

## POLITICAL FAMILIES: NARRATION, MEMORY AND HEALING IN CRISTINA GARCÍA'S *DREAMING IN CUBAN*

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**Abstract:** The paper interprets Cristina García's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* against the backdrop of contemporary multicultural identity prose by women. Against expectations about the possibility of healing and belonging in the feminine diasporic text, the novel problematizes the possibility and costs of healing, reconnecting, and reconciliation. The text represents how profoundly political and family history are interconnected on an individual level, and how the intersection of family, politics, and individual limits the scope of change for the protagonist.

**Keywords:** Narration, Memory, Female Identity Prose, Dislocation, Politics and the Novel.

### Introduction

Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) represents Cuban history entangled with family history. Three generations of women in the del Pino family tell their stories, which make up multiple life narratives before and after the Cuban Revolution. The text is usually categorized as multicultural identity prose by women, displaying many of its features. The plot is comprised of the histories of mother-daughter relationships, the topic of exile/home is in the center, and the rewriting of history plus the political nature of families become an issue. The *Bildung* or empowerment of the main female character remains in the focus and there is a healing potential of magical connections among women. In addition, an emphasis is put on languages (English/Spanish and personal idiosyncratic) as ways to make sense of and construct or reconstruct the world, which is usually enhanced by multiple perspectives in narration (Bollobás, 699). These themes and methods are familiar from Sandra Cisneros' *The House in Mango Street* (1984) or her "Women Hollering Creek" (1991), Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976), or Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), to name just a few well known examples that were contemporaries of García's first novel.

One key element of multicultural identity prose by women is the focus on the possibility of imaginative construction of identities at the intersection of cultures, countries, languages, genders, races and classes. There is a positive celebration of the potential of imaginary constructions. This potential may take many forms: in Toni Morrison, there is a focus on healing and storytelling (Kovács, 2019), a repeated concern with constructing a home (Mohácsi, 2019). Cisneros constructs textual and extratextual homes (Cristian, 2015) and in her texts, female laughter can cut across boundaries (Tóth, 2019). More specifically, García's *Dreaming in Cuban* is usually read as a female

bildungsroman (Davis, 2000: 63) in which women of color can pursue new “lives as artists after moving to the US” (Roszak, 2017: 276), where personal traumas can be processed and healed (Pettersson, 2013: 57). My reading has affinities with Kim Sasser's interpretation of the novel in which the central concern is belonging, and who argues that this novel “thwarts our expectations about how this Latina novel will engage belonging” (2014: 145).

García's account of family relations that are severed by historical events presents a problem in the identity prose context. The magic healing potential of language and art in identity prose novels does not seem to function in this particular story well enough to provide the chance of a new beginning. My essay focuses on how the novel represents attempts of healing family strife in the context of Cuban history. My aim is to ponder upon the nature of “healing” available in the highly politicized Cuban context of the Revolution. I argue that the notion of healing is problematized in the novel because of the political aspect of history that permeates personal relationships to the extent that transformation and reconciliation becomes impossible. In the Cuban context available subject positions remain oppositional, belonging will be tied to interpersonal relationships (Sasser, 2014: 146).

The paper investigates the functioning of political families in the novel in three sections. First it displays the interconnections of history, politics and family, second, it looks into the creative potentials of characters that offer chances of remembering and healing, then thirdly, it shows how changes for the better and healing are actually thwarted in the text.

## 1. Cuban history creates political families

García's *Dreaming in Cuban* relates the story of three generations of women whose extended family falls apart to the rhythm of the changes in Cuban domestic and foreign policy. You witness the coexistence of family and politics on three different time planes: first, a prosperous Cuba before Castro under US economic influence, second, the politically conflicted Cuba of the 1950s with Castro's coming into power in 1959 and afterwards; and finally Communist Cuba at the end of the seventies, beginning of the eighties. The time before Castro is represented through the memories of Celia, the grandmother. The Revolution and *coup* is seen through the eyes of Celia and her daughters, Lourdes and Felicia. Lourdes chooses to emigrate to America, while Celia and Felicia decide to stay in Cuba, Celia becoming an ardent supporter of El Líder, Felicia not caring about him. The ‘present’ of the storytelling belongs primarily to Pilar, Lourdes's daughter who has grown up in the US and is looking for a Cuban American identity in NYC and back in Cuba. Her account of her relation to her grandmother and cousins is interwoven by accounts of her mother and other relatives.

