

Postcolonial Humour:
Jokes in Ana
Menéndez's "In Cuba I
Was a German
Shepherd"

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Colonial oppression and its resulting power dynamics inevitably lead to the marginalization of people and cultures. However, despite the efforts of the colonizer to delegitimize them, the cultures of colonized people are frequently resilient and it is possible for elements of their folklore to be preserved and adapted during and following colonization. According to Frantz Fanon, “A national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in systematic fashion”; however, in a postcolonial context, “oral traditions— stories, epics, and songs of the people— which formerly were filed away as set pieces are now

beginning to change. The storytellers whoused to relate inert episodes now bring them alive and introduce into them modifications which are increasingly fundamental” (1963, 237, 240) Ritualized joke-telling is one such adaptable oral tradition, which creates a sense of belonging that allows marginalized postcolonial individuals to unite as a folkgroup . Jokes, as ritual performances, create a ritual space that either allows participants to suspend reality or engage with it in productive and creative ways. In this article I will discuss how Ana Menéndez’s fictional short story "In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd" demonstrates how jokes are creative forces that allow performers to establish folkgroups, assert their identities, and engage with their emotions outside of the restrictions of quotidian reality.

The main character of "In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd", Máximo, is a Cuban man who was exiled from his home by Castro’s dictatorial regime and has been forced to adapt to foreign surroundings while struggling to maintain his Cuban cultural identity. As a result of the imposed distance that separates him from his native country, culture, and community, Máximo utilizes jokes to create a Caribbean folk-group with similarly displaced males. This practice of telling jokes is a specific type of folkloric performance that requires that the performer adhere to a ritualized structure in a specific context to inspire the intended reaction from his or her audience. As Fine and Wood write, “the joke is not only a window

into the beliefs of the society and the moral behavior permitted within a local setting, but is also a window into the strategic intentions of the teller” (2010, 304).

Within this group, Máximo uses the ritual space created by jokes to express opinions and emotions that he would otherwise be unable to engage with due to societal expectations associated with masculinity, while his audience uses the same space to suspend their quotidian realities through laughter and/or introspection. Furthermore, due to the ritualized structure of the joke, the performance creates a ritual space that allows the performer and the audience to temporarily exist outside of their quotidian realities:

The nature of ritual, the way it is framed as a separate time and experience outside the everyday world, allows the participants to enter a space that is different from their real world environment [...] Because ritual spaces are different from ordinary life, people can do and say things in a ritual that in their daily experience would be unusual, perhaps even inappropriate or unacceptable. (Sims and Stephens 2011, 109, 110)

As a result, the performer is able to deliver his message using whatever means necessary to convey the desired information and/or inspire the reaction of his audience without fear of transgressing societal conventions. As a result, jokes have become prevalent in moments of instability, particularly in postcolonial situations like that

of the Cuban exiles in Menendez's short story, when individuals seek out ways of "reflect[ing] anxieties that come with alterations in the social order" and jokes become a way for them to "react to their feelings of a loss of certainty and stability" (Fine and Wood 2010, 303).

Like the majority of the Caribbean, the postcolonial nation of Cuba has a history of involuntary political exchange. The island was under Spanish control until the late nineteenth century, which resulted in the implementation of a plantation system, the introduction of the transatlantic slave trade, and the beginnings of the multiracial and multiethnic society that would become inextricably linked to Cuban culture. Following the Spanish-American War, Cuba was ceded to the United States and, in 1902, was declared an independent republic. In addition to imperial oppression and political exchanges, against which Cuban citizens frequently rebelled, the country has also suffered neocolonial, authoritarian regimes. One of the most internationally recognized leaders is Fidel Castro, who controlled Cuba from 1958 until 2008. While Castro was in power, thousands of Cubans left, voluntarily and involuntarily, and by any means necessary, to begin new lives in other countries, particularly in the United States: "Since the triumph of Fidel Castro's revolution in 1959, there has been a steady influx of Cubans into the United States, ed by four significant waves: 1959-1962; 1965-1974; 1980; and 1993-5. Each wave has reached deeper into the layers of Cuban so-

ciety, from the wealthy in the 1960s to the dwellers of Havana's squalid inner city neighborhoods in the 1990s" (PBS 2005).

