Coming of Age in the Cuban Revolution: A Dialogic Analysis of Gerzom Gomez’s Memoir

Suny Cardenas-Gomez
Southern Adventist University, sunyc@southern.edu

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Suny Cardenas-Gomez
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Author Note
I would like to dedicate this project to Raquel Gomez, my grandmother, who taught me how to stitch together fabric before I could stitch together words. Special thanks to my academic advisers, Dr. Adrienne Royo and Dr. Rachel Williams-Smith. Thank you also to the Southern Scholars faculty committee for approving this project, and to Dr. Linda Tym for leading the program. And, of course, to my grandfather, Gerzom Gomez, for living the life and writing the memoir that made this all possible.
Abstract
This paper reveals common themes in literature about the turbulent changes occurring in pre-revolutionary Cuba. Included is an original communicative translation of selections from the memoir of my grandfather Gerzom Gomez from roughly 1935 to 1965. He was coming of age in 1959 when Castro’s Revolution triumphed. The center of the project is a dialogic analysis of work by other Cuban authors writing during or about the pre-revolutionary period. Through the analysis, I discover that my grandfather’s memoir and the other texts share the following common themes: life in a military state, complicated family relationships, coming of age, and the realization, which comes too late, that the world is changing irreversibly around them. Gerzom’s memoir adds to the diverse voices of the Cuban diaspora as a representative of one of the last living generations who remember a time before the Revolution.

*Keywords:* Cuba, Cuban Revolution, Cuban diaspora, Spanish translation, dialogic analysis
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Coming of Age in the Cuban Revolution: A Dialogic Analysis of Gerzom Gomez’s Memoir

The story of the Cuban Revolution, or really, of the arrival of communism to the island, has permeated my entire life. It was so commonplace, so ubiquitous, so simple. Not until years later – now, when I am 22 years old – did I stop to examine the narrative. What really happened in those war-torn years before 1959? What was Cuba like before then? What did other Cubans have to say about it? Where does my grandfather’s narrative fit into it all? That is what I set out to discover in this research journey.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On February 7, 1942, Bertha Fraguela Delcourt and Florencio (Flores) Gomez Artiles became the proud parents of a baby boy, who they named Gerzom. That baby, born in a dilapidated house in Santa Clara, grew up to have babies and grandchildren of his own, including me. He lived so much that he decided to write it all down, in a memoir, which then inspired this project. And, as of this writing, he keeps on living with as much fire as ever.

This memoir is a deeply personal story. Due to the sensitive nature of some information Gerzom shares, I have changed all of the names in the story except for those of historical personas, his, and his parents’, who have both since passed away. Nicknames, however, will stay in their original form, as will all town and city names.

Thesis

Through a dialogic analysis, I discover that my grandfather’s memoir and the other texts I reviewed share the following common themes: life in a military state,
complicated family relationships, coming of age, and the realization, which comes too late, that the world is changing irreversibly around them

Chapter 2: Methods

Dialogic Analysis

Dialogic analysis is at the center of this project. This is a type of narrative analysis which focuses on how different works connect to each other (Allen, 2017). In my case, I narrowed the focus to an analysis of themes shared in common across the works. The parallel works I reviewed include novel, short story, poetry, and article formats. I chose literature written during or about the time period before, during, or just after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution.

Translation

I conducted a communicative translation of selections from my grandfather’s memoir. This means I translated the meaning of sentences and phrases instead of translating literally word-for-word. This also means that I use equivalent English idioms whenever possible instead of translating the Spanish idioms literally, which would destroy the idiomatic quality. In some cases, I decide to leave the original Spanish word in place. I indicate these words by italicizing them at the first usage.

The memoir is peppered with parentheses. These are all original. Any parenthetical additions I have made will either be in brackets ([ ]) or in a footnote. Any section headers are also his own. In addition, I have separated phrases into sentences in a way not present in the original. Spanish writing generally uses longer sentences, but these long sentences make less sense in English. I chose to break the lengthy
segments into sentences to preserve a natural reading experience. I also added commas.

I don’t know what I expected when I decided to translate my grandfather’s memoir. Maybe a direct, factual narrative with strong spiritual focus points, much like his style of speech. Grave, gravelly. What I found was magical realism. Stories flowing on a stream of consciousness, alive with characters. His life is set out like a string of pearls, one outstanding event after the next. As I translated, I endeavored to leave the reading experience intact. As a translator, I am trying to transmit, not to edit, polish, or “correct.” I hope that as you read, you will see what I saw – a glimpse into the life of a young boy living unawares on the cusp of a Revolution that shook his world.

Chapter 3: Brief History of Early 20th Century Cuba

Socio-Political History

Cuba just before the turn of the 20th century was buzzing for change. Of Spain’s once-vast empire, Cuba was one of the very few colonies that remained. Revolutionaries like the immortal José Martí1 had been agitating for independence from exiles in the United States (US) and abroad for years (Tone, 2006).

This was actually Cuba’s third independence effort. Previous attempts were in 1868-1878, the Ten Years’ War, and in 1879-1880 (Tone, 2006). Full emancipation had come to Cuba in 1866, and many more Afro Cubans joined the struggle for independence. The Ten Years’ War was particularly brutal. In order to reduce the threat

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1 José Martí (1853-1895) was a Cuban poet, journalist, and political activist who was a key part of the Cuban effort for independence. He is still considered a Cuban natural hero (Tone, 2006).
of guerilla warfare, Spanish forces corralled rural communities into concentrated walled towns. This spread the disease that were already so deadly for both armies, like yellow fever (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).

Although Spain won the ten years war, the victory was short-lived. Cubans had not given up on their dream of independence. Finally, in 1895, the stirring pot of conflict once again bubbled into war. Freedom fighters, many from the wild, isolated Eastern end of the island (the Oriente), used guerrilla warfare tactics borrowed from countries like the Dominican Republic that had already won their own independence (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).

In 1898, the United States entered the fray. By December of that year, Spain was defeated and signed the December 10, 1898 Treaty of Paris. Cuba hadn’t achieved independence just yet, however. The treaty gave the US control of the island. The US stayed in control until 1902, but even after formally withdrawing, they retained the power to intervene with their military should it become necessary, and they kept a base in Guantanamo Bay. After Cuba won its independence, it began to hold democratic presidential elections. Even so, its politics were full of corruption and private interests. Once again, people were stirring for a change (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).

In 1952, Fulgencio Batista’s military coup gained control of Cuba and pushed president Carlos Prío Socarrás into exile. Although he held the title of “president,” Batista’s government became increasingly militant as it came under attack from an even newer wave of change – the Cuban Revolution (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).
An event that helped launch the Cuban Revolution was the attack on The Moncada garrison on July 26, 1953. Castro’s rebel movement became known as the 26 of July Movement because of that date. The attack was unsuccessful, but it raised visibility for the movement and inspired new rebels. The Castro brothers were imprisoned and trialed, and finally sought exile in Mexico in 1955. But, in December of 1956, Castro and a core group of rebels returned to Cuba aboard the *Granma* yacht. They hid in the Sierra Maestras, and the armed guerilla warfare portion of the Revolution began in earnest (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).

The year 1958 saw a particularly brutal “campaign of terror” by Batista’s government struggling to stay in power (Martínez-Fernández, 2014, p. 35). Meanwhile, Castro was organizing the resistance from the Sierra Maestra mountains and talking with American journalists, including one from the New York Times. He continued to characterize the revolutionary movement as pro-democratic. Publicly and to the leadership of supporting rebel organizations, Castro shared plans to return power to the electorate within a year of his triumph (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).

In January of 1959, Fidel marched into Havana. Batista and his followers had fled Cuba. Jubilant crowds awaited him and the rebels. Batista had fled with his principal followers the night before, and the people who remained in Cuba largely welcomed the Revolution and its charismatic leader (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).

The Revolution’s government started off with very moderate official leadership. The first president was Manuel Urrutia, not Castro, and the first Cabinet had professional, privileged politicians. Castro was the commander-in-chief and the true
popular leader, but the generals who had helped him with the war were absent from the official government. Also absent, at least at first, were communist policies and party members. Castro said the Revolution was about “Bread without terror, freedom with bread, neither leftist nor rightist dictatorships. Humanism” (Martínez-Fernández, 2014, p. 116).

This first moderate Cabinet was little more than a puppet government. It did not last the year. Castro had forced out president Urrutia by mid-1959. And the next year’s promised elections did not come. Castro cancelled elections for a second time, the first being in April 1959. The revolutionary government began to change its policy. The leaders instituted several land and housing reforms, including some that led to the nationalization of private property (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).

