selves. "Displaced" refers to what we have brought with us and hold on to, letting this richness evolve and be transformed as needed, even as we displace ourselves from our communities/countries of origin and are denied a full place in mainstream U.S. society.

Since our *proyecto* is *histórico*—material—I have chosen to use the word "displaced" as a heuristic device to point to its physical reality, to indicate that our *proyecto* is a *topos* and not a non-place. Hispanas/Latinas' *proyecto histórico* has a geographic base: we were displaced from somewhere concrete, and our "original" selves—our *first* selves as well as our *creative* selves—continue to be displaced, not only from our origins, but also from our current home (even if it is our birthplace). The preferred future we are creating is likewise to be viewed as a "space." It is turning our displaced-ness into a "multi-sites" space/place that includes both where we come from and where we are—both of which are in themselves many places that harbor spaces. We are working to create our multi-sites *proyecto histórico* here where we live, in the United States. We are also helping to create a multi-sites *proyecto histórico* in our communities and countries of origin.

What does our "displaced-ness" contribute to the creation of our Hispanas/Latinas *proyecto histórico*? I want to suggest that we bring four gifts to this utopian project—each of them subdividing into whole baskets of gifts. The first gift is the lived experience mentioned above. The community, city, country in which each of us lives is never single site: it is always a multi-sites place. This is one of the main characteristics of the twenty-first century that enriches humanity. I call it globality. Globality is not globalization, which is that ideological stance concerning modes of production and consumption that oppress and marginalize most of our world. Globality refers to the interconnectedness of all areas of our world, of all spheres of our world—ecological, animal, human—and of all the

people in our world. Hispanas'/Latinas' "displaced-ness" reminds others, as well as ourselves, that economic and political isolation are impossible in today's world. To talk about ourselves as displaced persons indicates that we have to take responsibility for the consequences of our actions, for they spread out like ripples that reach every corner of a pond.[8]

The second gift we displaced people offer is our understandings and ways of thinking about life and the fullness of human life-liberation: understandings that emerge from our cultures and countries of origin. These conceptions enrich the places where we have arrived, the spaces where we hope to be safe and to fully belong. This implies, of course, that there is a multiplicity of truths that can coexist in one same physical-historical-political-social space. This is indeed possible as long as none of these truths sets itself as arbiter of the other truths. The multiple conceptions of life and fullness of human life-liberation that exist indicate this is not a static concept but a principle that can become flesh in many different ways. Our second gift, then, has to do with making this claim in the face of hegemonic understandings of "the good" prevalent in the United States. If taken seriously, our gift can help to counter the violence created by the claim that the United States is the best country in the world and that if others would only do as is done here, they will flourish.

The third gift we bring to our *proyecto histórico* is that of "dangerous memory": we must never forget where we came from.[9] Why not? I could allude here to all sorts of psychological and sociological reasons, but I will refer only to a religious one since it is the most important for me. I believe that we are not born in a given country or to a given mother and father in a haphazard way. I claim that there is a purpose for my having been born in Cuba, to my Díaz mom and my Isasi dad. And this purpose, for me, is linked to my understanding of the divine and to what is, for me, life and fullness of human life-liberation.[10] What was, what is, the purpose? As I analyze how my life has evolved, it appears to me that at least a part of it has to do with reminding the United States that this country has done harm to Cuba,[11] for example, by imposing on the original Cuban constitution an offensive and demeaning amendment

that gave the U.S. government the right to invade Cuba whenever the order—as the U.S. interests saw it—was endangered.[12] Remembering and making known the oppressive and exploitative ways in which the United States has dealt with (and still deals with) our cultures and countries of origin will remind Hispanas/Latinas that our *proyecto histórico* is not a matter of our participation in oppressive structures but rather of replacing those structures with all-inclusive structures. Dangerous memories help us keep this perspective clear. Dangerous memories do not have an accusatory tone, nor do they indicate a relishing of the past for the past's sake. Dangerous memories make the past present so that we will not repeat the crimes of the past, so that we will continue to seek ways of organizing ourselves socially, economically, and politically that allow fullness of life to flourish for all.

The fourth gift that displaced Hispanas/Latinas bring is recognizing the danger of closure inherent in all utopian projects. Once a preferred future begins to unfold and to take hold *in* our reality and *of* our reality, how do we refrain from closing ourselves to other possibilities? And if we do not remain open, how can we claim that we are not excluding anyone? How do we move from the either/or that a preferred future is thought to need—for if it remains always open to change, it never becomes a concrete reality—to a both/and that affirms our choice but continues to contemplate the possibility of evolving and even radically changing as others seek to be included?[13] I believe that we displaced persons who live in the geographic-cultural interstices formed by our back-and-forth movement, we who carry constantly with us the preoccupations and dreams of those others (and those others include us as well as the people back home) who are excluded from life and fullness of human life-liberation, we are a reminder of the danger of closure. We are a reminder that closure can never be definitive and final, for we represent the excluded.