Cuban history determines the lives of the characters by providing basic turning points in their life stories. Back in 1934 Grandma Celia had a premarital affair with a married

Spanish lawyer who left her in 1934 and returned to Spain as Fulgencia Batista's troops threw over the Provisional Government. After several months of despair Celia eventually survived the shock and got married in 1935 to a Cuban middle class man who worked for an American firm selling electric household appliances in Cuba. Jorge del Pino respected and revered his American boss and secured an upper middle class existence for his family in the 1940s, the years of American commercial influence and prosperity in Cuba under Batista's government and then finally under his dictatorship in the early 1950s. However, for Celia, material prosperity meant no refuge from sorrow, and she suffered from post-natal depression after the birth of her first child, Lourdes.

Castro's 1952 revolution, imprisonment, and eventual seizure of power from Batista in 1959 meant a basic change in the life of the family. Jorge del Pino saw ruin in Castro's regime, while his wife Celia admired Castro's lonely determined fighter image. When Celia's husband died, she replaced her husband's image on her bedside table with that of Castro and decided to live for the revolution. She watches the coast from the swing chair of her small house by the sea once a week with her binoculars to prevent another Bay of Pigs landing. She volunteers to cut sugarcane for two weeks. She also volunteers to be a judge for the People's court once a month and administers reforming sentences, like sending a womanizer to work in the local nursery for a year or ordering an upstart un-revolutionary poet to work with a theater company.

In contrast, Lourdes, Celia's eldest daughter chooses emigration as the proper reaction to the Revolution. She is married to the eldest son of one of the wealthiest families of the American times in Cuba, whose wealth is being taken over by the state piece by piece. Lourdes lives on the family's country farm with her husband and daughter in 1961, where soldiers harass her husband, she loses her unborn child in the hassle, and one soldier finally rapes her. After this she and her husband leave Cuba to join the husband's ex-wealthy family in Miami mourning their losses. Soon they move to NYC to start their independent mourning for the past: Lourdes for her lost son, her husband for the animals and the machinery on the farm. Yet Lourdes attempts an escape from passive resistance when she buys a bakery where she produces apple pies, pumpkin pies, brews American coffee, and the place eventually becomes a meeting place for immigrant Cubans.

In contrast to her mother and sister, Castro's Revolution leaves Felicia, Celia's younger daughter unimpressed. She lives in constant battle with and for her husbands, lapsing into nervous breakdowns. No guerilla practice or demotion at work can make her a good comrade. She relies more and more on Santeria practices to cleanse herself. Yet she dies in the aftermath of becoming a priestess, in an attempt to forget the world once for all.

Lourdes' daughter, Pilar, is three at the time the family leaves Cuba and is apolitical. She feels she remembers her grandmother and imagines talking to her in the evenings although she cannot return to Cuba for 17 years. Pilar criticizes her mother's every move and because of her emotional bond with her imagined grandmother, Celia, she is

curiously drawn to Cuba. It is her accidental discovery of Santería practices that eventually makes her return to Cuba on a root trip. Pilar persuades her mother, Lourdes to visit Cuba after a seventeen-year absence in April 1980. This is a time of opening up in Cuba, when the government is desperate for foreign currency and allows emigrants to return and spend money on the island. Pilar reconnects with her grandmother, paints watercolors of her, listens to stories of his cousin, Ivanito about her aunt, Felicia, and visits Felicia's adopted sister, Herminia, the black Santería priestess of the village. After six days, Lourdes takes Ivanito to the Peruvian embassy, where 12.000 people gather in the hope of a free escape from the country. In 1980, the Peruvian ambassador's offer to accommodate Cubans ended in the 125.000 Cubans were allowed to leave the country.