Castro's regime is the political backdrop of Menéndez's story and the protagonist, Máximo, represents the countless Cubans who left everything behind to immigrate to the United States. Although Máximo voluntarily chose to leave Cuba in 1961, he had only intended to relocate for a short period of time to escape the political and economic shifts that were beginning to affect the country. However, as a result of his initial belief that Castro would soon be out of power and that he and his family would be able to "return in two years' time. Three if things were as serious as they said" (Menéndez 2001, 6).

Although Máximo is plagued by feelings of bitterness toward Castro for distancing him from Cuba, "In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd" depicts Máximo as an elderly widower who has had time to accept that he and his family will never return to live in Cuba. As a result of this acceptance, joke-telling becomes a coping mechanism that expresses the emotional struggle accompanying the loss of his nation, his culture, and his history. According to Derek Walcott, this creative or productive impulse is a defining feature of postcolonial Caribbean identity. Walcott writes, "in the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered, what has

mattered is the loss of history... what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention” (1974, 259). As a result of leaving Cuba, Máximo feels the loss of his history and his insignificant position in the United States, which is what inspires him to create and perform jokes to express his feelings, assert his Cuban identity in the diaspora, and create a folkgroup with other Caribbean men in the diaspora to compensate for his condition as a postcolonial Cuban exile.

Like many Cubans, after arriving in Miami, Máximo had to reinvent himself in order to assimilate into American society. He realized that he was “too old to cut sugarcane with the younger men” and that his “Spanish and his University of Havana credentials meant nothing”, which forced him to relinquish his identity as a professor and establish a place for himself in the food service industry (Menéndez 2001, 6). This professional demotion was a necessity for Máximo to adapt to his new American surroundings and become a contributing member of society. As a result, Máximo and his family settled in Miami’s Little Havana neighborhood , where he was able to reaffirm his Cuban identity through daily communication with other similarly exiled individuals. However, although these quotidian interactions provide Máximo with a superficial connection to his homeland, the majority of the time they consist of sharing an idealized Cuba that does not allow for the same productive expressions of negative sentiments or create the same sense of belonging as Máximo’s jokes:

People who come from the same place and think they already know the important things about one another... [they] would start the stories that began with 'In Cuba I remember.' They were stories of old lovers...Of skies that stretched on clear and blue to the Cuban hills [...] In Cuba, the stories always began, life was good and pure. (Menéndez 2001, 5, 7).

These types of expressions contain a “homing desire” which connects an individual to a “mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” (Brah 1996, 192), and helps them cope with the idea that “the island haunts all of us Cubans; it won’t let us go, no matter what distance we travel to get away” (Behar 2008, 3). However, these exchanges are not as productive a means of expression as Máximo’s jokes, which create a ritual space within which the protagonist is able to engage with and express his emotions.

In order to cope with the loss of their home country and their former lives, the stories told by many of the exiles only represent the idyllic beauty of Cuba. However, despite their insistence on the perfection of the Cuban landscape, they seem to be haunted by the “withering, malignant” memories of the traumatic reality: “the stories that opened in sun, always narrowed into a dark place” (Menéndez 2001, 7). Máximo is not immune to the potential for darkness and depression that can be inspired by his position as an exile in Miami, but, instead of telling nostalgic stories about his personal experiences in

Cuba that begin joyfully and end in despair, he tells jokes to his fellow domino players to cope with the memory of Cuba that “menaces and haunts [his] present domestic space” (Socolovsky 2005, 238). In his jokes he uses *choteo* humour, which is defined by its subversive nature or its “selective disrespect for those kinds of authority that one thinks illegitimate” (Firmat 1984, 68). Although he also accepted that he will never physically return to his native island, using Cuban humour to express his identity allows him to maintain an emotional connection to Cuba. He also creates a Caribbean folkgroup with three other elderly exiled individuals from the Spanish Caribbean with whom he plays dominoes-- one other Cuban and two Dominicans-- in Domino Park . This folkgroup is formed from both necessity and choice:

Other twosomes began to refuse to play with the Dominicans... any team that won so often must be cheating.. But Máximo and Raúl liked these blessed Dominicans, appreciated the well-oiled moves of two old pros. And if the two Dominicans, afraid to be alone again, let them win now and then, who would know, who could ever admit to such a thing? (Menéndez 2001, 11).

