

HYPHENATED IDENTITIES IN CRISTINA GARCÍA'S *DREAMING IN CUBAN AND THE AGÜERO SISTERS*

VERONICA POPESCU¹

ABSTRACT. *Hyphenated Identities in Cristina García's Dreaming in Cuban and The Agüero Sisters.* The two novels analysed here are organically connected by their exploration of the effects of the Cuban Revolution on the families divided by their political allegiances and their experience of that revolution. The present study investigates the author's personal journey towards understanding her own hyphenated identity as a "1.5er" reconciling her own conflicting impulses and cultural identities, using writing as a means to heal herself and others through an on-going interrogation of all aspects that help configure communal and personal identity and exploring their interdependence, in fascinating and intriguing tales of survival and atonement.

Keywords: *Cristina García, Cuban American fiction, hyphenation, identity, trauma, ethnicity, "1.5" generation.*

REZUMAT. *Identități cratimate în romanele Dreaming in Cuban și The Agüero Sisters ale Cristinei García.* Cele două romane analizate aici sunt legate organic prin explorarea efectelor Revoluției Cubaneze asupra familiilor divizate de loialitățile lor politice și modul în care au trecut prin revoluție. Studiul de față investighează călătoria personală a autoarei către definirea propriei identități împărțite ca reprezentantă a generației „1,5”, reconciliind propriile impulsuri și identități culturale conflictuale, folosindu-se de scris ca modalitate de a se vindeca și a-i vindeca și pe alții printr-o interogare continuă a tuturor aspectelor care conturează identitatea personală și pe cea a comunității, explorându-le interdependența, în povești fascinante și provocatoare despre supraviețuire și împăcare.

Cuvinte cheie: *Cristina García, literatura cubanezilor americani, cratimare, identitate, traumă, etnicitate, generația „1,5”.*

¹ Veronica Popescu is lecturer at the English Department, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, where she teaches British and American literature (British Neoclassicism and Latin fiction) and film studies. Her research interests focus on Latin literature and adaptation studies, with a focus on film adaptation as a form of interpretation and rewriting. Contact address: <veronica.t.popescu@yahoo.com>

Along with remembered or received memories of Cuba comes
ideological baggage—this too is an inheritance.
(Gustavo Pérez Firmat)

Introduction

Hyphenation, Gustavo Pérez Firmat writes in the Preface to the revised edition of *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, “fundamentally ... names a spiritual bilocation, the sense of being in two places at once, or of living in one while residing in another. That one of these places no longer exists only intensifies the desire to inhabit it; the demon of discontinuity must be exorcised.” (xi) Much of Cuban-American literature – at least that written in English by writers Pérez Firmat identifies as “one-and-a-halfers,”² who came to the United States as children and now feel compelled to write about their cultural contradictions – is a literature of double engagement. On the one hand, the children of Cuban-Cubans feel they have a duty towards their parents’ culture, which they experienced in their families through stories and nostalgic recollections, and, on the other hand, to the culture in which they function as adults, the U.S. cultural environment in which their education and professional lives have taken shape. In the particular case of Cuban-Americans, the conflict between these two cultures is further complicated by history and politics more than in the case of any other Latino community, identity being a site of psychic conflict that some attempt to solve through their art.

The Cuban-American diaspora was born primarily as a consequence of political conflict fuelled and reinforced by Cold War ideologies and historical realities. To many, Cuban Americans are people living in relative isolation and self-exclusion as exiles (Schutte 69), in Little Havanas that recreate the pre-revolutionary Cuba they left in 1959 or the early 1960s, idealizing perhaps the Cuban-U.S. relations prior to the Revolution to justify their demonization of the Castro regime – the only reason they had to leave their homeland.³ They are die-hard anti-communists, dreaming of returning to the island as assassins of Fidel Castro and freedom heroes relieving Cubans of a monstrous communist regime. They are Cuban Americans without a hyphen to signal a double allegiance, since they regard their American experience as a temporary situation, an exile that will end as soon as they can return to a liberated Cuba.

² Firmat borrows the term for the Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut (1991), the first one to speak of a “one-and-a-half” or “1.5” generation of immigrants with very specific problems of adaptation and cultural negotiation.

³ For a fine analysis of the first generation of Cuban immigrants and their ideological stance to this day, including their perception of contemporary Cuba, see Guerra (1-17).

This creates, according to Ruth Behar, an environment of intolerance for any other position regarding Cuba and the diasporic subjects' cultural identification, widening the gap between Cubans across the Florida Strait:

Within this conflicting web of representations born in the Cold War, there is little room for a more nuanced and complex vision of how Cubans on the island and the diaspora give meaning to their lives, their identity and their culture in the aftermath of a battle that has split the nation at the root." (Behar 2)

On the other hand, Cubans born in the U.S. to "1.5" generation parents seem more than a half generation (or even one whole generation) apart from their grandparents, as for them Cuba is even less real than for their parents. These ABCs (American-Born Cubans) or CBAs (Cuban-Bred Americans), as Pérez Firmat would call them (4), know Cuba only from the stories they happened to hear growing up or they read in books. They are (and they feel) "Americans through and through" (Pérez Firmat 4), unicultural rather than bicultural, like their grandparents.

