



**Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro  
Centro de Educação e Humanidades  
Instituto de Letras**

**Marina Job Vasques de Freitas Espirito Santo**

**Being Cuban and American – Differently: Assimilation and Tradition in the  
Novels of Cristina García**

**Rio de Janeiro  
2007**

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Dissertação apresentada como requisito parcial  
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Orientadora: Prof<sup>a</sup> Dr<sup>a</sup> Leila Assumpção Harris

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2007

To all the women  
who struggle every day  
to cope with the  
fragments of their ever-  
shifting identities.

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## SINOPSE

Análise dos romances *Dreaming in Cuban* e *The Agüero Sisters*, da escritora cubano-americana Crsitina García, com enfoque em personagens femininos vivendo em exílio e suas respostas à experiência de “viver-em-deslocamento”. Exploração das transformações em suas identidades diaspóricas através de processos de assimilação, Atitudes em relação à herança cultural e hibridismo. Uso de *Santería* e realismo mágico para destacar conexões entre estes personagens e seu lugar de origem.

## SYNOPSIS

Analysis of Cuban-American Cristina Garcia's novels *Dreaming in Cuban* e *The Agüero Sisters*, with focus on female characters living in exile and their responses to the experience of "dwelling-in-displacement". Exploration of transformations in their diasporic identities through assimilation processes, attitudes towards cultural legacy and hybridity. Use of *Santería* and magical realism to underscore connections between these characters and their prior homes.



## RESUMO

O objetivo desta dissertação é analisar os romances *Dreaming in Cuban* e *The Agüero Sisters*, da escritora cubano-americana contemporânea Cristina García, focalizando nos personagens femininos vivendo no exílio. Pretendo examinar as variadas reações à experiência de viver-em-deslocamento exibidas por estes personagens e explorar as transformações em suas identidades diaspóricas, incluindo processos de assimilação, atitudes em relação à herança cultural e a negociação permanente entre culturas que leva ao hibridismo. Também pretendo mostrar que a *Santería* e o realismo mágico são utilizados por Cristina García para destacar as conexões entre os personagens e seu lugar de origem.

Palavras-chave: Diáspora, construção identitária, hibridismo, realismo mágico, *Santería*

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze the novels *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters*, by contemporary Cuban-American writer Cristina García, focusing on the female characters living in exile. I intend to examine the varied responses to the experience of dwelling-in-displacement exhibited by these characters and to explore the transformations in their diasporic identities, including processes of assimilation, attitudes towards cultural legacy, and the ongoing negotiation between cultures that leads to hybridity. I also intend to show that *Santería* and magical realism are the elements used by Cristina García to underscore the connections between the characters and their prior home.

Key-words: Diaspora, identity construction, hybridity, magical realism, *Santería*.

Cubano Americano: dónde soy?

son que se fue de Cuba

corazón que dejé enterrado

rinconcito de mi tierra

pedacito de cielo: dónde soy?...

cuba: no

america: no

Gustavo Pérez-Firmat,

“Filosofías del no”

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## INTRODUCTION

*Cuba is a peculiar exile... We can reach it by a thirty-minute charter flight from Miami, yet never reach it at all.*

Cristina García

In November 1999, a five-year-old Cuban boy named Elián González was found in the waters off Florida coast, supporting himself within the ring of a truck inner tube. He was part of a group of fifteen *balseiros* who were trying to reach the United States in a tiny boat with an outboard motor. Twelve passengers – his mother included – drowned, but the little boy, along with two others, survived the heavy seas. His father, who had stayed in Cuba, wanted him returned to his family in Cárdenas. His relatives living in the U.S. won the support of the Cuban-American community and strove to give him a permanent home in Miami. The Federal Government in Washington sided with the father and was soon in bitter conflict with the Cuban community in Florida. Elián became the center of a political battle that lasted over six months, until the boy was reunited with his father in Cuba. It is noteworthy that 63 percent of Miamians – together with people all over the U.S. – wanted Elián to be sent home. Americans, who had once welcomed Cuban exiles with sympathy and displayed strong disapproval of Castro’s communist regime, had shifted into a more tolerant position towards the dictator through the last twenty years. A large segment of the Cuban community living in exile, however, continues to long for the day when they will be able to go back to a Castro-free country, whereas the Cubans who remained on the island seem to be adapted to the regime, only deciding to leave – when they do so – in search of better economic conditions (GOTT, 2005, 310-314).

Elián’s story clearly underscores the deep division that has never ceased to exist between Cubans living on the island and exiles living in the U.S. Yet long before the massive migration of Cubans to the U.S. that occurred after Fidel Castro took power in 1959, Cuban society had been marked by sharp divisions along social and racial lines ever since colonial times. Throughout the decades which preceded the Cuban revolution, rich people became richer whereas poor people became poorer, making the gap between the two classes deeper and deeper. With the onset of the revolution, the Cuban elites were the first to go to the U.S. They were followed by middle class Cubans, who left their country on the “Freedom Flights”. The lower class Cubans who

did not want to remain in Cuba had their chance to leave on the boats which left from the port of Mariel. Their arrival marked a disruption in the Cuban community living in exile. This community had been welcomed both by the American government and people because of their social status and because of ideological affinities. The *marielitos*, however, did not enjoy the same welcome either from Americans or from Cubans. The same division that had existed at home was perpetuated in the host country.

Diasporic populations experience a feeling of identity loss due to the contact with a different culture. In *The Question of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall states that “the old identities which stabilized the world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject”. This process is part of a wider one in which the central structures and processes of modern societies are being dislocated, making it impossible for individuals to have “stable anchorage in the social world.” This shift from a personal, centered identity, into a fragmented, de-centered one extends to cultural identity as well, the identity which is related to ethnicity, race, language, religion and nationality (HALL, 1992: 274). Hall emphasizes that national identity is no longer considered something we are born with, but something which is “formed and transformed within in relation to *representation*.” He adds that a nation is “*a system of cultural representation*,” that is, the narratives that account for a certain nation – including its literature (HALL, 1992: 291-3). When the subject, already de-centered, also suffers displacement through diasporic movements, it exhibits further fragmentation, as it is forced to live and negotiate between two cultures, making meaning out of the combination of two different sets of traditions. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur point out that “more flexible or diasporic notions of citizenship are needed to probe the multiple belongings created in diaspora” (BRAZIEL & MANNUR, 2003: 6). The theme is dear to Cristina García, the author of the novels I chose to analyze in my dissertation. Exploring “how family myth evolves and how history is made”, García focuses on the “many different versions of the truth and the “many conflicting realities that had to be reconciled” (GARCÍA, 2003: 305).

Cristina García was born on July 4, 1958 in Havana, Cuba, but moved to New York City with her parents in 1961, after Fidel Castro took power. She grew up in Queens, Brooklin Heights, and Manhattan, attending catholic schools. In 1979, she received a bachelor’s degree in Political Science at Barnard College, where she took an English course which raised her passion for literature. She graduated from John

Hopkins University School of Advanced Studies in 1981 with a Master's degree in International Relations. During her graduate studies, she spent a year in Italy and planned to join the Foreign Service after graduation. Instead, she returned to Europe for her first job, a marketing position with Procter and Gamble in West Germany, which she held for three months. Upon her return to the United States, she turned to a career in journalism, working for different newspapers. In 1983, she accepted a job with *Time Magazine* in New York, for which she subsequently worked in San Francisco, Miami, and Los Angeles. In 1990, she left *Time* to write fiction full-time.

In 1992, Garcia gave birth to her daughter, Pilar. She speaks Spanish to her daughter, believing in the importance of tradition. Although she did not grow up as part of a Latino/a or Cuban community, she says she has always thought of herself as Cuban, but in an interview to Scott Shibuya Brown, she reveals her full fragmentation and hybridity, by declaring she had "the privilege of experiencing two cultures at very close range, participating in both and belonging to neither entirely". Garcia grew up speaking Spanish at home and listening to family stories about Cuba, which gave her a strong sense of pride in her country of origin. She says that she sometimes has an uncomfortable relationship with Cubans, both on the island and in Miami because she has generally not engaged in anti-Castro activism. She believes strongly that "*there is no one Cuban exile*" (GARCÍA, 2003, 1), a theme which she seeks to emphasize in each of her novels as well as in her own life.

Like many of her characters, García returns to Cuba after more than two decades in the U.S. She stresses the importance of this return visit:

Going back to Cuba was instrumental in the resurgence of my own Cuban identity, which really didn't take hold until I began writing fiction. There's something in the excavation process that one goes through in creating a book that allowed me to reach areas that I didn't even know existed within myself. The Cuban aspect of my identity has, to my surprise, become my wellspring. It is now an indelible, strong, and very visceral part of my identity (GARCÍA, 2003: 306).

Garcia published *Dreaming in Cuban*, which was nominated for the National Book Award, in 1992, followed by *The Agüero Sisters* in 1997 and *Monkey Hunting* in 2003. She has been a Guggenheim Fellow, and a Hodder Fellow at Princeton University, and is the recipient of the Whiting Writers Award.

García is a representative of the heirs of a change which began with the Chicano movement, back in the 1960s and 1970s. In *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space*

of *Postmodern Ethnicity*, Ellen McCracken analyzes the struggle for civil rights that encompassed blacks, students and antiwar groups. She states that Chicanos emerged from that space seeking “the political rights and cultural recognition that eluded them under the traditional model of the U.S. “melting pot””. Puerto Ricans, a younger generation of Cuban Americans and other Latinos also emerged as minorities who “refused the symbolic meltdown with other immigrants in the metaphorical pot” (McCRACKEN: 1999, 3). An important part of this resistance was represented by narratives which wished to recover oral traditions, popular religious rituals, *fiestas*, and *canciones*. There were also alternative newspapers, magazines and journals, position papers and documents. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Americans witnessed the publishing of hundreds of short stories, novels, narrative poems and plays written by young Latinos, but only a few of them were women. It was not until the 1980s that the flowering of Latina women’s narrative took place. Chicana writers produced political essays and poems, whereas Cuban American women wrote about exile. All of them, however, addressed the issues of gender and sexuality, identity and subjectivity.

My aim in this dissertation is to examine the varied responses to the experience of dwelling-in-displacement exhibited by García’s female characters and to explore the transformations in their diasporic identities, including assimilation processes, attitudes towards cultural legacy, and hybridity. *Santería* and magical realism are the elements used by García to underscore the connections between the characters and their prior home.

In Chapter I, Cuban history is briefly reviewed, from its discovery to present days. I discuss the Spanish invasion and the slave trade, showing how the *mestisaje* which derived from the mixing of these two races contributed to create a socio-economic and racial division which persisted until the revolution. I also point out that immigration to the United States started long before the Cuban revolution led by Fidel Castro in 1959, when political exiles flooded the American territory. The unique preferential treatment given to Cuban émigrés by the American government was an attempt to use the Golden Exiles as anti-communist propaganda. Americans, who at first were very friendly towards those “victims of an evil communist leader”, become less and less sympathetic as the successive immigrant waves exhibited a lower and lower economic and social profile, and the consequent replication of the division that existed in pre-revolutionary Cuba.



Cristina García intertwines some historical facts in the narrative of *Dreaming in Cuban*, in a successful attempt to give historical validity to her narrative. In the last letter Celia writes to her lover Gustavo, she states that “the revolution is eleven days old. My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today. It is also my birthday. I am fifty years old” (245). The letter is dated January 11, 1959. In four sentences, Celia manages to temporally situate herself, her granddaughter and the revolution. In another passage, Lourdes blames Kennedy for the failed invasion of Bay of Pigs in 1961. She longs for “another Joe McCarthy to set things straight. *He* would never have abandoned them at the Bay of Pigs” (171). When Lourdes returns to Cuba, she witnesses the invasion of the Peruvian embassy in 1980. The incident inspires her to persuade her nephew Ivanito to seek political asylum at the embassy, go to Peru and meet her later in the United States (239).