To be able to present these gifts as part of a preferred future, we Hispanas/Latinas have to ground ourselves in our own space, our own reality. Why? First of all, to ground ourselves thus helps us not to idealize our communities or countries of origin. Part of this process of idealization is, I believe, a defense mechanism against

the United States' habitual undervaluing of all other nations and cultures.[14] We counter it by telling ourselves and others "tall tales" and romanticizing the places we came from. At the same time, we always need to renew our knowledge so as not to freeze in the past our communities or countries of origin. Just as we have changed in the time we have been away, our people and the culture back there have also evolved. Space and time—distance—make us long for what we have known, tricking us into thinking that the past was better than the present, and insisting that we hold on to what was.[15] As a countermeasure, we need to stay in touch with what is new in our communities/countries of origin by reinserting ourselves there as often as possible. Third, we need to realize how enticing are the privileges and benefits of U.S. society. The myth that anyone who really wants to can prosper in this country is extremely powerful—though no less of a myth because of that. Therefore, staying close to our communities and countries of origin can be an antidote to the desire to "make it" here, a needed antidote since success in the First World is always—to some degree—at the expense of Hispanas/Latinas or other Third World people. To "make it" we have to participate in present oppressive structures. Only if we stay close to our origins, only if we continue to experience ourselves as displaced, will we stand against oppressive structures and work to radically change them.

This idea of keeping in physical proximity to our communities and countries of origin is almost instinctive in the Hispanic community. Our people do everything to return home as often as possible, whether home is Cuba, Texas, or Puerto Rico. And if we fail to return alive, the community will make sure that at least we are buried back home.[16]

What are the cultural realities that hold us and, at the same time, send us forth—that inhabit us?[17] What concrete realities have been harmed, and are being harmed, by the marginalizing and exploitative attitudes prevalent in the United States toward our communities and countries of origin? How do these same attitudes affect us here in the United States? To know the reality of our sites of origin necessitates our seeing them with our own eyes and experiencing them with our own flesh.[18] For me, for example, this means return-

ing to La Habana, analyzing La Habana. What about La Habana do I need to make present in the United States? What can I learn from La Habana that will be beneficial in the construction of our *proyecto histórico*? How will the immediacy of being in La Habana help me evade total closure? How will it help me invent ways of remaining open to future possibilities while making a firm commitment to a specific future for Hispanas/Latinas in the United States?[19]

The descriptions of places and ways of life in La Habana that follow are an attempt to give specifics regarding the meaning of being grounded in the physical reality—the geography—of one's community, one's country, of origin. These descriptions offer "outsiders" important insights into the above questions, which are essential to me as a displaced person and which provide, if not answers, at least clues. My hope as a displaced person is that readers will also appropriate at least some of what I describe, making changes as needed because of differences between La Habana and whichever place the reader calls home, but allowing my description of La Habana to challenge and expand their horizons.

La Habana— The City That Witnessed My Birth

The sea that I was imagining more than seeing was an undefined gray mass way down there. Only slightly more than half an hour had passed since takeoff from Miami when I saw dim lights. I knew that in no time I would be landing for the first time in twenty-seven years in my homeland, in the land of my birth, infancy, and youth. I was not scared nor was I apprehensive. Indeed, what I felt was an immense desire to be back in Cuba. I had enormous expectations of reconnecting physically with my birthplace.

A huge sign with the name of the airport, the same one I had seen from the window of my departing airplane in 1960, now seemed to spell "Welcome." There was no jetway connecting the airplane to the terminal. I came down the stairs of the airplane with great intentionality, quietly but decisively claiming the right to be home regardless of the fact that the government of Cuba, even today, erects

obstacles to this right. So many thoughts were crowding my mind; so many emotions were caught between my chest and my throat! I felt so much a stranger in that airport, surrounded by what seemed an inordinate number of uniformed people given the small number of travelers arriving that morning. But I also had a profound sense that I belonged there. I wanted so much to feel at home.

