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Power by Possession: Cuban-American Types
and Collecting in *The Agüero Sisters*

Ashley Walton

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
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Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Power by Possession: Cuban-American Types
and Collecting in *The Agüero Sisters*

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Although many other ethnic and cultural studies have moved beyond essentialist labels and categories, Cuban-American studies persists in categorizing the people belonging to the cultural group in terms of how much time they have spent in Cuba, thus creating a hierarchy of “authentic” Cuban-ness. Isabel Alvarez Borland gives a comprehensive overview of Cuban-American literary categories, and through her description we can see how these categories may lend themselves to stratification. These categories include: the first generation, the second generation, the one-and-a-halfers, and the ethnic writer. To say that one generation of Cuban exiles is more or less authentically Cuban discounts the emotional connection of individuals to a homeland—a homeland that is now different for each generation, and therefore, all Cuban-Americans live with constructed ideas of Cuba that are not necessarily reflective of a “reality” of Cuba. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that any of these individuals are any less Cuban or any less culturally or emotionally impacted by Cuba, as evidenced by someone like Cristina García who delves into Cuban culture in her writing and studying. *The Agüero Sisters* by Cristina García, can be read as a critique of this cultural categorization through the way in which characters in the novel obsess over taxonomizing animals and even other people. It seems in order for Cuban-American studies to move forward productively, these labels must be revised.

Keywords: Cristina García, *The Agüero Sisters*, Cuban-American, taxonomy, collecting

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Cuban Types.....	4
Function of Collecting.....	10
Taxonomy in <i>The Agüero Sisters</i>	13
People as Representational Shells	15
Power by Possession	22
A Need for New Labels.....	24
Works Cited.....	27

INTRODUCTION

The Agüero Sisters (1997) is Cristina García's second novel, following her debut novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992). *The Agüero Sisters* details the lives of two sisters, Reina and Constanca, as they attempt to reconcile their own identities and their relationships with their father, Ignacio, and their dead mother, Blanca. Some sections of *The Agüero Sisters* are told from the point of view of Reina, others from the point of view of Constanca, and others from the point of view of Ignacio's journal entries. We follow Reina's life in Cuba and her journey to the United States after a thirty-year separation from her sister, and we also follow Constanca's moving from New York to Miami, after having lived most her life as a New Yorker. When the sisters are reunited in Miami, they ultimately join together to try to solve the mystery of their mother's death, which occurred when they were both young.

In *The Agüero Sisters*, Ignacio Agüero is a naturalist, taxidermist, and taxonomist who passes down his fascination with nature and collecting to his daughters, Constanca and especially Reina. It is not that Ignacio enjoys hunting down these creatures, ranging from snakes to bats and birds, but he enjoys feeling that in so doing he has uncovered some truth about the universe. By systematically killing animals, Ignacio can order them, study them, and categorize them in ways that allow him to feel that he can move past the mere representation of living creatures and see them in their ostensibly true essence. After her father's suicide, Reina surrounds herself with Ignacio's preserved and stuffed creatures, and through her possession of these objects, Reina begins to follow in her father's footsteps, trying to understand the supposedly true nature of things through the possession, classification, and study of her taxidermic creatures.

Just as Reina and Ignacio taxonomize the creatures around them in the name of science, García herself also taxonomizes each character in her novel, styling each one to fulfill a Cuban-American type—the first generation exile, the one-and-a-halfers, and the ethnic writer. This essay focuses on the taxonomy of the Agüero sisters themselves, who serve as two different types of one-and-a-halfers. Despite the similarities between Reina and Constanca, each has a difficult time functioning in the Cuban-American communities in the United States, partly due to the categorical segregation between the different “types” of Cubans. García’s novel seems to make this move in order point out the stratification of “Cuban-ness” within academic studies, categorizing Cuban-American identities with the labels of the “first-generation exile,” “second-generation exile,” and the “one-and-a-halfers.” While these labels may help articulate the Cuban-American experience to a certain extent, they employ cultural essentialism, eliminating individuality and nuance.

Cuban identity cannot responsibly be categorized in terms of “more Cuban” or “less Cuban” since the location of Cuba itself is questioned by scholars—not the literal geography of the island, but the more expansive site of the larger diasporic Cuban transnation. On the issue of Cuban identity Román de la Campa, author of *Cuba on My Mind: Journeys to a Severed Nation* (2000), explains Cuba exists in the ideological and conceptual interstices between Cuba and the United States (175). To say that later generations of Cuban exiles are more or less authentically Cuban discounts the emotional connection of individuals to a homeland that is now different from the one that their parents or grandparents remember. All Cuban-Americans live with constructed ideas of Cuba that are not necessarily reflective of a reality of Cuba. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that any of these individuals are any less Cuban or any less culturally or emotionally impacted by Cuba, as evidenced by someone like Cristina García: a

writer who left Cuba at a young age but nevertheless delves into Cuban culture in her fiction and critical studies.