The only genuine Cuban-Americans, with a clear hyphen as symbol of biculturalism and a hyphenated identity, are the "1.5"ers, who, through their exposure to both cultures, are in many ways "marginal to both the old and the new worlds, and are fully part of neither of them," as Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut explains (qtd. in Pérez Firmat 3). Trapped in-between cultures they create a third space, the kind of mental space that Gloria Anzaldúa called a *borderland*, in which the dwellers, those with a hyphenated identity, develop a "tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity," they learn to "juggle cultures," operating "in a pluralistic mode," turning "ambivalence into something else." (101) In the process of discovering the polyphony of their inner voices, of finding out exactly how their homeland and their new land shape their identity in a "mixture of confusion, ambiguity, uncertainty, denial, anguish, and/or paradoxical love-hate feelings toward things Cuban (and/or American)" (Rivero 111-12), they also heal an emotional trauma of displacement by learning to cope with the inherited nostalgia for the homeland that prevents them from acculturating or transculturating completely.

The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Whiting Writers' Award, among other honors, Cristina García is one of the major authors of the Cubana Boom (Rivero 2009), displaying the same kind of hybrid sensibility as many of her Latina contemporaries and the authors following in her footsteps, among whom Achy Obejas, Andrea O'Reilly Herrera or Ana Menéndez, to name just a few of the Cuban-American authors published by major commercial presses. Like other ethnic writers, she too started by writing about what she knew, her experience as a "one-and-a-half," in an attempt to retrieve her

family memories and understand their significance for her own life, tied as they were with fine yet strong webs of cultural information and nostalgia, doubled by her own understanding of her heritage and the homeland. Unlike other Cubans living in the United States, however, she has always rejected the exceptionalism of the Cuban diaspora, the self-exclusion from a national (North American), integrationalist binding and the rhetoric of exile, choosing instead to feel and think of Cuban-American identity in terms closer to Pérez Firmat's as a hyphenated one, a site of negotiation and complex processes of (self)interrogation and (self)assessment in relational terms. For Cristina García, therefore, the hyphen becomes a metaphor for identity-in-the-making, which she explores in her fiction by going beyond national borders and the temporal limitations of the present aware of the fact that if she is to understand who she is, as a woman, a Cubana, a North American, a "one-and-a-half," a kin to her relatives in the U.S. and in Cuba, a Latina, a dislocated being and a bicultural, bilingual person, she has to delve deeply into the history and the culture of her people – on the island and in the U.S. That is exactly what she does in her first three novels *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), *The Agüero Sisters* (1997) and *Monkey Hunting* (2003), a trilogy of sorts in which the novelist attempts a mapping out of the complex web of emotional and physical wounds – of the island, of its people, which has provoked a national trauma affecting Cubans on either side of the Florida Strait.

When asked to comment on the title of *Dreaming in Cuban*, the author replied that "because it's a book written by a hyphenated-American as opposed to a Cuban-Cuban, a lot of it is a sort of projection and dream and distortion," (García 2003) openly acknowledging that the fabric of her fiction operates in the realm of psychic and emotional reality, where knowledge and understanding are only available to those open to alternative forms of experiencing reality, mostly magical and supernatural. In García's first two novels "women's dreams," Ruth Behar notes, "begin to heal the wounds of the divided nation" (12), building bridges of communication, mutual understanding, forgiveness and acceptance, healing and transformation.

***Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and the Cuban Revolution – A Transgenerational Saga**

Dreaming in Cuban (1992) focuses on the destinies of the members of the del Pino family, some living on the island, the others in New York, being a transgenerational saga covering a period of twenty years before and twenty after the Cuban Revolution – a character in its own right it would seem. This is, in many respects, the most autobiographical of her novels and the text that comes closest to a favourite genre within the relatively young tradition of ethnic literature, the (fictional) autobiography. "The writing of autobiography"

writes Paul John Eakin “emerges as a second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self-conscious selfconsciousness.” (18) It is a young author’s claim for an artistic as well as an ethnic identity through writing her own experience of being enmeshed in two cultures: the one in which she grew up (Brooklyn, New York) and the culture that her parents brought with them from a tropical island that she cannot remember.

On more than one occasion García has described her childhood as “bifurcated,” hyphenated. Growing up in Brooklyn, surrounded by a white culture, she only experienced her Cubanidad at home, where her mother, fully aware of the connection between language and culture, insisted on her learning Spanish. Gradually, García confesses to Irraida H. Lopez, her sense of Cuban identity, a “family affair,” became “very important,” particularly after her visit to the island in 1984 (García 102, 104). She soon became aware of the impact of historical events on the lives of individuals and communities, including the lives of her own family, divided by the Revolution into exiles and struggling islanders, the former anti-Castro activists, the latter people who did not or would not leave Cuba. Her life as a reporter brought her in contact with many Cuban exiles particularly while working for the *Times* in Miami, and she was soon to understand that cultural identity was a more complicated aspect of her and their life than she had imagined. And that is how her journey into the past – her family’s, her homeland’s – began with a jump in history to the moment when, at least for most Miami Cubans, it all began: the Revolution.