Volunteering to be the first in our group to face the immigration officer, I stepped up to the window. My U.S. passport shows I was born in La Habana, but he still had to ask. "Go to the end of the line so I can process the rest of the people, and then I will take care of your papers," he said. Some document I needed—who knows what!—was missing. My traveling companions, fellow seminarians, agreed to be processed and to meet me on the other side of the door. While I waited alone, leaning against the wall, I could not help feeling a bit scared, but it was mostly sadness that I felt at being required to present so much documentation, to seek permission before being able to walk the streets of my native city, La Habana, to get my passport stamped. Finally the officer called me back. I had to go to some government agency in La Habana. "You will not be allowed to leave the country if you do not have that stamp," he warned me. (When I left Cuba two weeks later, the immigration officer never looked in my passport for the stamp I had dutifully gotten that first day in La Habana.)

The moment the minibus in which we were traveling left the airport parking lot and turned left, I knew where we were: I could have driven us to La Habana! That gave me an enormous sense of relief, for I had wondered how accurate my memories were. No, I was not a stranger. I was home—and even if that sense of belonging was to be tested and even marred during my two weeks in Cuba, my time there confirmed my conviction that, though I hold American citizenship and live in New York City, I am a Cuban and the city of La Habana inhabits me.

After that first trip back to Cuba, I did not return for ten years. Then, starting in 1997, I have been able to go and actually work there every year. La Habana has changed much during these seven years, and I certainly see it through very different eyes than I did that first time I went back. What has not changed, however, is my

feeling of being at home in La Habana. Regardless of the fact that I do not live there, despite the fact that I do not earn a living there and that my family does not live there, despite having to petition for an entry permit every time I go and being allowed to stay for only a month (to stay longer I have to petition and pay for an extension of my visa), despite the fact that the U.S. dollars in my pocket make my life while there different from that of the majority of Cuban people who have no access or very limited access to hard currency—despite all of this, I walk endlessly around La Habana knowing this is my city, reveling in the fact that I am more Cuban than anything else.

Aeropuerto Internacional José Martí is fifteen miles from La Habana. Often when I arrive in La Habana, instead of going north into the city, I go further south. The mother of the friend who always picks me up at the airport lives in Santiago de las Vegas, a nearby small town, and I go visit her. The people there who have to go into La Habana face one of the most difficult parts of everyday living: transportation. Before 1990, subsidies and favorable trading terms with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe allowed a good public transportation system that linked all areas of La Habana. However, when the economic help came to an end with the unraveling of the USSR and the radical changes in governments and economic systems in Eastern Europe, gasoline—which had been rationed even before—became almost nonexistent. This, together with the lack of spare parts for buses that had been imported from the Soviet camp, brought the system of public transportation to a virtual halt. Though the system is now back on its feet, Cubans have to face long waits in the tropical heat and, when the bus finally comes, they pile in like the proverbial sardines in a can.[20]

Taxis provide another means of transportation, some of them for tourists carrying U.S. dollars and others for Cubans. The latter ones, most of them "vintage cars" from pre-1959, crowd in as many passengers as possible, picking up and dropping people along a set route. On Cuba's roads and streets, one sees every imaginable motor-driven or human-propelled contraption with wheels: bicycles—most of the time with two or even three riders—"rickshaws" for one or two persons, motorcycles with sidecars. Although less in

La Habana than elsewhere, one sees every sort of animal-pulled cart imaginable, some fitted with benches and roofs to protect against the sun. Then there is hitchhiking—*coger botella*. Everyone, young and old, women and men, tries to get a ride with anyone going by. In the main streets of La Habana, at all hours, but particularly when it is time to go to work and return home, people stand on both sides of the streets and even in the middle, between the rows of cars. One of my friends still gives rides to people in her Russian-made Lada. Another one stopped doing so after the number of people who crowded in ruined the back doors and seat of her car.

Why is it that Cubans cannot buy new cars? Of course, much has to do with the fact that what they earn, not only now but during these last forty-five years, has never been enough to allow them to save to buy a car. But there is also another reason: the government did not want some to have what others could not, the idea being to try to make everyone equal. I am not sure whether one would need special permission to buy a new car. But just to make sure this is not possible, the sales tax on a new car is 100 percent. Instead of buying new cars, therefore, Cubans keep recycling cars and constructing them from pieces salvaged from others or made from scratch. I have traveled in a car that had a pre-1959 American body, motor parts from a Russian-made Lada, and other parts salvaged from a Russian-made Moscovich. Drivers must have available on demand their sales receipts and government permits for the various parts comprising their cars. Policemen stop them randomly just to check them.