To transform this assembly of people into a folkgroup, Máximo participates in the performative act of joke-telling: “[S]oon came Máximo’s jokes during the shuffling, something new and bright coming into his eyes like day-dreams as he spoke... the four men learned to linger long enough between sets to color an old memory while the

white pieces scraped along the table” (Menéndez 2001, 11). Through his choteo jokes, Máximo creates a folkgroup and a ritual space within which he is able to defy machismo and express emotions like frustration and bitterness that in another context would betray his vulnerability.

Máximo interacts with these other Caribbean males in the park, which is a locality where, because of the number of elderly Caribbean men who play dominoes there, it should be simple to establish a Caribbean folkgroup. However, because it is a male-dominated sphere, it is also where he is most subjected to machismo. Machismo is a socially constructed view of male action and interaction in many Latino cultures, including the Spanish Caribbean. Traditionally, the idea is attached to male power and an ability to provide for one’s family, but there is another dimension of it that corresponds to particular social situations involving other males. *Machismo* dictates much of Latino male interaction because to not possess sufficient masculinity can lead to being considered a maricón or a homosexual. Therefore, it is expected that men do not openly express their emotions because it is a sign of vulnerability, which is synonymous with weakness and a lack of masculinity:

Each macho must show that he is masculine, strong, and physically powerful. Differences, verbal or or physical abuse, or challenges must be met with fists or other weapons. The true macho shouldn’t be afraid of anything...

The impotent and homosexual are scoffed at— the culturally preferred goal is the conquest of women, and the more the better... one's potency must be known by others, which leads to bragging and storytelling. (Ingoldsby 1991, 57-58)

Machismo is demonstrated in "In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd" through the lack of conversation between the domino players about their personal lives, the competition that drives their interactions, and their desire to demonstrate their virility by discussing their sexual conquests whenever they see a beautiful woman walk by: "‘No me jodas,’ Raúl said. ‘You are a vulgar man. I had a life all three of you would have paid millions for. Women’..." The women of Cuba were radiant, magnificent..." (Menéndez 2001, 12-13). Therefore, to escape the social expectations associated with machismo, joke-telling becomes particularly valuable for Máximo who is able to use these performances to create a ritual space outside of his daily life, which is dictated by *machismo*, in which he can engage with his emotions and express his opinions without fear of negative judgment by other men.

Although the two Dominican members of the folkgroup cannot always understand that Máximo's jokes contain a deeper truth and reflect "all the layers of hurt" that characterize the Cuban diasporic experience, they are nevertheless able to participate in the folkgroup (Menéndez 2001, 9). They are able to find amusement in the absurdity of Máximo's jokes and superficially learn

about Cuban culture through these performances. For example, Máximo jokes about a young Cuban school boy who, when he is asked what he wants to be when he grows up, responds, “I would like to be a tourist” (Menéndez 2001, 16). This joke addresses both the travel restrictions placed on Cuban nationals and the impoverished status of the Cuban people who could not afford to leave their communist country even if it were permitted. As a result of these factors, for many years Cubans were unable to leave the island without extensive paperwork, government approval, and/or external sponsorship. Therefore, through this joke, Máximo is expressing the frustration and sadness of knowing that children, like the boy in the joke, can only dream of the wealth and freedom necessary to travel to other countries, a fact that he and his friends, as residents of the United States, have the luxury of taking for granted. This joke is not fully comprehended by the Dominicans, who have not experienced the same oppression as the Cubans, but Raúl, the other Cuban of the group and the person who is most familiar with these sentiments, reacts to the joke by stating it is “so funny it breaks [your] heart” (Menéndez 2001, 16).