Dreaming in Cuban focuses on the politics of Castro’s regime as seen through the relationship between a mother, daughter and granddaughter (Celia, Lourdes and Pilar, respectively) across generational and geographical lines. Here, like in many Cuban families, divergent political views and life choices induce separation, miscommunication, and broken emotional ties, to the point that the people who stayed and those who left seem to be living in mutually exclusive worlds. As if to reflect the separation existing between members of the same family, the novel takes the form of interweaving third person and first person narratives, with epistolary interludes belonging to Celia, that record the history of the del Pino family, before and after the fateful victory of the Revolution. The only uniting presence is that of granddaughter Pilar Puente – an interesting name considering its reference to bridges as carrying across (translating, Pérez Firmat would say) and also uniting – who emerges as the central consciousness of the novel, and whose task is to restore all lost connections. Through reconciliation and an understanding of her family history, she will also get a grasp of how her own identity and sense of belonging are linked to her Cuban cultural heritage.

It is with Pilar that the author identifies the most. Like García, she is the daughter of exiles, a kind of “skeptical punk who dabbles in art and Santería.”

(Alvarez-Borland 137) She has a tense relationship with her mother and a deep longing for her grandmother, from whom she was separated in infancy. For García Cuba is a mental construction, a fiction that she pieced together from the stories of her family members, whose recollections of their homeland serve as temporary suspensions of reality in bouts of nostalgia. Pilar, on the other hand, has more than imagination to rely on: "I was only two when I left Cuba but I remember everything that's happened to me since I was a baby, even word-for-word conversations." (*Dreaming in Cuban* 27) Yet she is aware that for everyone else memory is a great deceiver and it rewrites history appropriating it, using it as a means to either reduce the past to that one event that marked the separation from the homeland (as Lourdes did), or to idealise it by association with a lifestyle or a happiness long gone. She writes in her diary:

I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we'll have when we're old. Every day Cuba fades a little inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. There is only our imagination where our history should be. (*Dreaming in Cuban* 138).

Pilar is ready to fall prey to her imagination, the faculty that turns her childhood memories and the telepathic messages from Abuela Celia into an idealised picture of Cuba, a safe haven for a confused teenager. "Even though I've been living in Brooklyn all my life," she writes "it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out. If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged" (*Dreaming in Cuban* 18).

The mother and daughter's return to Cuba is a necessary act of healing for Lourdes and of self-knowledge for Pilar. Though unimaginable for a long time, Lourdes' return to the island becomes possible only as her daughter reaches a level of maturity that enables her to really see her mother and connect with her. Though the first step toward reconciliation is made by Lourdes, who defends her daughter in public after Pilar humiliated her with an offensive punk mural in the new Yankee Doodle bakery Lourdes has just opened, Pilar meets her halfway by understanding that her mother's defence is an act of love. The connection between the two women will be strengthened after Pilar's initiation in Santería in a New York botánica, a ritual that reconnects Pilar to a Cuban form of spirituality without which her journey back could not be complete.

A character modelled after the kind of Cuban exile for whom post-Revolution Cuba is an open wound, a constant reminder of the reason why exile was the only option, Lourdes associates Cuba with pain, suffering, humiliation and inhumanity, with a loveless mother whose allegiance to Castro she cannot comprehend, and with the brutality of her own people. In the early days of the

Revolution Lourdes was raped as a punishment for defiance and her pointless refusal to accept the revolutionaries' authority and power. The last memory she has of Cuba is as a place of chaos and of violence, where nothing makes more sense than the unintelligible scratches made by the rapists on her skin, signs and symbols of her emotional trauma. Two months later, as she and her husband were driving up north of Miami, getting away from anything that might remind her of Cuba and her life there, she could only think of getting as far away as possible from the island. "This is cold enough" she said as they reached New York, her new home where she can reinvent herself through acculturation. Unlike many Cubans of her generation, this woman is not an exile but an American-in-the-making, rejecting her homeland, her culture, her Cubanidad, reinventing herself as citizen of this new country. The narrator comments:

Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention. She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats cracking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her" (73).

She joins the local auxiliary police forces and fights crime in her spare time from the Yankee Doodle bakery – her business and her pride. She will go to great lengths to become the most typical American citizen possible, everything that her mother and her daughter despise and reject; the former because of her political convictions and socialist ideology, the latter because she is a punk and a rebellious teenager, more attuned to her father's nostalgia of Cuba than her mother's love of the cold New York. Pilar comments sarcastically that:

Mom makes food only people in Ohio eat, like Jelly-O molds with miniature marshmallows or recipes she clips from Family circle. And she barbecues anything she can get her hands on. Then we sit around behind the warehouse and stare at each other with nothing to say. Like this is it? ... We're living the American Dream? (137)

What Pilar ignores is that her mother's Cuban wounds go deeper than the Revolution. Lourdes communicates with her dead father the way Abuela Celia did with her granddaughter, and in these talks we learn of Lourdes' original and deepest wound, inflicted on her by Celia when she first held her. As Lourdes is flying into Miami at some point, the ocean takes her back to the day she was born:

Lourdes could smell the air before she breathed it, the air of her mother's ocean nearby. She imagined herself alone and shriveled in her mother's womb, envisioned the first days in her mother's unyielding arms. Her

mother's fingers were stiff and splayed as spoons, her milk a tasteless gray. Her mother stared at her with eyes collapsed of expectation. If it's true that babies learn love from their mothers' voices, then this is what Lourdes heard: "I will not remember her name." (74)

Emotionally maimed by her own mother, Lourdes is incapable of relating to either Celia or her own daughter. She had no one to teach her what it means to be a mother, to offer love and care as only a mother can. And neither had Celia, orphaned from an early age and mistreated by the two men in her life who should have treated her kindly.

