I, Carmelita Tropicana

Performing Between Cultures

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Milk of Amnesia / Leche de Amnesia

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Stage has a minimal look. It is divided into two halves. The left is the writer’s space, and is dimly lit. It has a music stand with makeup, costumes, hats. This space simulates a backstage area where the artist will change clothes, put makeup on, and read. The right side is painted white, resembling a white cube. This space is a defined performance space (the dimly lit space is the private space; the white cube, the public space). There is a mike and mike stand, and a chair that gets placed there depending on the scene.

The piece begins in darkness with a blue light bathing the chair inside the white cube, as an audiotape with the voice of the writer is heard.

Years ago when I wasn’t yet American I had a green card. On my first trip abroad the customs official stamped on my papers “stateless.”

When I became a citizen, I had to throw my green card into a bin along with everybody else’s green cards. I didn’t want to. I was born on an island. I came here when I was seven. I didn’t like it here at first. Everything was so different. I had to change. Acquire a taste for peanut butter and jelly. It was hard. I liked tuna fish and jelly.

I used to play a game in bed. About remembering. I would lie awake in my bed before going to sleep and remember. I’d remember the way to my best friend’s house. I’d start at the front door of my house, cross the porch. Jump off three steps onto the sidewalk. The first house on the right looked just like my house, except it had only one balcony. The third house was great. You couldn’t see it. It was hidden by a wall and trees and shrubs. Whenever I’d look in the German shepherd sniffed me and barked me out of his turf. I’d continue walking, crossing three streets, walking two blocks until I came to my best friend’s house. I did this repeatedly so I wouldn’t forget. I would remember. But then one day I forgot to remember. I don’t know what happened. Some time passed and I couldn’t remember the third block, then the second. Now I can only walk to the third house. I’ve forgotten.

I had a dream when I was a kid. (Sound of footsteps running on tape) I guess because we were refugees. Me and my cousin were fugitives running away from the police. We had to escape. We were running through the streets. We saw a manhole cover and it opened up. (Sound of metal door shutting) We went down. We were in a sewer. (Sound of dripping water, echo) We were safe. But it started to get hot. Stifling hot. And as it happens in dreams, one minute my cousin was my cousin and the next she was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The heat was making her melt. I held her in my hands. She was oozing down. I was crying. Don’t melt, Pat. Please don’t melt. I woke up in a sweat. (Alarm clock rings)

In the morning I went to school. Our Lady Queen of Martyrs. That’s when it happened. In the lunchroom. I never drank my milk. I always threw it out. Except this time when I went to throw it out, the container fell and spilled on the floor. The nun came over. Looked at me and the milk. Her beady eyes screamed: You didn’t drink your milk, Grade A pasteurized, homogenized, you Cuban refugee.

After that day I changed. I knew from my science class that all senses acted together. If I took off my glasses, I couldn’t hear as well. Same thing happened with my taste buds. If I closed my eyes and held my breath, I could suppress a lot of the flavor I didn’t like. This is how I learned to drink milk. It was my resolve to embrace America as I chewed on my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and gulped down my milk. This new milk that had replaced the sweet condensed milk of Cuba. My amnesia had begun.

Pingalito, a cigar-chomping Cuban man, enters as a mambo plays. He greets the audience. He’s on the cube and brightly lit.

PINGALITO
Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the show du jour, Milk of Amnesia. I am your host Pingalito Betancourt, the Cuban Antonio Banderas.
For those of you who are from Cuba, you may recognize my face. I was the conductor in 1955 of the M15 bus route, the route that go from La Habana Vieja to El Vedado. And it was in that bus that I meet Carmelita. For Stanley Kowalski there is a Streetcar Named Desire. For Pingalito this was Destiny on the M15 bus route.

When I heard of Carmelita's tragic accident I rush right over, hoping a familiar face can trigger something in the deep recessed cavities of her cerebro, cerebellum, and medulla oblongata. You see, people talk about their methodologies for curing amnesia, and I have mine.

