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Alberto Rey's *Balsa Series* in the Cuban American Imagination

Isabel Alvarez Borland

Then I saw that the days and the nights were passing and I was still alive, drinking sea water and putting my head in the water, as long as I could, to refresh my burning face....When the raft came apart each one grabbed a tire or one of the planks. Whatever we could. We had to cling to something to survive. . . .But I was sure I wasn't going to perish....It was like the end of a novel, horrible. Someone had to remain to tell the story.

Guillermo Cabrera Infante

In one of the final vignettes of Cabrera Infante's *View of Dawn in the Tropics* (1974), history becomes dramatized in a first-person narrative as life is pitted against death.¹ For Cabrera Infante (1929-2005), the use of a *balsero* perspective creates a new empathy in the reader, who is immediately drawn to the lives of those who speak and to their suffering. Infante's *View of Dawn* addressed the lies and the violence in Cuban history, and the use of oral language and popular scenes and topics such as a *balsa* crossing provided an effective portrayal of the links between writing and repression. Thus in the above quoted vignette the author changes the narrative voice of *View of Dawn* from the distant third-person of a fictional historian to the intimate first-person voice of the *balsero*. Faced with the event of an ocean holocaust, Cabrera Infante simply could not pretend objectivity before such a tragedy.

Since the late 1960s the raft or *balsa* appeared as tragic yet familiar icon in the visual works and narratives of Cuban exile writers. Visual artist Luis Cruz Azaceta (b.1942 -), who left the island as a teenager in 1960 and has been in exile for more than 50 years, has depicted the ocean tragedy since those early years and has obsessively treated the theme from different perspectives and painterly styles. In fact, the first *balsa* images of Luis Cruz Azaceta-- produced in the early 1970s-- a time roughly contemporary to the writing of *View of Dawn in the Tropics*--

showed depictions of this theme in its most naked stages. In an interview with Jorge Gracia (2008), Azaceta remarks that he dealt with certain themes such as the *balsa* crossings because they affected him personally and collectively: “*The image of the balsero while it is Cuban is also universal in depicting, isolation, horror and displacement.*”² *Balsa* crossings have been going on during all of Azaceta’s creative life and, for this artist, they are a Cuban experience that is very close and part of the exile reality. Because of the temporal proximity to the physical experience of various *balsero* exodus, both Cruz Azaceta and G. Cabrera Infante display indignation and anger towards a history that changed their lives forever. In the work of both artists, the viewer/reader perceives angry feelings of betrayal that reflect the chronological proximity of the historical events to the art produced.

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1990 and Cuba lost important subsidies from her main trading partner. Fidel Castro declared the time a “special period” and asked Cubans to conserve and sacrifice for their country. By 1994, when Castro announced that the military would no longer hinder ocean departures, more than 30,000 Cubans took to their rafts and boats.³ People escaping Cuba in homemade rafts was nothing new, but what was different was the number of attempts suddenly being made in 1994. It was during this time that the *balsa* and the *balseros* who sailed them re-emerged in works by scores of younger Cuban artists both in the United States and Cuba. Rafael Lima, a reporter and *balsero* spotter, describes what he saw in 1994:

The impression one gets flying over the balseros at 500 feet is one of looking down at floating garbage. You cannot believe that people are crossing an ocean on these things. They are pieces of Styrofoam. Not blocks. Pieces. You lower to 200 feet and the garbage gets bigger, and then 100 feet and you see there are people dressed in rags standing on the garbage, and when you see the children being held up in the air for people in the

plane to see, your heart breaks. We dropped survival packages with water and called the position in to the Coast Guard. ⁴

How are contemporary immigrant experiences of community expressed through visual and literary culture? What are the different ways in which the issue of community can be engaged by the Cuban-American artist? This study considers the ways in which the visual renditions and narratives of the *balsa*—some created roughly at the time of the 1994 exodus and others very recently--- function as a kind of migration narrative for contemporary Cuban exile artists and how the visual and narrative representations of the raft operate within an immigrant community as a mode of story-telling or story making which seeks to unify the fragments of an exiled community. By doing so, connections are made between the visual representation of the *balsa* and other modes of narration.