This Cuban-American preoccupation with hierarchical authenticity is illustrated through *The Agüero Sisters*' treatment of taxonomy and collecting. In order to understand how we can move past these labels, this essay explores the underlying psychology behind collecting and taxonomy, as discussed by Jean Baudrillard, and the assumptions that must be made in academic spaces in order for society to support taxonomy as didactic. Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure, Baudrillard asserts that an object's meaning is only understandable through a system of objects. In addition, Baudrillard suggests that people collect and classify things as a means of subverting the urge to claim power over other individuals, since a complete understanding of the intricacies of human life is impossible, and when people think otherwise they become seduced by a simulated version of reality (11). Thus, the urge to collect often lends itself to taxonomy (the classification of things in a set of a collection) which sometimes lends itself to taxidermy (the stuffing and preserving of creatures in a lifelike form so that one might possess it in a frozen state). In the case of Ignacio, the urge to collect becomes harmful, and I argue that his mysterious motivation for murdering his wife is his obsession with taxonomy and taxidermy. When he cannot understand his wife or have power over her, the only way he knew how to deal with her was to kill her, freezing her in time as his possession, reducing her to an inanimate corpse that can be understood and classified however Ignacio sees fit. In contrast to Ignacio's violent approach to taxonomy, Reina's preoccupation with taxonomy slowly turns to suspicion of the usefulness of the practice, as a result of several experiences in which she could not find the answers she was looking for from her taxonomic creatures.

CUBAN TYPES

Just as each member of the Agüero family tries to make sense of the world through taxonomy, García herself taxonomizes each character in the novel, each fulfilling a Cuban-American type in order to point out the problematic nature of the current categorical structures within Cuban-American literature. In his article “Cuban Types, Distorted Memory, and a Return to Cuba in Cristina García’s *The Agüero Sisters*,” Emron Esplin explains, “The different types of Cuban exiles deal with their memories of Cuba in distinct ways, and while not every exile in *The Agüero Sisters* reaches the same resolution . . . García’s overt use of stock Cuban types shows that she recognizes the differences between the groups” (84). But while it’s true that the novel uses distinct stock characters, it also critiques the segregation of these characters caused by the categorical types or groups. As with other diasporic groups, Cuban-Americans grapple with complex issues of identity, teetering between and belonging to two cultures at once.

Although many other ethnic and cultural studies have moved beyond labeling its human subjects in terms of authenticity, Cuban-American scholars persist in stratifying Cuban-Americans according how much time they have spent in Cuba (perhaps as a result of the ongoing tension and isolation between Cuba and the United States), thus creating a hierarchy of “authentic” Cuban-ness. In *Cuban-American Literature of Exile* (1998), Isabel Alvarez Borland gives a comprehensive overview of Cuban-American literary categories, and through her description we can see how these categories can be used as hierarchical. She explains that the “first generation” is a group of people who were adults when they left Cuba and therefore received their education on the island before coming to the United States. Alvarez Borland explains that the literature of first-generation authors record “the experience of exile in its most naked stages” (6). Alvarez Borland goes on to explain that “[b]ecause of the temporal proximity

to the physical experience of exodus, this writing displays indignation and anger toward the traumatic events or individuals causing exile. This is a literature with an overt political content that expresses angry feelings of betrayal” (6-7).

The second category described by Alvarez Borland is the “second generation,” the children of the first generation of exiles, and she divides this category into two subcategories: the “one-and-a-halfers” and the “ethnic writers.” She explains that this distinction must be made according to how long each group had lived in Cuba prior to coming to the United States because the difference in time spent in Cuba “produces a literature of markedly different sensibility toward both Cuba and the United States” (7). According to Alvarez Borland, one-and-a-halfers are people who moved to the United States in early adolescence and therefore had a Cuban childhood and a U.S. adulthood; in contrast, Cuban ethnic writers are those who came to the United States as infants or were born in the United States.

Alvarez Borland is not alone in using these terms of Cuban identity. The term “one-and-a-halfer” was coined by Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut who started using the term in the 1970s, inspired by the term “half-second generation,” used to describe Polish immigrants. The term “one-and-a-halfer” has become commonplace; Cuban-American scholars such as Gustavo Pérez-Firmat explain the term at the beginning of their books along with the terms “first generation exile” and “second generation exile” in order to differentiate between the labels before moving on to a conversation of Cuban-American identity. In *Life on the Hyphen* (1994), Gustavo Pérez-Firmat describes the category of one-and-a-halfer: “In some ways they are *both* first and second generation. Unlike their older and younger cohorts, they may actually be able to choose cultural habitats” (5). Similarly, scholars who write on Cuban-American novels often

reference the definitions of all three terms before discussing a Cuban-American text (as this one does), so readers can understand the cultural framework underlying the texts.

On the one hand, a discussion of these labels and definitions is necessary in order to understand a text that inhabits this cultural space. On the other hand, these labels become essentialist when they suggest one category is more authentically Cuban than another category or when they suggest a high level of similarity between all the members of the group. Alvarez Borland describes the “ethnic writers” as being further removed from Spanish, as most of them learn Spanish and English simultaneously in their home growing up. Alvarez Borland says, “These authors write simultaneously for an American and a Cuban audience. Their literature places greater distance between the writers and the events of diaspora” (141). This is the category into which Alvarez Borland places Cristina García, implying that García is less equipped to discuss Cuba than other Cuban-American writers. Alvarez Borland says, “Ethnic writers such as García have lost not just the reality about which they write but also the language upon which that reality is construed” (141). It is not clear here what Alvarez Borland means by “reality,” since to say that García has lost the reality about which she writes suggests that somehow her writings are less authentically Cuban because she did not grow up in Cuba. This implied critique seems to somehow discredit García’s interpretation or ideas of Cuba, even though the history and identity of Cuba is intertwined with the United States, and neither culture is complete without the other. Within Alvarez Borland’s comment, we can see a ranking system of Cubanness as a result of segmenting and categorizing the Cuban-American experience, a system which also reveals why García’s novel *The Agüero Sisters* can be read as a response to this categorization.