I make my way through the hospital corridors saying hello to all the nice Filipino nurses and I enter her room. She is asleep, looking like an angel, mouth open, pillow wet, making puttering sounds of a car engine. And I think of a childhood memory she used to tell me about. Her grandfather who smoke a cigar would take her number for a drive in his Chevrolet driving with a foot on the brake, stopping and starting, stopping and starting, stopping and starting. She would get so carsick. So I decide to simulate this memory. By blowing smoke in her face, playing with the controls of the hospital bed, making the legs go up, the head go down, up and down, down and up. I am playing her like a big accordion when a doctor comes in and says I gotta go. Something about my cigar and an oxygen tank.

But I don't give up. I return the next day. I think what, above all, is Carmelita? I tell you, Cuban. One hundred fifty percent. So I decide to tell her some facts about Cuba. See if it jigges something. (Showing audience a map of Cuba) I have here audiovisual aid number one, a placemat I pick up in Las Lillas restaurant of Miami titled "Facts about Cuba." Ladies and gentlemen, upon further examination of this placemat, you can see that the island of Cuba is shaped like a Hoover vacuum cleaner with Pinar del Río as the handle. How many of you know Cuba is known as the "pearl of the Antilles" because of its nature wealth and beauty? And the first thing we learn as little children is that when Christopher Columbus landed in our island, kneeling down, he said: "Es ésta la tierra más hermosa que ojos humanos han visto." This is the most beautiful land that human eyes have seen. The majestic mountains of la Sierra Maestra. Our mountains, not too tall. We don't need high. If we get high we get snow, then we gotta buy winter coat. And the beaches of Varadero! But ladies and gentlemen, none can compare with the beauty of the human landscape. Oyeme 'mano. Esas coristas de Tropicana. With the big breasts, thick legs. In Cuba we call girls carros and we mean your big American cars. Your Cadil-

lac, no Toyota or Honda. Like the dancer Tongolele. I swear to you people, or my name is not Pingalito Betancourt, you could put a tray of daiquiris on Tongolele's behind and she could walk across the floor without spilling a single drop. That, ladies and gentlemen, is landscape. For that you give me a gun and I fight for that landscape. Not oil. You gotta have priorities.

Fact two. Spanish is the official language of Cuba and it's a beautiful language. You talk with your hands, you talk with your mouth. My favorite expression when you want to find out the color of someone you say: "Oyeme 'mano ¿y tu abuela dónde está?" Tell me brother, where is your grandmother? Which brings us to fact three.

Three-fourths of all Cubans are white, of Spanish descent, and a lot of these three-fourths have a very dark suntan all year round. When they ask me, "Pingalito, and where is your grandmother?" I say, "Mulata y a mucha honor." Dark and proud.

Well, I look at Carmelita and she is not blinking and I have fifteen more facts to go. So I decide to change my route. If the M15 bus doesn't take you there maybe the M21 does. So I ask you people, what is Carmelita above all? Eh? Above all she is an artist. One hundred fifty percent. So maybe a song and a poem will do the trick. Poetry is something we Cubans have in our souls. It is our tradition. I don't know how many of you know that our liberator Jose Martí, our George Washington, is also the Emily Dickinson of Cuba. So I recite for Carmelita and for you today "Ode to the Cuban Man."

Spielberg forget your Assic Park
Some say the Cuban man is disappearing
Like the dinosaur
I say que no
The Cuban man
This specimen
Will never go away
We are here to stay

Like the Cuban crocodile
One of a kind in genus and species
You find us in the Bronx Zoo
The swamps of Zapata
Calm in the water but also volatile
So don't bother the crocodile
Because we got big mouths
We open up and swallow a horse and a cow
That's why we have the Cuban expression
To la comiste mi hermano
You ate it bro'

The Cuban man is persistent, stubborn
Like the mosquito, always buzzing around
Why you think yellow fever was so popular

The Cuban man is the apple in his mother's eye
Even when he is a little dim of wit
To his mani he is still the favorite
And at eighty she calls him baby

The Cuban man has no spare parts
Nature did not create any excess waste
She made him compact
Not tall in height, but what street smarts
Suave, sharp, sippery, and sly
Like yuca enchumbe in mojo greasy pig lard
Or like the Yankee from New England say
Slicker than deer guts on a doorknob
The Cuban man has a head for business
He combines the Jewish bubululah with the African babalú
And that's why they call him the Caribbean Jew

