FROM THE EDITOR
Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez

FROM THE GUEST EDITOR
When You Can't Go Back: Exile and Dislocation
Achy Obejas

ARTICLES
Karla Suárez, Silente Viajera
Mabel Cuesta

Merging Exile into Diaspora: Other Letters to Milena
Kristin Dykstra

A Young Woman Brought the First Flowers
Reina María Rodríguez, translated by Kristin Dykstra

INTERVIEW / ENTREVISTA
Loida Maritza Pérez
CLR Oral Histories

FEATURED THEME
Tropical Disturbances
Cristina García

Fragment from the Diary of My Return to Chile in 1990
Ariel Dorfman

The Shine in the Eyes of the Naked
Adrián Castro

Siempre Nos Qedará Madrid [fragmentos]
Enrique Del Risco Arrocha

Displacing Forces
Gint Aras

POESIA
Poems from One Day My Hands Will Touch the Ceiling
Erika M. Martínez

La ciudad donde habito
Johanny Vázquez Paz

Los primeros dos años aquí (son los más duros)
Néstor Díaz de Villegas

Fancy Limes at a Sponging House and The Biographical Fallacies
Found in Migration’s Anxious Knuckles
Michael J. Pagán

FEATURED ARTIST
Héctor Duarte

Contributors
Submission Guidelines
Call for Papers
Subscribe to Diálogo
We are pleased to present this second issue of Diálogo 15, conceived and selected by guest editor Alicia “Achy” Obejas in response to her call, “When You Can’t Go Back: Exile and Dislocation.”

Exile, diaspora, homeland, identity and transnationalism are now concepts in regular use and understanding, and yet personal experience is more elusive. It is through creative works that a better sense is often gained of societal issues, hope and anxiety in self-identity. Exile from original homelands leaves regret, anger, and other emotions invisible to general society. The children of exiled persons as well often feel nostalgia for their parents’ experience, and seek understanding in travel and those around them.

I am reminded of the final image in Tomás Rivera’s landmark novel … y no se lo tragó la tierra (And the Earth did not part), which captures a certain feeling of esperanza (more than hope, a strong desire for fulfillment). In that novel a young migrant worker examines life, harsh treatment and family issues, as he travels the harvest circuit from Texas to Wisconsin picking crops during the mid-20th century. In the final vignette, the young protagonist climbs to the top of a tree to look far off into the horizon and think about his future. He detects another tree in the distance, where another small figure has climbed to the top, and appears to wave to him. For the reader—after the despair and difficult issues pursued in this narrative—such an intriguing ending offers a variety of readings, from mirrored action to contact with other souls of similar experience.

It was Thomas Wolfe’s landmark 1940 novel, You Can’t Go Home (published posthumously) that opened literary consciousness to considerations of time and memory, a return to old roots in expectation of understanding, contemplations of homeland while living displaced experiences. During the 21st century, what and where is the “home” of so many migrants, exiles, and transnational beings? This issue of Diálogo invites an array of assessments on the post-exile experience.

In criticism two scholars explore recent works by Cuban writers Carla Suárez and Reina María Rodríguez, followed by a recent narrative of Rodríguez’s, in translation: a moving reflection on the death of her friend and poet Alexander Blok. “One is from places far away,” states Rodríguez, speaking to us all. In Diálogo Entrevistas, an interview with Dominican-American novelist Loida Maritza Pérez that was conducted in the Center for Latino Research offices some years past, while Pérez was on tour with her first novel, Geographies of Home. She explains her artistic drive in creating that novel, as well as observations on the publishing world and Latinos in the US. Excerpts from this interview were published in Diálogo 4 (March 2000), this edited version makes an interesting addition to our thematic issue.

Creative writer, journalist and translator of creative works herself, Obejas has collected a variety of narratives and poetry for her special featured section, beginning with an intriguing excerpt of new work from Cristina García, a prominent writer who is herself the child of exiled parents. Her character an aging Cuban émigré, he examines the Biscayne Bay from his hospital bed, recalling experiences from early life in Cuba, as well as those of the US, including his estranged children. Experiences and impressions are contrasted. Despite the proximity of death, the image projected infers a position of privilege: the view from his hospital room a magnificent view of the bay, where he surveys boats and recognizes participants from his own yacht club.