The haunting images of Alberto Rey's *Balsa Series* (1995-99) and the tragic narrative of Joaquin Fraxedas *The Lonely Crossing of Juan Cabrera* (1995) were created immediately before and after the 1994 Cuban *balseiro* crisis and thus these works serve as indexical examples of how *balsa* images and narratives have evolved and reshaped our contemporary understanding of this tragic subject. In more recent years Luis Cruz Azaceta's series *Trajectories/Trayectorias* (2010), and the novel *Cubop City Blues* (2012) by Pablo Medina points towards the persistence of the *balsa* in the imaginary of the US Cuban exile artist and address a perspective on this theme that illustrates the constant changing visions of community in US Cuban narrative and visual art. By selecting Cuban artists belonging to several generations and a variety of migration waves, we trace how these artists depict, not only their own personal suffering, but also the trauma of community displacement.

Alberto Rey's Balsa Series (1995-99)

Born in Havana, Cuba, in 1960, Alberto Rey's family left Cuba for Mexico in 1963 and moved to Miami in 1965. Two years later, his family relocated to Barnesboro, Pennsylvania, a small coal-mining town where he lived until the early 1980s. In his website and in interviews with O'Reilly Herrera in 1998, and with Jorge Gracia in 2006, Alberto Rey indicates that he felt a range of emotions and a sense of alienation from the story of the aftermath of 1959, a story which somehow was his, but that at the same time he had not lived.⁵ It wasn't until graduate school when---prompted by the tragic death of his grandmother whose raft never made it to U.S. soil---the artist felt an intense need to confront the story of his parents' exile, a story that he vehemently had avoided during his teens. It was then that Alberto Rey understood that his identity had been shaped by his parents' exile and indirectly by the 1959 revolution. Four series of paintings, all created between 1995 and 1999, exemplify Rey's most important work on identity: *Icons* (1993-95); *Appropriated Memories* (1996-97); *Las Balsas* (1995-99) and, *Balsa Artifacts* (1995-99). While each series of paintings is thematically and stylistically unique, they are tied together by Rey's exploration of his Cuban heritage.

As Rey observes in conversation with O'Reilly Herrera (1998), in *Icons* he wanted to recognize “*the integral function of food in preserving and transmitting culture, memory, and tradition*” (298). The *Icon* series, consisting of ten large paintings of single objects (5 x 8 feet), evoke the aesthetics of pop art through a coded and playful visual language that allows the artist to connect with Cuban viewers and participate in the experience of a shared culture. *Bag of Chicharrones*, for instance, depicts a greasy brown bag whose contents only the Cuban viewer could identify as pork rinds (*chicharrones*) a coded way to find a connection with a community the artist felt he had long ignored. In another painting such as *Ancel Guava Paste*, Rey

appropriates the commercial label “Ancel” and the product *dulce de guayaba* (guava paste) as he speaks in different levels to Anglo, Hispanic, and bicultural viewing audiences.

Appropriated Memories (1995-1997), a series of paintings inspired on black and white archival photographs of Cuba taken between 1890 and 1920, represents Rey’s exploration of the story of the 1959 exile. The memories ‘appropriated’ are inspired by photographs, familiar representations of Cuban landscapes and landmarks that Rey had never seen. According to the artist, the use of photographic references from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was very intentional and places the images, in the painter’s words, in “a country without politics or individuals.” As Rey indicates, this type of unhistorical depiction would remove the artist from the political issues that forced his family’s exile, allowing him to create a separation between the imagery of the past and the reality of Cuba’s present. Moreover, the artist’s use of archival black and white photographs allowed Rey to express his inability to create from the memories of others: “*I could have gone into the mid-1990s and found color images but I wanted to work with the black and white because I wanted an untainted separation from the present*” (Gracia 2006, 98).