The intersection of politics and family severs family ties. Politics alienates family members from each other. Celia has become Castro's devout comrade, while Lourdes adores American consumerism without criticism. Pilar and Felicia feel apolitical, therefore stand apart in a family saturated and divided by political convictions. Yet in this family, you always have to take a stand, and families are shown as always basically political.

## 2. Imagination and healing through memory and narration

This is a feminine novel in the sense that it is related by women about women (for women). Family relations among women are blown up to gain universal dimensions, as variations of the mother-child relationship dominate the story. Pilar's root trip and story of self-development gradually takes center stage of the narrative but there is no final outcome to her transformation. The nonlinear multiple perspective storytelling, the witty sarcasm, the poetic interludes result in the lack of a clear ending to Pilar's story.

Women acting as daughters and mothers create and recreate networks of emotional relations that position their respective relational identities (Davis, 2000: 64). Four-year-old Celia had been abandoned by her mother, and a great aunt on her father's side brought her up. This behavioral pattern is repeated by Celia when she produces symptoms of depression, leaves her firstborn, Lourdes, to the care of others, and hides herself in a sanatorium saying "I will not remember her name" (43). In contrast, she would like to be a good mother of her second daughter, Felicia, and the attempt degenerates into pampering the child. As an adult, Felicia loses her ability for independence and self-reflection. The motifs are repeated again in the next generation, as the concept of motherly love does not exist in Lourdes's frame of reference, so her daughter, Pilar, cannot get any of it, either. Perhaps Lourdes would have felt different about her second child, but she lost the fetus and then also her fertility, in the course of the revolution. Felicia neglects her twin daughters but adores her son, Ivanito, who will suffer from weak nerves as a result. All the members of the family become victims of inherited not good enough mother-child relations.

As a result of the problematic mother-daughter bonds, being abandoned becomes a modus of life in these stories. In this life-mode, Celia's medicine will be depression and politics, Felicia's potion will be losing her memory, while Lourdes will recreate herself according to her own America-ideal she can share with no one, neither husband, daughter, or lover. Her "work is artistically complex and empowering in its own way" Suzanne Roszak argues (287), as it "blurs the boundary between domestic labor and artistic production" (ibid.). Pilar escapes her mother's dominating 218-pound presence by painting abstract pictures, listening to the music of 80s NYC punk subculture, playing the bass, and learning Santería rites.

So ironically, maternal abandonment is accompanied by the upsurge of creative energies in the person. Celia reaches the level of a fictive reality through playing the piano and reading Lorca, Felicia's creativity is played out in the beauty parlor and in Santería ceremonies, Lourdes bakes sophisticated colorful cakes arranged artfully, while Pilar paints, plays music and does magic.

The story functions as Pilar's bildungsroman. Despite recurrent motifs of female behavior, despite being abandoned by family, and despite abandonment as a life-mode, Pilar manages to find her own sense of being at home by relying on her artistic aspirations and magical sensibilities. She makes herself feel at home in her dorm room, in the pubs of the Village, at pop concerts. This ability to feel at home culminates in her trip to Cuba.

Where does the healing creativity come from? Beside everyday events, all female characters experience magic happenings, too, and these magic experiences provide the energy for the characters' repeated attempts at self-fashioning. In the novel specific historical events blend with events created by the play of the imagination. A factual presentation of events is used for depicting everyday life in Castro's Cuba, demonstrations, the missile crisis, Cuban refugees at the Peruvian Embassy in Havana, the work of local courts of justice. Punk subculture flourishing at the end of the 1970s in NYC is also well documented.