Above all the Cuban man is sensitive, sentimental, simpaticón
With sex appeal for days
And this is where our problem comes
It is our hubris, our Achilles' tendon
It is our passionate and romantic side
We love women too much
Too many women, too many kids

But when you tally up
The good, the bad
You too will decide
He is like a fine Havana cigar
The one you gotta have
After a big hearty meal with an after-dinner drink and

Coffee on the side
Because he is the one that truly, truly satisfies

Pingaito exits the white cube as the audiotape with the writer delivering the following monologue comes on. While tape plays, the actress takes off Pingaito's costume revealing white shorts and white T-shirt, which will be Carmelita's costume.

In high school I was asked to write an essay on the American character. I thought of fruits. Americans were apples, healthy, neat, easy to eat, not too sweet, not too juicy. Cubans were mangoes, juicy, real sweet, but messy. You had to wash your hands and face and do a lot of flossing. I stood in front of a mirror and thought I should be more like an apple. A shadow appeared and whispered: Mango stains never come off.

I didn't write about fruits in my essay. I didn't want them thinking I wasn't normal.

In the eighties, that's when my amnesia started to show cracks. As I joined the ranks of Tchaikovsky and Quentin Crisp—I became a civil servant and a thespian on the side.

As a teen I had gone to the Circle in the Square Theatre but my thespianism had been squelched the day the teacher announced the Puerto Rican Traveling Co. was holding auditions and needed actors. When she said the Puerto Rican Traveling Company everyone started to laugh. As if it was a joke. Like a Polish joke only a Puerto Rican one. I was the same as a Puerto Rican. Maybe the island was bigger, but same difference. I guessed I wouldn't do theatre.

Until I came to the WOW theatre and got cast in Holly Hughes's *The Well of Horniness*. We were asked to do it on the radio. I had a dilemma. Would my career as a civil servant be stymied if people knew I was the one who screamed every time the word horniness was mentioned, or that I was playing Georgette, Vicky's lover, or Al Dente, Chief of Police? Maybe I needed a new name.

As if by accident, the pieces were falling into place when I entered the WOW theatre and a comedy workshop was to take place. The teacher would not give it unless four people took it. There were three signed up for it, and with me the body count would be four. I said no. No. No. But the teacher, she was cute. So I took it.

But it wasn't me. I couldn't stand in front of an audience, wear sequined gowns, tell jokes. But she could. She who pencilled in her beauty mark, she who was baptized in the fountain of America's most popular orange juice, in the name of Havana's legendary nightclub,
the Tropicana, she could. She was a fruit and wasn't afraid to admit it. She was the past I'd left behind. She was Cuba. Mi Cuba querida, el son montuno...

Blackout.

Carmelita is sitting on a chair inside the club wearing a hat made of helium balloons. A square spotlight resembling a film close-up is on her face. As the scene proceeds, more light bathes the stage.

CARMELITA

The doctor said hypnosis might help. I said, "Anything doctor, anything for a cure." So he started to hypnotize me but in the middle of it he said I had to count backwards. Backwards. I got this sharp pain in my throat and I felt these blood clots in my mouth and I said, "No, Doctor, I can't count backwards. Don't make me. Count backwards. I never count backwards." The doctor writes in his chart: "Subject is mathematically impaired." They wanted to know what other impairments I got. So they connected these wires to my brain, my computer, my mango Macintosh. The doctors, they monitor my every move.

This (pointing to deflated balloon) is connected to my organizational skills, this to my musical memory, and this to my housecleaning ability. This (pointing to an extra large balloon) is linked to my libido. When I think of Soraya my nurse giving me a sponge bath or rubbing Keri lotion into my chest it (pops balloon with hidden pin so audience does not see) pops uncontrollably. And this one (pointing to a regular-sized balloon) is for languages. Spieglein Spieglein on der Wand. Wer is die schonste im ganzen land... What language is this? Is this the language of Jung und Freud? Oh herren and herrleins pierce me with your key. Let me not be a question mark any more. Open up Pandora's box.

