
CREATIVE WRITING AND PERSONAL ESSAY

My Brother's New Clothes

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A personal narrative about the dressed body of the Other, in a play with the multiple meanings of the terms and concepts involved in the manufacture of the “marielito” as assigned identity whose attributes are intricately linked to the way in which that othered body is outfitted, shrouded and clothed, both figuratively and metaphorically. In a hypothetical, one-sided dialog with the “marielito” figure of her childhood imaginary, the author stitches together a loose collection of imprints from early 1980s Miami, present-day reflections and retrospective impressions from her young adulthood—church clothing drives and donations, garment factory floors, news media images, styles, accessories, garments, branding, films, fear, moralism, family conflict—intertwining and interweaving these fragments to create the identitary patchwork of otherness that reveals the social underpinnings of stigmatization.

Keywords: Cuba; Mariel; stigma; clothing; dressed body; manufacturing difference; fashion; memory; Miami

Though your image now un-draws itself, I've often thought of you, brother, carrying you with me well into adulthood. Un-suturing, unsealing, unstitching the shrouding of you, I can see the warp and the weft of my own preteen impressions, childhood fascinations, privileged aversions, peeking from behind a half-closed hand. The basting, the darning, the making of you, the needle and thread piercing your skin. Do you still feel the prick?

Carrying Hefty bags across the church parking lot on Sundays. Lugging huge sacks filled with clothes, to the chapel-turned-shelter on the epistle side of the cruciform building. Spanish mass that smells of new paint and sheetrock, like most everything in the *sahuesera*. We add ours to the growing pile of other bags stuffed with other-suits: the better to cloak you with, brother. It's 1980 and we're just kids hoping to catch sight of you, secretly wishing to glimpse the bodies we've seen on the six-o'clock news: boats teeming, seeming to collapse beneath the weight, boats barely visible beneath brimming sprigs of bronze-colored, wiry, mostly male bodies, cheering and smiling, some toothlessly, in triumph, inching toward us. Sperm whales. Is it true, what they say? Human shipments with a signed dedication: *from Fidel, with love*. Otherwise the very incarnation of untruth, we find it easy to believe Castro then: “bums, antisocial elements, delinquents.” Doing good, clothing the “marielitos” at the church.

I wonder why my 5th-grade teacher doesn't speak of you at all, brother. But then, I guess, there's life as usual. I wonder if she donates clothes on Sundays. Doing good, outfitting the “marielitos.” The divorcee of a Dallas petroleum magnate—she does talk about that—she wears head-to-toe khaki, looking like she stepped out from behind the TV screen, the real Sue Ellen. You know the type.

What is the type? What is the outfit of that childhood hallmark (a paper doll)? Vividly-printed polyester shirt, unbuttoned to the navel, a thick gold chain with a gem-eyed Playboy bunny pendant to match your eyes. A jittery disposition. A junkie? They talk about your criminal-ness, your mental ill-ness, your general other-ness, and we are uplifted by our own good-ness, by our choice to bypass, to overlook; we make sure to overstitch. The community church, the so upstanding shrouders: doing good, enfolding the “marielitos.”

Welcoming you with our open arms (policy), as long as you don't come into the living room and court our sister/daughter. Socially-sexually (un)desirable, you are her very own secret. Even from me. She's older now, fourteen, and we no longer share a bedroom. I think of you, brother, when I overhear our parents shout, forcing her, coaxing her. They won't have it: “He's a 'marielitos!'” Self-explanatory. Even for me. It's 1982, and by now, I know the type. I made you myself.

We have been cast (funny how that word applies here, too), along with the other kids, to the family room at our parents' friends' house. It's 1984, maybe '85, and the *sahuesera* scent of new paint and sheetrock has long been replaced by the mustiness of aging, sand-colored plush carpeting. From the too-soft faux leather couch, above the low grumble of an overworked air conditioner, I hear the sound of voices from the screen entwine with the hissing of the VCR and with the more distant, muted rise and fall of grown-up laughter from the dining room: *iNo los queremos, no los necesitamos!* / sssss / Ha-ha-ha-ha / *You need people like me so you can point your fuckin fingers!* / sssss / Ha-ha-ha-ha / *He was a bum then, and he's a bum now! Who do you think you are?* / sssss / Ha-ha-ha-ha.