Not much is said about her relationship with her other two children, daughter Felicia and son Javier except that her communication with them is cold and professional, in the spirit of the Revolution, to which she dedicates all her energy. She is proud of Javier, who embraced her cause from an early age, moving to Czechoslovakia to bring his contribution to the strengthening of the communist block against the U.S. Yet she cannot understand or control her other daughter, Felicia, a misfit in the new social order, who slides into madness and takes refuge in Santería. She is a symbol of old Cuban values, everything that the Revolution set out to destroy because it did not fit the new norms or ideology. She suffers from amnesia – a mirroring of a national amnesia that seems to have stopped time and history in a continuous present of the Revolution, one that is in progress without really moving anywhere – and then fades away silently into an “emptiness without history or future.” (*Dreaming in Cuban* 187) Subjected to physical and psychological violence in educational camps, Felicia eventually disappears during a Santería ritual – the symbol of spiritual resistance *par excellence* in pre- and post-revolutionary Cuba. Felicia's three children, daughters Luz and Milagro and son Ivanito, are a new generation of Cubans for whom the future is yet to be written. The girls are more Celia's daughters, products of Fidel Castro's regime. As embodiments of Cuba's socialist future, they reject their own mother because she represents the wild, untamed Cuba which cannot be subdued or controlled. Ivanito's soul is not corrupted yet like his sisters', and Lourdes decides to offer him a future in the United States. Ivanito's rescue, her understanding that Cuba has also been scarred – by poverty and dictatorship – seeing her mother old and weak, reaching out for a connection with her granddaughter Pilar, Celia's death and her own daughter's understanding that her home is in New York, with her, all have a role to play in Lourdes' healing and her finding a kind of inner peace that she had denied herself all these years.

Celia's death at the end of the novel is thus a necessary stage in the psychological-emotional journey of both Lourdes and Pilar. Through their special connection, Pilar will carry with her into the future and into her life a history that her grandmother has written in the form of letters and that she

has telepathically transmitted to her after their separation. In the last letter written by Celia to her great love Gustavo, a letter which concludes the novel, Celia writes: "The revolution is eleven days old. My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today ... I will no longer write to you, mi amor. She will remember everything." (245) Pilar becomes thus the recipient of a valuable historical baggage – one that unifies personal, family history and the history of the nation – which she understands as part of the fabric of her own life story and, therefore, of her own identity. Not that she can totally grasp its significance. Yet.

Failure to fully see through the complicated web of familial, cultural and historical ties is perfectly understandable. Pilar is "the bicultural character at the crossroads" (Kevane 97), frustrated by her realization that she has misremembered Cuba and misunderstood her own connection with the island for so long. By identifying Cuba with her own grandmother, she has simply reduced it to a set of positive features associated with images of happiness and safety. The reality, however, takes her by surprise. Celia represents a Revolutionary Cuba that has become old and obsolete in the 1980s. The dire poverty in which people live and the empty propaganda of the Castro regime, García seems to say, have weakened people's belief in the Revolution and the bright future ahead. Celia's cancer is symbolic of the weakness of the Castro regime after too many years of waiting for the Revolution to be complete. From the outside, Cuba is just like Celia: a weak, scarred old woman, abandoned by her own children. Celia's tragedy is that she had abandoned her family first in favour of her political and social causes, and now, at the end of her life, all her legacy consists of a few letters and a granddaughter's subjective memory of what Celia has told her. Celia's disappearance into the blue sea of the island is a symbolic acceptance of failure and a final identification with her homeland. This is how her granddaughter will choose to remember her, against a sea of blues, more than she could have possibly imagined. Her story, the story of a Cuban-American's experience of Cuba, will be told by Pilar in a language of her own choosing, neither English nor Spanish, but her own "hyphen - language" of lines, volumes, colours and textures – the language of art.

Having learned to love Cuba for its magic and beauty, Pilar is ready to love herself more and to allow Lourdes into her life. Rocio Davis points out that Pilar's trip to Cuba makes her understand that "she belongs to a family as well as to Cuban history and culture. This discovery enables her to decipher the master codes of her increasingly complex subjectivity, allowing her to signify on her own, yet within the network of women of which she forms an inextricable part." (61) She has to allow her mother's special kind of Cubanidad to be part of her identity because it represents a side of the hyphen that she must acknowledge, just as her grandmother represents the other side. Pilar's

experience of beautiful Cuban nature, of Spanish, of Abuela Celia in her world of wonderful blues and her stories of the past, of the sharp contrast between her grandmother's image of the country's future and the facts of the real Cuba make her understand what her longing for a half-remembered island prevented her from understanding before: "sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong – not *instead* of here, but *more* than here." (*Dreaming in Cuban* 236) With these final words Pilar begins a new stage in her identity-formation, incorporating her American and her Cuban identities in a new fashion which is entirely her own.