Just as Alvarez Borland is not alone in using the categories and labels of Cuban-American literature, she is also not alone in referencing García as an inauthentic Cuban-American. In her article “Authenticity and Language in Cuban-American Literature,” Lori Ween points out the way in which different academics and critics discuss and stratify the Cuban experience. For example, Ween provides a translation from Spanish to English of an article written by Elinor Burkett in Miami newspaper, *El Nuevo Herald*, that points out that García does not speak Spanish in her household and lives in Los Angeles, just a few of the factors in making her “the most North American of the Cuban writers” (131). Apparently, there are certain objective markers of authentic Cubanness that García does not successfully fulfill. Ween discusses this passage’s tone toward García’s inauthentic Cuban persona, saying,

Somehow, García’s upbringing separates and alienates her from her “Cubanness.”

She was not raised in Miami, which is now often considered a major source of authentic Cuban-Americanness. The fact that García’s husband does not speak Spanish also somehow keeps García from understanding her “true” Cubanness, and Los Angeles is not “Cuban” enough to be considered authentic. (131)

Like Alvarez Borland, Burkett diminishes García’s writing as less authentically Cuban, and therefore perhaps less “accurate,” because of her background. Still, it seems that some writers have just cause for such a reading of García. Ween translates a review from Spanish to English on *Dreaming in Cuban* by Patricia Duarte that says,

I am offended by the primitivism, the rudimentary mental processes and the vulgarity that the author attributes to Cubans... I am also bothered by the distortion of the folklore and customs. The suspicion that the santería rituals in

the book have no correspondence with reality inspired me to verify this with a santera, who diagnosed it as *Dreaming in American*. (137)

Of course, the fear of a culture being misrepresented or somehow treated as lesser is a legitimate one and should not be dismissed, especially given the political tension between the United States and Cuba, and certainly stereotypes and derogatory depictions are a cause for concern among scholars and writers. However, Duertas is too caught up in her concerns of primitivism, which causes her to ignore the concern of Cuban-American categories of authenticity. In reaction to Duarte's reading of *Dreaming in Cuban*, Ween says, "For Duarte, García's identity as an American woman colors her representation of Cuba, and in her point of view, García distorts the reality of Cuban existence and changes the traditions and practices that exist" (137). Since the "reality" of Cuba itself changes depending on the perspective, it is difficult to argue that García does not maintain a legitimate description of Cuba.

Cuban identity cannot be categorized in terms of "more Cuban" or "less Cuban" since the idea of Cuba is not limited to its literal geographic location. On the issue of Cuban identity Pérez-Firmat explains, "Cuba is less a place on the map than the label for a certain ethnic or cultural group. Just as there are Cubans from Havana, there are Cubans from Miami or New Jersey or North Carolina" (17). Similarly, Román de la Campa suggests that perhaps the "real" Cuba exists in the interstitial space between Cuba and the United States, since "there is no real return or reunification left as far as Cubans are concerned, except in the dramatic embrace of these crisscrossing passages, travels, and flows that promise no clear direction" (175). Therefore, when Alvarez Borland says that Reina is "the most Cuban character in the novel" (145) it is not clear what that entails.

In his book, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Antonio Benítez-Rojo also discusses the fluidity of identity and borders in the Caribbean islands. He says, “[T]he Caribbean is not a common archipelago, but a meta-archipelago . . . and as meta-archipelago it has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center. Thus the Caribbean flows outward past the limits of its own sea with a vengeance and . . . may be found on the outskirts of Bombay, near the murmuring shores of Gambia . . . at a Balinese Temple, in an old Bristol pub...in a windmill beside the Zuider Zee, at a cafe in a barrio of Manhattan” (4). Instead of perceiving the Caribbean as a self-contained entity, or instead of seeing it as a bridge between North American and Central America, Benítez-Rojo sees the Caribbean islands as an entity that cannot be contained within its literal borders and therefore permeates different areas and cultures around the world. Our understanding of what is or is not Cuban is far more complicated than how long someone or something has been within the literal borders of Cuba.

The discussion of “authentic” and “non-authentic” members of a culture can quickly degenerate into a discussion on the brink of cultural essentialism. In an essay on cultural identity, Rosalind O’Hanlon warns we must be careful to avoid “essentialism arising from the assertion of an irreducibility and autonomy of experience” (82). To say that one generation of Cuban exiles is more or less authentically Cuban discounts the emotional connection of individuals to a homeland—a homeland that is now different from the one that their parents remember. As such, all Cuban-Americans live with constructed ideas of Cuba that are not necessarily reflective of a “reality” of Cuba. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that any of these individuals are any less Cuban or any less culturally or emotionally impacted by Cuba, as evidenced by someone like Cristina García who delves into Cuban culture and identity in her writing. Indeed, Ween says,

However a critic deals with issues of authenticity, by positing the possibility of writing a true account of Cuban life the critic is also claiming that there is, indeed, a correct and central mode of being Cuban or being Cuban-American. The myth of originary culture makes possible (and all but inevitable) the limitation of the population's cultural growth, creativity, and techniques for bridging multiple sources of traditions. (140)

Ween astutely points out the dangers of stratified categories: placing a culture into certain parameters, codes, or types limits the culture's growth and impedes the bridging of multiple traditions. We need a certain amount of categories and codes in order for academics to enter the same conversation with the correct vocabulary, but when we use certain categories to describe not only a mode of literature but also a group of people, the linguistic labels hold power and connotations that easily degenerate into derogatory stratifications and must therefore be carefully selected. Put differently, at what point do the labels describe the Cuban-American experience, and at what point do the labels prescribe the "authentic" Cuban-American experience?