After visiting my friend's mother, I go a few miles farther south to an area where there are several military camps, to El Cacahual. I have made this a required stop for myself and those I take to Cuba. There, in an elevated spot from which one can see the whole city of La Habana, is a huge rotunda the size of a football field. It contains the tomb of Antonia Maceo, one of the heroes of Cuba's War of Independence fought against Spain starting in 1895.[21] Next to him is buried his aide-de-camp, Francisco Gómez Toro. I go there for the view of La Habana and to reminisce, for this was a site where we used to go for school outings. I go there to remember the mother of Maceo, Mariana Grajales, the Cuban "mother of the Maccabees," for

history and myth tell us how she encouraged each of her sons to be willing to die for Cuba's independence.[22] However, the main reason I go there is to keep in mind that Cuban history predates 1959 and the triumph of the revolution of which Fidel (as we Cubans call Castro) was one of the leaders.

The other place I go before heading into La Habana is El Rincón. There I visit the Santuario de San Lázaro, one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Cuba. San Lázaro is the patron saint of the sick, and his feast is on December 17, when some fifty thousand devotees come to give thanks to the saint and ask for new favors. This was one of the places visited by Pope John Paul II when he came to Cuba in January 1998. The story of San Lázaro says a great deal about the relationship between the official theology and liturgy of the Catholic church and Cubans' popular religion. The latter is not church-based, definitely not church-sanctioned, and very much mixed with Santería, a Cuban version of the Lucumí religion the Yoruba slaves brought from Africa to Cuba when it was still a colony of Spain. Catholicism provides the iconography used in Santería while the Lucumí religion provides the deities. The Catholic saints are seen as incarnations or representations of the Yoruba *orishas* and provide a cover for religious practices officially banned. So San Lázaro is the *orisha* Babalú-Ayé. But this is not the only sleight of hand going on here at this Catholic church. As you approach the Santuario, you notice that the statues of San Lázaro being sold in the street are of a man on crutches and covered with sores. However, the image of San Lázaro inside the church is that of a bishop. The San Lázaro to which Cubans are devoted is the lame, sore-ridden beggar in Jesus' parable of the rich man who refused to help Lázaro, the beggar at his door.[23] In the Catholic church, saints are persons who have lived virtuous lives and are proposed to the faithful as exemplars; thus, with the liturgical reforms of the 1960s, the church removed the statues of the man in crutches from its altars. But when the people simply would not stop praying to San Lázaro, the church began to promote in Cuba another St. Lazarus, a bishop who was in its roster and whom lepers and victims of the plague in Europe had invoked centuries ago.[24]

Once we light candles to San Lázaro in thanksgiving for the good things that have come into our lives and in appeal for help with the difficult things, my friend and I are ready for the drive into La Habana. Shortly after leaving El Rincón, we see Los Cocos, Cuba's first sanatorium to house people infected with HIV/AIDS. In the early 1980s, Cuba started massive testing of its population and quarantined everyone who was HIV-positive. HIV/AIDS was seen as "a health problem/public health problem with human rights dimensions rather than a social problem/human rights problem with health repercussions."[25] By 1994, when mandatory testing was stopped, nearly all of the adult population had been tested. Mandatory confinement, from the perspective of the Cuban government, an attempt to stem the spread of AIDS and to provide the best care to those who were sick, was seen by many as a violation of human rights. Since 1993 patients can choose to live in the sanatoria—there are several others in the island besides Los Cocos—or at home. The sanatoria serve now as residences for HIV/AIDS patients as well as outpatient facilities. "Community-based education, case finding, and treatment are now being stressed." At present, "infection rates are slowly rising. . . . HIV infection among the homosexual population constitutes the fastest increase, as well as spread through prostitution. The expanding tourist industry has created new channels of spread of the virus."[26]

The road into La Habana houses numerous light industries, and it is one of the few places with commercial billboards. Almost all billboards feature slogans and quotes from Fidel encouraging people to remain faithful to the revolution. One of the students I took to Cuba decided to write down all the billboard slogans we saw, convinced that he could piece together from them a pretty accurate picture of the ideology of the government. He was right! Billboards often picture dead heroes of the revolution, particularly Che Guevara, the Argentinean doctor who fought against the dictator Batista; Camilo Cienfuegos, a popular leader who fought with Fidel and Che and who was killed in a mysterious airplane crash shortly after Fidel came to power in 1959; and Julio Antonio Mella, a student leader, one of the founders of the Cuban Communist Party, murdered in Mexico while in exile in the 1920s.