Over the next few years, Castro’s government began to take its true form. As Communist party members and ideologies became more integrated in the official position, revolutionary leaders began to dissent. One important break happened in 1962, when Commandante Matos, a rebel general, resigned in protest. He was arrested and convicted of sedition. Shortly thereafter, popular revolutionary leader Camilo Cienfuegos died under mysterious circumstances. The Revolution began to eat its own (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).

Castro’s government saw a cabinet turnover in 1960 that trended much more towards radicals and communists. The government also began an attack on media outlets, private educational institutions, and the church. By the end of 1960, only nationalized or pro-rebel media outlets survived, effectively ending freedom of the
press. By 1962, all universities came under the government’s purview and student protests, ironically, became illegal. And, in a move that would become very significant for my family, political affiliation became a requirement for university admission (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).

By 1962, just three years after the triumph of a popularly supported, “humanist” Revolution, the reality of Cuba as a communist state under the autocratic rule of Fidel Castro had taken shape.

**Early history of the Seventh-Day Adventist church in Cuba**

The first two Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) missionaries to Cuba, a married couple from the Chicago Battle Creek Sanitorium, arrived in May of 1904. The next year, another missionary, this one from Minneapolis, came to organize the first SDA church in Havana. It had around ten original members (Ogden, 1935).

The recent Spanish-American war had ended well for the United States, breaking the power of Spain and, consequently, of the Catholic church in Cuba. Mission-minded Adventists like Allen Moon had their sights on Cuba and the former Spanish empire as new places ready for the Adventist message as early as 1898 (Moon, 1898).

The Cuban mission field had its first baptisms. Manuel Avila and Pedro Cruz, who were baptized in the Marianao River. Both men became literature evangelists (colporteurs) and helped spread Adventism throughout the island (Avila, 1926).

Education is an important component of the SDA church. True to this focus, Cuban Adventists opened the first SDA school in Cuba in 1922. Although the school
was originally in Oriente province, it moved to the Western province of Santa Clara and became the Antillean Union College in the 1950’s (Land, 2014).

The next major event in the development of Adventism in Cuba came in 1935, when the Cuban Conference was organized. That same year, the church started a radio station that broadcasted in Cuba. By the mid 1940s, the once-tiny Cuban Mission became the head of the SDA Inter-American Division (Land, 2014).

When the Revolution triumphed, and later became a communist dictatorship, it shook the Cuban SDA church. The Antillean Union College moved from Santa Clara to Puerto Rico in the early 1960s, just ahead of the move to nationalize all educational institutions (Land, 2014). Even so, Adventism did not receive the same initial backlash that the Catholic church received from revolutionary leaders. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that, unlike the Catholic leadership, the Adventist leadership in Cuba did not speak out against the Revolution, at least not at first (Martínez-Fernández, 2014).

In fact, the Antillean Union College hosted hundreds of rebel soldiers during the war. The college provided food and medical care. For a period of time at the end of the war, during the takeover of Santa Clara, the iconic Che Guevara had a center of operations at the college. The college president, Walton Brown, went to see Guevara personally and spoke to him about the SDA church, according to Brown’s account. Guevara promised to ensure the Adventists preserved their religious liberty, Brown says (Brown, 1959a).
Despite this amicable start, the suppression of individual rights that came with Castro’s totalitarian government negatively affected Cuban Adventists, and the church as an institution. This was especially true when, in 1962, political affiliation became a condition of admission into institutions of higher education (Martínez-Fernández, 2014). Adventists who, like my family, refused to affiliate themselves with the communist party could not earn a professional degree.

Chapter 4: Selections from Memoir

Memories of my Childhood

Each person has their own gamut of memories. Some have memories from very early ages, others from more recent times.

In Santa Clara we were four siblings. Only two survived, Sira and me. Uriel and Irad died. Later, my parents had five more children. They were born in Pinar del Río and grew up far from the influence of our paternal grandparents. All of them called our mother mamá or mima. Sira and I tried to call her mamá or mima, but we couldn’t. The reason why was that our grandmother, Agustina, and our paternal aunts taught us to call her Bertha. That is how we learned, and later we could not change. We were deprived the practice of calling our mother mamá.

Memories in Pinar del Río

On one occasion, China, our neighbor, came to the house. Only my mother and I were there. What happened then is etched into my mind. This happened when I was four years old. I remember it in detail. China told my mother, “hey, Bertha hasn’t any
man who isn't your husband ever given you a little pinch?” My mother told her “you’re crazy, China, what are you saying? China said, “girl that’s the best thing there is. All you have to do is, when a man asks for it, you let him grab you a little. You’ll see how good it is.” While she was saying this, China’s husband, his name was Arturo Ramos, came into the house and began to tell my mother that he wanted to sleep with her. China told my mother to do it so she would see how good it felt. My mother began to defend herself, and they tried to force her to do it. When I saw what was happening, I tried to help my mother. I took the broom that was next to me and tried to hit Arturo with it. He told me, “brat, what do you think you’re doing?” He took the broom from me and made as if to hit me with it. My mother began to scream, and they tried to quiet her, but she kept screaming and then they ran out of the house.

When my father came home, my mother was waiting for him, and so was I. I waited for my father to go to where that bad man was and make him pay for what he had done. I was waiting expectantly to see what my father would do. My mother told him what had happened. My father said, “did he touch you or do something to you?” My mother answered no, that they had tried to force her to do it, but she had not allowed it. Then my father said, “well, if they didn’t do anything to you then there’s no problem. I’m not going to lose a friend over that.”

I was deeply shocked by my father’s attitude. I felt a strong hatred deep within me, and I swore to myself that one day I would kill that man. I grew with that inside of me. Those people moved away. Some time later, I saw that man with someone else, fishing in the Maragota lagoon. I was with another boy from the neighborhood. When I
saw him and I realized there was nothing I could do to him because I was still only a child, tears ran down my face. Arturo saw me and asked, “why are you looking at me like that?” And he told the man that was with him, “that boy doesn’t like me.”

Time passed. I was now a young adolescent. One day I arrived home and my mother told me, “do you know who was just here?” I answered no, and she told me, “Arturo Ramos.” I asked her where he had gone. I ran out after him to settle the score, but I didn’t find him.

More time passed. I was then 17 years old and I was ready to fight Arturo, but I had grown in my personal relationship with God and I no longer hated anyone. Really, that is the only man I have hated in my life. One day, while I walked down a street in Pinar del Río, I came to a corner and all of the sudden ran into this man. He felt very afraid; trembling he lowered his head and waited for me to attack him. Seeing him like that, trembling and full of fear, I felt pity for that man. I shook him and told him to give thanks to God for the change He had made in me, because I was a true Christian. I told him to leave and shoved him. He rushed away and didn’t even look back. That is how that episode of my life ended.

In Río Seco

After Ismael recovered, my parents began to prepare themselves for their next move. This time, it would be to a place in Río Seco, on the main road about a kilometer away from Nilda. The owner's name was Joel Pérez and he rented part of the house to us. In the other part he had a general store managed by his son Jorge. We lived there for some time.
A wall separated the two parts, but it did not reach the ceiling. It was as high as the two cross beams. One day, my siblings and I were home alone when all of the sudden we heard a sound on the side of the house where the store was, which at that time was closed, and it scared us. Then I tried to deepen my voice and I said, “who’s there?” No one answered. Since I was the oldest, I had to resolve the situation, so I climbed over the wall and crossed over to the other side. No one was there. Apparently, it was a rat, but that was a very scary moment for us. It was the occasion for us to adapt to a new place.

When we left the house in Nieves for the rented house, we were in a very precarious economic situation. In addition, Felipe, dad’s brother, showed up and told my parents he needed help, that they should give him some of the clothes they sold so he could sell them too. Dad helped him; he made Felipe his partner in the business and gave him a list of the clients who owed him money since he sold on credit (he would give them the merchandise, and they paid later in installments).

So, in addition to the business, mom worked in the tobacco industry with my sister Sira, even though she was only 10 years old. At 7 years old I had to stay home to cook and clean, wash and iron the clothes, clean everything that needed it, clean and take care of the house, in addition to looking after and feeding my younger siblings: Rafael, 4 years old, Ismael, 2 years old, and Arlen, less than one year old. I also needed to have food ready for my parents and Sira. Because of this, I could not continue going to school.
It seems that, since the work I did was women’s work in Cuba at that time and being as I was not allowed to fight with anyone, I had problems with other kids of my age. They made fun of me, they called me *hembrita* [little lady], and I was the focus of the attention and ridicule of all the kids, I think of some of the adults too. My self-esteem was very low since I didn’t have shoes, just one or two pairs of pants and one or sometimes two shirts.