A narrative of meditation follows, by distinguished Latin American writer Ariel Dorfman, born in Buenos Aires but raised in Chile, and who has lived in the US extensively. Most of his writings evoke the trials of exile. Here, upon a return visit to Chile, he surveys a “pillaged wasteland,” both physically and in memory.

Enrique del Risco’s title the story as much as the narrative itself, the physical journey from Cuba to Spain, into exile, serves to reveal deeper-rooted sensibilities and crisp descriptions that tantalize the senses. Much like Dorfman, the account employs a singer, in dialogue with the narrator, to pursue political feelings dialogue and seek understanding of the past. In Adrián García’s essay the Yorùbá myth and spiritual priest (babalú) serve to explore the vicissitudes of life and history in both Nigeria and Cuba. In a different manner and through another myth, set in Lithuania, Gint Aras’ account relates family stories, folktales, pre and post-World War II history, to weave a loving journey through memories of ancestor immigrants, concluding with an unforgettable metaphor. The difficult state of an exiled identity is further explored in the creativity of four poets.

Another exile is that lived within, pain and anguish of loss forever present, like that of Mexican poet Javier Sicilia, whose 24-year old son was murdered, along with several other university students, in 2011, their bodies left on the street in Cuernavaca by the drug cartel. His pain, and valiant voice in protest, has put a face on the suffering of
many families, the now 50,000 people killed in Mexico during the five-year course of a “war” not of their choosing. Many of those murdered have been migrants, en route toward the hope of economic relief for their families. Sicilia now dedicates his life to protest, imploring the cessation of the Mexican president’s campaign against the cartels; he insists that all Mexican lives are endangered, that it is now an urgent “matter of public health.” Sicilia founded the Movement for Peace and Justice and Dignity in Mexico, and will now lead a caravan of protest, in late summer of 2012, from San Diego to Brownsville along the US-Mexico border, then to the cities of Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC. Organized by the human rights organization Global Exchange based in San Francisco, the purpose of the caravan is to gain the attention of the US public and Congress. In the US many families suffer the murders and kidnappings of their relatives in Mexico, and are forced to drain bank accounts to meet hostage demands, or “disappear” from contact with their families.

The 21st century has become one of constant danger to migrants and other dislocated people, Sicilia himself now lives a life of constant protest and travel. Last year he stated publicly that he was giving up poetry to dedicate his life to human rights. His last two poems are posted online, the following opening lines are from “El sobreviviente:”

Toda ausencia es atroz
y sin embargo, habita como un hueco que viene de los muertos,
de las blancas raíces del pasado.
¿Hacia dónde volverse?
¿hacia Dios, el ausente del mundo de los hombres?;
¿hacia ellos, que lo han interpretado hasta vaciarlo?
¿Hacia dónde volverse que no revele el hueco,
el vacío insondable de la ausencia?

The breathtaking artistic images in this issue provided by Chicago-based Mexican-American artist Héctor Duarte, painter, printmaker, and muralist. His work is exhibited in museums in Mexico and the US, and he is co-founder of a print workshop in Zacatecas, Casa de la Cultura in Zamora, and Mestizarte in Chicago. The mariposas, butterflies frequently in his works symbolize for him the travels of migrants from small villages in Mexico to various regions of the US for work. Sometimes they return, sometimes they don’t, an experience not dissimilar to experiences in this issue. Sometimes it is impossible to return. The image on our cover illustrates the experience of being out in space, away from homeland and destination.

How to understand that constant feeling of loss that accompanies so many in life? We hope the power of the human spirit and creative word in this issue inspire you, and conjure your own memories, just as Achy Obejas’ collection of reflections and creative works inspire greater support for human dignity.

Please review our new Calls for Papers and join us with your own works of criticism and inspiration, book and media reviews, commentary and interviews. We look forward to Diálogo’s 16th year in dialogue and participation with readers and contributors.
What happens when we can't go back where we're from? What happens to our memories of those places? What happens to the life we imagined in our future?