Al Pacino is Tony Montana and I feel like I understand something, brother. I wonder whether that something that I understand is different than what the grown-ups understand. Potentially different, at least. *We hear about it in the papers* / ssssss / Ha-ha-ha-ha / *It's animals like you* / sssss / Ha-ha-ha-ha / *It's Cubans like you who have given a bad name to all our people* / sssss / Ha-ha-ha-ha / *Fuck you, meng!* I intuit how my parents' disapproval of you, resistance to you, negation of you, is somehow stitched to this to portrayal of you. Or, is it the other way around? Al/You/Tony, with that big gold watch, boldly-ringed fingers, splayed collar shirts and Colt AR-15 tucked under a cream linen suit.

She breaks up with you, in the end. At fourteen, even though now she's sixteen, and the pins and tucks will hurt around the edges long after only she and I will remember the details and talk about it sometimes. *So say goodnight to the bad guy! Come on. The last time you gonna see a bad guy like this again, let me tell you. Come on. Make way for the bad guy. There's a bad guy comin' through! Better get outta his way!* / sssss / Ha-ha-ha-ha.

From my desk in a Miami garment factory, that tele-sales-feeding-machine churning out Donna Karan knockoffs in four colors and five sizes, I think of you, brother. When I overhear the sample room seamstress—a sister, maybe a fellow passenger on that same boat that brought you to this other shore—say, “What *is it* that they want, those Haitians?” Black bodies, half-alive, washing up at that same shore. No (policies of) open arms, if it makes a difference. It's 1992, barely over a decade since her own passage. Since yours. But she shakes her head as she says it, as she sits at her Chinese-made sewing machine in an industrial nave (funny, too, that word) on the stolen soil of Opa-locka, each loop a forgetting, the needle like a miniature anchor that fixes her American-ness in place, as she manufactures prototypes: bodysuits that snap at the crotch.

At a peach-colored motel with a regal name on the old road to Rosarito, in Tijuana, I think of you, brother. It's 2001, and though it seems like a lifetime, it's been just over two decades since my idea of you first began to take shape. Groups—smaller sperm whales—of three to five youngish men on the landings between floors circumventing the central patio, fall silent as my bare legs climb past. They play cards, gathered around small hills of pistachio shells. Forged Greek passports in safekeeping at the hotel reception, but I know they're speaking another, further-east language. My curiosity-intimidation mounts in time with their pistachio shells: a rhythm and a question. Once the ice finally breaks, things start to come into focus and for a few days, there's a “we”; sitting around bottles of tequila in the afternoons, I listen to their stories and wonder what theirs have in common with yours. Just like you then, they are hoping for political asylum, for those open arms (policies). They, too, deserted: same plight, different war. *Tampoco los quisieron, tampoco los necesitaron.* They avoid talking about why some among them are missing fingers. With names like George and Phil that dress their foreign-ness, that disguise their Iraqi-ness. An idea of American-ness. The first stitches. In Detroit, relatives await their arrival. Who awaited yours, brother? They mention they're Catholic, and I wonder if neighbors will lug bags of clothing to church on Sundays. Doing good, shrouding, clothing. Paper dolls. They've even got jobs lined up at the family business: clothing shops. How cosmic is that? I wonder if they've watched *Scarface*, and if fourteen-year-old girls will break their hearts.

Do you still feel the prick, brother? I think about all those clothes at the church. Did you pass them onto someone else? Send some back home? Did your family or friends in Cuba hide them, push them to the back of their closets—*sin quererlas, sin necesitarlas*—ashamed of that textile proof of your new-outfit-you-didn't-ask-for-but-that-we-gave-you-anyway: cloak, shroud, assignation, designation, a name you never wanted? Sewn to your skin and to my memories, suturing us together, making us both. It's 2021 and I wonder, still peeking from behind a half-closed hand.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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