Felipe, my uncle, stole the clothes from my father that he had been given to sell, plus, since he had the list of clients, he collected the money they owed my dad and kept that too. When dad realized what was happening, he was left without merchandise to sell, $15 in his pocket, and with a debt of $34 to pay to the general store. We had to spend a considerable amount of time eating nothing but cornmeal in the morning, and in the evenings nothing but cornmeal and beans. If I were to characterize Felipe, I think that he was a person without any positive feelings of any kind and worse than an animal since, with everything we were going through for some time already, he robbed my dad at the worst moment. Even so, this wasn’t the only time. On another occasion when we were also going through very difficult times, he appeared once again and again robbed our dad. This other theft was worse than the first. All dad would do was go to his house and make a big stink. Felipe, locked inside his house, waited until the scene was over. Everything would be over for the moment, until Felipe returned to rob my father. That was the paternal uncle who lived close to us.

Around that same time, Leonys Blanco, who donated blood to my mom, asked dad to give him clothing merchandise to sell. Dad told him not to scam him because we
were doing poorly financially. Leonys said he wouldn’t, but nonetheless he stole from him. He never reimbursed him for anything.

While I was having issues with the neighborhood boys, I met Manuelito Álvarez, with whom I never had any issues. When he came to my house for the first time, he had a broken arm. He arrived smoking. I asked him, “why do you smoke?” He told me that his father smoked and so did he, even though he hid it from his father. One day when he was smoking, his father, whose name was Emmanuel, came home, so Manuelito put his lit cigarette in the back pocket of his pants. It gave him a little burn. We became friends, like brothers, and we still are to this day. I had a beautiful friendship with his family, especially with his sister Elenita and his father.

One day, at suppertime, a boy who was the same age as Rafael arrived at the house. He ate with us; his name was Mario Alvarez. They called him “Macho el de Heidi” (Heidi was his grandmother). He also has been a good friend to us, like family. He spent more time with my brothers than with me because they were closer to his age. He was always over at our house, and we would go to his house to listen to Las Aventuras de los Tres Villalobos at noon and the Aventuras de Leonys Moncada in the evening. One afternoon, while we waited to listen to the Aventuras de Moncada, a great commotion built up over something strange that could be seen in the sky. It was like something small and intermittently luminous that left a trail of white smoke behind it. Niño Cabrera and Heidi (Macho’s grandparents, with whom he lived), along with others who were there, asked me and my brothers: “You who read the Bible and go to church, can you tell us what we see in the sky?” I answered that we didn’t know but that the
Bible said that in the last days there would be signs in the heavens. That was the first time vapor trails from a plane were seen there as they moved across the sky. The only aircraft that passed by there were some small planes that, in times of political elections, dropped propaganda fliers and advertisements. We kids would race to pick up those papers.

The Tours
In the church of Santa Damiana there was a custom that when they wanted to raise money to accomplish something they needed, whether it be for the church or for one of the members, they would organize a tour. The places we went were Soro, the Finca de Critna, the valleys of Viñales and San Vicente, the Santa María lagoon, and other places. It was like an excursion the church members went on, and to which they invited people who were friends of the church. With time, some of them became members.

The church of Santa Damiana had good-looking young men and ladies, and that made it so other young people from the neighborhood wanted to go on the tours. Other churches were invited on many of these activities, such as San Luis, Buenavista, Pinar del Río, and Pedregales. Many of these tours gave rise to relationships between the young people. Afterwards some began to date, and some even married. Many of the places mentioned were or became tourist destinations. Others, like the Santa María lagoon, were not, but they had attractions for everyone involved. Family members and relatives of people from the church of Santa Damiana lived there. They were from the family of Irene Martínez, the mother of Daniel, Ana María (known as la China), and Javier García.
For my family, this lagoon was something particularly good; the reason was the following. On one occasion, my family visited Santa Clara. Rafael was a child just learning to walk; he had an attack of a fever and asthma. Very close to the house, down the narrow path of a little hill, a river of clear water passed. There was a part that was good for swimming, but another part had stones that formed a kind of bridge to cross to the other side. Suddenly, my mother noticed that Rafael wasn’t with us and she started to look for him. Finally, they found him in the shallow part of the river where people crossed over. Instead of making his asthma and fever worse, he was healed.

The conclusion my parents arrived at was that if a person had asthma or fever and they went into a lagoon or a river, they would be healed. As children, Ismael and Arlen suffered from these attacks of asthma and fever. On two trips to the Santa María lagoon mom took them and put them in the water, and they were healed. Just like Rafael, they never had those problems again.

When these things happened, I didn’t know how to swim, but I remember how my mother swam. She did it very well, and she tried to teach others.

**Christmas, New Years, and Games before Castro**

I just spent Christmas of the year 2017 with part of my family. This brings to memory how Christmases were when I was a boy. I mean the Christmases in Cuba until the arrival of Fidel Castro’s government because, when Castro came to power, he abolished the seasonal festivities because he was communist and did not believe in God. He wanted to keep the Christian religion from the minds of the Cuban people.
Christmas was celebrated in all of Cuba. Families came together in the home of the patriarch, and many people gathered together in one house. This brought much joy and unity for families. But, before Christmas arrived, families made sweets out of bitter orange, coconut, guava, papaya, and mangoes, marmalades, and buñuelos [yucca flour fritters] in syrup. Upon visiting a house, a plate with some of these would be offered to the visitor. During Easter and Christmas Eve they had different kinds of turrón, made of nuts such as hazelnuts, plus wines and other liquors, roasted pigs, and other meats. People roasted them in bakeries or by digging a pit in the ground, filling it with charcoal or lit firewood, then covering it with leaves and branches. On top of these they would place the pig or lamb – well seasoned with red wine, dry wine, olives, and other spices. On top of the meat they placed more leaves and branches and on top of that an aluminum sheet, and over the sheet, more earth. Then they waited until it was well-roasted.

They cooked congrí rice (white rice with black or red beans cooked together), yuca, potatoes, salads, cold plantains, and other things. They drank liquors and beers; even the children drank. The new year came with celebrations that brought families together and spread joy.

I remember that they would offer me those things at friends’ homes, but I never tried them. Plus, I was embarrassed to see my young friends and their families drinking alcohol and getting drunk. They put Christmas trees up in their houses and gave each other many gifts. Houses were painted during those times.

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2 Turrón is a bar of sweet, crumbly nut paste, similar to nougat, popular in Spain.
It was a very colorful and pretty time of the year. The festivities continued through December 31st and January 1st. January 6th was the day of the *Reyes Magos* [Three Maggi or the Epiphany]. Parents taught their children that during the night the Maggi came in through chimneys or gaps in the walls to bring the children the gifts they had asked for in their letters. The children put these letters in their shoes under the bed and this is where the toys went, too. Early in the morning of the 6th, the sounds of children with their new toys running through the neighborhood could be heard. During those days hardly anyone slept. Some years at the garrison of the national guard they gave out toys to the poorest children.

In our house it was different. We didn’t celebrate Christmas. Our parents told us that it was a pagan holiday and that Jesus wasn’t really born on December 24th and that we shouldn’t celebrate pagan festivities. Even so, we celebrated in a way since we had the turrones, raisins, grapes, apples, and cans of syrupy pears and peaches. The first of January we did celebrate at home and at church.

On the day of the Three Maggi, like all the children, we wrote our letters and put them under the bed, but in the morning, we found nothing. Dad told us, “when the Maggi passed by here, they were very tight on cash and they couldn’t leave any toys.” Tradition was that if the kids didn’t receive anything on the day of the Three Maggi, then they would get something the next day. So, I would make little bags of toys (jacks, bouncy balls, marbles) and I would leave one in each pair of shoes. Once I learned that parents were the Three Maggi, well I stopped waiting until the next day to leave the toys. In my whole childhood, I only remember one or two times when dad left us a toy.
Important Memories from Río Seco

Río Seco before the year 1960 was a prosperous place. Its economy revolved around tobacco and commerce. They farmed rice, beans, corn, malanga, bananas, potatoes, and different types of fruit trees, but mostly tobacco. There were two types of tobacco, open field and covered.

Commerce in Río Seco was pretty active and good. Beyond the business in the local area, there was work in the cities of San Juan and Martínez.