Reconciliation and Healing in *The Agüero Sisters* (1997)

If in *Dreaming in Cuban* it is the Revolution and the Castro regime that are the primary causes of the sharp division between the Cuban diaspora and the island – with historical traumas becoming personal physical, emotional and psychological traumas – in García's second novel it is the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the subsequent military and economic presence of the U.S. on the island that trigger chaos, conflict and the destruction of family ties, with consequences well into the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, if in the former novel Cuba appears as an old woman, with visible signs of a former beauty counterpointed by signs of decay, disease and poverty, in the latter Cuba is represented as a mysterious young woman with an irresistible charm, a natural beauty that mesmerises and subdues yet seems to be an agent of self-destruction at the same time, especially in the context of patriarchal (understood here also as colonial) oppression.

As in the previous novel, the narrative voices in *The Agüero Sisters* alternate, making the story polyphonic and the perspective multiple, capturing the complexity of cultural and family experience. Thus the third person limited narrative of the novel is occasionally interrupted by the first person narratives of grandfather Ignacio and granddaughter Dulcita, the former covering the decades when the island was still under U.S. control, and the latter describing a poverty-stricken, hopeless and desolate island from which the lucky few manage to escape. The story follows the lives of Reina and Constancia, the two Agüero sisters whose destinies were marred by a terrible family secret which has kept them apart for most of their lives, showing how the two were finally reunited on U.S. soil, where a long process of self-discovery begins, culminating with the discovery of the truth about their mother's death. The novel begins and ends in the Zapata Swamp on 8 September 1948, with an account of the occurrence that was to mark the destinies of all three survivors of the Agüero family. The only difference between the Prologue and the Coda is one of

perspective: the former is a third person narrative of how Ignacio shot his wife in the swamp; the latter is a confession of murder which Ignacio pens in his diary, a necessary yet incomplete explanation for his daughters to understand their family history. What makes the novel remarkable is the allegorical form that García gives to her tale of Cuba's turn-of-the-century natural and economic history through a masterful weaving of historical detail, of Santería symbolism and magical realism of the finest quality which work together to tell a story of suffering, victimization, confusion, atonement and healing that, once again, begins in Cuba and follows the characters into their adoptive country, where their lives acquire their true meaning only after the past is unveiled and understood. Once again, it is through the fictional exploration of the destinies of three women empowered by self-knowledge and self-understanding that the novelist works her way closer towards finding answers to her own questions about the intricacies of cultural identity, and the answer suggested here is that, apart from the knowledge one gains from a scrutiny of one's own family history and the relations it forges among its members, the picture is never complete without the history of the homeland – complicated as it may be by foreign influences – with which individual destinies are inextricably linked.

Constancia and Reina Agüero are half sisters sharing a mother and a problematic history of family relations. Born three years apart and not sharing the same biological father, the two girls lead separate lives before their mother's death and share only a few years in a boarding school together, a period in which Constancia, the elder sister, does everything in her power to ignore Reina's existence, just as Blanca Agüero had done to her after Reina's birth. The exodus of the rich Cubans in the first two years of the Castro regime takes Constancia and her second husband, with their baby girl Isabel, to New York, a place that suits her quite well, though she does not share Lourdes' enthusiasm for cold weather and everything that is American. Like Lourdes, however, she becomes financially independent from her husband. Constancia displays a Puritan attitude to life and work: she is very correct in appearance and speech, she is very hard-working and precise, with "a low threshold for disorder" and an obsession with old age, accentuated by her working for a cosmetics company. Underneath this controlled appearance and demeanour lies the wounded soul of a girl rejected by her own mother, cast from her family's home at the age of three and then abandoned by her first husband Gonzalo, whom she loved with a passion that was out of the ordinary. Like Lourdes in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Constancia paid dear a price to be able to leave Cuba with her family: her son Silvestre, shipped hastily in 1961 to a boarding school in the U.S. so as not to be sent to Ukraine by Castro's government, becomes deaf and is convinced that his mother abandoned him as his birth father had before her.

Her life in New York is well organized and her homesickness kept repressed. When she and her husband Heberto retire in the Miami area, the past is suddenly revived for both. 51 and experiencing the first symptoms of menopause, she now has her senses awakened by the smells and flavours of native Cuba and the memory of her first husband returns with a passion that has diminished only very little in time. She will have to overcome her ambivalent feelings for Gonzalo and the memories of her suffering in childhood and as a young wife, feeling a foreigner among the other Cubans. Heberto will embrace the cause of Miami Cuban exiles planning a new attack on Cuba, losing his life heroically as he wished he had done thirty years before.