In *Appropriated Memories* the viewer detects reverence for the image which is bolstered by further experimentation with light on the black and white photograph. As in his previous works, the artist draws the viewer into an intimate relationship with the image by providing only the most meager context and by forcing the viewer to look closer at the images due to the insufficiency of light. In appropriating and depicting the century-old images of Cuba, the artist struggles to imbue the work with a reality that he understands was not his own, but which nonetheless is fully resident in his psyche. A lack of resolution or a blurring withholds their details and the viewer is left groping to make sense of the landscapes and monuments that

characterize the series. When the artist paints the images from these archival photographs, he manipulates the light from the original images so that the light source comes from only one point in the painting. Everything else is made darker in order to control the order in which the viewer looks at the painting contributing to a clear but somber mood. For instance, in *El Morro* the viewer is unsure if the image's darkness is produced by night time calm or by an ominous, impending storm. The only light available to the viewer is the flat, weakened light which escapes from the low, gray clouds painted above the structure. A bluish tint further forces the viewer to struggle to see the well-known landmark that had been a Cuban prison since Colonial times. In a similar vein, in *Behind El Morro*, the viewer senses a sad evanescence to the place as gray fog seems to be rolling just ahead of rain-bearing clouds. Another picture, *Havana Harbor* projects a sense of uniformity as the harbor shows none of the expected signs of life from vessels, man, or sea. Past and present blended; these images depict Cuba as a place dedicated to impermanence, spectral in memory.

The title of the series, *Appropriated Memories*, is playful and somewhat misleading since Alberto does not transpose, enhance or paint over the photographs as would be expected of most artists who work with photographic appropriation in the visual arts. According to Rey, "the paintings, although painted in a devotional sensibility, are painted in a gestural manner so that the brushwork is evident and so it is clear that the work is a painting, not a photograph. The manipulation of the image is important so that it is clear that [only] the image is appropriated and that it is a selected visual metaphor for a much larger concept."⁶ *Appropriated Memories* thus explored borrowed memories as a personal reflection on time and personal identity. Alberto Rey's play with light creates an intimate, personal rendition of classic Cuban landscapes and

provides an example of how a visual artist is able to appropriate only *the image* of a memory in order to recreate a geography never seen.

Yet it is his next series, *Las Balsas* and *Balsa Objects* that becomes his most significant work on identity and community. In fact the *Balsa Series* began a meditation on death that prevails today in Rey's current work as the artist now explores death and loss as it occurs in the natural world. The images in the *Balsa* series were inspired by empty rafts or *balsas* that had washed ashore from Cuba the artist had seen on a visit to the Cuban Refugee Center on Stock Island during the summer of 1995. In the artist's own words,

While investigating the Cuban archives at the University of Miami and in the Key West Library for the Madonnas in Time Series, I went to the Cuban Refugee Center on Stock Island. The Cuban Refugee Center provided temporary housing for many Cuban immigrants who had arrived to the keys on rafts and housed a small collection of rafts and materials used by Cubans who attempted the 90-mile crossing. I wanted to document these objects as silent remnants of great human tragedies and of a contemporary politically social condition that is part of our time.⁷

Lynette Bosch observes that Alberto Rey makes use of available traditions in art history that would bring additional meaning to his coffin-like rafts. In *Balsas IV* (Fig) Rey endows his vessel with a sense of spirituality by placing it as a singular object within a spotlight and surrounding it with darkness as if it were on a stage. The image of the raft and what it represents to the Cuban memory is reinforced by the artist not affording the viewer the slightest chance for distraction. A general lack of additional information leaves the viewer quite alone with the raft creating a sense of bearing witness to its tragic journey. According to Bosch, Rey's use of a

fresco-like technique, a format that had historically been used during the Renaissance, coupled with the representation of the *balsas* as altar pieces in the manner of the *Retablo* religious paintings and the artist's use of *grisaille* tonalities achieved the solemnity the painter sought to attain. This technique, avers Bosch, gives the impression of a *memento mori* as a silent way of eulogizing the many deaths in the ocean.⁸

Rey's *balsas* provide none of the anticipated context of the subject image as these vessels render only the essential physical elements that constitute a simple raft, yet upon which all the complexities of the loss of human life are entrusted. Here the subject is explicit and somber, and the visual language is not coded by cultural familiarity as it was in *Icons*. In *Las Balsas II (Fig. ?)*, the viewer faces two tires in a blue background which suggests they are floating in the ocean. Rey works in a slightly naïve style which adds a raw character to his vessels: the tires seem entirely vulnerable as we can perceive that they have cracks or tears that are painted in white. The space in the image is relatively shallow like that of theatrical stage, and the scale of the inner tubes seems out of proportion drawing the viewer's attention to the empty vessels. In fact, the tires seem like flat cutout forms and are reminiscent of a stage set. Each tire seems to occupy its own space unaware of each other, colors are isolated to individual forms reinforcing the sense of isolation between the two repeated images in the picture. There is a limited palette of muted colors consisting mostly of black and grayish blue which allows the black color of the inner tubes to stand out leading the eye through the composition. As with *Appropriated Memories*, the scene seems to be immersed in low light and the smooth clean surface of the painting gives the image a dignified feel which psychologically charges it. Here the light is dim, reflecting the idea of emptiness, the human figures absent, perhaps dead. Rey's use of light and shadow is dramatic, the intense hues of blue and grey are set against dark blues and blacks allow the colors to glow