In Río Seco there was very active commerce. There were local travelling salesmen who sold clothes (mostly), shoes, dresses, slips, frames, curtains, comforters, little porcelain dolls, and other products. Other sellers offered electric lamps, electric and battery-powered radios, jewelry, refrigerators, powdered spices, and Guarina and Atuey ice cream. The Guarina ice cream seller’s name was Ernesto Rodriguez and the Atuey salesman was a man of color who drove a car and competed with Ernesto. Ernesto thought that he was the only one who had the right to sell ice cream in the neighborhood.

They fought many times about that, until one day Ernesto threw a knife at the other vendor. He was lucky that the knife hit the man with the handle and not with the blade. After that, the Atuey vendor took a long time before he came back to that place. The fights ended.

There were several butcher shops in the neighborhood. For some time in our house we bought lamb from Joaquín Hernández; he had freckles and we called him el pinto [the spotted one]. There was also a shoe factory and a place that fixed electric
appliances and radios. Also, a radio station and a game parlor. A travelling salesman who sold fish, one who bought yute sacks, and another who exchanged coffee for bones and dry beef filets came to the neighborhood. With respect to professional tobacco aficionados there were two: Ortiz and Delgado. The latter would make himself a cigar around 12 inches long; he would spend the whole day smoking it.

Once per year the fair, or ponies with boats and an Estrella voladora [a spinning carnival ride], the carousel, and other rides came to town. They brought many wares and games with them and vendors came from the neighboring areas with their goods. Almost all of the people in the neighborhood went to the fair. Many couples made their courtships official each year at the fair. The activity lasted a week.

**Anecdotes and Other things of Interest**

Callejón de Valle was a place in Río Seco, at a distance of about two kilometers from the house. A man lived there nicknamed Perico who married a good woman, Juana. She was from a good family (the woman’s name has been changed). Everything was going well with the marriage until one day when Perico arrived at his house and found his wife in bed with another man. Very appropriately, without raising a scandal, he took Juana to her house and gave her to her parents, telling them what had happened. After some time, Perico was thinking about his wife Juana and he decided to go look for her and reestablish their marriage. He told her he forgave her, that he wanted her to go back home with him and stay together to form a family. Juana told him, “you are a good man and I’m not going to lie to you. When you brought me to my parent’s house because you saw me with a man, I only had that one man. But now, I have four. It’s
because I have *fuego uterino*, and I need to have many men. If you want me to return with you, it’s under the condition that you’ll let me have the men that I need.” Perico agreed to that; he only asked her to be with him and to have a family together. Juana asked to go to live in a different place, and they moved relatively close to our house.

In the new place, Juana began to have many men, some steady and others who went and never returned. She also received those boys who were 12 years old or older. My friends from the neighborhood would go to her and tell me I should go with them, too. When Perico was home and he would see a man coming, we would leave through the back door. One day one of the regulars arrived (I won’t say his name, but in the neighborhood everyone knew). Perico didn’t see him, so instead he stayed in the room and hid under the bed. The man arrived and went into the room with Juana. Once they finished their activities, Juana told the man, “tomorrow is Perico’s birthday.” He answered, “let’s give him something so he’ll be happy with us.” She told him Perico needed a pair of shoes, and the man asked what his shoe size was. Juana answered that she wasn’t sure, maybe size 39 or 40. Perico, who was listening to all of this from under the bed, said quietly “no, no, it’s 38.” After that, everyone in the neighborhood called him 38 or Perico 38.

This is a true story. After some time, Perico developed a serious illness. Juana cared for him with dedication until his death. Despite the story, Juana was a good woman. She raised her children very well (under the circumstances). It seems that they were all Perico’s. The children became respectable people.

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3 Translates literally to “uterine fire.” This is a reference to nymphomania, a condition used to describe “excessive” sexual desire in women during the 19th century (Groneman, 2000).
The first radio dad bought was very small and cost $5. It almost didn’t pick up any stations and it had a weak signal, which was hard to hear. Our house was in very bad condition. When it rained, it would sprinkle inside before outside. Between the living room and the kitchen there was a gutter, and when it rained a powerful current of water would spill over into the house. During one *aguacero* [heavy rainstorm] the little radio was on a chair under the gutter and a stream of water spilled down and soaked it completely. Dad put it outside for several days to dry in the sun, and when he plugged it in and turned it on, he could pick up even radio stations from different countries. The sound was so loud that people even asked dad to play music at dance parties.

From that radio, I heard the World Series that Milwaukee won against the Yankees. I also heard *Tres Patines en Tremenda Corte*, the Cuban Sugar King baseball games, *La Taberna de Pedro el Polaco*, Mamacusa Alambríto, and others.

On Saturday nights, a man named Javier García would come to the house to listen to a musical radio program of *danzones* that lasted an hour. Other people came too. While he listened, García would watch the people passing on the road. When he would see a man called Periquito (he was a very small black man), García would mock him and tell him he looked like a monkey, that he wasn’t a man (García was also black). In Río Seco there lived a man named Joel. He was over seven feet tall and very muscular. He was the lover of Negrita, Javier García’s wife. One night Javier died, and some time afterwards Negrita moved in with Periquito, the man García would mock. Periquito was the smallest (5 feet tall) black person in the neighborhood.
Next to the house there was a pretty big concrete floor. When it rained, we would clean it well and slide along on our bellies under the rainstorm. We really liked to do that. Later, other children from the neighborhood would come to skate with us and we made up competitions. In the season of mangos, we would get together with other boys and go to the houses with mango trees. We would pick the ones that had fallen on the ground. We returned to the house always full of mangoes. They were so sweet and delicious. Mostly, there were yellow, macho, jobos, and blancas mangoes. On some occasions when we were in the rainy season (it had rained several days in a row), we would go to a place called Burón (where Yazmín lived) with dad. There, in the pasture, there were many mango trees. We picked mangoes from the ground in the rain, and we climbed the trees to shake the branches and make more mangoes fall. We would fill many sacks. We had to watch out for the cows who would come to eat the mangoes. When we returned, we would give the mangoes away to people, and dad made mango sweets. That was something we loved to do.

In the year 1951 it rained heavily in Río Seco. They called it the year of the flood. There were many days of very heavy rain, day and night. The Maragotos and Peñas dams overflowed and joined with the brook of los Álvarez. The water came rushing down the path like a river. When the storm began, I was in a house next door and I couldn’t return home. That night dad came looking for me. He carried me home because the water was very strong. The house was just a meter and a half above the level of the water and the water came up to dad’s knees. The Feo, Seco and San Sebastián rivers and the streams, plus the water running over the path met in a place
called La Taironas. From there to the sea it was all water. Many houses were lost, as were crops, and bridges that fell. But worst of all, many people died. Days later, a man with his two children passed through the town gathering money for Saint Lazarus or Saint Barbara because he had made a promise since (according to him) they had saved his life and his children’s’ lives. He told us that when the water began to rise, they all began to climb up to the rafters. The water kept rising to the roof of the house. From there they could see how people were dragged away by the water as their houses fell. All his family was dragged into the water when their houses fell too, but he and his two children grabbed onto a branch and were saved. In the road in front of the house, after the water had passed, we collected fish from the puddles of water that formed.

The Largest Fire I have Seen in my Life

What I will write from here I do not remember if it happened in the year 1955 or 1956. The month was the end of February or the beginning of March. These were difficult times because then was the height of the fight between Fulgencio Batista and Fidel Castro.

Río Seco is primarily a tobacco farming place. It had hundreds of tobacco barns, a good part of them dedicated to covered tobacco. Those fields had a protective structure made out of wires covered with a fine cloth, like a mosquito net, called a *chiclot*. Some tobacco barns had tanks of natural gas and burners they lit to heat and dry the tobacco faster. The tobacco dried here had an olive-green color and a unique smell. In this manner they produced special tobacco with a much higher market value, and they sold this tobacco for more money.
The tobacco farmers paid an insurance that guaranteed their harvest. If they lost it for a valid reason, they would be reimbursed.

One day, around 11:00 am, I saw that a tobacco barn on the other side of the road was burning. Close to that on the other side of the road was a field of covered tobacco.

That day there was a lot of wind. The burning tobacco barn began to launch sparks and pieces of lit guano panco, and as these fell on the chiclot cloth the fire spread very quickly. It reached other tobacco barns and other fields covered in cloth and grew more and more. When the fires reached some of the tobacco barns that had gas tanks, then these heated up and exploded in the air with violent noise. Firefighters came from the cities of Pinar del Río, San Luis, San Juan, and Martínez, but nothing could be done because of the wind.