In Chapter II, my focus is on subject fragmentation. I discuss the historical developments which determined the evolution of the concept of identity, from unified and anchored in Illuminism era to fragmented and sometimes temporary in postmodernity. I point out that subject fragmentation is more intense when subjects live in exile, as they are unable to keep their original culture intact while assimilating values of the host country, becoming transcultural subjects. The loss of identity experienced by diasporic individuals is surprisingly expressed by the most assimilated of García’s characters: on her way home from her store, Lourdes “ponders the transmigrations from the southern latitudes, the millions moving north. What happens to their language? The warm burial grounds they leave behind? What of their passions lying stiff and untranslated in their breasts?” (73). I also describe the postmodern narrative strategies García uses to emphasize identity fragmentation, analyzing the fractured time span and geographic locations in both novels, and showing how these fragmented structures are built as a puzzle which will only make complete sense in the end of the novels. *Dreaming in Cuban* covers a time frame that goes from Celia’s first letter, in 1935, to Lourdes’s return to Cuba after her sister Felicia’s death, in 1980. Geographically, the action takes place in four different locations: Santa Teresa del Mar, Havana, Miami and New York. The juxtaposition of present and past and the focalization of the same event through the eyes of different characters contribute to convey a fragmented perception of time, space, and action. *The Agüero Sisters* covers an even broader time frame; Ignacio Agüero’s autobiography begins in 1904, and Constancia’s return to Cuba is placed in 1991. Again, the same juxtaposition of past and present is used, but in this novel the

action takes place in a larger number of locations: New York, Key Biscayne, Miami, Madrid, and Cuba. Again, focalization plays the role of giving the reader multiple points of view of the same events. These narrative strategies also aim at underscoring fragmented identities. It is not by chance that Lourdes, Pilar, and Constancia go back to their home country in the end of the novels. They all seek to “fill in the blanks” of their history, acknowledge their “Cubanness”, come to terms with their past and reconcile with their present. They all show connections to Cuba that not even the many years of exile had been able to erase. One of these connections is memory, not memory as reconstitution, but rather as a construct. In the words of Juan Flores,

Remembering thus always involves selecting and shaping, constituting out of what was something that never was yet now assuredly is, the imaginary of the present, and in the memory of the future (FLORES, 1995: 1).

Memory, however, is not the only connection García’s characters keep with Cuba. In Chapter III, I discuss the roles of magical realism and *Santería* as means to this link. Karen Christian, in *Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction*, explains that both elements are an essential part of postmodern Latino/a fiction, as the “magic” associated with miracles can be attributed to religious practices of *Santería* (CHRISTIAN, 1997: 124). In García’s novels, however, this is not the case. All passages of magical realism aim at underscoring the powerful connection the characters have with Cuba, whereas *Santería* practices appear as a means to materialize these connections by taking the characters back to the island so they can go through some sort of revelation about themselves or about their past. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar maintains telepathic communications with her *abuela* Celia, and this is how she keeps up with her “Cubanness”. Lourdes maintains conversations with her father’s ghost in which he makes revelations about her past. Advice from a *santero* helps Pilar decide to go back to Cuba with her mother, where Lourdes acknowledges her links with the island only to deny them once again. While she wholeheartedly embraces American culture, Pilar fully accepts her condition as a hybrid subject, belonging to both cultures at once. In *The Agüero Sisters*, magical realism transfigures Constancia’s face into her mother’s, revealing the depth of the unresolved issues she has to figure out, concerning her mother and her sister Reina. A *santero* is the agent who urges her to return, pointing out that it is the only way to reconcile with her past and recover her face. In both novels, magical realism reveals the need for a return, but it is *Santería* that promotes this return.

In order to carry out my argumentation concerning subject fragmentation, identity search, diaspora, hybridity, magical realism and *Santería* in the works of Cristina García, I have used concepts and ideas expressed by well-known theorists and critics such as Stuart Hall, James Clifford, Sonia Torres, Ellen McCracken, Homi Bhabha, Roland Walter and Migene González-Wippler, among others of equal importance.

It is my hope that the analysis developed in this dissertation will show that Cristina García is a refined writer who invites us to reflect on the challenges diasporic subjects have to face in order to accept their condition as fragmented, hybrid individuals.

## CHAPTER I

### CUBA: THE HISTORY OF A DIVIDED NATION

*Exile  
is living where no house  
holds the memories  
of our childhood  
and where we cannot visit  
our grandmother's grave*  
Lourdes Casal

After Fidel Castro took power in Cuba in 1959, approximately three quarters of a million Cubans migrated to the USA, leaving behind fortunes, lands, relatives and friends. Long before that, though, since the early nineteenth century, Cubans had been going to the United States in search of political stability and economic opportunity. From colonial times until the revolution of '59, Cuba was a nation split along social and racial lines. Today, the fractures, once perceptible inside the island, have become a geographical reality too, with its population divided between its boundaries and the United States. This chapter will review the history of the island and the formation of its people. Cuba's long-standing relationship with the United States and the way in which both Cubans and Americans have influenced each other's culture will also be discussed. James and Judith Olson devote the first three chapters of their *Cuban Americans: From Trauma to Triumph* to depict the early stages of Spanish colonization, the economic development of the island, the slow movement of migrations towards the USA throughout the nineteenth century and the struggles that ended up with Cuba's independence. From the very beginning of the narrative, it is clear that the geographic closeness to the continent, to what would become the North American continent, would play a decisive role in the destiny of both lands.

When Columbus reached the island of Cuba, on October 14, 1492, he believed it to be the Asian paradise he had been hoping to find ever since he had left Spain. In his log, he wrote that he had "never beheld so fair a thing; trees all along the river, beautiful and green and different from ours, with flowers and fruits each according to their kind, and little birds which sing very sweetly." The island was approximately 800 miles long and ranged in width from 160 miles in the east to 25 miles near Havana. It was a land of swamps, of peat bogs, of mangrove trees, of heavy jungles, of savannas, palm trees and pines. The rainy season was six months long, making the land perfect for

agriculture. Columbus had no idea that island was destined to become the strategic heart, and “last major colonial entity of the Spanish empire.” The Indians who inhabited the island were a total of 100,000, divided in three major groups: the Guanahatabey, Ciboney, and Taíno (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 2).

In 1508, Sebastián de Ocampo became the first Spaniard to circumnavigate Cuba and establish it was an island, and not an extension of the mainland. Diego Velázquez organized the first expedition to Cuba, in which he defeated the Indian tribes and established settlements in Baracoa, Bayamo, Havana, Puerto Principe, Trinidad and Santiago de Cuba. In this expedition was a soldier, Bartolomé de las Casas, who made a fortune in the new land but was horrified by the Spaniards’ treatment of the Indians. He went back to Spain where he became a priest and devoted himself to the defense of the Indians. His efforts were not enough to save them, though. They had been devastated by the contact with the civilized men (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 3-4). This does not mean that there is no indigenous blood in the ethnic constitution of the Cuban people. In *Cuba: a New History*, Richard Gott states that although the indigenous element has usually been ignored or denied by Cuban historians, its contribution is unquestionable, for “many of the island’s original peoples survived, in official reserves or in mountains settlements, at least until the nineteenth century, and they also cohabited with more recent arrivals, particularly with the blacks” (GOTT, 2005: 7). If we consider these two sources, we can say that by 1550 the *mestisage* in Cuba consisted in the mingling of indigenous and Spanish blood.

With the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1521 and Peru in 1532, Cuba became the economic and political base for the lucrative mainland enterprises, and this fact transformed its economy. Havana became the main port for treasure fleets returning to Europe, and large farms produced manioc, tobacco, corn, cotton and potatoes. In 1523, the sugar industry was transplanted to Cuba. To replace the Indian workers, Cubans began to import African slaves. At that point, the political system reflected the values of the Spanish crown and The Roman Catholic church. The Cuban government was extremely authoritarian, and the church knew a period of increasing wealth and power, tied to the interests of the elite that dominated Cuban life. The main positions in the government belonged to the *Peninsulares*, individuals born in Spain who had been appointed to work in Cuba but hoped to obtain enough influence to be taken back to Spain. Right below the *peninsulares* were the *criollos*, individuals of Spanish descent born in Cuba, who were prosperous farmers or merchants but who were looked down on

by the *peninsulares* and therefore unable to secure influential posts in the clergy, military, and colonial bureaucracy. Only 10% of the population of Cuba was female then. Spaniards, because they had dealt with the moors for 700 years, did not share the negative reaction of other Europeans to the indigenous people of Africa; as a result, they took African women as their wives or mistresses, giving birth to a population of Spaniard-African mixed blood (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 4 – 6).

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, another influential social group appeared: the free blacks. Because the demand for cheap labor was not so pressing in Cuba, slaves received the status of *coartación* – the right to negotiate their freedom. Those free blacks constituted a large portion of the Cuban working class. Free black farmers coexisted with working-class whites and mixed-race people, giving Cuban society and culture an unusual sociological mixture at that time (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 7).

By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Cuba had its own social structure, with the *peninsular* elite on top, followed by the *criollo* elite. There was a middle-class of small landowners and artisans, most of them of Spanish ancestry but some free blacks and people of mixed ancestry. Beneath them was a lower class of landless peasants, wage laborers and migratory workers consisting of a small number of poor whites and a large number of free blacks. At the bottom of the social structure were the African-Cuban slaves who worked in the sugar plantations (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 7).

In 1717, the Spanish crown assumed the right to purchase all Cuban tobacco, at an artificially low price, to sell it in European markets at an artificially high price. This policy triggered a wave of protest against imperialistic practices. In 1740, Spain extended the monopoly to the importation of slaves, the production of sugar and cattle. In 1762, the British navy seized Havana and controlled it for 10 months, liberating prices and declaring Havana a free port. The number of ships entering Havana raised from 15 to 1,000. Cuban farmers sold their products at market price, and Europeans and Americans flooded Cuba with consumer goods. When the British withdrew from Cuba, Cuban merchants refused to tolerate the imperialist policies of the past. As most of these merchants were *criollos*, this led to a politicized *criollo* class (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 8).

When Charles III assumed the Spanish throne, in 1759, he took a series of measures to develop both Spanish and Cuban economy. He aimed at modernizing Spanish mercantilism. One of the measures was to give Spanish Caribbean possessions access to several Spanish ports. The colonies were also allowed intercolonial trade, both

in American and European goods. In 1774, Louisiana received legal access to Havana, opening it up to all the American goods that came down to New Orleans by the Mississippi River. In 1778, Charles III issued the Free Trade Decree, designed to eliminate contraband and increase tax revenues. For the following two decades, the volume of trade increased substantially, both from and to the United States. American products – lumber, manufactured goods, foodstuffs – flowed into Cuba, while Cuban planters found new markets for their tobacco, molasses, and sugar. Spain's becoming an American ally in the war against Great Britain in 1779 contributed to strengthen even more the economic links between Cuba and America.

These measures taken by Charles III had a huge impact on Cuban society. Economy boomed, and so did the population. There was a higher demand for cheap labor. As a result, a significant number of slaves came into the country. Between 1774 and the early 1860s, sugar planters imported more than 832,000 slaves into Cuba, but by 1862 this number had gone down to 350,000 due to the continuing practice of *coartación*. The number of slaves became even smaller because many did not survive the harsh working conditions in the sugar fields; it was common for planters to lose up to 10 percent of their slaves every year. The situation, which was not easy for landowners, became even harder in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when England and Spain signed an agreement prohibiting the importation of slaves into Cuba. By the 1840s, total population of Cuba was of 1 million, half of which was black, with 436,000 slaves and 153,000 free blacks. Within the black half of this split society, free blacks “occupied the middle of the Cuba's social hierarchy.” As they were not allowed to work in law, medicine, accounting, pharmacy, universities, and government employment, the ones living in cities earned their living “as butchers, carpenters, cobblers, midwives, undertakers, seamstresses, bloodletters, glaziers, barbers, and hairdressers”, whereas the ones living in the country were “farmers, drovers, ranch hands, seasonal workers, and peddlers”. Even among free blacks, color was an important element of social distinction: “People of mixed African-Spanish ancestry were known as *pardos*, and they considered themselves, and were so considered by most whites, to be the social superiors of full-blooded African free blacks – the *morenos*”. The social hierarchy of the country's population was led by whites, divided into *criollos* and people coming from different countries in Europe. In the middle there were the free blacks. At the very bottom were the white *monteros*, who considered themselves superior to the blacks. Those white people would rather do nothing than do jobs considered to be fit for blacks.