The old two-lane highway that brings us into La Habana ends at a huge fountain, now without water, that serves as a traffic circle. To the right is the old Palacio de Los Deportes, and behind it a huge sports complex with other stadiums and sport fields. Ahead of us is the Plaza de la Revolución with an imposing statue of José Martí, the father of our country, as centerpiece.[27] The tower behind the statue is the highest point in La Habana, and at present it houses a splendid museum of Martí; the top of the tower has windows from which one can see fifty miles in all directions. At the base of the statue and tower is a massive review stand and podium from which Fidel addresses the masses. I went to the Plaza in 2000, on one of Cuba's main holidays, Labor Day—celebrated on May 1—at the height of the Elián affair.[28] Though in the past the celebration consisted of military parades and Fidel's endless speeches, recently the festivities have changed. The year I was there, the atmosphere was like a party, with music and poetry readings, dances with flags, and, as always, a long speech by Fidel. That day I moved around the crowd watching intensely the faces of the people. Certainly there were some who were enthusiastically participating, but there were many who waved their Cuban paper flags and repeated slogans on cue without much *ánimo*—fervor. These mass gatherings are obligatory. Workers report to their jobs, children and youth to their schools, and, after attendance is taken, they are bused to the Plaza. In his speeches, Fidel instructs the people, announces policy changes and government programs, interprets national and international events, and "consults" the people, something he has done since he first entered La Habana triumphantly on January 8, 1959, days after Batista had fled. That day, during a long speech, Fidel "announced he had a question for the 'people,' thereby inaugurating a new approach to the art of governance: a dialogue with the masses, through which they would affirm his policies by chanting responses to his 'questions.' Soon he would call it 'direct democracy . . . of the marketplace,' cleaner and more honest than the old-fashioned corrupt electoral procedures of the past."[29] Undoubtedly Fidel's government by rhetoric is without precedent, and it has proven to be effective, being one of the main reasons for the staying power of his government.

As one travels around La Habana, one often sees long lines of people in front of stores waiting their turn to buy the limited goods available. The long lines have existed since the early 1960s, but they have grown longer since the beginning of the "Período Especial," the "Special Period in a Time of Peace," an unprecedented austerity plan announced by Fidel in January 1990. The government had to take strong measures in 1993 and 1994 to stop Cuba's economy from shrinking any further (between 1989 and 1993 the "economy shrunk 35 to 50 percent"[30]). One such measure was the legalization of the U.S. dollar, allowing "free markets for agricultural products and light consumer durables."[31] Despite these and other changes, feeding a family in Cuba today is a heroic deed requiring immense patience, dogged perseverance, limitless time, and a huge dose of Cuban ingenuity. I have eaten lobster at a friend's house, because the day I came to visit, someone knowing she has access to dollars came to her door selling lobster tails, though it is illegal both to fish and sell lobsters. I often have *café con leche* for breakfast, because my friends get milk from *campesinos* who either sell it illegally or buy powdered milk in the black market: milk is permissible in Cuba only for children under seven, the elderly, and people on diets because of health problems. The best bananas I have ever eaten are grown by one of my friends in her backyard where she also keeps chickens. When driving outside La Habana, I have learned to keep my eyes open for fresh cheese and garlic sold by *campesinos* who do not approach your car until they are sure you are not a government official stopping to confiscate their goods and impose a stiff fine for selling without a government permit.

I have stood in line outside a store where one has to pay with dollars to buy food to contribute to the family that was hosting me. Those in line with me—the line was needed because of the crowds—were quiet and somber, a total reversal of the loudness and lightheartedness of Cubans. I spent a long time pretending to examine merchandise on a shelf near the checkout counter so I could observe what people bought and how they paid for it. Most of them bought small quantities of food, often imported canned goods and toiletries, and they paid generally with one-dollar bills.

My friends later explained that most of these bills were tips from tourists staying at the nearby hotel or simply money the people who knew how had hustled. I have also gone with friends to the "agros"—the agricultural markets where one finds cheap produce, pork, and chicken in government-subsidized stalls, and more expensive—and better—goods at stalls where one buys directly from the campesinos and pays a higher price. Quantity and variety are not much of a problem in these markets, but obviously many Cubans cannot afford to buy there. Then how do Cubans manage to eat? Since 1962 when food rationing was begun, *la libreta*—the rationing book—has allowed each person to buy for pennies a certain amount of staple products, such as rice, beans, coffee, lard, cooking oil, household detergent, soap, and matches. But often many of these staples simply are not available or are not available in the quantity allowed, and Cubans complain constantly about the bad quality of what they get. Some items, such as cooking oil, household detergents, and soap have been missing for a long time. People get whatever is available, and then the process of exchanging what one has for what one needs begins.[32] Something still available every day is a small, very glutinous bread roll, one per person. I always smile when I eat one, remembering that the daughter of a friend of mine baptized them *"pan del Comandante"*—bread given by *"el Comandante,"* as Fidel is called.[33]