On the other hand, Máximo’s second joke is more easily understood by all members of the folkgroup. It is about a group of people who are preparing to illegally leave Cuba via raft when they see Fidel Castro walk by wearing swim trunks and carrying a raft on his back. When

the group asks him why he is carrying a raft, Fidel answers “I’m sick of this place too. I’m going to Miami” to which the rafters reply, “Coño, compadre, if you’re leaving then there’s no reason for us to go. Here, take my raft too, and get the fuck out of here” (Menéndez 2001, 8). Like the previous joke, this one criticizes the Cuban government for its policies and blames Fidel Castro for the country’s problems, particularly the departure (and deaths) of the thousands of *balseros*, or rafters, who made the perilous journey on homemade flotation devices. The joke also implies that, if Castro were to leave Cuba, then the Cubans would no longer have any reason to leave and would be able to reclaim control of their country. The two Dominican men laugh at the absurd image of the Cuban leader escaping his own country by raft, which contributes to their sense of belonging to the folkgroup, but, more significantly, Máximo’s joke is intended to give him a chance to voice his opinions and frustration about the detrimental effects of Castro’s leadership on the Cuban people and his bitterness toward the man responsible for his exile.

Máximo’s third joke is about Bill Clinton, the president at the time of the story, who has been frozen and awakens in the year 2105. A Jewish person informs Clinton that the Middle East is now a peaceful place and an Irishman reports that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have united to become one harmonious country. However, when Clinton asks about the situation in

Cuba, the Cuban character replies “Let me tell you, my friend, I can feel it in my bones. Any day now Castro’s gonna fall” (Menéndez 2001, 4). Again, the Dominicans laugh at the absurdity of the joke, which arises from the idea that someone could live to be 179-years-old, as Castro would be in 2105. However, Máximo uses the joke to express his disapproval of the violence and death associated with the situation in Cuba, which he considers to be equivalent to that in Northern Ireland or the Middle East, and to express the widespread fear that Castro and/or his political influence will continue forever and Cuba will never be able to alter its current circumstances.

Lastly, Máximo’s most meaningful joke is about a Cuban dog, Juanito, who immigrates to Miami. In the joke, Juanito is “just off the boat from Cuba” and is bewitched by the dazzling, cosmopolitan city. However, when he attempts to attract the attention of an “elegant white poodle”, the poodle rebuffs him and calls him “a short, insignificant mutt” (Menéndez 2001, 22, 28). The punch line, which is Juanito’s response to the poodle’s insult, is the dog’s declaration that, “Here in America, I may be a short, insignificant mutt, but in Cuba I was a German shepherd” (Menéndez 2001, 28). For Máximo, this joke conveys the humiliation and social demotion that he experienced when he first arrived as an immigrant in the United States. By telling it, he is able to express some of the sadness and bitterness that still plague him many years later.

Unlike the other jokes, the one about the German shepherd inspires an emotional response from all of the members of the Caribbean folkgroup, both Cuban and non-Cuban. They, like Máximo, identify with the humiliation felt by the anthropomorphic canine character who has been rejected by American society, which is represented by the white American dog. Like Juanito, these men have suffered the trauma of being separated from their homes, arriving in Miami, and facing traumatic humiliation and feelings of displacement in their new environment. These painful memories are repressed in day-to-day life in order to conform to the societal expectations of *machismo*. However, during the momentary suspension of reality that occurs during a joke, the laughter that would normally unite the group is replaced by a common emotional response to the memories of a shared past that connects the four men of their folkgroup on a deeper emotional level: “The past is a country from which we have all emigrated, its loss is part of our common humanity” (Rushdie 1991, 12).

Although the apparent purpose of participating in the ritualized performance of joke-telling is to amuse the group, the process of telling them also allows Máximo a means to express his complex feelings of bitterness, assert his Cuban identity, and to create a shared community with other expatriate Caribbean men through the expression of his experiences of degradation and struggle in a coded manner. According to Elliot Oring,

one reason to use the performative joke form for these purposes is because, “jokes are forms par excellence that deal with situations of unspeakability because they may conjoin an unspeakable, and hence incongruous, universe of discourse to a speakable one” (1987, 282). Or, in other words, joking creates a ritual space that allows the speaker to express real yet unspeakable feelings by discussing an apparently unrelated speakable or absurd idea (e.g. dogs, Fidel Castro on a raft, Fidel Castro living forever, or school children) in a humorous way.