FUNCTION OF COLLECTING

One of the ways in which *The Agüero Sisters* explores the potential harmful nature of types is through the way taxonomy is used by characters in the novel. It seems obvious that people cannot be stuffed and taxonomized like people, but in *The System of Objects* Jean Baudrillard posits that whether we're conscious of it or not there's an unknowable quality to humans that incites an urge to taxonomize. For Baudrillard, this is an urge that must be subverted, or else the result will be a flattening of individuals to mere representations.¹ According to Baudrillard, an object is "anything which is the cause or subject of a passion" or in other words,

“the loved object” (7). In our lives, an object is not just something outside of our selves, but something that is profoundly subjective—something for which meaning is constituted in the mental realm of the individual. Therefore, the act of possession is made possible only once an object’s function has been divested and the object only has meaning in relation to a subject (or person). Baudrillard asserts that the desire to collect objects, to categorize and to lay things out, is propelled by the individual’s desire to claim power over the world outside the self (9).

Individuals can assert power over objects in a way that they cannot assert power over other individuals; therefore, individuals invest in objects “all that one finds impossible to invest in human relationships” (11). At the same time that the object lends itself to subjectification, the objects that are revered as important by individuals are revered as such because of their singularity or ability to fit as a link in an already existing chain, or larger spectrum. Therefore, one of the appealing things about collecting objects is that they lend themselves to be “simultaneously catalogued and personalized” (11). An individual is able to revere an object as special and unique, while simultaneously assigning a meaning to the object that only exists in the individual’s mind.

If the meaning of an object is realized through the observer, then perhaps the means of taxonomy or taxidermy in the name of science says more about the individual engaging taxonomy rather than whatever is being categorized. In his book *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads*, Stephen T. Asma affirms that a taxonomic specimen itself does not have any meaning. It is how people choose to exhibit specimens within the context of the museum and how individuals choose to analyze the specimens that give them meaning (xiii). Museum curators become the subjects who are able to possess the objects, to assign meaning as behind-the-scenes interpreters (Luke 3). In reality, the shells of taxonomic creatures that garnish natural history

museums are merely representations. Even though dead creatures do not fully represent their living selves, it is only in death that people are fully able to exert power over them; therefore, it is after the creatures are dead that they are perceived as valuable, even priceless, from a scientific viewpoint (Preston xii). Because the meaning of the objects is in observer, the objects can hold up a mirror to museum patrons. People see that “history is written by winners and nature defined by survivors,” and they see the “creative destruction of history and the destructive creation of nature” (106). The objects themselves are representations of power—a reminder of how creatures survive and how they die out. As people look at these dead creatures, they are able to find pieces of themselves, since people project themselves and their own meaning onto the objects.

Accordingly, natural scientists value collections—and clearly, since society builds museums to house these collections, society as a whole believes in the value of natural history collections as well. Some people believe that collections hold facts—even the secrets of the world— and that they will “reveal the relationships among all life on the planet, including human beings” (Preston 24). This may be true, but the value of the objects does not lie in the objects themselves, but in the possession and collection of them—in the ability of a subject to assign personal meaning to them. The drive to collect can function as a positive thing, as a means to subvert the urge to assert power over people; however, sometimes the function may fall short. In *The Agüero Sisters*, the characters perceive these creatures as something outside of themselves—a constant—that will reveal truth about the world, but the characters do not realize that the meaning of the objects lies in themselves and serves as a psychological form of power. For Reina, this fascination with objects is not dangerous. For Ignacio, asserting power over objects is not enough, and he tries to preserve his wife in a form where he can forever have power over her,

instead of having to bend to her erratic moods and behaviors. In this instance, the urge to collect becomes harmful, driving Ignacio to assert power over his wife by killing her, like one of his many other taxonomic creatures.

TAXONOMY IN *THE AGÜERO SISTERS*

Ignacio believes that studying taxonomic creatures will enable him to unearth some objective truth about the object at hand. Ignacio devotes his life to taxonomy, which enables him to supply natural history museums with taxonomic creatures. Toward the beginning of the novel, before his years of lamentation, Ignacio says his enthusiasm regarding taxonomy comes from a satisfaction “not in the pursuit of modest discoveries but in the bald act of approaching the very essence of things” (4). It is not that he enjoys hunting down these creatures, but he enjoys feeling that he has uncovered some truth about the universe. By systematically killing these creatures, he is able to order them, study them, and categorize them in ways that allow him to feel that he can move past the mere representation of things and see things as their true essence.