and appear intense. It must be noted that the inner tubes depicted in *Balsas II* are not photographs but paintings of photographs, a technique that allows the manipulation of space by the artist and permits illogical relationships to coexist. The repeated image makes the inner tubes seem an inversion of each other and suggests that the scene is not unique and that it could be multiplied or repeated further as the water itself seems to frame the inner tubes and thus contributes to the multiplication of the frames. By providing the inner tubes with such a sense of unreality, the artist has created a very specific mood of sadness and hopelessness.

Balsas V (fig. ?) from the same series, depicts a raft in the shape reminiscent of a coffin that sits at the center of the picture plane. Behind the homemade raft is a dark, shadowy, foreboding space of nothingness, emptiness and desolation. The dark values in the background emphasize the idea of an ocean that stretches for many miles in the distance. Again the mood of the piece is dark and sinister as the artist has used a limited palette of dark tones which gives this particular vessel a ghostly look. As in all of the raft images in this series, the vessel is bathed in a spotlight. This halo effect separates the raft from the space behind. In *Balsas XII* (fig. ?) the viewer is presented with a small boat that contains a single inner tube. While it seems less vulnerable than the other two paintings, the somber mood and the absence of human figures conveys the idea of a boat which is also a coffin. Two other Series on the *balsa* theme, *Constructions* (1996) and *Artifacts* (1998-99) complete Rey's work and represent, in the words of the artist, "an intimate look at the objects selected by those fleeing their homeland many of which would not return or survive."⁹ While *Artifacts* depicts objects found in the vessels such as rosaries, baby bottles and maps, the *Constructions* were Rey's own small clay and wire representations of the vessels. The objects carried by the *balseros* and his own construction of these vessels allow Rey to personally grieve the death of a grandmother he never got to know

and simultaneously participate in a communal mourning of all those who perished. These objects manifest the need of the artist to connect to a past he had hardly understood until this point in his artistic trajectory and they are painted with the same veneration and solemnity that he had applied to the *Balsa* series.

The three series on *balsas* and related objects constitute Alberto Rey's most political work since the artist's depiction of these fragile vessels and objects confronts the viewer with an ocean holocaust whose proportions will never be documented. Unlike Cruz Azaceta, and most of the artists and writers who have worked on this subject and have given primacy to the human figure of the *balseiro*, Rey's empty vessels and the objects left by those who perished suggest an absence which is referential to the many deaths that have occurred in these dangerous crossings. Yet his link to the tragedy was also familial: his own grandmother had lost her life in the crossing in 1995 and his grandfather had arrived in 1997 from Cuba also in a raft.¹⁰ The entire series becomes a memorial that honors the community lost in these deathly crossings as the viewer, and most particular the Cuban viewer, provides the context to Rey's act of memorializing by 'understanding.'

In 1998, Rey returned to Cuba for the first time in 36 years. As a consequence of his trip, Rey's work moved away from the Cuban story of identity as the artist decided to create colorful videos of Cuban coastal scenes. The solace of nature unperturbed by human greed and politics now possessed the dynamic of movement signaling the experienced reality that was absent from his earlier work on identity. Yet Alberto Rey's *balsa* depictions become a stage in his artistic trajectory that could be considered a seed to his present meditation on the fragility of life.