The doctors tell me my name is (pronouncing the name with an American accent) Carmelita Tropicana. I've had a terrible accident. I hurt my head when I was chocolate-pudding wrestling. I don't remember a thing. (She sings) Remember, walking in the sand, remember her smile was so inviting, remember... I don't remember the lyrics to this song. So much flotsam and jetsam inside my head. And I want to remember so much I get these false attacks. In desperation, I appropriate others' memories.

The doctors try to control these attacks by surrounding me with familiar things. (Shows bottle cap necklace) This beautiful bottle cap says "Tropicana, shake well"—I don't know. They tell me to eat the food they bring, because the French philosopher Proust ate one madeleine cookie and all his childhood memories came rushing back to him. (Picks up a can of Goya beans) Goy... Goya? Black beans. (Picks up a beverage bottle) Malta Hatuye or is it Hatuye? Is the H aspirated or not aspirated? And is he the chief Indian Hatuye or the Native American Hatuye? Oh, these labels are so confusing. (Picks up a yuca) Is this a yuca or a yuucua? Do I eat it or do I beat it? Oh to be or not to be. But who, that is the question.

That short guy with the cigar—what was his name, Pingalito, the one who made me throw up on the bed—he tells me I'm from Cuba.

Maybe there is only one way to find out. To go back to the place I was born in. My homeland, the place that stucked me as a newborn babe. In the distance, I hear the clink, clink, clink of a metal spoon against glass. It is my mami stirring condensed milk with water. She holds a glass. The milk beckons me. I hear a song: "How Would You Like to Spend the Weekend in Havana?" (Carmelita takes off balloon hat. Lights change. Carmelita speaks into microphone.)

My journey begins at five A.M. at the Miami airport. I am so sleepy. It's crazy to be at the airport at five A.M. I don't know where I am going; I hear "Follow the Maalox, follow the Maalox" and then I spot a multitude. The Cuban diaspora that's going back, holding onto plastic bags with medicines and the most magnificent hats. I am so underdressed. These people are so dressed: skirts on top of pants on top of skirts. The gentleman in front of me, an octogenarian, has his head down. I don't know if it's age or the weight of his three hats. I discover my people are a smart people. They can weigh your luggage and limit you to forty-four pounds, but they cannot weigh your body. The layer look is on.

The excitement mounts when I enter the plane. The doctors told me to be careful. Too much, too soon can cause attacks. In only forty-five minutes I will cross an ocean of years.

When we land it is scorching hot outside. People desperately rip off the layers on the tarmac. I see a field in the distance. Palm trees, two peasants, and an ox. It reminds me of Southeast Asia, Vietnam. I've never been there. But who knows where memories come from—movies, books, magazines.

I go to the counter in the airport holding on to my Cuban passport, my American passport, and a fax saying my visa is waiting for me here. Names are called for people with visas but mine is not one. The immigration guy says I gotta go back. Say what? You know who I am? He says "Who?" Yo soy Cecilia Valdés... Oh my god, I started to sing an operetta, a zarzuela. The guy thinks I am making fun of him. I say
no. I'm sorry, I say I hurt my head and it has affected my vocal chords. He don't care. I am returned. Back to El Norte. But I don't care because I have determination. I go back especially now that I know how to dress. I go in style. I make myself a magnificent hat. Check it out. (Carmelita models hat.)

Soy una tienda ambulante. In my Easter bonnet with toilet paper on it. I'm a walking Cuban department store. Tampons and pearls, toilet paper, stationery supplies. What a delight. (The actress steps out of the white cube and, dropping Carmelita's Spanish accent, addresses the audience.) Now this is the part where you think it's performance art, a joke. Truth is stranger than fiction. The New York Times in 1993 had a photo essay of women with these hats. And when I went back the competition got tougher. Next to me was a woman with a pressure cooker on her head. A pressure cooker. These people are going to survive. (As she returns to the microphone, she resumes the Carmelita persona.)

When I go back, the immigration guy is so friendly. "Back so soon? I like your hat." So I give him a couple of tampons.

