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Only One Identity

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The winter rains in Boal are always persistent, fine, and sometimes cold. The mountains seem like routes to heaven and divide the valley between the towns of Los Mazos and Las Viñas, where my father was born almost a century ago. El Franco and Coaña in the North; Castropol to the West and Villanueva de Oscos and Illano to the South divide all the towns. Penouta Peak has taken over the geography and has made the Galician and Asturian almost like me because, despite the fact that I no longer live on the Island, I feel deeply Cuban, which is also how I feel about Galicia and Asturias. It is one of those contradictions that bring us to our identity because, while I am as white as papyrus, I feel very African. I say

so, because that is how I dance, how I speak, and how I feel. And I owe it all to my Asturian father and my mother, who is also a descendant of Galicia and Asturias. My father died in Marianao, dreaming of someday returning to Boal. When I left Cuba, in the beginning of the 1960's, he remained on the Island while I constructed for myself a new continent. He decided never to leave Cuba, and this separation from him has tormented me my entire life. Now that I have more experience, that I have lived a more intense life, and have suffered firsthand the reality of a faraway homeland ("*immersed in humiliation and shame*") my incomprehension has returned to nostalgia and my love to his memory--an obsession.

It is not necessarily being "*a son of an Asturian dove,*" like I heard repeated often as a child, it is a journey. In his book, *Gallego*, Miguel Barnet reminds us how difficult life was for many Spaniards in Cuba. My

father labored twelve hours a day, hard at work (*al pie del cañón*), glued to the oven door in his bakery six days a week. He really was a worker that perhaps once aspired to be *petit bourgeois*, but could never free himself from work to be a *Cimarrón*, another book by Barnet. Working, eating, working, sleeping, working and working. I imagine, now that I am old myself, that he thought that life would offer other alternatives, but death surprised him early one morning in August, depriving him of choices.

When I arrived in Boal in the beginning of 1961, they showed me the foundations of the bakery that my father had started to build in the 1930s when he returned to Spain during the Second Republic. Also one Sunday, crossing the Plaza, I found myself face to face with a woman in a black dress, as old as all the women of Asturias, and whom one of my cousins identified as my possible mother, had my father not left her behind in Boal. Those six months I spent in Asturias were full of great personal experiences, seeing the school building, and the high school where many generations of *Boalenses* studied, constructed with Cuban

funds, sent from Cuba by the Spaniards living there. The system of water fountains in all of Boal and in many other villages in Castropol also were constructed with money sent from Cuba. The sumptuous houses of the *Indianos*, Spanish-American transplants in the outskirts of the city after returning from Cuba, were palaces constructed with money taken from Cuba. The sidewalks in the plaza, the city hall building, the paved streets in the center of the village, the ancient and decadent church, all were monuments to the Cuban peso. Generation after generation of *Boalenses* went to Cuba to leave their sweat, their sacrifice, and many times, like my father, their bones, and their generosity to their homeland was manifested in a concrete and clear manner in the beloved and faraway village. In the nights between the tears that came by chance from the absence of my mother, of my father, of my siblings, gathered unconsciously that profound existential responsibility of being a child of Asturias, of thinking like an Asturian, of feeling like an Asturian, of loving and hating like an Asturian, and, simultaneously, defining myself as a Cuban. Where

was the contradiction? I have to confess that I didn't have one. It is like being a white European and feeling like a black African. Whoever was not born on this passionate Island, with violent sunrises and coastal breezes that erase all the traces of hate and that mark everything with the caress of love, will never understand this mix of races, cultures, and accents. The Cuban identity surpasses anyone's sociological, political, or economical understanding, which is framed within our Asturian heredity. Dreaming maybe of becoming independent forever of Spain, the homeland, but incapable of forgetting it.

I believe I was in my fifth month of residence in Boal when they informed me that a Cuban family had arrived. I went to see them because it was necessary to meet up again with the intervocalic rhythms, the acute and constant *seseo*, and the sweetness of the language. They asked me to come and I sat down with those Cubans in a living room that was outfitted for everything but living. The lady of the house, an Asturian, and cousin of the recently arrived Cubans, left for the kitchen to get us coffee. I stayed

speaking with my compatriots who promptly asked me how many years I had lived in Cuba. "All my life," I answered them, somewhat astonished at the question. "All your life," they expressed astonishment at my answer too. "But, you aren't Spanish?" "No, I am from Los Quemados, in Marianao." The *jefe* of the family, whose last name was Álvarez, ensured that his cousin could not hear, and almost in a whisper said to me, "*Carajo*, your speech sounds like a Galician!" From that day, I knew that to be Cuban and to be Asturian, over all the thousands of kilometers separating both identities, brought more complicated responsibilities than the force of an accent.