The opposite of her sister in appearance and character, Reina is an independent, strong, sensual mulata working as an electrician, a kind of “amazonic superwoman” (Alvarez-Borland 143). Often on the road doing the hardest jobs with the confidence of a professional in full control of her hands, not afraid of anything, but most of all not afraid of death, Reina has a powerful effect on all the men she meets, mesmerising them with her scent and her body rhythms. Pepín, her lover of over two decades, has never stopped adoring her and dreaming of her during the day, yet their love stays an illicit one for Reina is untamed as nature itself. When she was sixteen, she fell deeply in love with the revolutionary hero José Luís Fuerte and together they had a daughter, Dulcita. A rebellious teenager, Dulcita is forced to practice prostitution to get by in the early 1990s, and she manages to escape Cuba one day accompanying one of her Spanish clients to Madrid. The strained relation between mother and daughter is caused primarily by the mother’s early separation from her daughter, whom she sent to a boarding school as her own father had done with her. Their communication is only superficial, Reina being partially disconnected from the harsh realities of life with all the gifts she receives from Pepín. Her daughter’s desperate measures to insure a decent life for herself go almost unnoticed, and so does the failure of the Revolution. Until one day she is struck by lightning while working on a difficult electrical job, her skin being almost entirely burned out and her special scent gone forever. It is now that she opens her eyes to the reality of her nation, ironically afflicted by a new and mysterious disease that makes Cubans blind – not a very subtle allusion to some Cubans’ refusal to acknowledge the dire consequences of their country’s self-isolating foreign policies – and she realises that the new Reina – whose skin incorporates skin grafts of her daughter, her lover and several other people – can no longer remain in Cuba. Without fully understanding it, she is irresistibly drawn to her sister, the one person in her life that can help her make sense of the past and perhaps of the present.

In spite of their remarkable differences, the sisters are both victims of traumatic events which begin in childhood, continue in their early youth and mar their adult lives as well. Their lives, Isabel Alvarez-Borland writes, “are filled

with coincidences, strange happenings and omens," and they will only find guidance and help for healing their inner wounds through Santería rituals (143). The memory of Ignacio, as recorded in his confessions, serves as a connector of destinies and a tool for the sisters' interpretation of past lives and present consequences. Unhappiness in the family goes all the way back to the sisters' grandparents, who seem to have been brought together by fate, without ever being happy together. His father, a Spaniard in exile, yearned for his native land all his life, whereas his mother, a woman with an unhappy past, could never get over the death of her first child, a daughter she had had as an unmarried woman. Ignacio's birthday on October 4, 1904 is associated was to be associated not only with the parade and the president's visit to Pinar del Rio, but also with an evil omen: an owl stole his blood-dripping placenta and flew over the parade, making everybody fear the worst. And this is how personal and communal history interweave: Ignacio's birth is also the beginning of a controversial period in the history of Cuba as a supposedly independent nation, the five decades of unofficial U.S. control of the island's politics and economy affecting not only the natural balance on the island through massive deforestation and its immediate consequences, but also the lives of millions whom the Revolution engaged to free the island of its economic colonisers.

Much of Ignacio's text – interrupting the sisters' story of reunion and restoration of the past like flashes of memory – is dedicated to describing the transformations suffered by the island in the 50 years before Castro's army took control of the island and restored it to the Cubans. Even the story of his marriage to Blanca Mestre and their life together can be seen as related to that evolution of events – an allegory of Cuba's history. In a 2007 interview Cristina García confirmed that she wanted to write about the geopolitical transformations of her parents' homeland as the U.S. investors took hold of more and more land and civilised it, a traumatic experience for the island, which ended in political, economic and cultural exile, all consequences of The Spanish American war of 1898 and the Platt Amendment in 1904. "The more Cuba 'developed,' the more unnatural it became. The political and social alliance with the United States really meant the denaturalization of Cuba." (178, 1789) To make this reality of Cuba's history and integral part of her story, García writes Blanca Mestre's character as undistinguishable from Cuba, the island as a very beautiful, mysterious, an untamed being with a life that seems to run parallel to everybody else's and the embodiment of the natural:

There was something about her presence – quiet, luminescent, distracted – that stirred people, although it did not induce them to come close to her. Her gifts had nothing to do with her intelligence, which she displayed in impressive abundance, but were born of qualities much less tangible. Instinct.

Intuition. An uncanny sense for the aberrational. ... she seemed to have an odd, mimetic gift for inanimate substances. When she worked with sulfur, for example, her normally green eyes took on a yellowish tinge. If an experiment called for phosphorus, she vibrated with its unearthly glow. And ordinary lead made her appear heavy and malleable and gray. It was as if matter spoke to Blanca directly, revealed to her its secrets. (*The Agüero Sisters* 182-3)

Following Lydia Cabrera's demonstration of the strategies for the integration of Santería oricha gods and goddesses into the religious practices of Christians in Cuba and the multiple paths or hypostases of the Yemayá and Ochún/Oshún gods, Amparo Marmolejo-McWatt makes a compelling demonstration of the hypothesis that, in this novel, Blanca represents Cuba by being the embodiment of various paths of the goddess Ochún/Oshún, the oricha goddess of love and honey, but also an Afro-Cuban Venus-like figure and a symbol of Cubanidad, associated in Cuban culture with Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, the Patron Saint of the country. She writes: "Santería in this novel offers a supernatural means of resolving the tensions between characters, particularly between the two sisters, and thereby suggesting a source for the reconciliation and healing of the Cuban society as a whole." (Marmolejo-McWatt 90). By discovering their mother through their father's account of their life together – a discovery prompted by a santero, who tells Constancia to return to Cuba on a quest for her father's confession - the two sisters discover a Cuba that they carry within their DNA and their affective memory, and it is only after they understand how they are connected to their mother/island that they can break the chain of victimization across generations and take full control of their future.