Yet factual events are paired with magic elements when history is placed side by side with the story of dreams, visions, and intuitions. As for Lourdes: she meets her dead father in NYC repeatedly, and is asked to pass on an important message of forgiveness to Celia. Celia herself can sense death: that of her husband and also Felicia's suicide attempt. Pilar discovers her prophetic faculty when getting acquainted with voodoo procedures and ceremonies, and this ability will help her find her place in New York. After years of drifting, ten-year-old boys attack her in the Park, she gets terrified but remains unharmed. Then a sense of security engulfs her:

I press my back against the base of the elm and close my eyes. I can feel the pulsing of its great taproot, the howling cello in its trunk. I know the sun sears its branches to hot wires. I don't know how long I sit against the elm, but when I open my eyes,

the boys are gone. I button my blouse, gather up my herbs and my album, and run back to the university (202).

After this incident and having had her series of cleansing herbal baths, Pilar already knows she has to go to Cuba. This visit will link her to the world of dreams, to her grandmother.

The title of novel, *Dreaming in Cuban* can be assigned a meaning from the text here. The role languages play had been thematized beforehand already: English is the language of business and facts, while Spanish is called the language of passion: poetry, intimacy, also of curses. Pilar's relation to Spanish changes considerably. First of all, she envies her mother's eloquent Spanish cussing, but she has nothing to do with it. Her letter to her grandma are written in an old style dead Spanish. Then, with her Peruvian boyfriend, Spanish becomes the language of intimacy. Later she realizes that she can initiate private conversations with foreigners (other immigrants of Spanish origin) in Spanish. Eventually she dreams in Spanish. In the title, Cuban may refer to her personalized version of Spanish that can represent the sea and its shades of blue, the exotic vegetation and noises of the island. So instead of being a tool of self-expression, language becomes a tool for self-creation in the novel, and the language Pilar can use for the purpose of self-development is called Cuban. For Pilar, 'Cuban' language stands for the ability to understand, to conceptualize the magic element of her life. This becomes possible for her only in Cuba, while she takes part in Cuban traditions, experiences a kind of reintegration with her family.

The novel problematizes not only the roles of languages but also the narratability of stories. As the magic perspective of the Cuban language was the result of Pilar's identification with magic, the story also contains narrative magic: the reader only needs to identify with this and can create the fictional world of the magic perspective. The text is a mosaic of shorter and longer stories told from the viewpoints of various family members. The first person singular is present in Celia's letters and in Ivanito's paragraphs. The stories of others are presented in the third person. The timeline is jumbled up, but from Pilar's diary entries you can trace a linearity of events.

### **3. Death, exile, betrayal**

At the end of the novel, Celia's suicide as she drowns in the sea also metaphorically represents Pilar's rebirth. Through this, one can argue, the novel presents an escape route from the cosmic abandonment of the Cuban immigrant by way of a hybrid cultural identity, which can integrate the magic element created in the language of Cuban imagination and tradition.

Yet, despite all the magic and cleansing and dreaming, by the end of the story the family has not reunited but has been shattered by a series of personal betrayals. Pilar feels her home is not in Cuba but in New York but hesitates to tell her grandma. Lourdes cannot make herself transmit his father's message of forgiveness to her mother. Instead,

she makes Ivanito leave Cuba through the Peruvian embassy without telling anyone. In response, Celia drowns herself in the ocean. She cannot handle this triple betrayal: the simultaneous lack of contacts with and loss of daughter, granddaughter and grandson. So despite all the magic and cleansing in connection with Pilar, it is not healing but betrayal and death that ends the narrative. Eventually, Lourdes' and Pilar's attempt to reconnect backfires and cannot transform basic politically motivated rifts within the family.

## Conclusion

The emergence of the artist protagonist, Pilar, in *Dreaming in Cuban* happens against a backdrop of identity narratives by women. Another backdrop, however, is Cuban politics that complicates the familiar story of female empowerment. The novel's political families limit both the healing potential of the imagination and empowerment of women in the Cuban context. García's multicultural identity prose problematizes the possibility of healing through storytelling and connecting to others, the theme many identity novels by women rely on. Basic emotional rifts among characters are accentuated by oppositional political allegiances, the combination of which prevents any hopeful unfolding of conflicts in the novel.

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