This love and passion for finding life’s truths through taxonomy is passed down to his daughter, Reina, but Reina complicates issues of identity and truth-seeking in ways that her father does not. Years after her father’s death, Reina refuses to throw away any of her father’s relics, in hope that they will reveal some truth—truth about her own identity or her father’s identity. However, even though Reina treasures her father’s world of taxonomy, her adoration and awe slowly turns to frustration:

Reina wonders whether it’s nostalgia to yearn for her mother, nostalgia to gather her shadows all these years. Why else would she choose to live like this, amidst the debris of her childhood and Papa’s dead specimens? What truths can they

possibly reveal to her after so long? Can they tell her why her mother died, why her sister was sent away? (67)

This appears to be the beginning of Reina's restlessness, her inability to accept the paths to truth that she's been given from her father. She realizes that she has continued this tradition of collecting, but for what? Her nostalgia doesn't appear to be productive; science doesn't bring her any closer to understanding the mysteries of her own life, let alone the mysteries of the world or of the universe.

Reina makes a final desperate attempt to unearth meaning from her taxonomic creatures when she visits the biology building at the university, hoping to find answers. However, as she wanders among the preserved and displayed animals, she does not find the understanding for which she had hoped: "The glare of lights only increases Reina's confusion. Nothing is familiar to her, nothing seems in its rightful place" (99). Reina realizes that it is not only her father's taxonomic collection that eludes her, but the biology building—and the study of taxonomy that it stands for—a structure that is supposed to be an objective place of truth does not satisfy her search for meaning. In fact, when these taxonomic creatures are taken out of the context of her home, out of her father's collection where she could at least contextualize them in terms of her father, they are completely alien and nonsensical, since the objects themselves do not hold meaning, and it is only through the contextual surroundings of the objects that a person is able to assign meaning to them.

By the time Reina leaves the biology building, she has moved past confusion and feels something more akin to resentment. The narrator says, "The science building is ablaze in a thunderous light. Reina feels as though she, too, were lit from within, burning with a forged history. She waits to see what her disturbance will bring. But nothing happens, nothing at all"

(100). In the course of the novel, Reina's attitude toward taxonomy moves from a place where she tries to reconcile her feelings of nostalgia to a place of anger because she feels she's been deceived. She begins to have her suspicions about the things that she's taken for granted her entire life. If her father has misguided her about the truths that taxonomy can reveal, in what other ways has her father misguided her? If she can't find truth through taxonomy, and the creatures are not even accurate representations of themselves, where can she find truth?

PEOPLE AS REPRESENTATIONAL SHELLS

Once Reina pontificates on the limitations of taxonomy, she begins to transfer those limitations to people and relationships: "Who will remember Mami in thirty years? Who will remember her father? Who, Reina wonders, will remember *her*? We hold only partial knowledge of each other, she thinks. We're lucky to get even a shred of the dark, exploding whole" (201). Referring to a person as a "dark, exploding whole" suggests that identity itself is a complicated concept. An identity is comprised of different shreds, and perhaps some chaos and conflict that does not necessarily fit into a neat notion of a homogenous identity. In complicating the notion of identity, Reina questions if her memories of her mother and father do them justice and if her memories can even be accurate or even begin to represent who her parents were. Just as Reina doesn't see how anyone can glean truth or explanation from a taxonomic shell, she doesn't see how anyone can know the truth about another person, since all we ever see is an outer representation, not the person within.

Reina hints toward this conclusion earlier in the novel, when she's going through her father's things and finds her father's blank passport. Ironically, she feels she gains more truth from this passport than from all the taxonomic creatures that she's collected and has continually attempted to extract insight from. The first page of her father's passport has a stamp permitting

him to travel to the United States. The narrator says, “The succeeding pages of the passport are blank. It seems to Reina that this passport, filed away for years with her father’s other important documents, tells the truth of their lives as nothing else does” (72). Note that Reina does not find the other important documents” as the most truthful, even though they no doubt contain more “information” than this blank passport. But documents can be forged; documents can lie. For Reina, it seems more truthful for the pages to simply be left blank, acknowledging their inability to contain truth. This blankness seems more self-aware and honest to Reina than any words, which could only lend themselves to further confusion and lies.

Not only do the characters in the novel seek to taxonomize the world around them, but Reina and Constanca are cast as two different Cuban-American exile types, showing the harmfulness of these culturally essentializing categories. In her article on sisterhood and *The Agüero Sisters*, Su-Lin Yu says that the novel “challenge[s] the validity and general application of the traditionally idealistic sisterhood but also adumbrate[s] a radically alternative figuration of sisterhood... the relationship of sisterhood is a structuring principle and a space where different women is constructed, displayed, and negotiated” (347). While the novel may in fact negotiate differences between women and Yu reads the novel as a deconstruction of sisterhood, I see the novel as a broader deconstruction of Cuban-American categories and a critique of separatist categories. Maya Socolovsky recognizes that Cuba is an important part of the characters in the novel, “creating an almost essentializing connection between their perception of themselves and their various ‘homes’ (148). By “various homes,” Socolovsky references the well-known structures and labels in place to discuss the Cuban exile experience: first generation, one-and-a-halfers, and the Miami exiles versus other “types” of Cuban-American exiles.