I take a taxi to the Hotel Capri. I tell my driver Francisco I want to see, touch, feel, hear, taste Cuba. All my orifices are open. Francisco says: "No es fácil." It's not easy. I have come during the special period. The special period—that's what the government calls it. No gas, no electricity, no food. I look out the window. Cubans are all on bicycles. They look like skinny models. Francisco says when there is no gasoline and the buses are not running he fuels his body with water with sugar. Water with sugar. The great Cuban energizer. Agua con azúcar and then he can walk for miles.

When I arrive in the Hotel Capri I go to the dining room. I can tell who the Cubans are with relatives here. They are the ones wrapping up food. I meet María Elena who is here for a conference and is wrapping chicken, bread, cheese. I ask her what about eggs. Don't forget the eggs. She says, "Eggs. Qué va. Yesterday I had to give a lecture on the poet Julián del Casal and when I took the paper out of my briefcase there was egg yolk all over. Egg yolk all over. No es fácil. It is not easy."

The tanned voice of writer is heard as the actress goes to the dimly lit space and puts on lipstick.

W R I T E R

Sometimes New York is too much. So is Havana. I toured the colonial part of the city. Kids flocked to me for candy, gum. Two decrepit mangy dogs limped along the cobblestones. Two girls tried to sell me a potent drug, PPG. Makes the man potent, satisfy your woman. A girl about fourteen asks me for my pintalabios. I part with my Revlon number forty-four "Love that Red" lipstick. I eat at La Bodeguita with two Cuban artists, a meal of fried yuca, fried pork, fried bananas. Cholesterol is not a problem. I take a ride to my hotel in a private vintage Chevrolet circa 1955, rumbling as it plods through streets, darkened except for a building blindingly bright, a beacon of light, the Spanish embassy. And the new currency is the dollar. Five dollars for the ride, five dollars for the beer at the hotel lobby. And who do I see coming in, Pintalabios, Revlon number forty-four, looking good with a man. What is she doing with that man and my lipstick? She looks down when she sees me. I'm pissed but with a swig of beer, reconsider, maybe the lipstick got her a steak dinner. And I go to my room, place a call to New York and put the TV on. CNN news. And the call comes through, and I switch channels. A movie is beginning: The Green Berets. I am in Cuba watching The Green Berets.

Carmelita goes to the cemetery. A Cuban son is playing as Carmelita enters the white space.

C A R M E L I T A

I have been in Havana for three days and I don't have any flashback, not even an attack. I decide to go visit my relatives, the dead ones at the cemetery. Maybe they'll talk to me from the grave. El cementerio de Colón is a beautiful cemetery with big trees that give shade and lots of statues and mausoleums. I start to look for the Tropicana, but find Menocalis, Menéndez instead. Menéndez brothers? I see four seniors hanging out by the tombstones. They look like they're in their seventies—two men and a couple. I go ask if they know the Tropicana. They don't, but they are very curious about me and start to ask me my name, what I do, where I live. When I say New York, they all say "Nueva York!" The woman, Consuelo, looks at my nose.

C O N S U E L O

José, mira que se parece a Luisita. De la nariz pa' abajo. Exacta. You look like my niece Luisita. She's a very smart girl, a painter. She went to New York last year. Went to all the museums. She was fascinated, fascinated. All those restaurants you have! Japanese, Chinese, even Filipino! She said the food, that was the real art. She came back twenty pounds heavier and her work changed. She went from Ab-
thought the voyage would never end. I started counting the days. Uno, dos, tres, cuatros. I fell into such a depression... I was no longer a happy Ponce in those days. The island was my 360-degree dream. I was remote from the mainland. Grass everywhere. Trees with fruit, guavas, mangoes, papayas, plantains, bananas, around the yard. The smoke from the barbeque offering us cigars. Papi was a big fan. I don't smoke, but I'll have some of that guayaba pig. I'm a vegetarian.

Havana in those days was a place filled with life, especially for the people. I could see that I was not their favorite, and I did not care. I was not on a mission. I was there to deliver the hair shirts. I was not there to make friends. I was not there to make friends, but to deliver the hair shirts to the natives for their children. I was not there to make friends, but to deliver the hair shirts to the natives for their children. I was not there to make friends, but to deliver the hair shirts to the natives for their children. I was there to deliver the hair shirts, to give them a chance to live, to give them a chance to live, to give them a chance to live.