People ran from one place to another and climbed to the rooves of their houses to put out the flaming pancos that fell on them. I climbed to the roof of my house and put out what fell there. My house was made of zinc; therefore, we did not have any issues.

Perched on the roof of my house, I could see how the fire spread more and more and people ran everywhere screaming. Juan, Manuelito’s mother, and Elenita with figurines of saints in their hands screamed and swayed asking for protection. The fire and the gas tanks made loud noise and there was great confusion. In the direction of the wind was the house of José Martinez and his tobacco barns, plus a large family homestead. José Martinez’s oldest daughter of was named Elizabeth; she was the pastor of the Church of God that had its church building in that place.
As the sparks began to fall over that place, all of the sudden the wind changed direction and blew the fire over the area that had already been burned. In that miraculous way that great fire was put out. Elizabeth and the Church of God greatly rose in popular esteem. People said, and I believed it too, that God had worked to protect his children. In total all of the chiclot cloths burned, in addition to 50 tobacco barns, but no one died in the fire.

The truth is that the fire in the first tobacco barn was not an accident. Rather, the owner started the fire because he had a bad harvest and he wanted to collect insurance, arguing he lost his crops in the fire. That man had some influence and he did not have any issues with anyone. Instead, the authorities sought out innocent people to blame as the culprits.

The blame fell on some of the sympathizers of the 26 of July Movement that supported Fidel Castro. In the end, a group of men were detained, tortured, and savagely beaten.

One of the men, whose name was Carlos Fernández, died later because of the torture and beatings. This injustice caused more hate and difficulty between the sympathizers of Fidel Castro and Batista.

A short time after that, the Rural Guard once again seized and imprisoned a group of young people, among them one known as Pato [duck] because he swam very well and could stay underwater for almost five minutes. He was the son of Irma López, the wife of Felix Serrucho [saw] (so called because he was tall and skinny). Felix was a popular character in Río Seco because in his youth he played baseball and he was a
pitcher with great speed and curveballs, one who many leagues wanted to recruit, but his mother and wife did not let him sign with anyone.

The garrison of the Guard was about one kilometer from the house. During the night hours (since this was a rural area) we all heard the sounds of the beatings and the cries of the people being tortured. One guard who did not agree with what they were doing said that one of those young men was going to be killed one night. We knew that, but no man did anything for fear that he would be killed too.

On the night they told us about, we could hear they were torturing the prisoners more aggressively. Close to 12:00 at night, Irma the mother of Pato ran down the road yelling at the top of her lungs. I remember her words: “Women of Río Seco, they kill our children and we’re not going to do anything?! Let’s go to the garrison to save them! Don’t let them be killed!” There was a great commotion, many women joined her, and as they got closer to the garrison others joined them, yelling even louder. When they had almost reached the garrison, the guards came out to the front to stop the women. They fired into the air and we heard how they yelled at the women to go away. But the women just yelled more and kept coming towards the garrison. That went on for some minutes, but finally they released the imprisoned young men to their mothers, and the mothers took them home.

Despite the gravity of the moment, there was a note of humor among us that night. It was because Congo, a good neighbor, had a wife named Alba who was a very pretty, curvy woman. Another character from Río Seco, who we called Tinguillo Trujillo, would say: “I would give this much money (some amount) to see that woman naked,
she’s so gorgeous.” This ruckus began around 12 at night. When they heard the noise, people ran out however they were dressed for bed and began to talk among themselves. Suddenly, one of Alba’s children told her, “mama, everyone is naked (she was too).” She covered herself with her hands and ran into her house. Suddenly, everyone realized what was happening and went home. The next day Tinguillo Trujillo complained, “I would give so much to see Alba naked, but she was right in front of me and I didn’t see her.”

**Times of War and Sabotage**

When I was about 14 years old, we were living through very difficult times in Cuba. They were times of war, primarily for La Sierra Maestra in Oriente with Fidel Castro and his commanders. Afterwards, in other parts of the Oriente with Raúl Castro and later in the center, in the hills of Escambray with Faure Chomón and Rolando Cubelas. Finally, the war moved to the Sierra de los Órganos in Pinar del Río with Derminio Escalona. That was in the mountains and out in the countryside, but in the towns and cities it was also a dangerous time because of sabotage, the secret sale of 26 of July bonds, bombing, and the persecuting Guard.

The times were difficult, but at the same time something was happening that I couldn’t understand well. The economy was primarily doing well. The Cuban peso had the same value as the US dollar; both currencies circulated at the same time. Many times, when new cars were made, they were circulated in Cuba soon after the USA. Cuba’s development was incredible. It was the most developed Hispanic country. The healthcare was among the best in the world. Commerce also flourished, as did transport
in general. The middle class was very strong. There were poor people, but even they (in Río Seco there were many) could eat and dress well. Workers from many places came to Cuba. I worked with some of them in the tobacco fields. Sports also flourished greatly, especially baseball and boxing. Cuban music was among the best. Carnavales, the radio, television, theatre, all of these flourished. Even today, there can been seen some videos of these times where Cuba’s development during this time is visible. But the war ended all of this.

In Río Seco there was much sabotage. Many people were activists from the 26 of July Movement, but I lived apart from all of that. Manuelito, Iván Peña, Periquillo, and I went out every night. Whenever we heard the motor of the Rural Guard’s jeep we would hide until it passed, and, afterwards, we would go on our way. I did not even know what the flag of the 26 of July Movement looked like.

During the season of kites, I made kites to sell. One day, I sold one to the son of Corporal Morales, the chief of the garrison, that was the same colors as the flag of the 26 of July Movement. But I never knew what happened with that kite.

One evening, when Elenita was around 11 years old, she came to see me and told me she was selling 26 of July bonds. I grew worried because that was very dangerous. I made her promise she would return them to whoever gave them to her. Thank God she did not have to suffer bad consequences for that because anyone that was found doing that, men or women, without regards to age, was first tortured savagely and then killed.
One night there were two incidents of sabotage near our house. One was a bomb that exploded, the other was that they threw a piece of chain at two electrical cables, provoking a short-circuit. It caused an explosion, and afterwards the power went out. The Guardsmen found bicycle tracks in that area.

In the morning, I was shirtless on the porch of my house making repairs to my bike. While I did that, Corporal Morales and a captain of the army they called Captain Sosa Blanco passed in front of my house. He was infamous for his cruelty, a torturer and killer. The corporal stopped the Jeep, got out, and came to see me. He told me, “within half an hour wait for me with your bicycle at the garrison.” He returned to the Jeep and left me worried. I knew I would have trouble. I told someone at home about it, put on a shirt, committed myself to God’s care, and left for the garrison. When I arrived, I found several men, all with their bicycles. We were 43 people in total, among them being another member of the church named Marco Jiménez.

Finally, the Jeep with the Guardsmen arrived. They moved us to the inner court of the garrison and lined us up while soldiers with long rifles patrolled in front of us. Captain Sosa Blanco introduced himself and started to talk to us. He told us that they were our friends but that he didn’t want there to be any sleight of hand. Someone asked him or he himself explained, well the Almendrades team lost the game because of this or that, or the Habana team won for this or that reason. Suddenly he said, well the fire was lit to collect on insurance, or that the bomb or sabotage happened at such hour. That he didn’t want us talking about sabotage or other things, neither do we want you to keep doing those things because you are friends. Now, to show we are your friends we
are going to give each of you a bonbon [candy], but if another incident occurs instead of a bonbon, we will give you the wife of the bonbon, the bombazo [a beating].

Sosa Blanca ordered a lieutenant whose last name was Ibáñez, to give us the bonbon. I took the one they gave me and ate it, but none of the other men did. Then the captain ordered us to eat the bonbon, everyone did, and afterwards he told us we could go home but that if there was another incident of sabotage, we would be blamed and pay a high price.

That same night, the Gonzalezs’ tobacco barn was burned full of tobacco. Juan’s brother’s name was Osvaldo Serrano. In that time, he had contact with some influential people and he would burn tobacco barns to collect insurance money. I think he caused the fire. At one time he wanted Manuelito and I to work with him, but we didn’t want to.

Because of the experiences I already had and because of what they told us at the garrison, that same night I got together all of the clothes I had: two pairs of pants and three or four shirts, two or three pairs of underwear and three pairs of socks, I made them into a bundle, and early in the morning I left for Nilda to catch the bus and go to the house of Miguel Ruiz. I spent all day hiding in the countryside. I would wake before dawn and return when it was night so no one would know I was in the area.