As previously noted, in *The Agüero Sisters* Reina is the sister who stays behind in Cuba—the one who guards her father’s taxonomic creatures that he has left behind after his death. When Reina moves to the United States, her self-imposed identity of how she fits into Cuban culture prevents her from being able to relate to the Cuban-Americans in Miami. The tension between Reina and the rest of the Miamians causes Reina to watch everything she says—she feels that she can’t be herself with her fellow Cuban Americans, for fear of causing an uproar. Emron Esplin points out the Cuban types that each of the characters fulfill:

Reina represents the Cuban who stayed behind, regardless of the choices made by her family members... Like many Cubans whose families emigrated to the United States in the 1960s, Reina is content, or at least indifferent, while living in Cuba after the revolution. She only leaves for the states after she has given her most productive years to the revolution and after she suffers a freak accident. (87)

She lives happily in Cuba, never scrutinizing the revolution but instead living a quiet life of hard work as an electrician.

When Reina moves to Miami, her idea of how she fits into Cuban culture prevents her from being able to relate to the Cuban-Americans in Miami. Inversely, Reina’s loyalty to Cuba makes many of the Miamians uneasy. The narrator says, “The minute anyone learns that Reina recently arrived from Cuba, they expect her to roundly denounce the revolution. It isn’t enough for her to simply be in Miami, or even to remain silent” (197). There is so much tension from separatism between the Miami exiles and Reina that they are not able to live harmoniously. In fact, Reina says that one day she accidentally calls a supermarket cashier “compañera” by mistake and “all hell broke loose on the checkout line, and a dozen people nearly came to blows!” (197). Reina is expected to make a conscious choice regarding which country has her loyalty,

because her own political views are looked down upon by the other Miamians. The tension between Reina and the rest of the Miamians is to the point where Reina feels that she has to watch everything she says—that she cannot express her real opinion to her fellow Cuban Americans, for fear of causing an uproar.

While fulfilling the trope of the post-Castro Cuban who refuses to leave and who works diligently under the regime, Reina also fulfills another “type”: she’s completely unromantic about sex and relationships, she loves working with her hands, she’s described as an Amazonian, and she’s perplexed by typically female-gendered indulgences like makeup and dresses. When she moves to Miami to live with her sister, she finds it difficult to relate to the other women she meets. The narrator says, “Reina is perplexed by the obsession women in Miami have for the insignificant details of their bodies, by their self-defeating crusades. She was appalled when Constancia took her to the Dade County shopping mall last Sunday. All those hipless, breastless mannequins, up to their scrawny necks in silk” (161). Reina feels like she cannot relate to these women, and she marks them as the “Other.” Not only can she not understand their motivations behind taking care of their physical appearance, but she looks down on them, mockingly. It seems that she is calling the women themselves “hipless, breastless mannequins,” mindless drones who follow the trends. She does not give their point of view any semblance of credence or respect. By placing the Miami women in a different category, in opposition to her own identity, she places them in a position as somehow “lower” than herself, creating a hierarchy of acceptable and unacceptable female identity. Reina does not simply use female categories as a means of understanding, but she uses it as a means for placing certain women in a group below herself so that she can feel more powerful than them.

Even though Reina criticizes the Miami women for fulfilling a female stereotype, Reina fulfills what is usually a male-centered Cuban stereotype and is described as one of the most sexualized characters in the novel. She is seen as a sexual object to all the men around her and she constantly engages in casual sexual relations. Consequently, Reina simultaneously exists inside stereotypes and outside of them. As an oversexualized woman (with the sex drive that is usually attributed to Cuban men), she takes control of her sex life instead of bending to the whims of the men around her. Just one of the many examples of Reina's attitude toward sex is exemplified in her dream to win the lottery so she could "spend the rest of her life floating around the world, ravishing her choice of men" (165). Throughout the novel, Reina does not talk about men as equals; rather, she talks about them as objects. The term "ravishing" implies dominance, a term that is usually used to describe men raping women. She even admits that she does not like the men who think highly of themselves, but she prefers men who are meek so that she can dominate them sexually. Reina is on the same side of the spectrum as the oversexualized Cuban men, unable to escape the stereotype, and again, labeling men as the "Other" so she can assert power over them.

In contrast with Reina, Constanica is sent to the United States when she is a child and represents in the novel the one-and-a-halfers, more specifically the non-Miami one-and-a-halfers. Constanica loves her life in New York and thinks of herself as a no-nonsense woman, vehemently shunning any romanticized Cuban past. Constanica categorizes herself as an outsider in Miami and therefore cannot relate to the women of her community. Communication breaks down between Constanica and the women of Miami because they cannot move past their cultural barriers (even though they share the commonality of all being from Cuba, of all being women, of all having to reconcile their identity with both Cuba and the United States). Esplin says of

Constancia, “While her in-laws in Miami planned Cuban invasions, she and Heberto [her husband] enjoyed New York City as a permanent home rather than an ephemeral resting place” and “like many Cuban exiles, she excels as a businesswoman, selling expensive cosmetics at a ritzy department store” (87). When Constancia moves to Miami, she consciously puts herself at odds with her peers, insisting that she does not indulge in nostalgia, and that she must mark the Miamians as the “Other,” just as Reina does. Like Reina, Constancia’s attitude perpetuates the fragmentation and alienation of Cuban-American categories.

Similarly to Reina, Constancia also has a difficult time identifying with and communicating with the women of Miami, but for different reasons: as someone who lived most her life in New York, she sees herself as an outsider to the Miami women. After Constancia moves to Miami and gains some weight, the narrator says, “Her acquaintances at the yacht club tell her the extra weight becomes her. But Constancia doesn’t believe these women. She knows she isn’t one of them, that her life outside of Miami will always mark her as a foreigner” (45). Constancia categorizes herself as an outsider and therefore cannot relate to the women of her community. Her alienation does not seem to be completely self-imposed, either, since the Miami women do indeed seem to treat her differently, to exclude her, and to treat her as an outsider. Communication breaks down among these women because they cannot move past their cultural barriers (even though they share the commonality of all being from Cuba, of all being women, of all having to reconcile their identity with both Cuba and the United States).