JESÚS
José, your blood pressure is the strain.

CARMELITA
Ai, my head. I must have fallen into a coma. A Collective Unconscious. Memory. A Collective Unconscious. The memories are gone. I have no memory of my time in Havana...

DON SÉ
No, no, Jose. You're not alone. I had the same experience. I was there, too.

ARRENO
I was there, too. I was there the day when the sky turned dark and the storm came. The storm came, and the sky turned black. The sky turned black, and the storm came. The sky turned black, and the storm came.

JOSÉ
Yes, yes, Jose. You're not alone. I was there, too. I was there the day when the sky turned black and the storm came. The storm came, and the sky turned black. The sky turned black, and the storm came. The sky turned black, and the storm came.
José

Do you pray? Do you believe? I do. Every day. If I didn't I'd be dead.

Slow fade to black.

An audiocassette is heard with the following joke.

Did you hear the one about the eggs and the fried steak? There are these eggs running through the Malecón Boulevard in Havana. And they're running because they are being chased by a million hungry Cubans. And these eggs are running and the Cubans are after them. And as the eggs are running they pass in front of a fried steak that is sitting on the wall of the Malecón, very relaxed. And the eggs yell at the steak, "The Cubans are coming, the Cubans are coming! Aren't you afraid they'll come get you?" The steak says, "No way, these Cubans don't know what a steak looks like."

The stage is dark as slides of Havana are projected onto a screen. The writer reads into the mike and when the slide of her old house comes on she stops reading and speaks into the mike, pointing out the different parts of the house.

Writer

(Slide of Cuban countryside.) As I go sightseeing I try to strike up a conversation with everyone I meet. But when people ask me where I'm from I have to a certain trepidation. How will I be received? I lie. I begin by telling them my father is Puerto Rican. After five minutes I feel comfortable enough to tell them I was born here, but don't remember much.

(Slide of Cuban plaza with flag.) I am like a tourist in my own country. Everything is new. I walk everywhere hoping I will recall something. Anything. I have this urge to recognize and be recognized. To fling my arms around one of those ceiba trees and say, I remember you from the park when I went with Cristobalina my nanny who had Chinese eyes, kinky hair, and used to sing, "Reloj, no marques las horas."

(Slide of cemetery.) I want a crack on the sidewalk to open up and say, yes, I saw you when you jumped over in your patent leather shoes holding on to your grandfather's index finger. But it doesn't happen. There is no recognition from either the tree or the sidewalk... .

(Slide of aerial view of Havana.) So I do what most Cubans do when they go back. I go back to the house I was born in. Trescientos diecinueve de la calle ocho entre quinta y tercera. The address pops out as if I'd been there yesterday.

(Slide of Centro Gallego.) I'm nervous. Why? It's just a house.

(Slide of house.) Oh my God. There it is. The house I was born in.

(Pointing to various images on the screen.) There was a patch of dirt here and in this corner there was a slug. I used to poke him with a stick. The slug, he's gone. And on this side I planted my mango tree. We had invented a new game, "agrarian reform" and had to cultivate the land. It was by the mango tree that I had an epiphany. I was peeling the skin and the ground to see how my mango tree was doing when I heard her footsteps. She had long hair tied into a pony tail, red lips, and dreamy eyes like a cow. I ran to her and jumped on her and kissed her creamy cheeks. "Okay, okay," she said, putting me down. We looked at each other for an instant. I ran and hid by my mango tree. My heart was beating fast. I was sweating. I knew then that that was no ordinary kiss. That kiss would mean a lot more in years to come.

And it was in this balcony that we played with our live Easter chicks. Live chicks dyed purple, pink, and green. We left my cousin Teresa with the chicks while we went to make skirts for them from plastic ruffled cookie wrappers, and when we came back Teresa was throwing the last chick from the balcony to its death. And on this porch we used to play Tarzan and Jane. I begged for a human part but I was told I had to play the cheetah or the elephant. I was playing cheetah when my father came. I called him the stranger because he had been away fighting in the revolution. He gave me and my sister gold bullet shells.