When I left home, I remember that, as I stepped onto the bus, the Guardsmen’s jeep was coming to begin apprehending people. I don’t know how many people they detained but the ones they took were the same ones they took before. They tortured those wretches mercilessly, killed two of them, and threw their bodies in unmarked graves. Another died later due to his injuries.
I spent six months hiding in Miguel Ruiz’s house. The Escalona rebels were relatively close to that place. At one point I thought about joining them, but I didn’t do it because I was a church member. I wouldn’t bear arms and I have never believed that humanity’s problems can be solved by humans, (although we have contributed many times to imparting justice), rather by the final solution, which is God who will destroy sin, in the end with the second coming of Christ.

I was able to return home because Miguel Ruiz was friends with a senator of the Republic named Pedro Menéndez. When Rodríguez had the chance, he talked to Menéndez and said I was a peaceful person who didn’t get into trouble. This senator talked with the Guard, and I was able to return home.

In that time, people had a desire to hear the Gospel. Each night we had worship services in homes where people asked us to go. Many people gathered together, almost always more than 50 listeners. The Guardsmen never made trouble for me again, and I always tried to be prudent.

On the first day of January in 1959 we were coming back from church, walking down a hill close to the home of Sergio Cruz, a member of the Santa Damiana church. I don’t remember which family members were there, but I do remember my parents were with me. Suddenly, in the distance, we saw a man running and yelling. As he passed by us, he yelled to us that Batista had left Cuba and Fidel Castro had won the war. I was happy to hear it, but we weren’t sure if it was true. But as the day went on, the news kept growing and finally we knew it was true. That Saturday, we stayed home quietly because it was the day of rest, but the next day everything changed.
In front of our house a big group of people gathered. The idea was to go to San Juan y Martinez, the capital of the municipality that was about four kilometers away. No one was the leader of the group, we all talked at once, and the truth is we didn’t know what we were going to do. Since dad sold clothes, I took two pieces of fabric, one red and one black, and my mom sewed them together on her sewing machine, making a 26 of July Movement flag. Once we arrived in the city, we saw that almost everyone had gone there. We went in Jorge Navarro’s truck. Along the road everyone yelled in favor of Fidel Castro. Truly that was a day of great confusion in Cuba.

On one of the streets in San Juan, close to the park, there was one of the Rural Guardsmen. All of us yelled at him, ‘Viva Fidel!’ and he said, “well, let him live.” The situation was strange and tense, everyone yelled and there was a great commotion, but nothing concrete was said. It was all noise and yelling. The saying is true, mobs are monsters with a thousand heads and no brain.

The garrison of that place was on a little hill, from where you could see the whole city, which was in a valley. In those moments, it was full of Guardsmen and members of the army who were quartered there for the war and heavily armed. In the city we were thousands of people, but without one firearm between us all, and without a leader who was in the army. But the spark was about to catch fire and catch it did.

Standing atop a truck I looked at the crowd and yelled “if you’re a man, follow me! We are storming the garrison!” I jumped from the truck and began to walk towards the garrison, drawing the loudest commotion I could. The crowd followed me, everyone yelling and saying, “Viva Fidel Castro!” When we came close to the garrison, some of
the guards cried out for us to back off, but we kept going. The guards gave themselves up without the least resistance. There was one whose last name was Rodríguez who at the least was a torturer, and he shot himself. With me in the lead, we took the garrison without having a clue what we were doing. The next day the rebels arrived and took care of things.

The Rio Seco garrison had been abandoned in favor of the one in San José y Martinez. When the rebels arrived and took over the garrison, they found something that had to do with me. There was a list of 31 men who they were going to hang on the second day of January 1959, and the first name on the list was mine. They listed me as a leader of the others. That was false because I wasn’t doing anything or leading any groups. But after what happened at the San José garrison we stormed and now seeing the list, the rebel leaders called me and gave me a rebel uniform and a firearm. But I told them I was religious and didn’t want to be in the army. I told them to give those things to Manuelito who would use them. They did and poor Manuelito, dressed as a rebel soldier and with the firearm took things to an extreme. He got sick and had a frog in his throat that was so big he couldn’t talk until he left the army. Then he recovered.

**Strike Leader**

The government of Fidel Castro began the first day of the month of January 1959. In those times the, tobacco boom was at its height. The work and workers were also affected. Well, there were changes in everything. There were new authorities and new people of influence.

At that time those of us who worked in the covered tobacco farms of Cuban Land found out the company paid the shareholders (for us the owners of the tobacco lots)
$10 for each day of work. The shareholders only paid us $2.44 per day. They kept the
rest of the money for the company Christmas and New Year’s parties. The companies
gave a gift, which they called a *plus*, [a bonus] that is to say extra money for the holiday
season. The shareholders kept that money.

The first time they gave us that bonus was that month of January, and they also
raised our daily pay. And we had more work hours because the fields were prepared
better. That made it so we all felt happier.

But this was a very fleeting joy. Apparently, they changed the people who
managed the tobacco workers, and the new leaders tried to put us in a worse position
than before. They took away the bonus, that is to say the aid for the end and beginning
of the year holidays. And the wages were decreased even more than before. The
workers began to protest, but they didn’t know how to say things. I also protested, and
since I expressed myself better, they asked me to represent them. In that way,
negotiation talks were held through me. They tried to convince me to accept what they
wanted to do. Things worsened and since we couldn’t come to an agreement, I told the
tobacco workers we should go on a strike and so we did. First, we were one group; and
leaders from the government came to us to try to end the problem, but always under
pressure to accept whatever they said.

This was happening only with the group where I worked, but the rest of the
workers started to hear about it little by little and joined our strike. After a short time, all
of the tobacco workers were involved in the issue. The strike reached all of us, and then
things became very difficult. The tobacco harvest began to be endangered, and that
meant the loss of several millions of dollars. We had many meetings, but everything stayed the same.

We came to a very tense moment. The leaders set a date for a big meeting with everyone involved. The event was held at a place called the Batey of Río Seco. It is the central location for everything concerning tobacco in the region. Many leaders came, including police officers and radio journalists. They made a big deal out of it; they brought audio equipment. There were government leaders, and others who represented the workers, but I was the one who had to speak for the workers at the meeting. I don’t know what the reason was for doing this so publicly instead of doing it privately. The case was that the government leaders presented their plans and the things they wanted to accomplish. And, when I had my turn, I said what we wanted, and we came to a final agreement. We gave up on a few things and they conceded on other things they were denying us. We all felt good. After this, I did not participate again in political matters or represent anyone else. I did not like that world, and I left it.

Chapter 5: Analysis of Themes

Complicated Family Relationships

The first theme that immediately became clear to me as I read the memoir and comparative texts was this phenomenon of complicated families. A loss of intimacy or closeness between parents and children complicates the family dynamic. An example of this theme from Gerzom’s memoir is that his paternal grandmother prevented him and Sira, his older sister, from calling their mom, “mom.” He still calls her “Bertha” to this day when he speaks of her. Something very similar happens to the characters in Dreaming
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in Cuban, (Dreaming) by Cristina Garcia (2004). The family matriarch, Celia del Pino, had conflicts with her mother and sister-in-law. She lives in their home during her pregnancy, and she rejects her baby once she is born. In an interesting reversal of Gerzom’s situation, it is Celia who says of her daughter, “I will not remember her name” (Garcia, 2004, p. 74).

Undiagnosed mental illness is another factor that also caused strife among the families in both Gerzom’s memoir and Dreaming. The family members in Dreaming suffer from mysterious maladies. There is, for example, Celia’s illness that took her to an asylum. Using modern terms, she probably had postpartum depression, since she had just given birth to her first child, Lourdes. However, the book does not describe the illness in those terms. Instead, Garcia writes phrases like, “A fat wax grows inside of me. It’s looting my veins…they poison my food and milk but still I swell. The baby lives on venom” (2004, p. 50) Later, Celia’s second daughter, Felicia, also shows symptoms of mental illness, possibly schizophrenia. Her “delusions commence suddenly, frequently after heavy rains” and “she can hear everything in this world and others, every sneeze and creak and breath in the heavens or the harbor or the gardenia tree down the block” (Garcia, 2004, p. 39,75). Felicia even tries to kill herself and her son. While nothing this drastic happened in Gerzom’s family, they did have a father whose behavior was irrational and irresponsible. He also displayed drastic mood swings and violent behavior. But, at the end of his life, Flores’ family received some clarity about his erratic behavior. An autopsy discovered that his brain was scarred by old lesions. No
one knows to what extent the injuries controlled his behavior, but they doubtless affected his life and his family.