At present he is involved with the depiction of salmonoids as part of his series *The Aesthetics of Death* (2006-):

As I looked more closely at the remains, I would search for details that would indicate what had led to their demise. I often saw these deserted or discarded bodies as metaphors for my own life. The majestic creatures that had, at one time, led noble battles in their attempts to survive and prosper. They now had become silent still-lives that were slowly being broken-down by the same elements that had supported them. There seemed to be a sad irony and elegance to the cycle.¹¹

J. Joaquin Fraxedas' The Lonely Crossing of Juan Cabrera (1993)

Born in Cuba and raised in Miami and Detroit, Joaquin Fraxedas came to the United States during the 1960s as a young boy. A lawyer by profession, he began to write fiction as a graduate student while he attended the University of Florida. Centered on a *balseiro*'s story, his novel precedes by one year the mass exodus of August 1994 in which more than thirty thousand Cubans risked their lives in rafts and boats to cross the treacherous waters between Cuba and Florida. Fraxedas' focus on the *balseiro* crisis has served to confront the generations that comprise the Cuban exodus in a way that had not been possible before. The writer captures this moment as his story demands an understanding of both the Cubans in Cuba and the Cuban-American community in the United States.

Fraxedas' narrative is roughly contemporary to the visual work of Alberto Rey. A moving portrait of a collective tragedy, *The Lonely Crossing*, is the fictional account of a treacherous raft journey from the island of Cuba to the Florida Keys. Depicting characters belonging to the various generations and migratory waves, Fraxedas seeks to reunite the ruptured

part of his nation. In comparison to verifiable accounts such as Rafael Lima's (quoted above), Juan Cabrera's meager transportation does not seem exceptional: "They brought the three deflated inner tubes...the nylon lines, the canvas tarpaulin, and the hand-operated Czechoslovakian air pump, along with a few personal items."¹²

From the start, Fraxedas' book pits humans against nature in a context quite reminiscent of Hemingway's sea adventures. The quotes from Cervantes and Homer set the poetic tone that frames this tragic saga: Three people set sail on a raft, yet only one will reach the other side. Indeed, the future of Juan Cabrera's two companions seems bleak: Andrés was 55 years old, had been a prisoner of Castro, and seems too weak to make the crossing. Raul, a poor farmer was overwhelmed by the trauma of the journey. Fraxedas effectively depicts the three men harrowing experience on the open seas as they confront sharks and hurricanes. Even if the descriptions seem hyperbolic at times, the documentary force of the text is undeniable and mirrors real-life accounts. Not surprisingly, early in their tragic voyage both characters lose their lives. Only Juan is left and must make the crossing alone. It is during this perilous crossing that Juan Cabrera reflects on his past, and the reader learns about his life as a citizen under the revolution.

Two U.S. characters stand out in this tragic book: Vivian and Alberto. Vivian, a Cuban-American who worked for the Coast Guard, has been raised in both Cuban and U.S. cultures and can envision events from a more distanced perspective. She is also able to acknowledge flaws in her people, although she never forgets that she, too, is a member of her community. As a child of the first exiles, Vivian expresses a sense of lost identity and feelings of not quite belonging anywhere: "But for us...in our memories the flight has assumed the trappings of a paradisiacal expulsion . . . So we keep searching and waiting. For what? she thought" (124). Vivian's love/hate relationship with her own community is not atypical for her generation. She wants to

be a source of pride for her people, while at the same time she recoils from the false promises and emotionalism of her parent's generation.

Alberto's story on the other hand enacts the plight of the first generation, as he typifies the lost idealism of the 1960s and the hopes of a quick return for the first generation of exiles. A veteran pilot of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, Alberto earns his living as a flight instructor and devotes his spare time to spotting *balseros* off the Florida Keys. His job forces him to confront the daily tragedy of Cuban's crossing the ocean in rafts such as Juan Cabrera's. Vivian and Alberto's metaphorical crossings become central in the development of the novel, for each embodies a different generation and thus has a different perspective of the consequences of 1959 for the Cuban nation. Through their psychological crossings, the horrors of Juan Cabrera's ocean adventure are echoed in the North American space. Together Juan Cabrera, Vivian, and Alberto encapsulate the generations and spaces that make up the fifty plus years of the Cuban exile saga. It is these characters' questioning of their own role in the Cuban story that helps readers of Cuban heritage make sense of their own part as well.