Black slaves, naturally, came last. While *criollos* got richer and richer, they failed to pay attention to the revolutionary movements that swept through other Latin American colonies. Cuba became thus the premier colony in the shrinking Spanish empire (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 9-13).

In *Nosotros in USA*, Sonia Torres reviews the transnational relationship between Cuba and the United States as of 1850 not only to highlight its importance but to underscore the preponderant role Cubans residing in America traditionally played in the events on the island. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American economy had grown and become important to Cuba as a trade partner. For some time in the 1850s, Cuban liberals flirted with the notion of annexation to the USA. Cuban *criollos* feared that independence from Spain would deprive them of the military means to fight a slave uprising. Annexation to the USA, where slavery was firmly entrenched, would solve the problem. The expansion of the USA westward also encouraged Cuban annexationists. By this time there were about 1,000 Cubans living in the USA. However, the growing abolitionist movement and the eventual end of slavery in the U.S. put an end to the annexation dream. American presence in Cuba kept growing, though, especially in terms of industrial and transportation infrastructure. These engineers, machinists, bankers, shippers and merchants helped build an anti-Spain feeling among *criollos*, the dominant social class in Cuba, fostering the independence revolution that began in 1868, led by Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, who declared Cuba independent from Spain and annexed it to the USA. Nonetheless, Spain managed to crush this rebellion, throwing Cuba into a turmoil – the Ten-Year War. In order to escape the consequent economic devastation, many cigar manufacturers left the colony and settled their factories in the USA. By 1880 there were nearly 7,000 Cubans living in the USA, mainly in Florida but also in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York and Boston. Along with the settlers came business: restaurants, cafés, barber shops and grocery stores. In 1990, the Cuban population in Key West alone was over 18,000, and in Tampa, over 23,000. There were also political refugees, active in the north-east of the country (New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Boston), of whom the best-known was José Martí, who devoted 15 years of his life as an exile to fighting for Cuban independence not only from Spain but also from the U.S. imperialistic practices (TORRES, 2001: 122-3).

Back in Cuba, the elite were watching the fall of the Spanish domination with worried eyes. It was clearer and clearer that Spain would no longer protect them against a war. They started looking for another protector, and it was only natural that their eyes



turned to their increasingly powerful neighbor. The USA was also deeply interested in the revolution, as their investments in Cuba had grown dramatically in the previous years. When Spain exploded an American ship near Havana, the USA intervened in the process, turning a Spanish-Cuban conflict into the Spanish-American War, which ended with the American occupation of Cuba from 1898 to 1902. The Platt Amendment gave Cuba a nominal independence, but in practical terms, it became an extension of the USA territory, with the right to keep military bases and maintain the power in Cuba. As a result, the island was quickly integrated into the North American economy, confirming thus Martí's deepest fear. As the USA companies controlled most of Cuban economy, thousands of Cubans were going to the USA, hoping to have a better life there. In Cuba, the American government established that English be taught in Cuban schools, encouraging middle and upper-classes to learn it as a means to get a good job in one of the many American companies in activity in Cuba. The Cuban elites became bilingual. Sonia Torres draws a panorama of Cuban society at the time by pointing out that while Cuban elites quickly integrated American economy, enjoying the benefits offered by its capital, its power and its influence, lower classes felt more and more exploited and excluded, deepening the already existing social fracture on the island social structure. For them, the Spanish-American War had done nothing but replace one hegemonic power for another and leave them under the political, economic and social control of the Cuban elites. The new enemy of the working classes had two faces now: as the continent treated the island as an extension of its territory, the Cuban elite and the U.S. class struggle took growing nationalist characteristics (TORRES, 2001: 122-4). Nevertheless, for many Americans the island was a vacation paradise where they could enjoy "the Cuban Way of Life" which, by its turn, was taken to the continent by an increasing number of immigrants. This period is summarized by Ruth Behar in the introduction to *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*: "Once upon a time, Cuba was such a commonplace of the United States's imagination that it was included in the maps of Florida" (BEHAR, 1995: 1).

An interesting example of the cultural exchange that was taking place between Cuba and the U.S. is given by Gustavo Perez Firmat in *Life-on-the-Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. Desidero Alberto Arnaz y de Acha III is depicted as an icon of the "Cuban Way of Life". Arnaz's father was a political refugee who had fled Cuba in 1934 and settled in Miami, where Desi Arnaz – his Americanized name –, then 17, studied and graduated. He became a musician and a singer, formed his own band and introduced

the conga line to the American audiences, reaching instant success on the nightclub circuit and winning a spot in the cast of Rodgers and Hart's *Too Many Girls*, where he played his conga act. When the show was turned into a motion picture, Desi stayed on and contributed to the spreading of American's peculiar views of the Spanish-American culture, which featured Latino characters who could play American football, do the conga, play the drums and be popular with women. Firmat argues that Desi's getting married to Lucille Ball and co-starring with his wife the tremendously popular TV show *I Love Lucy*, the most popular TV show in the U.S. during the fifties (still available in re-runs) fostered among Americans an acceptance of cultural differences. This bicultural wedding, featured both in real life and on TV, would become a symbol of assimilation (FIRMAT, 1994: 53).

James and Judith Olsen devote chapter five of their book to the social, political and economic factors which led Cuba to the revolution that would change the relationship between the continent and the island. While the United States viewed Cuba as the best thing next to paradise, on the island the lower classes were progressively neglected and treated as cheap working hands. This scenario of social division was fertile to develop in the working class – black and white – a hatred which was directed towards both the Cuban elites and the Americans. Throughout the presidential administrations of Tomás Estrada de Palma, Gerardo Machado and Fulgencio Batista, the social structure of Cuba did not change. The poor were still very poor, and increasingly irritated with the status quo. The Olsens state that by the early 1950s “the social deterioration became more and more visible. Out of these deprived people's plight emerged a powerful revolutionary nationalism that had strong allies among students and intellectuals. During the Great Depression, the Cuban Communist Party had had considerable success organizing sugar mill and cane field workers, filling the void created by the government's destruction of the labor unions. Less than 8% of the Cuban population owned up to 70% of the land, and peasants had long hoped for a redistribution of property. Fidel Castro's guerrilla expanded and succeeded in disrupting the economy. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of July in 1953, Fidel Castro launched an attack on the Moncada army barracks. It failed, and most involved were killed or captured. Castro was captured and given a trial, which he used to make his [famous speech](#), "History Will Absolve Me". Sentenced to 15 years, he was pardoned after just two. He then went into exile in Mexico, where he trained and assembled the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement. He gained support from [Che Guevara](#) and others before leaving aboard the *Granma* to invade Cuba

in 1956. Returning to Cuba, the revolutionaries hid in the Sierra Maestra mountains, gaining support among the peasants. Eventually, Batista was forced to flee when Castro took over on January 1, 1959 (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 51-53).

Castro's first acts fulfilled both the highest expectations of the working class and the worst fears of the elites. He reduced rent payments, slashed electricity and telephone rates, raised minimum wages, limited the size of land holdings and nationalized the remaining land. The elites were outraged and desperate, and, with the support of the USA, began protesting. The more they protested, the worse things got (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 53-55). Robert Gott observes that "land reform was the turning point in the U.S. relationship with Cuba." Claiming that it would have an adverse effect on the Cuban economy and would discourage private investments, the American government set a goal to foster an opposition in Cuba which would ultimately overthrow Castro and establish a new government, more favorable to its own interests. This decision would prove to be easier said than done (GOTT, 2005: 180).

A complicating factor in the already delicate relations between Cuba and the U.S. was the interference of the Soviet Union, which saw in the political moment a good opportunity to penetrate the Western Hemisphere. After all, Cuba was engaged in a revolution with the support of the communist party, while the U.S. was threatening to destroy the new government. Their first move was to resume diplomatic relations with Cuba, suspended during Batista's government. The Soviets also promised to buy Cuban sugar, extended economic assistance to Cuba and offered to sell petroleum at lower prices. The U.S. retaliated by prohibiting American oil companies to refine the Soviet oil and by ceasing to buy Cuban sugar. Castro's answer was to nationalize all foreign refineries. In October 1960 the U.S. imposed a complete economic embargo on Cuba, and Castro then nationalized all American companies and business. Early in 1961, The U.S. suspended diplomatic relations with Cuba (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 54).

The practical effects of this ideological conflict were devastating to the Cuban middle class. From January 1, 1959 to October 12, 1962, approximately 248,000 Cubans migrated to the USA. In *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959 -1994*, Maria Cristina García analyzes "three waves of migration from Cuba to the United States": the "golden exiles", the "freedom flights" and the *marielitos*, focusing on their adaptation experience. She also mentions a fourth wave, that of the *balseros*, which began recently, with Cubans leaving the island on fragile boats and rafts (GARCÍA, 1996: ix-xii).

When analyzing the process undergone by the “golden exiles”, García remarks that it had two moments. The first to leave were the ones connected to the old regime: political leaders, high government officials and military officers, who decided to wait for less hostile times away from Cuba. These members of the Cuban upper class were followed by thousands of people who were not affiliated with the Batista regime but were negatively affected by the social and economic upheaval of the revolutionary government: merchants, business executives, and professionals such as doctors, lawyers, engineers and teachers. Finally, it was the turn of the working class: factory employees, artisans, skilled and semiskilled laborers. The reasons for such different people to leave were also different. Many had opposed the revolution from the beginning, others had become disillusioned with the course of the *revolución*, with its widespread violence, social indoctrination and general climate of suspicion and harassment. All, however, considered their stay in the USA a temporary one. Therefore, they saw themselves as exiles rather than émigrés. Adapting to the new life was not an easy task for the “golden exiles”. Most of them insisted on staying in Miami, which caused a sudden population growth the locals were not prepared to accommodate. Besides, there was a mild recession going on when Cubans arrived; as a result, they had to compete for job positions with unemployed Americans. Middle class Cubans – doctors, lawyers, engineers and educators – were not allowed to practice their professions in the USA because of licensing requirements, so they worked at whatever job was available. It was common to see doctors working as hospital orderlies, architects as gardeners, teachers as janitors. Many doctors and dentists practiced illegally, offering their services to fellow Cubans at lower rates than American professionals. Miamians resented the problems created by the Cuban crisis, and although they sympathized with the exiles, they could not help complaining about losing jobs to Cubans. In an attempt to call the authorities’ attention to their problem, a Cuban Refugee Committee appealed to President Eisenhower for assistance. By releasing U\$1,000,000 from the contingency funds of the Mutual Security Act, the President acknowledged Cuba as a communist state and Cuban exiles as political refugees. In December 1960, a Cuban Refugee Center was established in Miami which envisaged the resettlement of the exiles who had already set their residency in Miami and were unwilling to move. Both the community of exiles and the U.S. government perceived Castro’s dictatorship as a temporary situation; thus, it would not be necessary

to assimilate the Cubans, but to assist them until they could resume their normal lives back in their homeland (GARCÍA, 1996: 16-20).

In 1961, when President Kennedy took office, he considered Cubans to be victims of the Cold War and thus a national responsibility. Kennedy established the Cuban Refugee Program (CRP), which identified, interviewed and classified the refugees as to job skills, offered them health care and arranged for their resettlement. The CRP also took care of unaccompanied Cuban children and assisted refugees with a university degree who were overqualified for the jobs they were performing. While this assistance was being provided, a plan to overthrow Fidel Castro was being put together (GARCÍA, 1996: 22-30).

