



The Tower of the Antilles

Achy Obejas

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"Achy Obejas's collection is about fictional Cuban migrants who never quite escape the land they've left."

--**Electric Literature**

"For twenty years I've been a fan of the genius Achy Obejas--since I first read *Memory Mambo* in 1996. Obejas has been the model of a writer for me in every way--a master in her aesthetics, an inspiration in her politics, fearless and vital in every page. *The Tower of the Antilles* is another brilliant collection, a story of many Cubas, intensely personal and political, erotic and cerebral. I found myself holding my breath as I devoured this book, as I navigated the various avenues of the body, the blood, and all those seemingly impossible roads that lead to a place we try to call home."

--**Porochista Khakpour**, author of *The Last Illusion*

"These stories are like a long dream of many parts, mixed desire, love, longing, anger—Obejas is a master of the human, able to conjure her characters' heartbeats right under your fingertips, their breaths in your ears."

--**Alexander Chee**, author of *The Queen of the Night*

"Achy Obejas's new story collection begins and ends with a question: *What is your name?* The answer is an abounding one. Counterrevolutionaries, the witnesses to the arrival of Columbus's caravels, poets, Supermán--the characters in these stories, in all their riveting variety, name themselves as Cuban, and are bound in complex ways by the geography of their hearts, if not the geography beneath their feet. An audacious and remarkable read!"

--**Chantel Acevedo**, author of *The Distant Marvels*

Praise for Achy Obejas:

"Obejas writes like an angel, which is to say: gloriously...one of Cuba's most important writers."

--**Junot Díaz**

The Cubans in Achy Obejas's story collection *The Tower of the Antilles* are haunted by an island: the island they fled, the island they've created, the island they were taken to or forced from, the island they long for, the island they return to, and the island that can never be home again.

In "Supermán," several possible story lines emerge about a 1950s Havana sex-show superstar who disappeared as soon as the revolution triumphed. "North/South" portrays a migrant family trying to cope with separation, lives on different hemispheres, and the eventual disintegration of blood ties. "The Cola of Oblivion" follows the path of a young woman who returns to Cuba, and who inadvertently uncorks a history of accommodation and betrayal among the family members who stayed behind during the revolution. In the title story, "The Tower of the Antilles," an interrogation reveals a series of fantasies about escape and a history of futility.

With language that is both generous and sensual, Obejas writes about lives beset by events beyond individual control, and poignantly captures how history and fate intrude on even the most ordinary of lives.

The Tower of the Antilles Details

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From Reader Review The Tower of the Antilles for online ebook

Bill Brydon says

"The mob shouting as one, the crowd rallied to a frenzy. This is the story they told, she and her Cuban ex-lover, about their lives back on the island: That they were hiding from the neighbors, the windows shuttered, lights off. They had decided to skip the rally, to avoid the marathon at the plaza. Her Cuban ex-lover's father sat in a rocking chair, listening to a banned radio station through earphones. Her Cuban ex-lover's mother sat in her own rocker across from him, reading a detective novel with a pocket flashlight. Dulce remembered the chairs squeaking, the occasional static and the crackling of pages. And she and her Cuban ex-lover—a sweet, round girl she'd known and loved forever—in the bedroom across from them, the door closed and latched. She had a distinct memory of the click, of the wooden door groaning when she tugged at it. This was all routine: the father with his radio, the mother reading by clandestine light, the door resisting. It had all happened before: the silent kisses, the silent unzipping, the silent lowering of her mouth, the silent touch of tongue on belly and tongue on thigh and tongue on clit. Dulce was so burrowed in silence, so deep in the sea, that she could feel tissues dissolving, nerves misfiring. The room spun and she laughed, and then the room spun a bit more and her tongue lost its place and she looked up and her Cuban ex-lover, sitting spread-eagled and wide-eyed, poked Dulce's shoulder so she'd turn around."

David says

These are some good stories, I steamed right through. Seemed like many had a different kind of narrative approach than a lot of other stories I've been reading recently, in a good way. Interesting stuff.

Andrea Blythe says

The Tower of Antilles is a beautiful collection of short stories, centered around the Cuban experience, both on the island and as an immigrant elsewhere. These stories explore the nature of individuality, with the question "What is your name?" being the entry point for both the opening and closing stories. There's also a thread of queer experience throughout many of these stories.