Everything we find out about Blanca is significant for our reading of her character as a mirroring of the goddess Ochún/Oshún. She is "the repository of many behaviours" (Marmolejo-McWatt 93), beginning with her personification of sensuality and love, the "independent mulata that no one can resist" (90), a healer who uses herbs and natural substances (91), a bad mother (93) and the owner of fresh waters, the lover of the god of fire, Changó (96), a beautiful deity sometimes called the Holy-goddess-whore (99). Blanca appears to be everything that the goddess she represents is. She is a very beautiful, mysterious woman Ignacio and many other men find irresistible though not one of them, not even Ignacio can say he possesses her. She has a solid knowledge of the curative powers of plants and natural substances, and she lives in perfect harmony with her environment. She always makes love to her husband in fresh water, which is where she conceives her first daughter, Constancia. Not long after getting pregnant she claims more and more independence from Ignacio, threatening to leave him and work for other researchers if he will not pay her for her work. Her nature cannot be tamed, he soon realises, but there is nothing to be done. When Constancia is barely five

months old, Blanca disappears and returns three years later, pregnant and bearing the signs of serious physical violence. Without any explanation, she moves into the guest room until she gives birth to Reina, a mulata, whom she feels the need to protect from her sister's jealousy, sending Constancia to a boarding school, where she never visits her. Much of the story of this family is imbued with elements of the supernatural, which is unsurprising if we read Blanca's story as reflecting an Afro-Cuban spirituality, in which, according to Eugenio Matibag, "the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal interact and communicate normally" (qtd. in Marmolejo-McWatt 95).

Blanca and Cuba are connected not only through Afro-Cuban spirituality, but also through a series of historical and geographical elements that are revealed one by one in the story. Blanca as Cuba's unspoiled, wild nature is variously evoked through descriptions of Blanca with reference to or in connection with the rare birds that her husband is observing and scientifically analysing. Blanca is shot by her husband when he pretends to aim a bee hummingbird of exceptional beauty, and the painful pleasure he feels holding his wife's lifeless body is that of a collector who is finally in possession of an aspired trophy. As an ornithologist he kills in order to study and preserve. This is how Cristina García explains to Ylce Irrizary his shooting Blanca in a period of relative tranquillity in their relationship: "I think that in him we sense the need to kill something, to murder something, to be able to hold it in your hands and gaze at it at your own leisure in order to be able to understand it." (182) What is more, by writing about it all Ignacio writes his own fiction of Cuba; Blanca (from the English "blank") is "a blank narrative that he can write, that he must write" (183), just as he fills a blank space in the natural history of the island.

Of the two sisters, Reina is the one who most resembles her mother in her physical strength and her life force. Having left the island that would not let her sleep, she is cured of her chronic insomnia, begins a new life and becomes financially independent and, at the end of the novel, she is more sexually vibrant than ever, thrilled to realise that there is a new life growing inside her. Through this pregnancy, Reina will symbolically reconnect with her mother; the unborn child she feels in her womb is described as a hummingbird, recalling Blanca's association with that bird, which Reina feels "fluttering in its net of blood, fluttering its steady work toward eternity." (*The Agüero Sisters* 294) At peace with herself and her past now, Reina carries her Cubanidad as a prize into her new life in North America.

Less comforted by her discovery of the truth about her father, Constancia is, at the end of the novel, more at peace with her mother than she had ever been. Still suffering from the trauma of having been abandoned by her, Constancia at least knows that Blanca did not know how to be a good

mother to her daughters, though she did try to be a mother to Reina. A mulata of Haitian origin, Blanca's mother had died in a stampede at the pig farm, her mutilated body being deposited on the porch, right where little Blanca was playing. The only intact parts of the body were her mother's hands, and though Ignacio's story is not explicit, we understand that Blanca is carrying with her a little bone from her mother's wrist, a legacy that Constancia will retrieve from the Mestre ranch together with her father's diary (together with her father's diary, in a symbolic reconciliation with both) on her return to Cuba at the end of the novel.

Constancia has always had ambivalent feelings for her mother. After hating her for almost fifty years for having rejected her and (she thinks) for committing suicide, depriving her of the motherly love and female bonding that she has always missed, she wakes up one morning after a premonitory dream to discover that her face is now her mother's face and her body is as full of energy as her 34-year-old mother's body would have been. Caught in a strange relationship with Blanca's face her mother's face, now her own, Constancia slowly develops a curiosity for things that are even indirectly connected with her mother. She launches her own line of facial cream *Cuerpo de Cuba*, little blue bottles (reminding us of Pilar's fascination with Cuba's shades of blue) with Blanca's her mother's (now her own) face on the label. She wants to launch a full range of face and body products for every part of Cuban womanhood: *Cuello de Cuba*, *Senos de Cuba*, *Codos de Cuba*, *Muslos de Cuba* and so on, a glorification of female beauty and sensuality that recalls the influence of *Ochún/Oshún* on Cuban women, teaching them to celebrate their beauty and use the elements of nature to enhance it. She even has a catch line for each, exploiting the positive image Cuban women already have of themselves: as passionate, self-sacrificing, and deserving of every luxury. Constancia's way of coping with her painful past is both scientific, pragmatic and economically viable, using her mother's face and the natural ingredients of the tropics as incentives for purchase. Blanca's face on the bottle and in Constancia's reflection in the mirror becomes a metaphor for Cuba's presence in this Cuban-American's life, an aspect of her identity she tried to ignore, believing it disappeared at the same time her mother did.