When we talk about immigration, we talk of movements, from south to north, from east to west, from here to there, from A to B. And we talk of opportunities, of a wish for better lives, of education and frequently of progress. Sometimes we also talk of return, of a homecoming after a life's work, of a rest at the end of the road in the comfort of family and familiar surroundings, of something as simple as a visit to our native land.

But the exile -- the dislocated, the refugee -- frequently has other reasons for moving from one place to another: war, persecution, civil unrest or personal danger. The exile can't go back home because she is explicitly banished and threatened with imprisonment, torture or death upon return. For the exile, whether asylum is formal or not, home is a memory ever more distant, home is a mirage.

For some exiles, this kind of uprooting is a blessing: a chance at a new life, much like that of the traditional immigrant. For others, it's a blessing still, but because there is a life at all. And for others, exile is a temporary condition: a waiting period until they can be repatriated, vindicated perhaps, rescued certainly, returned to where they believe they belong: the home country, the native land, the hometown held static in the imagination and the heart. How to hold on to that idea over time? How to remember who we really are, and then who we were, so that we may go back someday?

And what happens if we can't return? If exile is endless? If the waiting becomes the entire time of our lives? How do we make a life where we don't want to be, where we are perpetual strangers? How do we compete with history -- by revising it or blotting it out or holding onto it with a furious love? What is the story we tell about our condition?

And how is that story different when we look in the mirror, when we pray or long for what is out of our reach? What is the legacy passed down to our children?

And what if -- what if! -- a door opens and we pass through it, exile forgiven, and we find ourselves back exactly where we thought we wanted to be?

Exile and dislocation fascinate me because I come from a family that left our home country because we no longer felt safe there, choosing instead to wait out what has turned out to be an endless revolution in the United States. I come from Cuba, which is in many ways unique (not the least because of our exile without end, but also because of our own peculiarly privileged place in American migratory policy), but the contemporary story of escape from danger, of banishment from our home could apply to people from Argentina, Chile, Bolivia and Uruguay during the era of dirty wars and dictatorship, to the countries of Central America during the many civil wars of the 80s, to Peru, to Colombia and Mexico during the drug wars, to the Dominican Republic during Trujillo, to Haiti during a series of governments from Duvalier on, to Eastern Europe both before and after the Soviet collapse, to Ireland and Germany and to people from a myriad countries in Europe, Africa and Asia and all over the world. The Maldives, islands threatened with disappearance by rising waters caused by global warming, just recently exiled their president. The middle east between Europe and Africa on the long list of places where people are exiled from.

Exile is ever present in human history, from the Greek Wars to our present catastrophic state of displacement: According
to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, there are 34 million dislocated people right now, as I write, awaiting some sort of decision on their lives, some sort of next step, some sort of help. Claims for asylum -- the ultimate certificate of you-can't-go-backness -- are up 17 percent from last year in industrialized countries.

Exile stories, dislocation stories, stories about being here instead of there, are classic stories, stories too big for one issue of any magazine or in one volume in an encyclopedia of a displacement, but here, in the volume you hold in your hands, we have a sampling of exilic experiences: the crazy Cuban in Cristina García’s story, who holds on to his fury as fuel for living; Ariel Dorfman’s earnest returning Chilean refugee, who discovers life in his home country has proceeded in unexpected ways that leave him marginalized; Reina María Rodríguez’s futile attempts to help an exile come home and the way the world shrinks for her in the process; a young man’s visit to his family’s ancestral home in Eastern Europe and its echoes of familiarity, its dark and alien silences.

What happens when we can’t go back where we came from, even if we want to? What happens when we’re forever dislocated, even when we return? These are the questions I put to our writers. But don’t look for answers here -- there are none. These stories and essays, poems and testimonies are here only to bear witness, to wrestle with the issues, to rephrase and chew on the questions, to give us a glimpse, and just that, a glimpse, of this human predicament.

Chicago, May 2012