In keeping with Fraxedas' desire to create mirror images of the dispersed communities he depicts in his story, Juan Cabrera becomes Vivian's chronological counterpart. Juan is raised under the revolution and disappointed by it. His life in Cuba has been a struggle from the beginning. Juan Cabrera's interest as a character lies in his sense of his own vulnerabilities. In fact, many times in the book Juan feels shame whenever he thinks about the things that he has done because of his own cowardice in expressing dissent. Eventually, and due to the help he receives from his exiled counterparts, Juan can understand what has happened and can better assess the complexities of being part of a displaced nation. Not unlike the visual representations of Alberto Rey, Fraxedas imagines the different fragments of his community and brings them

together in his fiction. For this author, all Cubans (those in the US and those in Cuba) have a sense of shared history. Affirmation of Fraxedas' ethnic community relies on this author's desire to present a good face to the dominant society. Yet if the life and death struggle of Juan constitutes the main narrative strand in this text, it is Fraxedas skillful depiction of the various communities and migratory waves comprising today's Cuba that renders this novel a place in the imaginary trajectory of the *balsero* in the Cuban American narrative of exile. The solutions to the problems in his novel can be solved if there remains a viable ethnic community with which the individual can reconnect.

Cruz Azaceta's swimmers (2010) and Pablo Medina's balseros (2012)

At present, and in spite of the 1994 and 1995 migration accords, *balseros* have continued risking their lives at sea. The *balsero* situation has been further aggravated by a major loophole in the accords known as the wet feet/dry feet policy: Cubans rescued at sea by the US Coast Guard are in accordance with the agreements automatically returned to Cuba while those who make it to US soil unassisted are allowed to apply for and usually receive political asylum. It is estimated that hundreds have died as a result of failed operations by *boteros* trying to deliver their illegal human cargo undetected by US authorities.¹³

The most recent work of visual artist Luis Cruz Azaceta has concentrated less on the *balsero* and more on the absurdity of the Cuban condition. In 2010, a year that marked his fiftieth year in exile, Azaceta's art expressed this theme with a combination of sadness and irony. While the painter continues to deal with the *balsero* theme that he has explored for many years, his series *Swimming to Havana* (2008) and *Trajectories/ Trayectorias* (2010) presents the *balsero* from a distant and at times pragmatic perspective. *Tub: Hell Act* (2009), the central

piece in *Trayectorias*, depicts a series of toy-like figures of *balseros* in a bathtub bobbing aimlessly in the enclosed space. Another image, *Exile 50 (2009)*, from his *Swimming to Havana* series, portrays a small figure holding the island by a thread, like a kite or cloud, and presents the island of Cuba surrounded by 50 spikes that create a fence of enclosure while “*Swimming to Havana*,” which bears the title of the entire series, depicts a labyrinth with a miniature *balsero* swimming inside but no exit is available to him. In the words of Azaceta: “*I think the idea of Cubans on the island wanting to leave and those of us in exile wanting to return creates the absurdity which is the ongoing state of suspension.*”¹⁴ Azaceta’s contemporary abstractions and figurations of the *balsero* convey asphyxia in an engulfing environment and the Cuban *balsero* trapped within a hopeless condition.

The same combination of sadness and absurdity is communicated in the latest novel of Cuban American writer Pablo Medina (b.1949) who arrived in the United States in the 1960s and has published several novels and poetry collections. Published in 2012, *Cubop City Blues* is a collection of interrelated tales set in New York City. The central narrator is a blind Storyteller who tells a series of stories to his dying parents which make up the bulk of this book. The tales are varied, some are magic and some are realistic and sorrowful, and even if all of them take place in the United States, Medina’s Cuban heritage is evident in almost all of them.

Among these tales is the story of a *balsero* by the name of Johnny Luna which Medina sets in 1995. After six months of careful building his boat, which he names the *Ana Maria*, and after seven unsuccessful attempts at fleeing the country, Luna arrives at Haulover Beach, north of Miami and finally sets out “to find the American Dream.” Told in a tongue-in-cheek manner, the pathetic story of Johnny Luna is significant in tracing the evolution of the artistic depiction of the *balsero*. Medina opts for a farcical tone for his story which involves confusion (Johnny and

Obdulio, his *balseiro* companion, land in a nudist camp in Haulover) and incarceration (the police does not understand who they are and why they were in the nudist camp and decide to imprison the pair). However this time the vessel is not a *balsa* but rather a safe and secure boat which Luna had constructed surreptitiously in the back of a garage in his Havana neighborhood. When a reporter is sent to Haulover beach to gather details of Johnny's crossing, Johnny is met with a surprise:

*...the reporter explained to Johnny that crossing the Straits of Florida was a dangerous thing, and lots of people had lost their lives trying. Johnny said that that was because they didn't know what they were doing. The reporter said he understood, but they couldn't run a story on television about someone who had made the crossing on a sturdy boat he built himself. You are either trying to flee communism or off on a pleasure cruise, and believe me, nobody's interested in two guys on a pleasure cruise. This boat looks brand new.*¹⁵

The tragicomic story ends with the suggested suicide of the *balseiro* as he walks into the ocean crushed by the negative circumstances of his arrival. Although the consequences continue to be mortiferous for individuals such as Johnny Luna, there is much less compassion in the contemporary representations of the *balseiro* story.

In her book *All My Relatives*, Bonnie TuSmith indicates that for ethnic artists community is a continuously evolving possibility that they strive to capture in their creative works. Adopting Thomas Bender's definition of community as "network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds," TuSmith observes that the notion of community calls attention to the

positive values of close fellowship, social solidarity, idealism, and harmony (22-24). For an ethnic artist, the idea of community can entail reuniting parts of a culture, asserting its identity, and mitigating the absence of culture by imagining in art and literature. Both Alberto Rey and Joaquin Fraxedas created works around the *balsa* at a time which was almost contemporary to the 1994 crisis and thus their emotional impact is strongest. And if Fraxedas' idealistic rendition of the *balsero* wills an ideal community in the imagination, Alberto Rey's solemn renditions of empty *balsas* draw attention to the process of grieving as a questioning of identity. Located somewhere between the individual and the community, Rey positions himself as an observer whose only possible task is to memorialize these rafts as icons of confinement and freedom. At the same time his "floating" empty *balsas* emphasize the artist's disconnection from family relationships and childhood memories.

Today the idea of community has become a source of tension for ethnic authors since its utopian connotations are far from the reality these authors must conform.¹⁶ Medina's and Azaceta's recent work on the subject take the narrative of displacement to a different point of understanding by explicitly suspecting the motivation of contemporary *balseros*. Medina's irreverence and Azaceta's ironic images of *balseros* provide a perspective on history that is as much about disenchantment as it is about truth. If the event of the crossing is contextualized in a farsical or ironical manner, then the tragedy is muted. Together, the images and narratives of these four artists not only represent a stage in the development of each creator, but also provide an example of the constant reformulation of a pervasive icon of exile in the U.S. Cuban artistic production. Whether these depictions of *balsas* and *balseros* convey reverence and idealism or are jaded by historical distance and politics, U.S. Cuban artists have re-coded the visual and narrative vocabulary of the *balsa*.

ENDNOTES

¹*View of Dawn in the Tropics*, 130

²“Interview with Luis Cruz Azaceta, (Gracia 2008).

³ The 1990s was a tragic decade for the balseiros. For accounts contemporary to the crisis, see Balmaseda.

⁴ Rafael Lima, p.8.

⁵ For interviews that discuss the trajectory and works of the artist see: O’Reilly Herrera, Andrea. and Gracia, Jorge J.E.

⁶ Letter from Alberto Rey to Isabel Alvarez Borland, September 2008. See also: Alvarez Borland’s “The Memories of Others.”

⁷ Rey, Alberto. 2008. Quoted from artist website. <http://albertorey.com/appropriated-memories>

⁸ For a critical overview of Alberto Rey’s works see: Bosch’s *Cuban-American Art in Miami: Exile, Identity and the Neo-Baroque*.

⁹ Quoted from artist website.

¹⁰ **Interview with Bosch (2012)**

¹¹ Quoted from artist website.

¹² Fraxedas, Joaquin. *The Lonely Crossing of Juan Cabrera*. All quotes belong to this edition.

¹³ For complete coverage and details of the 1994 crisis. See: Fernández, and also Masud-Piloto.

¹⁴ Interview with Cruz Azaceta, Cuban Art News.

¹⁵ *Cubop City Blues*, 222.

¹⁶ See Cordelia Chavez Candelaria. "Differance..."

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