Constancia’s “Othering” of her Miami peers becomes even more apparent when the narrator says, “Constancia doesn’t consider herself an exile in the same way as many of the Cubans here. In fact, she shuns their habit of fierce nostalgia, their trafficking in the past like exaggerating peddlers” (45-46). Constancia complains of being marked as a foreigner by her

fellow Miamians, but she simultaneously judges them and looks down on them in a manner similar to Reina, comparing them to “exaggerating peddlers.” Instead of trying to understand their nostalgia or sympathizing with it (or even empathizing with it), she disregards it as something inferior that has no place in her life. This is also ironic, since just a few paragraphs earlier she reminisces about going to the market with her father in Havana. It seems that she has projected some unwanted parts of herself onto these women instead of dealing with the shadows that make her a whole person.

In addition to being categorized as a non-Miami one-and-a-half, Constanica is also a representation of femininity—the good wife, the proper lady, the porcelain doll. She takes care of her husband (always cooks his meals, even after she’s worked all day), runs the household, and takes care in her appearance. Of course, her femininity is even more apparent and stark in contrast with Reina. While Reina cannot understand why women take so much care in their looks, Constanica believes in religiously preserving her appearance, even to the point of launching her own line of beauty products. As Reina tries to preserve her identity through her father’s taxidermic creatures, Constanica tries to literally preserve herself, preventing her skin from aging and keeping her outward appearance in accordance with the representation that she wants for herself. Her products are described as “a full complement of face and body products for every glorious inch of Cuban womanhood... Each item in her *Cuerpo de Cuba* line will embody the exalted image Cuban women have of themselves: as passionate, self-sacrificing, and deserving of every luxury” (131). Constanica sees herself (and by extension Cuban women at large) in a categorical way, labeling them as “passionate, self-sacrificing, and deserving of every luxury.” Even in her own explanation of what a Cuban woman is, there are contradictory ideas: a Cuban woman is both “self-sacrificing” but also “deserving of every luxury.” Even though Constanica

seems to have a clear view of what a “Cuban” woman should entail, her very definition is convoluted. However, she does believe in taking care of her appearance and the appearances of other women, and in her view of Cuban women, there is no room for people like Reina, who don’t care to try to preserve their looks but actually embrace getting older.

The characters in *The Agüero Sisters*, especially the sisters themselves, cannot escape the metaphysical boundaries that they draw between different types of Cuban-Americans. Each of the Agüero sisters, along with the Miami women (who are clumped together as one mass in the novel, not identified as individuals), has their own idea of what it means to be a Cuban-American woman. Therefore, the characters become so enthralled with their own categorizations that they mark some groups of people as lesser and others as better, or more authentic, creating a hostility between the different groups. This is indicative of the problem with categories of authenticity.

POWER BY POSSESSION

In failing to communicate with the women of Miami, Reina and Constanica enact Reina’s fear regarding the futility of communication, which is again echoed in how Ignacio has recorded in his journal. She has a tangible account from her father supposedly explaining why he killed his wife, Blanca, and yet it is not enough. The author is put in the same position as Reina and Constanica, unsatisfied with Ignacio’s vague and poetic reasoning. After following this murder mystery the reader is not given explicit pieces to solve the puzzle. However, by looking at the psychological function of collecting, as we have here, we are able to make a more informed guess as to why Ignacio kills Blanca.

Although Reina expects that Ignacio has killed Blanca, it is not clear to the sisters until Ignacio’s journal is uncovered, and even then, the account is dissatisfying. In his journal, Ignacio says, “I do not recall taking aim, only the fierce recklessness of my desire . . . the invitation from

the bird itself. I moved my sight from the hummingbird to Blanca, as if pulled by a necessity of nature” (299). Ignacio specifically talks about Blanca as if she were just another one of his creatures to be conquered. While she lived, he never had power over her—she was a free spirit who did what she pleased, which included having a child with another man. However, in this moment, when Blanca is on this trip with Ignacio, things are as they once were. For the first time in years, Blanca enjoys spending time with Ignacio; she enjoys sleeping with him and even going on excursions with him. So stricken by fear that he will “lose” his wife once more, Ignacio tries to freeze her in time, to assert power over her through death, just as he has with the other creatures in his possession. For him, the only way he will ever possess the “true” Blanca is to kill her so he can classify her.

Earlier in the novel, years after he has killed his wife, it is clear that Ignacio has learned from his experience, that he deeply regrets killing his wife. From his place of regret and thoughtfulness, Ignacio talks to Reina about the difference between humans and his taxonomic creatures: “What makes us different from those creatures you hold in your hands?” Reina is thoroughly puzzled. Her father had often held long discourses on the nature of instinct and intelligence, but she was much too young to follow his arguments” (97). Here it seems that Ignacio has at least partly moved past the idea of being able to encapsulate truth in a taxonomic animal. Instead, he looks at his taxonomic creatures to see the differences between them and humans, the answer being that animals rely on instincts while people rely on intelligence. Instead of trying to categorize people or categorize animals, dividing them amongst themselves, he groups “us” together as “humans,” implying that humans are complicated, intricate beings that cannot be understood the way animals can be. Here, intelligence is a new concept in opposition to instinct. He’s not speaking about “truth” or “power,” but the ability to reason, the ability to

assign meaning to the world, the ability to move beyond carnal instinct and into realms of compassion, humility, and humanity. It is tragic that he doesn't come to this realization earlier in his life, since he blames killing his wife on the fact that he was pulled by "a necessity of nature" (299).