The Central Intelligence Agency had been training anti-revolutionary Cuban exiles for a possible invasion of the island. On April 17, 1961 about 1300 exiles, armed with U.S. weapons, landed at the Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) on the southern coast of Cuba. Hoping to find support from the local population, they intended to cross the island to Havana. It was evident from the first hours of fighting, however, that the exiles were likely to lose. President Kennedy had the option of using the U.S. Air Force against the Cubans but decided against it. Consequently, the invasion was stopped by Castro's army. By the time the fighting ended on April 19, 90 exiles had been killed and the rest had been taken as prisoners (GARCÍA, 1996: 30-32).

The failure of the invasion seriously embarrassed the young Kennedy administration. The captured exiles were later ransomed by private groups in the U.S. Additionally, the invasion made Castro wary of the U.S. He was convinced that the Americans would try to take over the island again. From the Bay of Pigs on, Castro had an increased fear of a U.S. incursion on Cuban soil (OLSON & OLSON, 1995: 54).

The flights out of Cuba, taking refugees to the USA, continued until the Missile Crisis in October 1962. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a confrontation during the [Cold War](#) between the [Soviet Union](#) and the [United States](#) regarding the Soviet [deployment](#) of [nuclear missiles](#) in [Cuba](#). The missiles were ostensibly placed to protect Cuba from further planned attacks from the United States after the failed [Bay of Pigs invasion](#), and were rationalized by the Soviets as retaliation for the U.S.'s placing deployable nuclear [warheads](#) in the [United Kingdom](#), [Italy](#) and most significantly, [Turkey](#). The crisis started on [October 16, 1962](#) – when U.S. [reconnaissance](#) data revealing Soviet nuclear missile installations on the island was shown to [U.S. President John F. Kennedy](#) – and ended twelve days later on [October 28, 1962](#), when Soviet leader [Nikita Khrushchev](#)

announced that the installations would be dismantled. The Cuban Missile Crisis is regarded as the moment when the Cold War came closest to escalating into a [nuclear war](#). The Kennedy-Khrushchev accords included a nonintervention clause: in exchange for the removal of the nuclear missiles, the USA agreed not to invade the island. The incident had two significant outcomes: the exiles felt betrayed by Kennedy and Castro closed Havana's airport to all American planes (GARCÍA, 1996: 33-34).

However, the suspension of the flights did not stop Cubans from leaving their homeland; from October 1962 to September 1965, approximately 56,000 Cubans arrived in the US, mainly via third countries like Spain or Mexico. While Miamians kept complaining about the social and economic burden the Cubans posed, reports pointed to a different direction. According to studies carried out by state and federal institutions, refugees were not taking jobs away from Americans but rather creating new business and job offers; Dade County public school system had improved schools, and the money distributed by the federal government had helped the economy to develop (GARCÍA, 1996: 35-37).

In September 1965, Castro decided to allow Cubans with relatives living in the US to emigrate, on boats at first. Since many boats sank, causing the death of many Cubans, the two countries signed a "Memorandum of Understanding", authorizing "Freedom Flights", which constituted a second wave of Cuban immigration. Husbands, wives, parents and siblings were first in line. By late 1969, 230,000 Cubans had arrived in the USA. This second wave of immigration was distinct from the first in various ways. Castro controlled the emigrant pool, prohibiting the emigration of those professionals considered vital to the regime – mainly men at working age. As a result, many of the Cubans who left Cuba in the "Freedom Flights" were blue-collars, service or agricultural workers, and a large number was made of women and elderly men. Also, by the end of the freedom flights, the émigré population included a substantial percentage of Cuba's Chinese and Jewish populations (GARCÍA, 1996: 38-39).

Most Americans had mixed feelings about the arrival of so many Cuban immigrants during the 60s. The fact that they were a freedom-loving people fleeing a communist dictatorship guaranteed a certain level of political sympathy in the USA. Besides, their middle-class and upper-class status had reassured many Americans that the Cuban immigrants were hardworking and would not become a burden on public services and social resources. On the other hand, there were now so many Cubans arriving in such a short time. Between 1959 and 1969, more than 400,000 Cubans

settled in the US, most of whom decided to stay in South Florida, and the federal government had spent more than \$730 million on the Cuban immigrant aid programs. No other group of political refugees has ever received so much help when going to the United States (GARCÍA, 1996: 40-42). Sonia Torres explains that the Cuban immigrants were crucial to the American government because not only were they all fiercely anti-Castro but they also represented an unquestionable opportunity for the U.S. to improve its image in international circles (TORRES, 2001: 126)

The golden émigrés had been called the “cream of the nation” by Americans. During the second wave, editorials in the *Miami Herald* claimed that the cream had been skimmed, and that the continuing flow of lower-class Cubans was an economic burden to the US. Sympathy for the political refugees had begun to fade, and the following development of events did nothing but strengthen the negative feelings towards Cuban immigrants. (GARCÍA, 1996: 45)

According to García, the third major group of immigrants came to be known as *the marielitos*. In 1978, during a press conference, Fidel Castro invited émigrés to a dialogue to discuss, among other things, “the fate of political prisoners and the chances of a possible family reunification program”. He promised to release around 3,000 prisoners if the *diálogo* turned out to be successful. On that occasion, “he carefully referred to the émigrés as ‘the Cuban community abroad’ rather than the usual *gusanos*, *escoria*, and *apátridas* (people without a country) and publicly stated that perhaps he had ‘misjudged’ the community”. This apparent softening of Castro’s tone was, in fact, a politically astute move. In the previous years, there had been negotiations between Cuban and American governments to lift the trade embargo, but such negotiations had come to an impasse as the U.S. government opposed Cuba’s military presence in Angola. The promise to release prisoners would additionally improve Castro’s image abroad, since his government had had the worst evaluation concerning human rights. Castro’s proposal divided the émigrés’ community. A segment of the exile community reacted enthusiastically to the proposal, whereas “others, suspicious, criticized the invitation.” A passionate debate as to the moral implications of ‘collaborating’ with the communist regime took place. After all, “the fate of thousands of political prisoners was left up to the émigré community – or so they thought. For the émigrés, it was a moral dilemma with no easy or satisfactory resolution” (GARCÍA, 1996: 47).

The first *diálogo* was very successful and, on November 21 1978 Cuban officials announced the release of 3,000 prisoners at the rate of 400 a month. Internally,

the Cuban Revolution was not producing the effects desired and advertised by Castro. The international prices of sugar had fallen dramatically, and the increased production was not enough to break even. The economic embargo prevented Cubans from importing essential goods, and the Cubans who had believed in Castro saw their standards of living decline progressively. Using once more the *diálogo* as a means to obtain what he wanted and improve his image in the international community, Castro decided to allow one-week trips to Cuba for immigrants to visit their relatives. His expectations were that they would bring American dollars to spend, thus feeding the fading Cuban economy. This in fact happened, but the immigrants also took consumer goods to their relatives, which triggered a general dissatisfaction with the deprivation the communist regime had forced them into. While they had been asked to sacrifice for their country, their relatives who had left enjoyed a prosperity they yearned for (GARCÍA, 1996: 53).

What began as a strategy to inject American dollars into Cuban economy ended up being called the blue-jeans revolution. As Richard Gott points out, the visits of the exiles had a destabilizing effect on Cuban society, especially on members of a younger generation familiar only with socialist austerity, who saw an alternative way of life to that offered by the revolution (GOTT, 2005: 266). Pressure for emigration inexorably increased. When the opportunity to leave presented itself in 1980, thousands of Cubans took it, and the government was willing to let them go. Dissatisfaction was a threat to the regime, and emigration played the role of a safety valve to Cuban society (GARCÍA, 1996: 54).

Another incident fostered the third wave of immigration which would take place in 1980. By 1979, a few Cubans began getting into Latin American embassies to ask for political asylum. The most frequent targets were the Venezuelan and Peruvian embassies. By March 1980, this number had reached 30. Cuban authorities took heavy-handed measures to stop this flow, demanding that dissidents be returned to them, but the diplomatic world protested. Castro pulled all the guards from around the embassies, claiming it was not their jobs to protect 'criminals' who broke the law. On Good Friday, April 4, Cubans drove to the Peruvian embassy to watch the conflicts that might still happen. Many parked their cars close to the embassy and simply walked in. Forty-eight hours later, 10,800 men had requested political asylum at the Peruvian embassy. While the refugees sent help requests to the Vatican and to the Carter administration, Cuban exiles organized food and clothing drives through their churches and civic



organizations. Eventually, all the refugees were shipped to the U.S., Peru, Costa Rica, Spain, Ecuador, Argentina, Canada, France and West Germany. The U.S. took 6,200 of the refugees. This negotiation gave Cuba an acceptable solution to the crisis: Castro would get rid of 11,000 dissidents at no or little cost to his government (GARCÍA, 1996: 54-57).

However, what seemed to be a perfect solution backfired, causing great damage to the long-promoted image of model socialist state Fidel had carefully built for the island. As the first refugees arrived in Costa Rica, they shouted “Freedom” and “Down with Castro” to hundreds of foreign journalists who had been sent to document the moment, which depicted Cuba as a society in crisis (GARCÍA, 1996: 58-59).

In order to ease the unemployment problem and eliminate potential opponents to his government, Castro decided to authorize further emigration through the port of Mariel. Hundreds of Cuban-American motorboats started the trips. Once more, the Carter administration got ready to help the new refugees, releasing 10 million dollars that were to be used in the identification, medical check-up and establishment of the new émigrés. Nearly a million Cubans expressed their desire to leave, but Castro forced the boats to take not only relatives of immigrants but also prostitutes, homosexuals, criminally insane, mentally retarded. Although the latter corresponded to less than 4 percent of the total number of exiles, the press focused its attention on them. The American society, understandably, did not welcome these immigrants the same way they had welcome the Golden ones. As if this were not enough, American economy was going through a certain malaise, and the U.S. was already getting a large wave of migration from the Asian countries. On top of everything else, large numbers of the *marielitos* were Afro-Cubans, who had brought with them the *Santería* religion, which will be discussed later. Their beliefs scandalized the white-protestant Americans. The Cuban-American community also looked at these new-comers with reservations. More than 98 percent of the Cuban immigrants were white, upper and middle-class Cubans, who historically had discriminated against black people. Besides, the new immigrants did want to “improve their economic opportunities, but most had nothing but praise for the free services – health and education and sports facilities – to which they had been accustomed on the island. This was not a message that an old generation of exiles wanted to hear” (GOTT, 2005: 269). Both groups – white Protestant Americans and Cuban-Americans – rejected the newly arrived Afro-Cubans. Dade County, which was bilingual, hastily proposed that English be the only language spoken everywhere, in an

attempt to push the unwanted Spanish-speaking new immigrants away from its prosperous neighborhood. An unprecedented division in the Cuban-American community took place, replicating the racial and social division that had existed in Cuba prior to Castro's revolution (OLSEN & OLSEN, 1995: 78-85 and GARCÍA, 1996: 64-66).

Non-Cubans living in South Florida were strongly against the arrival of more exiles, since over 100,000 Mariel Cubans had settled in the area in less than five years. Dissatisfaction with the strict communist government, however, fostered illegal immigrations on rafts and small boats. García states that "in 1990, 467 *balseros* were picked up by the Coast guard; but every year the numbers multiplied" (GARCÍA, 1996: 78). And they have been trickling ever since.

Although the forces of assimilation have been working to absorb Cuban-Americans into the larger American community, the Cuban identity is still intact, highly visible, and politically active. Moreover, there has been an assimilation of the Cuban Way of Life by Americans, mainly due to the Cuban-American couple Desi Arnaz – Lucille Ball. Their influence has been so powerful that, although the show had already been cancelled when the first wave of immigration started, re-runs of its episodes have never stopped, shaping the way new generations view Cubans. In the words of Firmat, "several generations of Americans have acquired many of their notions of how Cubans behave, talk, lose their temper, and treat or mistreat their wives by watching Ricky love Lucy" (FIRMAT, 1996: 1).