(Slide of stairs.) I couldn't wait to go inside. Those are the stairs, the stairs I fell from when I was six months old. I bolted upstairs to my bedroom.

(Slide of writer by door.) Two men are in the middle of a business meeting. I interrupt. I'm sorry. I used to sleep here. The woman who has been following me, the secretary, tells me I can't just barge in as if it's my house. You don't understand, I say, this was my house. She opens the door to the bathroom.

(Slide of bathroom.) Oh my bidet, my toilet. She says, "Hey, you're not one of those Cubans who plans to come back and take over their house." I say, "Oh no, we only rented." The moment I say this I feel like I'm not like one of those Cubans who left—who never would have said they rented. They wouldn't have said they owned just one house. Are you kidding me, we owned the whole block.
(Slide of construction.) My house is now a construction company. Privatization entering Cuba right through this, my house.

Carmelita enters the white cube as a romantic ballad plays.

**CARMELITA**

It’s the middle of the afternoon. There’s music playing. From the window I see the Hotel Nacional as it sits on a rock and overlooks all of Havana Bay. I think of having a mojito, the favorite drink of Papa Hemingway. It could also be mine since I don’t remember what it tastes like. I walk to the renovated, four-star Hotel Nacional smelling the delicious grass. The sun is trying to come out. It just rained. I walk in the entrance of the hotel. The doorman winks. I say, “Buenas tardes.” Inside it is cool and beautiful. There are potted palm trees, Spanish leather chairs, and blue tile. Blue tile. How I hate blue tile, especially with yellow squiggles. It doesn’t go with anything. Bad decorating choice. A hotel employee looks at me. The blue tiles are making me sick. I’m holding tight to the potted palm frond.

**DOCTOR**

Carmelita, suérítala. Let go. Let go of your mother’s hand. You have to be brave. Hay que tener coraje, mucho coraje en la vida.

**CARMELITA**

No. Mami. No Mami. Please don’t let go of me. I’m your child. I want to be with you Mami. I don’t want to go with the green man.

**MOTHER**

Carmelita, it’s just a green uniform. Mi hijiita. Don’t be afraid. It will be over soon.

**HOTEL EMPLOYEE**

Señorita, if you don’t let go of the palm frond, I’m going to have to call security.

**CARMELITA**

I’m sorry. Yes, I don’t feel well. I need to eat. I’m hungry. I have to sit down in the dining room and eat. I go into the dining room like a somnambulist following the song “Lágrimas Negras” played by a trio. Where have I heard “Lágrimas Negras” played by a trio like this?—Oh yes, last week in Gloria Estefan’s Miami restaurant. At least the short-term memory works. I should try to remember. The more I remember the more I will remember. Let’s see, what did I learn today? Ochún is the goddess of the sea. No, that’s Yemayá. And if you want to get the love of your life you have to leave honey on a plate under your bed for five days. You get the love you want and the cucarachas you don’t. And the slang word for dyke is bombera, firefighter. So maybe if I yell, “Fire, fuego,” would all the dykes come out now? I feel much better. So much better I order a mojito and pork sandwich. “La Última Noche que Pasé Contigo” is playing. The waiter brings me the sandwich. He has a green jacket on. I try not to look at his green uniform. Trembling, I pick up the sandwich. A slice falls, no, it jumps.

Pig flies in and hangs above Carmelita’s head. On tape is the sound of a squealing pig.

**PIG**

(Short, short) The horse thought it was bad in colonial times, he should talk. I was a pig in the special period. Cochinito Mamón. I was just two weeks old lying under my mother’s belly sucking her sweet milk with my brothers and sisters when I was yanked off her tit by a man who put a blanket over my head and took me from my farm in Santiago to live in an apartment in Havana. It was so quick I couldn’t even say goodbye to my family. The apartment was on the second floor. My legs were too short. I couldn’t go up the stairs. Señor, I am no goat. I went into the apartment. I looked for mud but everything was so clean. The woman in the apartment, the wife, cradled me in her arms calling me “Nene,” boy. She fed me milk in the bottle. Hey lady, I’m not into rubber. I want real nipples. The man complained about my smell, so everyday she had to give me a bath in the tub.