Ignacio seals his repentance with a note when he kills himself. As Reina thinks about her father's suicide, she recalls his last piece of "truth" to impart: "'The quest for truth,' Ignacio Agüero had written his daughters, 'is far more glorious than the quest for power.' Their father had written this, and then he shot himself in the heart" (13). Throughout his life, Ignacio had (perhaps inadvertently) been treating the quest for truth and the quest for power as one and the same. It is not until he is driven to suicide by his guilt that he realizes that "truth" doesn't have to be something that is only obtained through consumption of the Other. In fact, his final note is a counter-argument to Reina's marveling at how people can possibly communicate with each other. True, the Agüero sisters don't seem to fully understand the implications of their father's note, but it is his last attempt to add some truth to the world, to reach out to his daughters and advise them not to make the same mistakes that he made—to advise his daughters to reach out to people and communicate rather than to assert power over others through taxonomy. Ignacio urges his daughters to seek truth rather than power, to try to understand others, rather than divide themselves categorically, labeling others as "lesser" as the sisters do with the Miami Cubans.

A NEED FOR NEW LABELS

For a novel clearly interested in deconstructing the idea of harmful categorization, the novel certainly uses the same kind of "typing" that it warns against. As Emron Esplin eloquently puts it: "Like Ignacio, García captures different types of Cubans, but she freezes them in print rather than stuffing and preserving their physical bodies" (87). García gives the reader an array

of Cuban-American types, from the over-sexualized Cuban woman to the brave anti-Castro guerilla to the prostitute looking for tourist clients. As Esplin points out, García even conveniently gives us the perspectives of different generations and different locations—we have Reina who stays behind in Cuba, forever changed by the revolution, and Constanica who prospers in the States and who is simultaneously inside and outside the Miami culture.

With Cuban-American scholarship currently interested in types of experiences, a culturally self-conscious author like García is put in a precarious position. On the subject of Cuban identity, García says, “What strikes me . . . is the notion of Cuban identity—the rigidity involved in that. I am interested in how Cubans are constantly defining each other and what it means to be Cuban” (180). She goes on to say that she liked playing with this issue of Cuban identity in *The Agüero Sisters* and that neither of the sisters fits “into the strict notions of *cubanidad*” (180). However, even if all her characters do not fit the “strict” notions of Cuban identity, it seems they cannot escape the types they simultaneously defy and fulfill. García cannot avoid these categories because in trying to describe the Cuban-American culture, she cannot escape the discussion of Cuban-American scholarship and categories that have come before her and the tropes of other Cuban-American novels that have come before her. If she ignores the categories completely, she loses the credibility that comes with the “markers” that she’s done her homework, that she’s read Cuban-American scholars and understands the differences between the various Cuban-American groups, especially as someone who needs to assert her credibility because she left Cuba at such a young age and is therefore not able to remember the “real” Cuba. However, her other choice is to use the categories, thereby reinscribing them. Ultimately, she uses them, and she reinscribes them, but attempts to use the categories in a way that points out their harmful power of stratification.

In order for Cuban-American studies to move forward in a productive manner, the Cuban-American experience needs new labels. Once labels carry a certain connotation, we need new ones. If it were possible to work within the current labels without connotations of stratified Cuban authenticity attached to them, then we would be able to work with the current labels that we have. However, our current labels are steeped in animosity that builds barriers, segments a culture, and favors certain cultural experiences over others, and therefore, new labels are necessary. Of course there are differences between different generations of Cubans and Cuban-Americans that need to be acknowledged, but *The Agüero Sisters* urges us to realize that we have gotten to the point where the blank passport pages are more accurate than the labels we have imposed.

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¹ I focus on the ideas of Jean Baudrillard because he discusses the relationship between collecting and subverting the urge to have power over people, but of course, Jean Baudrillard's ideas about taxonomy and collecting came from a long line of theorists who grappled with the same subject. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781, Immanuel Kant questions the idea that an object has meaning in itself, suggesting that each person brings their own judgments and experiences to their understanding of an object, and an object can only be perceived in terms of a subject's senses and in context of external relatedness. This idea of individual subjectification and meaning constructed in the mind of an individual was developed linguistically by Ferdinand de Saussure, whose lecture notes on the subject were compiled and published as *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916. Saussure posits that there is no particular reason why certain words are associated with certain meanings, and language is a system of interdependent entities, often placed in opposition to one another in order for meaning to be understandable. As Saussure tried to break down language into a scientific mode of study, Northrop Frye attempted to do the same for literature. In 1957 Northrop Frye wrote *Anatomy of Criticism*, which divides literature into categories and modes of classical structures in order to discuss them. And in 1967 Claude Lévi-Strauss took these categorical modes and applied them to anthropology in *Structural Anthropology*, in which he explores different cultures in terms of structuralism and binary oppositions.