When children feel that their parents have failed in their role as protectors, like Gerzom and Lourdes’ parents do, it causes division in the family. Gerzom writes with bitterness and, I think, some resentment, about Flores’ flippant attitude after their neighbors attempt to sexually assault Bertha. An incident of sexual assault also causes division in the del Pino family. Communist soldiers sexually assaulted Lourdes, the oldest daughter (García, 2004). Lourdes and Celia were already distant. Now, the rape leaves Lourdes furious as she flees the island. Celia’s impassioned support of the Communist cause, and of Fidel Castro himself, further distances mother and daughter. Lourdes’ traumatic experience makes her mother’s support of communism feel like a personal betrayal. Both children had expectations for how their parents should fulfill the parenting role, and, when their parents let them down, they distanced themselves.

**Coming of Age**

Due in part to his complicated family life, my grandfather matured much younger than most, and that experience molded part of who he is today. By age seven, he was running the household. While both parents and Sira were at work, he cooked and cleaned and cared for his younger siblings. It is like Roberto Fernández Retamar writes in his poem, “Felices los Normales” (Happy are the Normal Ones), people with “normal” lives, with functional, healthy families and plenty of wealth are blessed, lucky (2016). But Retamar says it is the ones “crazier than their mothers,” the ones “more devoured
by all-consuming loves,” who “create worlds and dreams…words that break us in two” (Randall, 2016 p. 163). And maybe, at least in this case, that is true.

Major coming of age moments, like sexual awakenings, happen in the public eye in both Gerzom’s memoir and *Tres Tristes Tigres* (2008). Gerzom’s Río Seco neighborhood was an incredibly tight-knit community, to an almost claustrophobic degree, by my standards at least. Gerzom records the story of a woman in town who kept many lovers. He mentions how young boys over the age of twelve, including his friends, would go to see her for their initiating sexual experience. Guillermo Cabrera Infante writes about a similar situation in the first story of *Tres Tristes Tigres* (2008). Two young girls become local celebrities after spying on a young unmarried couple’s clandestine sexual encounters from under a truck. Instead of chastising the girls, their parents, along with the rest of the town, wanted to ask, “wait a minute, what were you two doing under the truck?” (Cabrera Infante, 2008, p. 12). Instead of answering the question, the girls divert to tell the story of seeing the affair because they didn’t want to say what they were doing, “cositas,” a colloquial term for sexual activities, under the truck (Cabrera Infante, 2008, p. 11). Clearly, this experience was a coming of age moment for both girls. However, the events surrounding their experience were completely public. Every single person in town heard about the couple, to the point that the woman and her mother moved to another town (Cabrera Infante, 2008).

Perhaps it’s because Gerzom was seventeen when Castro triumphed, but I think his story illustrates how the Cuban Revolution can be understood as an analogy for

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4 This title translates literally to “Three Sad Tigers.” It is a reference to a Spanish tongue-twister.
adolescence. Major, long-lasting changes, a desire for autonomy, and rebellious behavior characterize both coming of age and the Revolution. When people go through adolescence, they begin to cement the core parts of their personality that they will carry into adulthood. Childhood influences and experiences are still important and carry weight. But, adolescence marks that shift, the change towards autonomy. Then there is, of course, the rebellion. The Cuban Revolution was a period of rebellion. Rebelling from Batista’s government, but also from a history of foreign powers (Spain, the US) controlling the island. And, just like a rite of passage, Cuba was never the same afterwards.

I think Mirta Aguirre’s poem “Este Camino,” (This Road) expresses the feeling of those transitional moments, both personally and nationally (2016). It is a poem about self-discovery. The first lines are “Blind, like a child. / Like a child stumbling on unsure feet.” but she continues, “Let no one give me light…Let me stumble, let them wound me / let me fall” (Aguirre, 2016, p. 75). Repeatedly, Aguirre makes a point many parents of teenagers have heard before: “let me be myself” (Aguirre, 2016, p. 75). Even if we make mistakes, adolescents and guerrilleros say, at least we will have accomplished it ourselves. At that vulnerable time of life and national history, people feel a desire to leave a mark, to be remembered. Maybe that rebellious fervor is what drives them to do things like storming a garrison without weapons, like my grandfather did. “Let me be myself,” they say, “Even if I am less / than what I might have been! / And, if only incised in clay, let the fingerprints / be mine!” (Aguirre, 2016, p. 75).
Life in a Military State

Teenage rebellion can turn violent, and in this case it did, adding more strife to an already explosive military state. The fear of violence at the hands of the Rural Guard is a major part of living in a military state for the people in Gerzom’s narrative. In the parts of his memoir that I translated alone, my grandfather records two separate incidents of the military arresting innocent civilians and torturing them. Although he grew up in a relatively small town, his town still had a standing division of the Rural Guard and a garrison. Similar accounts are present in literature from other Cuban authors. The Rural Guard make an appearance in the famous poem, “Tengo,” by renown poet Nicolás Guillén (2016). He writes, “I have, let’s see, / there’s no more Rural Guard / to grab and lock me in a cell, / or pick me up and kick me off my land” (Guillén, 2016, p. 26). But the violence did not stop when the rebels triumphed. It was those guerrilleros that Garcia writes about in Dreaming in Cuba (2004). Lourdes defies the soldiers of the Revolution who come to tell her the land now belongs to the government. In response, they rape her. Afterwards, one soldier scratches a message into the skin of her stomach. Lourdes later flees Cuba, marked in more ways than one by the violence she suffered (García, 2004). Because the island had been at war or under martial law almost continually since the late 1800’s, it makes sense that a standing army was such a common part of their life experience for Gerzom, Garcia, and Guillén to mention.

Another result of a culture of military oppression is that people decided to solve violence with violence. One example of this from Gerzom’s life is his wish to fight the boys who teased him and called him names as a child. Another, more serious example
is his resolve to get revenge on his mother’s would-be rapist. I see the same core idea reflected in Felix Pita Rodriguez’s poem, “Llegan los Guerrilleros” (2016). He describes the conditions of fear and violence in Cuba under Batista, and then ends each description with the phrase, “llegan los guerilleros.” “The guerilla fighters show up” (Pita Rodríguez, 2016, p. 53). “When mornings turn dark, when people close their eyes in fear / the guerilla fighters show up” (Pita Rodríguez, 2016, p. 53). In his imagery, the guerrilleros are like an avenging force of righteousness, coming to right wrongs. But they, too, took innocent lives and spread violence.

Due to the years of war and occupation, acts of violence became commonplace. There is that passing mention in the memoir of the ice cream salesman who attacked his competition with a knife out in the street. Gerzom only stops to comment that, luckily, the man wasn’t seriously hurt. Something similar happens in the first part of Tres Tristes Tigres, “Los Debutantes” (The Debutantes) (2008). The story, narrated in first person by one of the protagonists, is about two young boys going to the movies. The narrative style is loose and casual, like a story told by a talkative friend who likes to circle around the point. Then, suddenly, the commentary stands still as action erupts. People are screaming and running away, and the narrator’s friend pulls him into the shelter of a store, yelling “Silvestre, look out, they’ll kill you!” (Cabrera Infante, 2008, p. 33). Two men fight viciously in the streets until one finishes the other off with a close-range shot. The murderer leaves the corpse in the road, and life goes on. The people come out of hiding. The narrator and his friend go on to see the movie. Life goes on, but the violence does affect people. At the end of his story, the narrator comments that he
can’t remember which film they saw that night, but he does remember the violence (Cabrera Infante, 2008).