That first time I went back to La Habana in 1987, after an early breakfast at the old Habana Hilton, now the Habana Libre, when the driver turned right onto Calle 23, I knew that in seconds we would be in El Malecón—a winding avenue by the sea, six lanes wide and five miles long, starting in La Habana Vieja—the old city—and ending at the Río Almendares, the river where the other municipality of metropolitan La Habana begins. El Malecón, which refers to the avenue as well as to the seawall, was designed as a jetty wall by a Cuban architect in 1857 while Cuba was still a Spanish colony, but its construction was not started until 1902, when Cuba was a U.S. military protectorate. It took fifty years to complete. The wall is about three feet high and two feet wide, providing one long continuous *"sofá"* for the delight of all. All along the wall one can see the remains of square baths hewn from the rocks, "about 12 feet square and six to eight feet deep, with rock steps for access and a couple portholes through which the waves of this tideless shore wash in and out."[34]

On the other side of the avenue, El Malecón has many faces, many personalities. The first section of the avenue borders on La Habana Vieja with its colonial buildings on one side and the very narrow entrance of La Habana's bay on the other.[35] The second zone of El Malecón starts at El Prado—a kilometer-long boulevard with a tree-lined park running down the middle—and finishes at the "Parque Maceo." This section of El Malecón, about a mile long, is called the "traditional Malecón," and it is lined with stunningly beautiful residential buildings in great disrepair.[36] This "long urban façade wall, with a continuous pedestrian arcade"[37] is now under reconstruction. The centerpiece of the park where this section ends is a huge statue of Antonio Maceo on horseback. The third part of El Malecón ends at Calle 23, in El Vedado—one of La Habana's main sectors. In this area there is a noticeable variety in the sizes and styles of the residential buildings and there are some businesses, including a European car dealership. The fourth zone starts on a rocky promontory on top of which sits the Hotel Nacional, a beautiful 1930s building with Moorish-influenced architecture. Other more modern hotels might be more attractive to tourists, but for Cubans El Hotel Nacional continues to be the "grand dame." At the foot of the small cliff is the Monumento al Maine, in honor of those who died when the American warship exploded and sank in La Habana's harbor in 1898, providing the excuse for the United States to declare war on Spain.[38] The next structure on El Malecón is a park recently constructed specifically for demonstrations against the United States, next to a modern glass structure that used to be the U.S. Embassy but is now the U.S. Interest Section. Next to this tall building are some beautiful private homes set further back from the ocean. The fifth and last zone of El Malecón starts at the Monument to Calixto García, another hero of the Cuban War of Independence. Two hotels and what used to be a private social club dominate this zone. The houses and residential buildings in this area are also set further back from the sea. The Malecón ends with a military fortress—

today it houses a restaurant—built to protect La Habana from the west in the eighteenth century. The road at this end disappears into a tunnel under the Río Almendares, coming out on the other side as a beautiful boulevard named Fifth Avenue.

The physical description anchors what El Malecón represents and the role it plays for La Habana and its residents. El Malecón has been described as the "gateway" of La Habana, and it certainly is a symbol and, in many ways, a synthesis of the city. El Malecón serves as a porch for many of La Habana's residents. Children play and ride their bikes on its wide sidewalk and leave their clothes with their parents while they bathe in the sea. This is a favorite place for lovers—young and old—and for thinkers. Fishermen try their luck here, and it is a place where one can safely discuss politics, for the sea drowns voices. The houses bordering El Malecón might have belonged to people of economic means, but *el muro del Malecón*, the wall of El Malecón, is a democratic place from which no one is excluded.[39] When I talk about La Habana as the city that inhabits me, the first image that comes to my mind is that of El Malecón, and the description that I first think of is my mother's. She went on a cruise to Panama for her honeymoon in the 1920s. The ship returned at night, and I remember my mother telling us that the lights along El Malecón were like a string of pearls around La Habana.

Being a Displaced/Multi-Sites Person

La Habana is the city that inhabits me most fully. It is not the only city that inhabits me, because as a displaced person, I am a multi-sites person. However, La Habana is undoubtedly the city that provides most of the resources for my "imaginary," for my gaze into the present and the future, and a main point of reference in how I position myself in relation to the past.[40] Going to La Habana is a way of refurbishing—renovating, renewing, revamping—my resources for day-to-day living *(lo cotidiano)*. Though as a multi-sites person I do not belong fully in La Habana, the ways I do feel at home in La Habana renew my desire to make the United States, where I spend most of my time, a place I can also call home. Being in La Habana

gives me new impetus for the struggle *(la lucha)* to create a *mujerista proyecto histórico* where La Habana as well as the United States will be home for me. Having walked the streets of the city where I was born and grew up, I return to New York more sure of who I am, less foreign to myself. Many parts of me that in the United States mark me as foreign, make me in Cuba simply "part of the bunch." The centering or grounding that being in La Habana gives me in many ways makes me a better U.S. citizen, for I return here with a renewed vigor for life, for my work, and for the multiple commitments that mark my life.