**WOMAN**

Nene, sit still, Nene, don’t splash, Nene, let me wipe your nose.

**PIG**

I’m not a boy, I’m a pig. (squealing) I’m a pig! One day the man came in walking funny. He had been drinking with his brother who worked at the Hotel Nacional. He smacked the wife on the rump and made her get the tape measure from her sewing kit. He put it around my belly.

**MAN**

¡Coño, qué gordo está este puerco! This pig is fat.
PIG

I could smell the rum on his breath. She should give him a bath. The phone rang. It was long distance, the relatives from the United States. The man said something about showing me to them. The next day was Sunday. I didn't know what was happening. The woman put a hat on my head. It was a gift from a cousin in New York. A baseball cap. It kept falling off, so she tied it with another gift she got from New York: a bungee chord. The chord was tight around my neck. She was sitting on a chair holding me on her lap, lifting my head to look up. The man quickly got behind us when a flash went off. I got scared. I didn't know it was supposed to be a family portrait. I jumped down. My hoof ripped her panty hose. I tried to run but I had put on some weight. I slid behind a table and knocked over a lamp. It broke. The man went after me. He was screaming:

¡Puerco, puerco de mierda!

She was screaming:

¡Nene! ¡Nene!

PIG

I was squealing: ¡Mami! ¡Mami! With all the noise, the neighbors, they knocked on the door.

¿Qué pasa? ¿Qué pasa?

PIG

The man flew across the room and tackled me. He whispered in my ear.

MAN

Coño, puerco de mierda. You are going to be roast pork, but before that we are going to cut your vocal chords so you don't squeal and disturb the neighbors anymore.

PIG

The next day I was put in a box. The woman was crying as she punched holes in the box so I could see. We got to the place. I could see blue tiles.

DOCTOR

Carmelita, relájate. Estamos en la sala. I'm going to put this on so you can breathe deep. Respira profundo.

CARMELITA

No. I don't want to breathe.

DOCTOR


PIG

When I got out of the box, I saw a man in green. He had a shiny knife. I squealed, Mami! Mami! (Silent)

She pulls a string from the pig's neck and a stream of red glitter gushes down, spilling onto the white linoleum.

CARMELITA

My vocal chords, my tonsils. The pig and I, we had our operations at the same clinic. The clinic with blue tiles. I remember. We are all connected, not through AT&T, e-mail, Internet, but through memory, history, herstory, horsetory. I remember. (She shadowboxes as she recites the poem.)

I remember
Que soy de allá
Que soy de aquí
Un pie en New York (a foot in New York)
Un pie en La Habana (a foot in Havana)
And when I put a foot in Berlin (cuando pongo puta en Berlín)
I am called
A lesbische cubanerin
A woman of color
Culturally fragmented
threadbare, vivid colors now turned pastel. So much food for the soul, none for the belly.

I don't want to keep score. It's not a competition. Cuba vs. the U.S. When the Olympics are on I'm at a loss as to who to root for... No, not really. I root for Cuba. Why? Is it that I'm for the underdog and that if I'm in the U.S. I am more Cuban and if I'm in Cuba I'm more American? Is Cuba my wife and America my lover or the other way around? Or is Cuba my biological mami and the U.S. my adopted mom?

As lights go bright, Carmelita enters the white cube.

CARAMELITA

My journey is complete. My amnesia is gone. After so many years in America, I can drink two kinds of milk. The sweet condensed milk of Cuba and the Grade A, pasteurized, homo kind from America.

My last day in Cuba I spend at an artist's house. We sit, ten of us, in a circle, all sipping our one bottle of rum. I turn to the man next to me and tell him I have one regret. I didn't hear any Cuban music and to me Cuba is music. He smiles. He is Pedro Luis Ferrer, famous composer, musician. He will play me his songs, but first he tells me, "The embargo is killing us."

(Stepping out of Carmelita character and addressing the audience) I agree with Pedro Luis and I want to leave you with a song by him called "Todos por lo Mismo," a song that says it best:

Everybody for the same thing
Between the pages of colonialism
Capitalists, homosexuals, atheists, spiritualists, moralists
Everybody for the same thing

The tape plays several choruses as Carmelita exits.