**The World Changing Around them**

After enough time living in a military state, violence no longer seems so noteworthy. Maybe that is why, until the Revolution triumphed, the world seemed to just go on as usual. At two distinct moments in his memoir, Gerzom reveals how he stood apart from the revolutionary changes happening around him. The first is an intentional self-exclusion from the Movement from the “Times of War and Sabotage” part of the story. Gerzom writes, “In Río Seco there was much sabotage. Many people were activists from the 26 of July Movement, but I lived apart from all of that.” That last phrase, “but I lived apart from all of that,” is so clear. Far from the war front and the ideological discourse, people living in this critical moment in time could be so unawares. Once again, I find resonance in the poem “Tengo” by Nicolás Guillén (2016). He describes some of the surprise, in this case awe, at the sudden changes that come with the Revolution with this verse:

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When I see and know myself
me, Juan with Nothing yesterday
and today Juan with Everything,
with everything today,
I blink and look once more,
see myself and ask
how it can be
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Where Guillen finds awe in the Revolution, others experienced its arrival or, rather, the arrival of communism, as a shocking, unpleasant surprise. This was especially true for people who the government would later oppress. When he joined the crowds cheering for Fidel Castro on January 1, 1959, Gerzom did not know he would soon be among the oppressed because of his religion. Ironically, prior to the triumph of the Revolution, some Adventists were very welcoming to the rebels. I saw the clearest example of this in two narrative articles written by Walton J. Brown then the president of the Antillean Union College (1959). He writes about how the campus welcomed the rebels, offering them food and medical care. His writing casts the guerrilleros in a positive light, including details like how all the men, despite their exhaustion, stand quietly for prayer (Brown, 1959a). Brown also writes with pride about meeting Che Guevara and hosting him during the campaign on Santa Clara. He writes,

Now we are enjoying the ‘after-effects’ of that week. The new governor of the Province of Las Villas appeared at the college early one morning. He insisted on speaking to the young men and young women who had served him during that week when, he said, he had eaten several meals in our cafeteria. Our Choir came into demand, singing in the municipal auditorium, at the regimental headquarters, and before the commander in chief himself, Premier Fidel Castro”

(Brown, 1959, p. 3)

Although in retrospect, it is easy to condemn the church leaders for their early and enthusiastic reception of Castro and Guevara, I should not be so quick to judge. As
evidenced by the historical events, the Revolution underwent an unexpected metamorphosis after it triumphed. The Adventists, like so many others, were living unaware of what was to come and supporting what they thought would be a welcome change from Batista’s military state.

The second scene from my grandfather’s memoir that illustrates this idea of living unaware of change is because of his innocence at the time. The story is so nostalgic that it leaves me melancholy. “Next to the house there was a pretty big concrete floor,” he writes, “When it rained, we would clean it well and slide along on our bellies under the rainstorm. We really liked to do that.” He also writes about trips into the country with his father to pick fresh mangoes from a tree, “We returned to the house always full of mangoes. They were so sweet and delicious.” That image of my grandfather as a young child, blissfully unaware of the Revolution about to bubble over, is beautiful and compelling to me. I think Mirta Aguirre’s poem, “Todo Puede Venir” (Anything May Come) captures the essence of surprise that comes after innocence ends (2016).

“Anything may come from the direction / we least suspect,” she writes (p. 79). And, as the revolutionary government became more communist, it “comes face-to-face with a mirror but doesn’t see herself” (Aguirre, 2016, p. 79). Change, Aguirre says, can come from within or from the outside. For people like Gerzom who were not involved in the revolutionary effort, the world was definitely changing around them, shifting like a mobile while they stood still. Despite their inactivity, the changes did come.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The results of this project surprised me. I discovered shared themes, even in narratives that were otherwise so different from what my grandfather wrote. It reminds me of what Guillermo Cabrera Infante, the Cuban author who wrote *Tres Tristes Tigres*, said about writing in exile: “For me, it is essentially being an author who has lost his natural audience, the Cuban reader. Although, it is true that I do have my readers dispersed throughout the world” (Hernandez Cuellar, 1997).

I would like to think that, even if the “natural audience” for my grandfather’s memoir is dispersed, his found audience could benefit from it even more. I hope making part of his story accessible to English readers will help in some way to spread interest in the stories of Cuba.

Although this project focused on the shared themes of complicated family dynamics, coming of age, life in a military state, and the world changing around them, differences exist also. There is so much work left to be done in this field of research, especially since the story is ongoing. Now, while the generations who remember a Cuba before Castro still live, is a critical time to engage in this kind of research. These generations, which will pass on, leave to us the treasures of their memories.

Now, at the conclusion of my work, I see that I was mistaken at the beginning. There is nothing “simple” about the Revolution, or even about Cuba itself. From the island come many different voices. And yet, I feel more connected now to my people, to my island, than I ever have before.
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Appendix A: Family Photos

Author’s Note: Of the photographs included in this appendix, very few are from the pre-revolutionary period. Even though that period is the focus of this project, the lack of access the Gomez family had to photography equipment and the difficulty of preserving photographs through multiple migrations have limited the material available to me. Instead, most of these images were taken in the late 1970s-1980s. I have included photos with subjects that relate to the stories in the memoir and the central themes I discovered in my research.
My grandmother, Raquel, does not appear in the parts of the memoir I translated. She and Gerzom hadn’t met yet. Even so, I wanted to include her photo in this record because my relationship with her inspired me to learn more about my family history. She, too, was coming of age in the Cuban Revolution.
Gerzom takes an early analog camera selfie.
In this photo of a riverbed, a flaw in the film lends the appearance that a distant bridge is on fire. This is reminiscent of Gerzom’s story about the great fire that consumed the tobacco barns and fields in his town.
Bertha Gomez Delcourt, Gerzom’s mother, stands in front of the Gomez family home in Taco Taco, Pinar del Río. The corrugated metal sheets are the same kind that protected the family home in Río Seco from the great fire.
Another view of the Taco Taco home, this one with one of Gerzom’s young sons standing on the front steps.
A humble home in Pinar del Río. Wooden homes with roofs made out of palm fronds, like this one, helped spread the huge fire Gerzom witnessed in Río Seco.
Tobacco plants in Guantánamo, eastern Cuba. Tobacco was also a major part of the economy in Pinar del Río, Gerzom’s home province.
An open field of tobacco *de sol* with a tobacco barn visible in the distance.
A field of tobacco *tapado* covered in white *chiclot* cloth.
Another field of tobacco covered in *chiclot*. Gerzom records that many of the farms in Río Seco used this method for growing tobacco.
Rows of bushy tobacco plants on a hill with the sloping country of Pinar del Río stretching towards the horizon. Gerzom and his family worked in fields like these.
A river overflows its banks in Baracoa, on the eastern end of the island. Gerzom witnessed a more catastrophic flood in his childhood home of Río Seco.
This picture of the turbid ocean recalls Gerzom’s description of the great flood in his hometown.
Seeing a plane was still a rare enough occurrence at this point for Gerzom to stop for a photo. Decades had passed since that first time they saw a jet in the sky, but the plane still captured his attention.
San Antonio de los Baños: A social event in the covered terraced of the SDA church in San Antonio de los Baños, another place where Gerzom served as a pastor. Gerzom’s SDA faith plays an important part in his memoir.
One of the many SDA churches where Gerzom served as pastor, this one in Las Tunas. My mother, Arody, poses in the doorway.
Gerzom performs two baptism as a pastor at the Guantánamo Seventh-Day Adventist church.
Gerzom's parents, Florencio (Flores) and Bertha. His relationship to them is a major source of the complicated families theme of this project.
A young Bertha Delcourt. This photo was taken before she married. On the back, she dedicates it to her aunt and cousins, “with love, Bertha.”
An open road leads into a small town near Baracoa. The high mountains that characterize the Oriente provinces rise in the distance.
Cuba is a mountainous island. Mountain ranges like these provided critical shelter to Fidel Castro’s rebel guerrilleros.
A group of men crowd into a makeshift form of public transportation. Although these men are going willingly, during the revolutionary conflict young men were rounded up in vehicles by the Rural Guard under suspicion of sabotage.
The geography of Pinar del Río, where Gerzom grew up, is green and mountainous. The mountains provided refuge for a part of the rebel army, but also for Gerzom when he fled from the Rural Guard in Río Seco.
A crowd, probably from the local church, cheers together at an unseen feat. This image reminded me of Gerzom’s description of the festive spirit in San Juan y Martinez after Castro’s victory.
Gerzom photographed between the ages of 16 and 17. At this age, he lead an unarmed takeover of the municipal Rural Guard garrison.
Children participate in a church Christmas program. Gerzom’s memories of the holidays before Castro are some of the most nostalgic in the narrative.
Children and young people share a public playground. I chose to include this image because its playful and carefree appearance complements the fourth theme of this paper, the world changing around them.
This is a photo of my sister visiting the Varadero beach as a child. Even though the photo is obviously not from the pre-revolutionary period, I included it because it helps capture the aspects of warmth and nostalgia of the period that the memoir reflects.
Gerzom followed in his parent’s footprint by going on to have a large family of his own. These are the first of his five surviving children. The older girl is Arody, my mother.
Three generations of the Gomez family: Gerzom, Arody, his daughter, and me. The photo of me as a baby was among the last my family took while living in Cuba.