The Cuban community living in the United States, especially the golden exiles, has built a new life in the United States, but it would be hasty to conclude they do not wish to return to their homeland. When Castro became seriously ill last July and was operated on, rumor had it that he was already dead. This was enough to stir a great number of *émigrés*, who immediately organized themselves for a quick return. As for what kind of country they would have encountered, had Castro died and had they gone back, this is yet to be found out. But the imaginary Cuba they all cherish is kept alive in Little Havana and in every Cuban neighborhood throughout North America.

As for the one-and-a-halfers, a term which will be explained later, they belong to a younger generation of exiles, who grew up and went to college in the U.S. during the Civil Rights Movement. Sonia Torres points out that while they have turned out to be much less radical towards Cuba, they show great interest in recovering their cultural roots. The *diálogo* generation reached its majority in the 70s aware of the discrimination

against Hispanics and of the discrimination against Cubans, for coming from a “communist country”. Therefore, younger Cuban-Americans have become more critical of American external policy (TORRES, 2001: 131-2).

Torres states that the Cuban-American community of today, constituted by golden exiles, one-and-a-halfers and *marielitos*, repeats the pattern of a divided society that existed in pre-Castro times. The *marielitos* have become the working class, and their presence has been transforming the image of Cubans in the U.S. (TORRES, 2001: 135).

## CHAPTER II

### REFLECTIONS AND REFRACTIONS: DIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN *DREAMING IN CUBAN AND THE AGÜERO SISTERS*

*You insult me  
When you say I'm  
Schizophrenic.  
My divisions are  
Infinite.*

Bernice Zamora

The way we see ourselves and are seen by others is very much influenced by the particular context in which we are inserted. In *The Question of Cultural Identity*, Stuart Hall explains different notions of identity throughout history, highlighting three main concepts concerning the Illuminism subject, the sociological subject and the postmodern subject.

During the Illuminism, this concept was one of a unified subject holding the abilities of reason, consciousness and action, all of which were contained in an inner nucleus first shown at birth and developed throughout the subject's life, yet keeping the same essential characteristics. This essential center of the 'self' was the subject's identity. This unity was possible then because men, who lived in small communities which had virtually no contact with other communities, attributed great value to traditions and symbols which constituted the experience passed on from generation to generation (HALL, 1992: 278).

The modern world became more and more complex, and the concept of the sociological subject reflected this complexity. The 'self' would interact with other significant subjects, or with society as a whole, resulting in an identity formed through the articulation between the subject and the world in which he/she lived, its values, meanings and symbols – its culture. By aligning subjective feelings with objective places, identity "sutured" the subjects to the structure, stabilized the subjects and the world in which they lived, making them thus both reciprocally unified and predictable (HALL, 1992: 277).

In postmodernism, however, this stability and unity no longer exist; the subject becomes fragmented, made not only of one but of multiple identities sometimes

contradictory or unresolved. The postmodern subject no longer possesses a fixed, essential, permanent identity. The emphasis is on the discontinuity, fragmentation, rupture and dislocation of the subject. As Hall explains:

The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with - at least temporarily (HALL, 1992: 277).

Postmodern identities are contradictory; they act both outside the subject, in society, and inside the subject's head. Class is no longer an exclusive way to define one's identity, as it was in modernity; as political scenarios become fractured, the subject tends to represent its identities according to the new political trends: feminism, racial struggles, national freedom movements, ecological movements. Since identities may follow these trends, they have become political, and may be more or less permanent, according to how the subject feels toward a certain political issue at a certain moment (HALL, 1992: 280).

Perhaps it would be useful to make a few considerations about postmodernism before we proceed. According to Linda Hutcheon, in her article "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism", postmodernism is "a contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges – be it in literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dancing, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics or historiography" (HUTCHEON, 1993: 243-244). In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, she also states that "the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us" (HUTCHEON, 1989: 2). By entities, Hutcheon means capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism.

Some theoreticians such as Ihab Hassan and Patricia Waugh see postmodernism as ahistorical and apolitical, yet in Hutcheon's view, besides being fundamentally contradictory, postmodernism is also "resolutely historical and inescapably political". The presence of the past is an important concept, but not as a nostalgic return; it is rather "a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society". Postmodernism is also political in that it works within conventional political views in order to subvert them. It is seen by many theoreticians as "the results of late capitalism dissolution of bourgeois hegemony and the development of mass culture"

(HUTCHEON, 1993: 244-46). As master narratives are under attack, postmodern literature becomes what Julia Kristeva calls “writing-as-experience-of-limits” (KRISTEVA, 1980: 137). All limits – language, subjectivity, sexual identity, systematization and uniformization – are seen through a critical magnifying glass.

If fragmentation of the subject is a fact for any individual in a postmodern society, the large migratory movements, intensified since World War II and mostly generated by economic or political instability, have led to the displacement of individuals, contributing even further to the fragmentation of the subject. In many instances, political upheavals have forced entire groups to leave their home country and seek exile elsewhere. A subject in exile has to deal with difficulties such as the separation from his people and his land, the impossibility of returning to them, the idealization of the homeland, the adaptation to the new home, the preservation of memory and tradition. To borrow Kristeva’s phrase, narratives of exile can be considered “writing-as-experience-of-limits”.

The diasporic process affects the construction and/or development of both personal and national identities. As Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur remind us, “Diaspora forces us to rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism, while refiguring the relations of citizens and nation-states” (BRAZIEL & MANNUR, 2005: 7). As Hall also remarks, “national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to *representation*”, adding that the idea of the nation comes through representation of a culture. (HALL, 1992: 292). In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson describes nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” Anderson claims that a nation is imagined because most members of the smallest nation will never know, meet or hear of most of their fellow-members, but they are tied by nets of kinship and clientship. It is limited because even the largest nation has finite boundaries beyond which lie other nations. It is sovereign because it is free. And finally, it is a community because it is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship which leads its members to kill and die for it (ANDERSON: 1991, 6 - 7). In diaspora, under the influences of another national culture, displaced subjects will likely experience mixed feelings regarding this concept.

James Clifford, in his essay "Diasporas", questions the multiple ways in which diaspora discourses are constructed:

How do diaspora discourses represent experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home? What experiences do they reject, replace, marginalize? How do these discourses attain comparative scope while remaining rooted/routed in specific, discrepant histories? (CLIFFORD, 1997: 244)

Clifford also observes that “diasporic experiences are always gendered.” Theoreticians tend to hide this fact, to talk about these displacements as unmarked, leading to the belief that they are male experiences. If it is true that diaspora has different effects on men and women, it is also true that it may have a greater impact on women. Depending on the new environment in which they become inserted, conditions of subordination to patriarchy will vary, and they may become more independent. Allied to this newly acquired independence there is women’s potential to remain connected to their homeland through culture and tradition, experiencing thus a great sense of empowerment. These varied feelings are frequently expressed by women writers in their diasporic literary production (CLIFFORD, 1997: 313-14). The particular narratives of diaspora, influenced by cultural and historical specificities, as well as personal idiosyncrasies, attest to the fact that there is no place for an essentialist discourse about the diasporic subject.

Sonia Torres comments on the production of a Cuban-American literature stating that the Cuban community in the U.S. cannot be described as a monolithic model any longer, as it is no longer represented by the Golden Exiles and their children, the YUCAS (young urban Cuban-Americans). In recent years, there has been a racial and social division in Miami, caused by the arrival of the *marielitos*, the last immigration wave, composed mostly of non-white, working-class people. There were also a large number of homosexuals trying to escape from the homophobic practices of the Cuban government. Torres explains that all these issues were soon to become part of the Cuban literature produced in the U.S., with names such as Oscar Hijuelos, Roberto Fernández and Virgil Suárez, followed by women writers like Achy Obejas, Dolores Prida and Cristina García. Exile is still a central theme in their literary production, but women writers also address the issues of gender and sexuality, identity and subjectivity (TORRES, 2001: 141).

From 1959 to 1983, almost 900,000 Cubans came to the U.S. as documented and undocumented political refugees. As Fatima Mujcinovic states in her article "Multiple Articulations of Exile in US Latina Literature: Confronting Exilic Absence and Trauma", “the effects of such massive relocations are typically experienced as a

psychological rupture that inevitably problematizes the articulation of individual and collective subjectivity” (MUJCINOVIC, 2003: 1). But Karen Christian, in *Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction*, affirms that “sociohistorical forces are not the only factors that determine identity”, adding that “immaterial processes of identity formation must be taken into account” (CHRISTIAN, 1997: 14). By “immaterial processes”, Christian means psychological processes that are inherent to each individual and not to an entire community. In the fictive worlds created by Cristina García, sociohistorical specificities have a strong influence upon the characters’ lives but do not necessarily determine who they are or who they will become. These different processes influence the construction of individual and national identities. Homi Bhabha discusses the relationship between exile literature and identity in *The Location of Culture*. According to his concept of “nation as a narration”, national identity is constantly being “narrated” through the literary production of the people (BHABHA, 1999: 142). As individual identities become fragmented in postmodernity, so do national identities.

In exile, the subject, already fragmented, suffers a more radical deconstruction, and the struggle for a link with the past, which may give an illusion of unity, is even greater. In the novels which are the object of this dissertation – Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters* – subject fragmentation of characters living in exile is highlighted by the use of several postmodern narrative strategies.

Since the present chapter focuses on the fragmentation of the subject and its diverse attempts to come to terms with it, as well as on the fragmentation of a national identity that inevitably happens in diasporic conditions, I will concentrate my analysis on the two main characters from each book: Lourdes, the mother, and Pilar, the daughter, in *Dreaming in Cuban*; Constancia and her sister Reina in *The Agüero Sisters*.

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, the use of multiple points of view – a postmodern narrative strategy called polyphony – and of a fragmented narrative structure underscore the fragmentation of the characters. Most of the chapters are narrated in the third person but have focalizing characters whose different perspectives provide varied views on issues included in the novel. First-person narration is used by Pilar, her cousin Milagro, Ivanito, and by Celia in her letters. The use of focalizing characters, together with the “I” narratives, contributes to the polyphonic nature of the narrative. Ivanito criticizes his sisters Luz and Milagro for hiding from Felicia the Chinese scarves their father gave them, whereas Luz refers to the same fact with a tender feeling of nostalgia. Ivanito



does not believe their father still loves them, while Luz reports that she and her sister had met him and he had said he had never forgotten them. Celia, Felicia, Ivanito and Milagro refer to Felicia's obsession with coconuts from their own point of view. The painting Lourdes orders from her daughter is analyzed by both women under different lights. Celia's letters, scattered along the novel, provide relevant information about her past. Thus, the reader is exposed to multiple points of view, and has to work on his own to put the puzzle together. The absence of a linear narrative also contributes to reinforce the fragmentation of the selves. In "Back to the Future: Mothers, Languages and Homes in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*", Rocío G. Davis states that "the author frequently juxtaposes present and past, blurring and confounding the two time frames: rather than presenting a chronological account, she invites the reader to reconstruct the sequence of events – from the first story, set in 1972, to the last piece, a letter written in 1959" (DAVIS, 2000: 3). The narrative, which begins with Jorge's appearance to Celia right after his death in 1972, has in fact a much broader time span, as both the flashbacks from all characters and Celia's letters to her lover go back as far as 1935, and Lourdes's return to Cuba is set in 1980. This blending of past and present as well as of different geographic locations – Santa Teresa del Mar, Havana, New York and Miami – represent a dislocation of time and space that contributes to expose the fragmentation that is being discussed.

*Dreaming in Cuban* features two female characters that fit the profile of subjects living in exile, having fragmented identities caused by the uprooting from their original birthplace. Lourdes, the mother, and Pilar, the daughter, left Cuba shortly after Castro overthrew the government of Fulgencio Batista, and have settled in New York. I aim at analyzing the processes of assimilation they undergo, their attitudes towards preserving their cultural legacy, and the way they cope with the realization that they will never attain a unified identity.