Through all the associations with various aspects of Cuba that Blanca evokes, natural, spiritual, magical, mystical, Constancia will finally be able to reconnect with her country and culture though living outside Cuba, but, equally important, she will be able to reach out to a sister she could not understand or love until now, for the same reason that she considers her an important part of her life: her Cubanidad as revealed in the multiple ways in which she brings Blanca's legacy into Constancia's life.

Conclusion

Both *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters* interrogate the complex working of past wounds in present minds and souls through the agency of memory, imagination and nostalgia. A divided nation has no other choice but create a literature of the hyphen, a body of texts attempting to bring together the multiplicity of voices that stand on each side of the hyphen, for the answer, as García knows only too well, cannot be reduced to traditional binary pairs. A hyphenated existence as her own has guided Cristina García, as exemplified here, towards a more profound analysis of the various aspects that come into play in identity formation as a process that involves more than a culture and at least two types of history: personal (including the histories of one's family) and communal, involving various aspects of a country's political, social, economic and cultural systems.

The two novels share the author's concern with traumas of displacement, physical and emotional wounds that take too long in healing, a nostalgia for a former self and a homeland that are now beyond reach, reconstructed as they are by the characters' memories and fragile and unstable as only recollections and dreams can be. What makes their stories so compelling and so enchanting is the stream of magical realism of Kafka, Borges, García Marquez, Carpentier or Anaya, so "natural" in the literature of the Americas, pervading the stories of exotic lands – half remembered and half imagined – where intriguing or charismatic characters undergo profound transformations, have unexpected epiphanies and confront a past that always catches up with them. One of García's greatest merits, apart from the poetry and flowing rhythms of her prose, is the fact that she goes beyond the obvious and tries to define the hyphenated identity of Cuban-Americans on in her own terms, bridging souls, cultures, languages, experiences of the world, histories in a fiction that shares with its Latin American sources an interest in revealing the magical in the reality of her fictional worlds.

WORKS CITED

- Alvarez Borland, Isabel. *Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona*. Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1998. Print.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007. Print.
- Davis, Rocío G. "Back to the Future: Mothers, Languages, and Homes in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*." *World Literature Today*, vol. 74, issue 1, 2000, pp. 60-67, Print.

- Eakin, Paul John. *Fictions in Autobiography. Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985. Print.
- García, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992. Print.
- . Interview with Iraida H. López. “And There Is Only My Imagination Where Our History Should Be: An Interview with Cristina García.” *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*, edited by Ruth Behar. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995, pp. 102-114. Print.
- . *The Agüero Sisters*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997. Print.
- . Interview with Bridget Kevane and Juanita Herrera. “At Home on the Page. An Interview with Cristina García.” *Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers*, edited by Bridget Kevane and Juanita Herrera. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000, pp. 69-82. Print.
- . Interview with Jessica Murphy. “The Nature of Inheritance.” www.theatlantic.com, April 2003. Accessed 25 November 2015. Web.
- . Interview with Ylce Irrizary. “An Interview with Cristina García.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 48, issue 2, pp. 175-94, 2007. Print.
- Guerra, Lillian. “Elián González and the ‘Real Cuba’ of Miami: Visions of Identity, Exceptionality, and Divinity.” *Cuban Studies* 38, edited by Luis A. Pérez, Jr. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007, pp. 1-25. Print.
- Kevane, Bridget. *Latino Literature in America*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003. Print.
- Marmolejo-McWatt, Amparo. “Blanca Mester as Ochún in *The Agüero Sisters*.” *Afro Hispanic Review*, vol. 24, issue 2, 2005, pp. 89-101.
- Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. Revised edition. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012 (1994). Print.
- . “The Spell of the Hyphen.” *Cuban-American Literature and Art. Negotiating Identities*, edited by Isabel Alvarez Borland and Lynette M. F. Bosch. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009, pp. 15-30. Print.
- Rivero, Eliana. “Writing in Cuban, Living as Other: Cuban American Women Writers Getting It.” *Cuban-American Literature and Art. Negotiating Identities*. Edited by Isabel Alvarez Borland and Lynette M. F. Bosch. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009, pp. 109-125. Print.
- Rumbaut, R.G. “The Agony of Exile: A Study of the Migration and Adaptation of Indochinese Refugee Adults and Children.” *Refugee Children: Theory, Research, and Services*, edited by F.L. Ahearn, Jr. and J.L. Athey. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, pp. 53-91. Print.
- Schutte, Ofelia. “Negotiating Latina Identities.” *Hispanic/Latinos in the United States: Ethnicity, Race, and Rights*, edited by Jorge J. E. Gracia and Pablo De Greiff. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 61-75. Print.