One the many story that was resonant for me is "The Cola of Oblivion," in which a young woman returns to Cuba only to be addressed with the old grievances of her family there. It builds to a heavy conclusion, bearing the burdens of family expectation that stayed with me long after I finished the story.

Alex Sanchez Bressler says

In Achy Obejas's collection of short stories, *The Tower of the Antilles*, various subjects exist in precarity. Precarious subjects lack security; they are wobbly, uncertain, and they make do with the materials and forces at hand. The physical Tower of the Antilles that consists of makeshift boats and flotation devices is a metonymic device that signifies precarity: "There was nothing between the vessels...they swayed with the trade winds, waved to the waters, but did not fall" (157). In this instance, the tower consists of failed attempts to leave the isolation of Cuba; from the remains of foiled escape, a tower is built. Even though the Tower of the Antilles is built off a history of forced exile, totalitarian regimes, and economic distress, it does

not fall.

An existence of precarity is resilient even as it shudders and shakes in the wake of systemic violence. Sexuality is a site of precarious existence in *The Tower of the Antilles*. In the story “Kimberle”, the queer relationship between the narrator and Kimberle is tenuous, both sexually and emotionally. During sex, they narrowly avoid physical intimacy: “At one point, Kimberle was balanced above me, her mouth grazing mine, but we just stared past each other” (36). And when asked what she thought about their relationship, Kimberle replies, “‘Us? There is no us’” (42). Yet they embody an unmistakable intimacy, one that the reader cannot quite put a finger on. The end of the story is especially unstable, when an unnamed body lies in the wake of the narrator’s and Kimberle’s car crash. The body exists “above [Kimberle’s] shoulder...waxy and white but for the purple areolas and the meat of her sex” (43). This body remains unnamed, and the reader is unclear if this body is a metaphor for their relationship, or if it is a physical body of someone that they hit with their car. Regardless, the unnamed body is highly sexualized (connoted by “purple areolas and the meat of her sex”). Sexuality is thus a highly volatile realm that lacks clarity as it refutes heterosexual norms and concrete detail in the text. That is, sexuality exists untethered to firm notions of subjectivity as it floats amidst themes of violence and desire between Kimberle, the narrator, their various partners, and the unnamed body at the end of the short story.

Furthermore, Cuban identity is a subjectivity that exists in precarity within *The Tower of the Antilles*, and language becomes a critical site that mediates this volatile existence. For example, in the story “Waters”, a bilingual poet must defend and mediate her Cuban identity in response to a famous Cuban poet who only speaks Spanish. Reacting to the famous poet’s constant prodding (“‘In what language do you think?’...‘what language do you dream in?’” (96)), the bilingual poet responds, “I don’t always recognize the language in my dreams” (96). As the famous poet is forcing the bilingual poet to choose between Spanish and English, the bilingual poet offers a third alternative: at times, she chooses neither. Or rather, she does not recognize either, at least in her dreams. For the bilingual poet, language is not a stable, consistent, and secure mechanism in the operation of her poetics. In her dreams language becomes unrecognizable; it is tossed and turned amidst her subconscious, and the outcome is a fluid poetics that sometimes appears in Spanish, sometimes in English. *The Tower of the Antilles* is a similar hodgepodge of uncertainty: it consists of diverse and seemingly unrelated histories, yet it exists as a coherent whole. Since the bilingual poet’s Cuban identity hinges on her linguistic faculties in the eyes of the famous poet, national identity similarly becomes obfuscated through this lens of precarious linguistic subjectivity. In *The Tower of the Antilles*, what often seems stable and firm (e.g. citizenship) is in fact unstable and, at times, unrecognizable.

Stu says

This one didn't hit me like *Ruins* and *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?* did, which is less an indictment of *The Tower of the Antilles* and more a comment on how exemplary Obejas's other work is. By no means a bad collection, but not (in my opinion) a great one.

2.5 towers out of 5

Michael Jacobs says

I went into this very open-minded as I've not read anything from any Cuban authors. A few stories were okay, but there was far too much eroticism/sex/romance in it for me. Just not my thing. The ones that talked about the life on Cuba and the lives of Cubans living in America without the eroticism were good though. I did enjoy how "Kimberle" took place near me. Overall, the descriptions of Cuban life here, and in Cuba is

what saved it and made it a 3/5 instead of a 1 or a 2. A little less eroticism, and it would have gotten a 4 for sure. That stuff just isn't my thing, might be to others, but personally not for me.