Lourdes is a "golden exile", and as such, has a sharp sense of pride and superiority towards Fidel's followers. Prior to her departure from Cuba, when the soldiers go to her house to confiscate her property, she defies them, yells at them, fights with them, spits on their face. Her spirit remains unbroken even when they rape her, batter her and carve her belly with a knife (GARCÍA, 1992: 70-72). As a result, she loses the baby she had been expecting. The trauma caused by the rape and the consequent miscarriage have followed her to exile, a trauma she will understand and overcome only when she manages to persuade her nephew Ivanito to seek political

asylum in the Peruvian embassy and later meet her in New York. She's determined to give him a chance her own son never had.

When Lourdes arrives in the U.S., there is a substantial change in her social status. She is forced to work hard in order to be again a successful member of the new society, but she embraces the American Way of Life and rejects whatever is related to Cuba – even the weather:

Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention. Lourdes relishes winter most of all – the cold scraping sounds on sidewalks and windshields, the ritual of scarves and gloves, hats and zip-in coat linings. Its layers protect her. 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.<sup>1</sup>

This rejection of her origins distinguishes her from other diasporic people. According to William Safran, the main features of diaspora are

a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship (SAFRAN, 1991: 83-84).

Most “Golden Exiles” dreamed of an eventual return to Cuba after Castro was ousted and kept strong ties to the island. Lourdes, on the other hand, clearly chooses the host country over her place of birth. Besides the traumatic events that preceded her departure, another key to understanding her attitudes may lie in her early personal history. Celia, her mother, had rejected her when she was born, telling her father: “I will not remember her name” (43). Right after that, Celia had a nervous breakdown and was committed to an asylum. Lourdes never overcame this rejection, hiding her true feelings under her pride and arrogance and developing a strong bond with her father, to whom she felt very close. In her new home, she decides to put her past behind her and make a fresh start, but it is too late: she carries her pride and arrogance with her and becomes a ruthless store-owner, a manipulative wife, a controlling mother. She is not contented; she has never been, as Pilar points out:

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<sup>1</sup> GARCÍA, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. Toronto: Ballantine Books Edition, 1992: 73. From now on, all references to this book will be made in the text by the page number only.

Back in Cuba, everybody used to treat Mom with respect. Their backs would straighten and they'd put on attentive faces like their lives depended on the bolt of fabric she chose. These days, all the neighborhood merchants hate her. "Where are the knobs, kid?" they ask me when her volume goes up. I don't think Mom's ever bought something and not returned it. One day, she'll walk into a department store and there'll be camera lights and a big brass band and Bob Barker will announce, "Congratulations, Mrs. Puente! This marks the thousandth time you've come in here to complain!" (63)

Jorge del Pino, Lourdes's father, is the only who can establish with her a true affective connection and bring up a different Lourdes. He comes from Cuba to treat a cancer in New York. Even after he dies, he establishes contact with Lourdes, listens to her and gives her advice. He is the only person – so to speak – that Lourdes listens to. He is the one who tries to erase her mother's rejection from her mind:

After we were married, I left her with my mother and my sister. I knew what it would do to her. A part of me wanted to punish her. For the Spaniard. I tried to kill her, Lourdes. I left on a long trip after you were born. I wanted to break her, may God forgive me. When I returned, it was done. She held you out to me by one leg and told me she would not remember your name. I left her in an asylum. I told the doctors to make her forget. They used electricity. They fed her pills. (...) They told me that her health was delicate, that she must live by the sea to complete her forgetting. I couldn't bear her gentleness, her kind indifference. I took you from her while you were still a part of her. I wanted to own you for myself. And you've always been mine, *hija* (195-196).

After reassuring her that her mother loves her, Jorge urges her to go back to Cuba. Almost twenty years have elapsed since Lourdes left. Her father informs her about the death of her younger sister, Felicia, and tells her that "there are things you must do, things you will only know when you get there" (196). Lourdes has a chance to come to terms with her homeland when she returns. The 'Cubanness' Lourdes denies surfaces when she dances with her nephew Ivanito: "Her body remembered what her mind had forgotten. She held the notes in her hips and her thighs, and the room rumbled with applause as Lourdes spun and spun across the polished dance floor" (224). The next day her mind takes over, though, and the spell is broken. The visit to the island does nothing but sharpen her bitterness and hatred towards El Líder. Again, her daughter is the character who points it out:

We've been in Cuba four days and Mom has done nothing but complain and chain-smoke her cigars late at night. She argues with *Abuela's* neighbors, picks fights with waiters, berates the man who sells ice cones on the beach. She asks everyone how much they earn, and no matter what they tell her, she says, "You can make ten times as much in Miami!" With her, money is the bottom line. Mom also tries to catch workers stealing so she can say, "See! That's their loyalty to the revolution!" (234)

Not until Lourdes goes back to the old ranch where she was raped, where she lost her baby boy – "a boy she would have named Jorge after her father. A boy, Lourdes recalls, a boy in a soft clot of blood at her feet" – does she realize what she must do. She decides to take her nephew Ivanito to America, to give him the opportunity of a better life there, the opportunity her unborn son never had (227). For Lourdes, it is impossible to separate personal issues from political ones; they are forever intertwined.

Whereas Lourdes does not want to be Cuban any longer, her daughter Pilar can only wonder whether she is one. Gustavo Perez Firmat points out that many youngsters, like Pilar, belong to an intermediate immigrant generation that the Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut calls the "1.5" or "one-and-a-half" (RUMBAUT, 1991:61). The first immigrant generation has to cope with acculturation and the task of translating one socio-cultural environment into another; the one-and-a-halfers also have to cope with the transition from childhood into adolescence and adulthood in a new home. Thus, in some ways, they are first and second generation at once. Firmat claims that "Cuban-American culture has been to a considerable extent an achievement of the 1.5 generation." This generation has been able to negotiate between tradition and translation. Tradition is about convergence and continuity, while translation is about displacement and transmuting. The one-and-a-halfers turn to the traditional values of their homeland and at the same time embrace the values of their new home. From this cultural cocktail emerges the Cuban-American Way (FIRMAT, 1994: 4). Lourdes and Pilar, however, challenge this theory. Marta Caminero-Santangelo comments on this inversion in "Contesting the Boundaries of Exile Latino/a Literature", remarking that Cuban-born Pilar was taken to the U.S. when she was still a small child and raised as an American, but feels nostalgic for her homeland, whereas Lourdes, a first-generation immigrant, does not (CAMINERO-SANTANGELO, 2000: 13-14).

A powerful means by which she feels connected to her homeland is her extraordinary memory: "I was only two years old when I left Cuba, but I remember

everything that's happened to me since I was a baby, even word-for-word conversations" (26). But she also realizes that she cannot rebuild memories forever:

Most days Cuba is kind of dead to me. But every once in a while a wave of longing will hit me and it's all I can do not to hijack a plane to Havana or something. I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate memories we'll have when we're old. Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be" (137-8).

In "Diaspora and Exile", Alan Anderson observes that diasporic communities may see their homeland as "an ideological construct or myth, but no less significant to them than specific homelands to which other migrant communities relate" (ANDERSON, 1991: 16). Pilar left Cuba at such an early age that her experiences there were quite limited. In Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*, the chapter "Re-presenting the Past" develops the idea that history is a construct. Hutcheon states that "writers of history, fiction, or even theory render their materials coherent, continuous, unified – but always with an eye to the control and mastery of those materials, even to the risk of doing violence to them" (HUTCHEON, 1989: 62). Postmodern writers do not try to hide this tendency – on the contrary, the narrativization of past events is openly composed into a narrative whose constructed order is imposed upon them. The past is rearranged through representation. A proof that history is a construct comes in Pilar's remark about the way her mother manipulates it:

This is a constant struggle around my mother, who systematically rewrites history to suit her views of the world. This reshaping of events happens in a dozen ways every day, contesting reality. It's not a matter of premeditated deception. Mom truly believes that her version of events is correct, down to details that I know, for a fact, are wrong. (...) It's not just our personal history that gets mangled. Mom filters other people's lives through her distorting lens. Maybe it's that wandering eye of hers. It makes her see only what she wants to see instead of what's really there. (...) Telling her own truth is the truth to her, even if it's at the expense of chipping away our past. (176-7)

Lourdes's manipulation of events as well as Pilar's use of imagination to fill the gaps contribute to reinforce the idea of history as a construct. Amy K. Kaminsky, in *Reading the Body Politics: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers*, states that exiles carry something of the place they are separated from as well as the

historical circumstance of that place at the moment of the separation. This makes them absent from their homeland, but not a part of the new home. Exile is perceived thus “as a noncountry, not as a different one” (KAMINSKY, 1993: 30). Lourdes does not follow this pattern, but Pilar seeks to recreate the country she remembers by writing to her grandmother in Spanish, yet the distance from Cuba makes her Spanish out-dated and awkward. She writes “in a Spanish that is no longer hers. She speaks the hard-edged lexicon of bygone tourists itchy to throw dice on green felt or asphalt.” (7) Although she remembers very little of the island, she tries to build bridges between America and Cuba.

Pilar finds a powerful connection with her homeland through *Santería*, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. A while after her unsuccessful attempt to reach Cuba by escaping to Miami, Pilar is mysteriously attracted to a *botanica*, a shop where herbs and images are sold and spiritual orientation for people in need is offered. The elderly man who runs the place looks at her and labels her instantly, saying, “Ah, a daughter of *Changó*” and giving her unsolicited advice: “You must finish what you began” (200). She leaves the *botanica* with precise instructions on what to do:

“Begin with a bitter bath”, he says, lining up the ingredients on the counter. Bathe with these herbs for nine consecutive nights. Add the holy water and a drop of ammonia, then light the candle. On the last day, you will know what to do.” (...) On the ninth day of my baths, I call my mother and tell her we’re going to Cuba (200-203).

When she receives this sort of calling to return to Cuba, Pilar believes she will discover herself a true Cuban. To this effect, once she arrives there, she spends many hours catching up on her conversations with Celia, telling stories to her cousin Ivanito and waiting for the “revelation”. She visits *santera* Herminia and is received as a daughter, which could mean that she truly belongs in Cuba. On the other hand, when she dances the *cha-cha-chá* with Ivanito, unlike her mother, “she dances like an American, moving jerkily, off the beat, sloppy and distracted” (224), which could mean she truly belongs in the U.S. The truth about her hybridity gradually dawns on her:

I’ve started dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. There’s a magic here working its way through my veins. There’s something about the vegetation, too, that I respond to instinctively – the stunning bougainvillea, the flamboyants and jacarandas, the orchids growing from the trunks of the mysterious ceiba trees.

And I love Havana, its noise and decay and painted ladyness. I could happily sit on one of those wrought-iron balconies for days, or keep my grandmother company on her porch, with its ringside view of the sea. I'm afraid to lose all this, to lose Abuela Celia again. But 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*. How can I tell my grandmother this? (235-6; emphasis mine)

This realization constitutes what James Clifford calls “diaspora consciousness”, which arises from the awareness of being both Cuban *and* American, but “differently. It is also about being global” (CLIFFORD, 1994: 312). With her newly gained awareness, Pilar epitomizes hybridity and fragmentation, which, according to Stuart Hall, makes it impossible for Pilar to define herself as Cuban or as American. She is forever the product of several interconnected histories and cultures, belonging to more than one culture, more than one history, more than one home (HALL, 1992: 310). This may explain why García chose the title of her novel to be *Dreaming in Cuban*. It means much more than dreaming in Spanish, or in English. It means to embrace her Cuban half without having to embrace it as her whole. Homi Bhabha talks about this feeling of being “in between” in an interview, affirming that the experience of not belonging to one place or another creates a “third space” (BHABHA, 1994: 190). By not recognizing herself as either Cuban or American, Pilar occupies this third space. To other diasporic subjects, this space may mean resistance to oppression; to Pilar, it means the acceptance of her hybridity. I wish to acknowledge that the concept of third space, as used by Bhabha, goes far beyond this comparison I have just made, but it is not my primary interest to fully analyze it here.