In the story, creating a speakable discourse through jokes, whether or not the audience consistently understands the complex reality they represent, creates a sense of belonging among the men and results in the creation of a Caribbean folkgroup. Although they are not all Cubans and, therefore, cannot always recognize the hidden meanings in Máximo’s jokes, these rituals allow the men to unite through a shared sense of belonging established through their participation in the performance: “For many months they didn’t know much about each other, these four men... But soon came Máximo’s jokes... something new and bright coming into his eyes like daydreams as he spoke. Carlos’ full loud laughter, like that of children” (Menéndez 2001, 11). In the ritual space created by the jokes, the audience is able to momentarily suspend reality and distance themselves from their daily lives, while Máximo engages with his reality, asserts his Cuban identity, and speaks about his opinions and emotions outside of the daily restrictions of *machismo*.

Although every member of the folk-group participates in the humour of the space, the non-Cuban members of the audience listen without interpreting the true meanings behind the jokes because they are not accustomed to *choteo* humour and/or they do not subscribe to the same cultural identity as the Cubans. Until Máximo tells the German shepherd joke, ritualized joke-telling allows the Dominicans to momentarily suspend their realities by listening to and superficially responding to the joke. However, the German shepherd joke encourages the men to engage with their past realities by reminding them of the traumatic experiences they had as newly arrived immigrants from the Spanish Caribbean; therefore, the joke reinforces their membership in the Caribbean folkgroup because it unites them through a common trauma.

The other Cuban member of the group, Raúl, is consistently capable of decoding the multilayered meaning behind Máximo's jokes. He disapproves of the jokes his fellow countryman tells and resists participating in the ritual because he believes that the jokes pose a risk because they could potentially reveal too much about Cuban identity to cultural outsiders. However, when he hears the German shepherd joke, Raúl realizes the cathartic aspect of the performance, which allows Máximo to defy *machismo* and create a speakable discourse to express his unspeakable emotions and opinions. It also inspires Raúl to recognize the cultural similarities be-

tween himself and the other non-Cuban audience members. As a result, he is able to recognize the value of the joke form as a tool that inspires both performer and audience to replace shared laughter with memories of a common past that further reinforces their folk-group.

Jokes are a powerful force in Menéndez's story that are capable of establishing a folk-group amongst people of different national and cultural backgrounds. Even when they are not fully understood, jokes are rituals that create a ritual space in which the performer and the audience are able to interact outside of their daily realities. The performer, Máximo, is able to reinforce his cultural identity and form a folkgroup by voicing his emotions and opinions through his jokes. This is possible because of the situational and cultural specificity associated with Cuban choteo humour and his position as a postcolonial Cuban living in the diaspora. Similarly, the audience is able to momentarily suspend and distance themselves from reality by reacting, either through laughter, as demonstrated in Máximo's first three jokes, or through a shared sadness, as seen in the German shepherd joke. Within the ritual space created by the ritualized folkloric performances of joke-telling, a variety of possibilities are conceivable for the performer and the audience. As demonstrated in Menéndez's "In Cuba I Was A German Shepherd", in a postcolonial Cuban context, jokes are creative forces that are capable of establishing folk-groups and transforming the unspeakable (e.g. trauma)

to a speakable coded discourse that allows the performer to humourously and subversively express emotions in a ritual space outside of daily life. The audience also benefits from the ritual space created by the joke-telling ritual because it allows them to either momentarily suspend their realities or to creatively engage with them and a way to build community. For these reasons, ritualized joke-telling is a humourous oral form that is capable of surviving colonization and continuously adapting to culturally specific postcolonial and diasporic situational contexts.

Notes

¹ A folkgroup refers to “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is— it could be a common occupation, language or religion— but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals” (Dundes 1980, 7).

² Little Havana is a neighborhood in Miami that is considered to be “the heart of Cuba in exile” (Hetter 2017). In addition to Cubans, the neighborhood is also populated by immigrants from other parts of Latin America, which has contributed to the preservation of its Latino identity. In 2017 Little Havana was named a “National Treasure” by The National Trust for Historic Preservation.

³ Domino Park or Máximo Gomez Park is located in Little Havana and is famous as a site where elderly, predominately male, individuals congregate to play dominoes and socialize.

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