Every time I go to La Habana I go with preoccupations and questions that emerge, as they always do, from what is happening in my life, from my interpretation of world events, from my commitment to issues of justice, from my dedication to those I love. Returning from La Habana I have new questions and new insights into my questions. I have new preoccupations that I do not leave behind but instead add to my *cotidiano* in the many other sites where I live as a displaced person. For example, one of the last times I was in La Habana I began to see the importance of paying attention to globality and globalization, to learn what they mean, how they operate, and how they affect our present communities.

What made me turn my attention to these phenomena is the fact that in La Habana, contrary to most places in the world, globality does not work very well. To start with, telephone communications even within Cuba are limited since many people still do not have telephones. Calls to any place outside Cuba are expensive and, with rare exceptions, one cannot dial an international call from telephones in private homes. Those who can have a second telephone with a special line allowed by the government.[41] Moreover, the postal system simply does not work. The most common experience is for letters not to arrive—either coming or going—and if they arrive, the news certainly will not be fresh. Use of the Internet is severely limited. The number of people with computers is extremely small, and Internet access must be authorized by the government. News from Cuba and abroad is limited to what is provided on official television channels, radio stations, and newspapers. The physical insularity of Cuba is replicated at all

levels of contact and communication with the rest of the world. In many ways, Cuba does stop at the wall of El Malecón.

Cuba's lack of communication with the rest of the world is a result of its political and economic isolation, partially self-imposed, partially imposed by U.S. policies. Its insularity is broken by people who visit Cuba,[42] those who leave legally or illegally,[43] and those who live outside the island and keep in touch with relatives and friends, sending them medicine and money to the tune of a billion dollars a year.[44] Through these kinds of contacts, Cuba becomes part of globalization, a "global economic matrix" that encompasses not only the production and distribution of goods but also "a worldwide system of governance and power."[45] In us and through us who live outside but are indeed part of Cuba, our island interacts with the world in unofficial ways. Unfortunately, much of the interaction is not positive for, though some Cubans and Cuban Americans benefit from globalization, a great number of us Cubans who live outside the island—the majority—belong to the middle and working classes and are the ones used and abused by globalization.

Being used and abused is the reality not only for the majority of Cubans but also, of course, for all Hispanic/Latinos in the United States. Therefore, it is important—as we, Hispanas/Latinas, create our preferred future, as we work on our *proyecto histórico*—to pay attention to the role globalization plays in our oppression. The fact is that globalization creates a "demand for lower-paid workers," a category that covers most Hispanas/Latinas. The "global cities" that are the key links in the network of globalization are "most often supported . . . by large populations of immigrant workers who perform the blue-collar, industrial, low-wage, dirty work of the global economy as the valets, the coffee-stand servers, the janitors."[46] In the "global cities," such as New York, London, Frankfurt, Bangkok, Santiago (Chile), and a few others, global capital is not the only element present. There is also a workforce made up of "women, immigrants, people of color"[47] without which these cities could not perform the highly specialized transactions that are intrinsic to globalization. This makes these cities attractive to job-seekers. In other words, "some of the infrastructure that enables globalization enables and indeed may induce migration."[48]

Though much has been said about globalization in relation to capital, little or no attention has been paid to the "transnationalization of labor" it requires. The "global cities" need the support of labor coming from communities such as ours: the Hispana/Latina communities. These communities, instead of the cities and the countries in which they live, provide the principal source of identification to these workers, most of them being displaced/multi-sites people. Given that these "global cities" are sites not only for global capital but also for a "global workforce," they also contribute to "the formation of transnational identities."[49] The global cities are characterized not only by "their telecommunication infrastructure and international firms, but also . . . [by] the many different cultural environments they contain. . . . An immense array of cultures from around the world, each rooted in a particular country, town, or village, now are reterritorialized in a few single places, places such as New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, and most recently Tokyo."[50]

These global cities, therefore, have the effect of "unbundling" the territoriality of nations, for they relate among themselves and depend on each other much more than they relate to other cities in their same nation or to the nation in which they are located.[51] This unbundling of territoriality also leads to the "unbundling of sovereignty." "We are seeing the relocation of various components of sovereignty onto supranational, nongovernmental, or private institutions."[52] And because the working class that supports globalization in New York, for example, has much more in common with those who support globalization in, let's say São Paulo, Brazil, than with the elite population of New York, "new notions of community, of membership, and of entitlement" are emerging, linking workers across national boundaries.