In the essay “From Alienation to Reconciliation in the Novels of Cristina García”, Katherine B. Payant points out that, because *Dreaming in Cuban* has its action concentrated in the 1970s, feelings both for and against Castro were very strong, as displayed in the characters of Celia and Lourdes. García's second novel, *The Agüero Sisters*, is set in the early 1990s, a time when Castro's strength was not as intense, and both Cubans and Cuban-Americans were more skeptical towards the revolution. In this second novel, “politics plays a lesser role in the characters' personal passions” (PAYANT, 2004: 6).

*The Agüero Sisters* narrates the story of Constancia, a successful Cuban exile, and her half-sister Reina. Constancia and her husband Heberto are “Golden Exiles”, but while he dreams of returning to Cuba and plots to overthrow Castro's government, his

wife easily assimilates American values. Reina remains in Cuba while she believes in Fidel Castro's ideas, but after thirty-two years serving the revolutionary causes, she becomes disillusioned with the communist ideology and decides to join her sister in Miami. The two sisters have unresolved issues to work out not only concerning their relationship but also regarding their mother Blanca's death, surrounded by a mystery that is revealed to the reader through their father Ignacio's autobiographical narrative: he killed his wife and made everybody believe she had drowned. Reina, who was deeply attached to her mother, senses the truth after seeing her mother's shattered throat on the day of her funeral. Constancia, more attached to her father, denies this truth until the end of the novel when, back in Cuba, she gets hold of her father's diary.

The narrative structure of the novel is fragmented in a very complex way, highlighting the identity fragmentation of the characters. This narrative fragmentation takes place in two different levels. There is even more geographic fragmentation in *The Agüero Sisters* than in *Dreaming in Cuban*, as the plot develops in New York, Key Biscayne, Miami, Madrid and Cuba, and there is also time span fragmentation, as the present is often interrupted by flashbacks and by Ignacio's diary entries. Ignacio's autobiography starts in 1904, and Constancia's trip to Cuba takes place in 1991. The history of the Agüero family covers a time span of practically one century.

Polyphony – a concept developed by Mikhail Bakhtin – is also used to underscore identity fragmentation. In the chapters which tell the story of the two sisters, third-person narration is used, with or without focalization which, combined with Ignacio's narrative, offers different perspectives on Blanca's death. There are also first-person narrations by Dulce, Reina's daughter, and Ignacio. We must not forget that his diary is a fictional autobiography, a distinction established by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, in which they state that "People often confuse life narrative and fiction. Typically, autobiographic texts are called 'novels', although novels are rarely called 'autobiographies'" (SMITH & WATSON, 2001: 7). Ignacio's story, though fictional, constitutes a postmodern narrative strategy that subverts the concept of autobiography, involving the readers and making them believe it is the actual account of the life of a man who really existed. The setting of his narrative, described in detail, contributes to reinforce this impression.

The novel is divided in two parts; the chapters containing the narratives about the sisters show the place and the date in which events take place and are told in third



person. Interposing these chapters, Ignacio's story is told in first person. Dulce's first person narrative, less frequent, is about her own life in Havana, Madrid and Miami.

Since *The Agüero Sisters* deals with a character – Constancia – living in exile, it is expected that recurrent exile themes be present, themes like nostalgia and desire to return to the homeland. Eliana Rivero, in *Discursos desde la Diáspora*, states that

In the nostalgic discourse of Cuban writers the presence of palm trees and sugar cane is a constant. It can be said that the words sugar and sugar cane, and the images created by them, are metaphors for the essence of what it means to be Cuban. In the works of Cuban authors, then, and in those by younger Cubans in transition, “writing sugarcane memories” is an image that figuratively represents the re/creation of mother country motifs in a subtle form of nostalgic discourse (RIVERO, 2005: 175).

In García's novels, however, as I have already remarked, first generation exiles are not necessarily nostalgic about the country they have left. Although Constancia does not exhibit an aversion from Cuba the way Lourdes does, she too embraces wholeheartedly the values of the host country. Constancia becomes a successful salesperson in a large department store in New York, seeming to have completely assimilated the American work ethics. From her life in Cuba, she retains a taste for supernatural events. A dabbler in santería and a believer in omens, Constancia's favorite radio show is *La Hora de los Milagros*, ‘The hour of Miracles’. At the beginning of the narrative, she is about to move to Miami, but she is not sure this will be a good idea, and the reader learns why:

Constancia is uncertain whether she wants to leave New York, but Herberto is determined to retire. (...) In September, Herberto bought a condominium on Key Biscayne, overlooking the ocean, not far from his widowed father's house. There is a pool and a sandy beach and the daily theater of sunsets, but Constancia is not persuaded by such attractions. She likes her work, fears all inactivity. When silence surrounds her, the temptation to remember is too great.<sup>2</sup>

As the narrative progresses, the reader begins to discover what Constancia fears to remember:

When Constancia was five months old, her mother abandoned their house. Then shortly after Constancia's third birthday, Mamá returned, eight months pregnant and bruised. There were terrible welts on her body and one eye was swollen shut, but

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<sup>2</sup> GARCÍA, Cristina. *The Agüero Sisters*. Toronto: Ballantine Books Edition, 1998, 21. From now on, all references to this book will be made in the text only by the page number.

Mamá did not cry or complain. Constanica remembers wishing her mother would leave and never come back (47).

The theme of parental rejection is also present in this novel. When Constanica's half-sister, Reina, is born, Blanca completely neglects her older daughter, focusing all her attention on the younger one. This rejection triggers strong feelings of jealousy in Constanica, who even tries to harm her sister: "She dropped spiders in her sister's crib, forced clumps of mud in her tiny mouth. If her mother hadn't found out, Constanica wonders how long Reina might have survived" (47). Taken by her father to her grandfather's ranch in Camagüey, Constanica spends the rest of her childhood separated from her family, until her mother's death, when the sisters are sent to a boarding school. The resentments caused by these events, combined with the mysterious circumstances surrounding Blanca's death, contribute to deepen the gap between the sisters.

If young Constanica nurtured murdering feelings towards her half-sister Reina, one of grown-up Constanica's most remarkable personality traits is the energy with which she challenges death. When her baby daughter gets asphyxiated on the ship while they are fleeing Cuba, she does everything she can to revive her, going to extremes like biting her so hard on the heel she ripped out an inch of flesh – thus bringing her back to life. Many years later, when she finds her husband lying unconscious in the pink Cadillac, she has a similar fierce reaction: "For a moment, Constanica hesitates, struck by the strange peacefulness of her husband's expression. She climbs onto Heberto, slips, climbs again, then starts pounding his chest until she resuscitates him, pounds him and pounds him until his eyelids flutter" (50). When her grandson is born, she notices he has a red birthmark on his heel, "the shape of the gash on Isabel's left foot, where Constanica bit out an inch of flesh" (221). Constanica has an epiphany. "The axis suddenly shifts. Fierce and hissing, no longer buried, the knowledge comes to Constanica whole. She would kill to save him, kill to save them all" (221), including Reina. When the two sisters fight, on the boat that is taking Constanica back to Cuba, and Reina spends a long while under the sea, "she hooks Reina by the collar of her sodden jacket and, with more unexpected strength, drags her back aboard. Constanica bends over, seals her sister's mouth with an open kiss. Forces in breath until Reina's chest rises and falls of its own accord" (277). This obsession with which Constanica fights the death of her loved/hated ones is likely to be connected to her mother's death, which she was unable to prevent and whose circumstances are enveloped in a mystery she is both willing and reluctant to unveil.

Another facet of Constancia's identity which is very strong is her drive for business. When she moves from New York to Miami, she feels lost without a job to fulfill her life. After her husband leaves for a trip with other Cuban men who aim at overthrowing Castro, memories from her life in Cuba become more present, bringing back unresolved issues involving her mother's rejection and death. A scene of magical realism materializes this identity problem one night when, after having dreamed she has had plastic facial surgery, she wakes up, goes to the bathroom and does not recognize herself. At the same time, she experiences physical changes, "finds her face in disarray, moving all at once like a primitive creature. Her neck and temples itch furiously, erupting with bumps each time she attempts to scratch." After spraying herself with salt water, she checks the mirror again. Her face "younger, her eyes rounder, a more deliberate green. Then it hits her with the force of a slap. This is her mother's face" (105).

Constancia's main connection with Cuba is through *Santería*, to which she turns whenever she needs spiritual guidance or feels powerless to control her own life. When such an unusual and inexplicable transfiguration takes place, Constancia seeks spiritual guidance. The *santero* she sees to figure out what has happened tells her she must return to "where the grave was first dug, where the grave was first dug" (111). Constancia, however, does not listen to the *orishas*, missing the opportunity to acknowledge her "Cubanness". Instead, she starts a business to produce and sell beauty creams to Cuban women. She names the line *Cuerpo de Cuba*, and she resorts to her childhood memories and to the field trips she used to take with her father to recover the right herbs, fruits and fragrances for different creams: *Ojos de Cuba*, *Collo de Cuba*, *Cara de Cuba*, *Pies de Cuba*. These names, referring to body parts, symbolically echo the fragmentation of Constancia's identity, also stressed by her decision to use her mother's face – now her own – on the label of her beauty line<sup>3</sup>. As she is naturally gifted for business, she uses all the right sale strategies and her creams become an instant hit with Cuban women living in exile, who are lured by the echoes of the long lost homeland. Constancia exploits their collective memory to her own commercial benefit. Regarding collective memories, Patrick Hutton affirms that:

Collective memory is an elaborate network of social mores, values, and ideals that marks out the dimensions of our imaginations according to the attitudes of the social groups to

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<sup>3</sup> The insights on this paragraph come from Professor Dr. Leila Assumpção Harris, my advisor.

which we relate. It is through the interconnections among these shared images that the social frameworks of our collective memory are formed, and it is within such settings that individual memories must be sustained if they are to survive (HUTTON, 1993: 78).

Constancia keeps on working, paving her way to success thanks to Cuban women's nostalgia and turning her backyard manufacture into *Cuerpo de Cuba* Factory. Her growing urge to come to terms with her past, especially her mother's rejection, combined with the news that her half-sister is moving to Miami, will precipitate a process of "re-memory". In "The Site of Memory", Toni Morrison refers to the several books written by slaves in which they account for the horrors they had to endure, inflicted on them by white men. But those authors could not write freely about those savage episodes of physical and moral abuse, or the readers would not show towards them the sympathy they sought. They were forced to leave out these passages by writing unemotional accounts, using expressions like "But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate." In Morrison's words, "In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they "forgot" many other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe." She finishes her article by emphasizing that she is now in a different position, and feels obliged to move that veil aside, which requires certain procedures. First, she must rely on her own recollections, as well as on recollections of others. Then she affirms that "These 'memories within' are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me" (MORRISON, 1987: 3). In *The Agüero Sisters*, Reina's arrival will bring out Constancia's "memories within" and move aside the veils that hide the truth. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Lourdes goes through a similar process while dancing with Ivanito and while visiting the very place where she had been raped and lost her baby.

Reina is apparently nothing like her half-sister. Constancia is feminine, careful, married to the same man for thirty years, a successful business woman; Reina, on the other hand, is powerful, adventurous and sexy, has always had many lovers and has worked as an electrician for the past twenty-four years. A materialist who believes only in her senses, she nevertheless visits Basilica del Cobre to ask La Virgen de la Caridad to cure her insomnia. In this sense, she behaves the same way Celia does, in a sort of

“believing skepticism”. Part of her power comes from her biological father, “a giant mulatto, tall as a lamppost and with incalculable heft (...). He had a broad, smooth face and eyes that suggested a touch of Oriental blood. (...) His resemblance to Reina was unmistakable” (265). The beaded bracelet he wore on his wrist, with its red-and-white pattern, indicates that Reina’s father was a son of *Changó*, the *orisha* of thunder and lightning. This explains why Reina is struck by lightning and survives: the power of her biological father protects her. Her skin is severely damaged, though, and she is saved by skin grafts from her daughter and other loved ones. She thus becomes a symbol of the mixed blood that makes up Cuba, but her appearance undergoes a change that has a parallel in Constancia’s “new face”. After a midnight visit to Ignacio’s old lab at the university where she half expects to find Blanca – “Would her mother be there, stuffed and inert like everything Papá killed?” (99) – Reina knows she must leave Cuba and meet Constancia.