Kel says

very disappointing. I really love her other work but I did not enjoy this at all. There's not even one story that stands out.

Laurel says

The Tower of the Antilles, a book of short stories by Achy Obejas, concerns individuals who live in Cuba under revolutionary rule and those who have physically escaped to the United States. I say, "physically escaped" because their emotional ties to Cuba are still strong and unbreakable. They have this in common with those they have left behind. Some of the stories in this book really appealed to me and struck me as great examples of the migrant experience. Others didn't seem to fit, and I felt gave the book an uneven feel. I was particularly struck by the opening story, "The Collector," which was an excellent lead-in to the rest of the stories. Ultimately, The Tower of the Antilles is a small book with big stories and a good addition to Latin American literature.

J David says

The Tower of the Antilles is a wonderful collection of short stories by Achy Obejas, a Cuban American. Her stories are of Cubans in Cuba and in America. I like settings and I especially loved the settings in Cuba which made me feel and understand better the country. My favorite stories were later ones, Superman and The Maldives. Superman is an erotic story of a young man, an entertainer. We follow him through his life. The language and the story are rewarding. This book is a gem and I highly recommend it.

Anna says

This slim volume of stories is one that I've read and re-read over the course of the last six months. Achy Obejas achieves the amazing feat of writing that is lovely and dream-like while tackling some of the harshest aspects of reality: the limitations of and breaking down of the human body, trusts betrayed and suspicions raised in both romantic relationships and family relationships, the challenges of being an immigrant in the U.S. My favorite stories in the collection are currently "The Maldives," "The Sound Catalog," and "The Cola of Oblivion."

Jennifer Collins says

This is such a strange and fast collection of short stories, I ended up reading it in one sitting. There are flavors of writers like Marquez and Borjes here, as well as contemporaries like Gaiman and Link. And each story, given the depth that it has, could easily be imagined as a far longer tale, complete as it is in the short

form. I'm not sure how I feel about the framing stories--the first and the last--but beyond these short ones, each one is a sort of world of its own, and strange enough to keep a reader enthralled, entertained, and sometimes shocked or delighted. All told, there are a few stories here I already plan to read again, and a few I feel I need to, but I look forward to reading more of Obejas' work.

Jen says

My thanks to Susannah at Akashic Books for a copy of this book to read and review.

This is a really sad and confused 1 star review. I requested this book because it looked really good. Short stories by a Cuban American author, about Cuba and the Cuban experience in America. Sounded really great. Well....

If you like semi-magical realism and stream of consciousness, this is your bag. On a positive note, this is VERY LGBT inclusive, though ALL of the stories seemed to have sex as a major part in it and I wasn't reading to be titillated.

One of the stories was looking good, with a serial murder sub-plot, that just ENDS, no resolution to the murder plot. There was another story where what happens to the MC at the end is told as different rumors of what was heard, but no one knew the truth. Again, no clear resolution. I felt cheated as a reader, having to come up with the endings myself. That's the writer's job, not the reader's job.

I'm sure this isn't a bad collection of stories, but it just didn't speak to me like I had hoped it would. That disappointment is why I am giving this one star. That and I absolutely detest stream of consciousness and non-clear endings. But that's just me. If those things work for you, this book very well might.

Fred says

Be wary of any jacket blurb extolling the virtues of the writing within as "dreamy." This usually signals vague or ambiguous language, unclear plot lines, etc. This book is a great example. Some of the plots are completely confusing and disorienting, and although that may be the mark of a great post-modernist writer, contrary to that school of thought, obfuscation is not a sign of deep intelligence. Clarity is apparently a lost art in this post-Derrida world. A shame.

Not for me.

Thank you to the author and publisher for a review copy.

Shivane Ramlochan says

The better stories in this thin collection do not announce their intentions. They board you like ships arriving to your island at night, soundless until they want to be heard, a rich and ineffable, maritime wind swelling their sails. They are careful navigators; the map they traverse is Cuba: a Cuba that was, is, and will be, in fragmentary and raucous permutations.

One of the stories in here is so beautiful, so agonizingly imperfect and lined with sorrow, that it made me hold the book to my ear like a shell, hoping that more slender flutes of meaning might fall into me like rain flooding an archipelago.

Mills College Library says

Fiction O122t 2017