Another element generated by globalization, an unintended element that nonetheless plays a significant role in the way transnational labor continues to relate to the people "back home," is that of family remittances. We Cubans are not the only ones to send monies back to our country of origin. Hispanas/Latinas as a whole practice this "philanthropy of the poor,"[53] which often is the main sustenance of our families and friends back home. The need for family remittances are to a large extent a consequence of globalization.

> As the global north has put increasing pressures on governments in the global south to open their economies to foreign firms, these countries have become poorer even as certain sectors within them have gotten very rich. Government and large sectors of the population in many of these countries have come to depend more and more on the remittances of immigrants in the global north, which overall are estimated at an annual 70 billion dollars over each of the last few years.[54]

This sort of sharing and deployment of resources also takes place in Hispanic/Latino families born in the United States. Though I have never seen statistics, I am sure that such monies are economically important to the local communities, particularly if we come from small towns. The fact is, then, that the poor of the world are maintaining the poor of the world. The poor of the world in the United States are maintaining families and friends back home as well as contributing in a significant way to the economies and governments of our communities and countries of origin.

These mechanisms of globalization, at work in many cities with great concentrations of Hispanas/Latinas, have created new ways, meanings, and understandings of the back-and-forth characteristic of displaced/multi-sites people. Globalization is not only about transnational economic spaces; it is also about transnational people, and that is what many of us Hispanas/Latinas are. Definitely, globalization is exploitative, benefiting only 20 percent of the world population. However, if we look carefully at the mechanisms of globalization, I propose that we can use some of the unintentional side effects of globalization in constructing our *mujerista proyecto histórico*.

First, as these global cities of the globalization network concentrate larger and larger numbers of Hispanas/Latinas (and of course also Hispanic/Latino men), we begin to be a critical mass that can organize to pressure the government for our rights and the benefits we have earned by being productive members of this society. This will be useful for the *mujerista proyecto histórico* only if we are clear that our goals are to create a society from which no one is excluded, and not to participate in oppressive structures. Second, with the

growing dependence of Third World governments and U.S. town, city, and state governments on remittances from those of us who work outside their parameters, can we not turn our generosity into influence? Can we not find effective ways of using the economic leverage that remittances give us to reverse the structural adjustment programs imposed on governments by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that have cut health, education, and other social programs? Third, the transnational labor force of globalization of which Hispanas/Latinas are a part contributes a basis for identity that makes clear we have to see ourselves in relation to our communities and countries of origin. We have much more in common with women in our communities and countries of origin than we have with the privileged women of the global cities. Being conscious of this and finding effective means of maintaining close contact with each other can aid our struggle to create a *proyecto histórico* from which no one is excluded.

La Habana, the city that inhabits me, is the city that challenges me, the city that makes me ask new questions, the city where I dream dreams and see visions. La Habana is the city that is home—but not completely, for La Habana also displaces me, sending me forth to be a multi-sites woman. La Habana is one of the key organizing principles in my life: who I am and who I want to be, what I want to do with my life—a life that will always have to honor the discontinuities and ruptures created in me and for me. La Habana is the place that precludes me from returning; it fragments me, but this fragmentation is not problematic to me. Rather, it facilitates the interstices through which I can reach our *mujerista* utopian project, or where I can stand free of the objectifying gaze of those who insist on constructing me as "other."[55] La Habana has its all-encompassing effect on me as I walk its streets, manage its heat or its surprising coldness (having fallen prey to the propaganda that in-January-it-is-hot-in-the-tropics), and maneuver through its still somewhat unfamiliar systems in order to get food, find transportation, make a phone call, or buy an airline ticket. La Habana, with its sad buildings holding on to a splendor that shines through crumbling walls, imposes itself in irrevocable beauty on my heart and mind and soul:

this is the city, the place, the locality, the human geography that was and continues to be my starting point as a displaced/multi-sites person committed to a *mujerista proyecto histórico* that will exclude no one. La Habana: "*Si no existieras yo te inventaría, mi ciudad de La Habana.*"[56]

Notes

Preface

1. See Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: New Press, 1998).
2. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22.
3. John Berger, *The Look of Things* (New York: Viking, 1974), 40, cited in Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989), 22, 61.
4. Henri Lefebvre, "Reflections on the Politics of Space," trans. M. Enders, *Antipode* 8 (1976), 31, cited in Soja, *Postmodern Geographies,* 80.

1. Taking the Train

1. See Kevin Starr, *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace, 1940–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
2. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).
3. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).