Reina’s reaction to Constancia’s bearing their mother’s face is one of astonishment. “Constancia looks so much like Mami now, down to the minutest details, that Reina couldn’t help it – she studied her sister’s face like a blind woman, tried to read with her hands the grace and terror that lay hidden there” (158). But it is also one of twisted identification. As Payant points out, at first the two women “come together almost as two separated halves of a whole person”, sleeping together like spoons, combing each other’s hair and feeding each other. Reina has a feeling of being reunited to her mother, as Blanca is within Constancia. When Constancia is silent, she can feel her mother and let the past emerge. But soon the differences begin to show: Constancia is loyal to her father, who never abandoned or rejected her, whereas Reina is deeply connected to her mother. The two sisters disagree on most anything, from the way their mother died to the way Constancia uses Blanca’s image commercially, to Reina’s free way of life (PYANT, 2004: 8-9). They have mixed feelings for one another: love, hatred, envy, contempt. Nonetheless, the reunion of the two sisters brings out what they have in common: they are both determined women, both traumatized by the loss of their mother, and both hide their feelings under a protective cape of self-sufficiency.

When Constancia’s daughter nurses her baby, Reina realizes that she carries deep scars from her mother’s death and feels the need to relive her nursing experience, letting herself engage in the process of “re-memory” that has been discussed. She asks her niece to taste her milk. Isabel gives her consent and “Reina closes her eyes and breathes in the distant scent of her mother, closes her eyes and settles her lips on her

past” (241). Realizing how deeply wounded she still is by the loss of her mother is the first step to healing, the first step to reconciliation with her history.

The two sisters’ reconciliation is slow and painful, as they have many unresolved issues between them. When Constancia receives the letter from her uncle Damaso, written shortly before his death, revealing that her father’s diary is buried in Cuba, she goes to her *santero* for guidance. Piñango consults the *orishas* and translates their message: “‘You will return home, disguised as night.’ Oscar Piñango wraps the dead hen in brown paper and lays it at Constancia’s feet. ‘As the river flows to the sea, so does Oshún flow to her sister, Yemayá’” (258).

The *santero*’s speech touches a crucial issue in the novel: the identity search. Only by going back to Cuba and unveiling the secrets of her past will Constancia be able to recover her face, that is, to recover her life. As a diasporic subject, Constancia simply cannot dismiss the past. She will also have to come to terms with it and reconcile with Reina before her life goes back to normal, just as it is normal that the river flow to the sea.

Ready to stir their “memories within”, Reina and Constancia engage on a mystical journey, following the careful and thorough instructions given by *santero* Piñango. The first part of the ritual symbolically takes place by the river, where Constancia kneels on the ground, perceiving it, maybe for the first time, as “alive, pulsing with currents and destinations”, and thinking it may be the true river. Reina wonders why she agreed to come along, while her emotions contradict her reason. She “senses an electricity swilling within her” and thinks that “here by the river [she] has no name. And there is only this persistent, velvety fear” (270). Reina fears what is to come and so does her sister. Since the second part of the journey is to be undertaken by Constancia alone, Reina’s task is to take her sister to the sea, to the fishing boat which will lead her back to her home country. Constancia’s return represents the end of a cycle which started with the feelings of rejection that she experienced as a child, continued with her youth of a rejected love, with her adulthood of a semi-happy marriage, with an exile of professional success and personal failure. The closing of this cycle is necessarily related to the rescue of her origin, of her history, of her identity, of her face. The bonding with her sister can occur only after she literally digs out the truth concerning their mother’s death. In Cuba, she finally opens the box which contains her past:

“Inside, a paring knife, a box of matches, a faded flannel pouch containing a worn bit of bone, and the stack of her father’s last papers. Constanica slips the little bone from its pouch, fingers its knotted end as she begins to read. Papi’s writing is neat, legible, crisply formal – intended, it seems, for no one in particular.(...) Constanica reads Papi’s words carefully, reads and reads them again, until only the stars are left to clarify the sky. The little bone, she decides, she will take home to her sister” (297-298).

In her essay “Between Island and Mainland: Shifting Perspectives in Cristina García’s *The Agüero Sisters*”, Ada Savin states that García uses the reunion of the Agüero sisters to reunite the “two Cubas”, extending the cultural critique to both shores. In Cuba, the disorder is counterbalanced by the vitality of the people; in Florida, however, “there reigns an opulent but sterile order. (...) This encounter results in the construction of a hybrid transcultural space”. Savin makes a parallel between The Mexican and the Cuban diaspora. For Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa, the Mexican-American border consists of a “1,950 mile-long open wound” where the third world “grates with the first and bleeds” (ANZALDÚA, 1999: 2-3). As Savin observes, this border separates but also unites the inhabitants of both sides of Rio Grande (SAVIN, 2003, 7). The lost land being contiguous to the new home makes it possible for immigrants to build a transnational experience, a mixture of kept traditions and new assimilations. Since Cuba and America are separated by the sea, the Cuban diasporic experience is one of extraterritoriality, but the preservation of culture and traditions still occurs through what the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz calls transculturation. Silvia Spitta analyzes this concept in “Transculturation, the Caribbean, and the Cuban-American Imaginary.” According to Spitta, Ortiz coined the neologism “to undermine the homogenizing impact implicit in the term ‘acculturation’”, which meant interactions between cultures. Ortiz considered the process rather as an imposition of alien values inside Cuba. He uses the example of the cultures of tobacco and sugar to illustrate his theory; while tobacco was a native culture, sugar had been brought to Cuba by the Spanish colonizers. In the long run, the sugar culture became the most important agriculture on the island, reshaping its landscape and establishing a new economic order in the country, whereas tobacco planters kept their importance not inside Cuba, but to the rest of the world. After the massive immigration waves to the U.S., the term “transculturation” evolved, being used to designate the process by which the émigrés negotiated between their own original culture and the new one, giving birth to a hyphenated community – the hybrid Cuban-Americans (SPITTA, 1997: 161-5).

Constancia is the hyphenated subject described by Spitta, Perez-Firmat and many other critics, a “Golden Exile” who arrived in the U.S. soon after the Cuban revolution willing to settle and embrace the new culture, but she is also connected to her past through religious practices such as *Santería*, and to her native language through code-switching. As for Reina, we can make an analogy between her and the native Cuban tobacco: her burned skin, healed by grafts from different donors, symbolizes the several races that contributed to the formation of the Cuban people.

The two novels analyzed in the present chapter have many aspects in common. One of them is subject fragmentation, which is the trade mark of postmodern identity. This fragmentation is caused by the multiple roles the subject has to play in postmodernity, some of them temporary, some of them permanent. The experiences of exile – another central theme in the novels – contribute to intensify this fragmentation, especially because the diasporic subject is forced to negotiate between his own original culture and that of the host country in order to cope with separation and assimilation. The result of this negotiation is the re-invention of the self and the constitution of a hybrid subject, who does not belong in any country and yet belongs to both. This fragmentation is underscored by the use of postmodern narrative strategies such as chronologically and geographically fragmented narratives, polyphony, and focalization. The novels also focus on the issue of maternal rejection and identity search. The return of three characters to Cuba help them achieve their goal. Lourdes rejects her “Cubanness” while Pilar comes to terms with her hybridity. Constancia learns the truth about her mother’s death, regaining control over her life and consequently over her face and her identity. Reina makes a reverse move by willingly moving to the U.S. for a final reunion with her sister and her past. Their connection with the homeland takes place on two levels: the concrete return and the maintenance of spiritual bonds, made evident through religious practices of *Santería* and passages of magical realism.



### CHAPTER III

#### *SANTERÍA AND MAGICAL REALISM: “BRIDGES TO CUBA”*

*Long ago, the sun married the moon, and they had many children. Their daughters were stars and stayed close to their mother's side. But their sons followed their father across the morning sky. Soon the father became cross and ordered his children home. The sons, small suns themselves, fell into the ocean and drowned. That is why the sun burns alone but the moon shares the sky.*

*Cristina García*

The displacement which is inherent to diaspora has deep effects on exiles. Unwillingly – or not – uprooted from their home country, they struggle with the nostalgia for all the familiar things they left behind and the difficulty to fit in a new culture without giving up their own. In the interview Cristina García gave to Scott Shibuya Brown, she states that she has had “the privilege of experiencing two cultures at very close range, participating in both and belonging to neither”.<sup>4</sup> While displaced people gradually assimilate the host culture, ties with their place of origin are maintained to a higher or lesser extent. In another interview, when asked why she writes so much about *Santería*, García answers that “the syncretism between the Yoruban religion that the slaves brought to the island and the Catholicism of their masters is the underpinning of Cuban culture” (GARCÍA, 2003, 255). Other Cuban-American writers share this belief. Maria Teresa Marrero, author of the essay “Historical and Literary *Santería*: Unveiling Gender and Identity in U.S. Cuban Literature”, recalls that her family, as well as most Cuban families, did not practice *Santería per se*, but then again they did not practice standard Catholicism either (MARRERO: 1997, 139). In García’s novels, some characters, including Constanca, Felicia, and Pilar, are actual practitioners of *Santería*, whereas others, although skeptical, dabble in some of its harmless superstitions. This explains why Celia, a true communist, “frequently stops by the ceiba tree in the Plaza de las Armas on her way home from Palmas Street. She places an

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<sup>4</sup> BROWN, Scott Shibuya. Online at [http://us.penguingroup.com/static/rguides/us/geographies\\_of\\_home.html](http://us.penguingroup.com/static/rguides/us/geographies_of_home.html)

orange and a few coins by its trunk, and says a short prayer for her daughter” (90). Reina is not a practitioner, but a believer; when her lover Pepín insists that “a persistent evil is interfering with [*santera*] La Sequita’s cure” and brings a rooster to her house to trace the evil, “absorb it, fling it back to its dank origin”, Reina agrees, because “she believes that the world functions through a myriad of vital linkages, animate and inanimate, infinite and infinitesimal, a great interdependency that survives in order to perpetuate growth and decay. Nothing, Reina knows, can be dismissed” (39). Her sister Constanca both practices *Santería* and listens to a popular radio show called *La Hora de los Milagros*, which tells about “Virgin sightings in and out the tourist hotels of Cozumel; a Chilean pig rancher with unmistakable stigmata on his palms; a long-barren woman who finally conceived a boy at Lake George” (25).

*Santería* is an important tradition which often connects diasporic people to their home country. In *Santería: the Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America*, Cuban-American Miguel A. de la Torre, director and associate-professor at Iliff College of Theology, where he teaches Social Ethics at the Justice and Peace Institute, explains its importance to Latin immigrants:

“Those of us raised in this spiritual environment survived the alienation of living in a new country because of the shared sacred space created by the tension existing between Christianity and *Santería*. For my family and myself, *Santería* became a source of comfort, community and empowerment for those who, like us, were refugees navigating the difficulties and struggles of trying to survive and adapt to exilic life. While there was no confusion among those of us practicing *Santería* concerning the difference between us and the priests and nuns, still an ambiguous religiosity developed, fusing the elements of these diverse traditions in order to resist what we perceived to be the danger of assimilating into the dominant Euroamerican ethos” (TORRE: 2004, 2).

Torre associates *Santería* with resistance against complete acculturation, while Maria Teresa Marrero underscores the fundamental role which *Santería* has played in the development of a Cuban cultural identity:

Foregrounding the role of *Santería* in contemporary U.S. Cuban literature punctuates the continuing role that this African religious tradition has played in the development of a Cuban cultural identity. It is a historical and cultural dynamic that offers a relatively unexplored avenue in the field of Latino ethnic studies. It implies that liminar strategies of cultural retention may be taking place within some U.S. Latino Caribbean groups (MARRERO: 1997, 155).

Both in *Dreaming in Cuban* and in *The Agüero Sisters*, *Santería* functions as a powerful element that connects the characters to their homeland. In the Introduction to Migene González-Wippler's *Santería: The Religion*, Dr. Charles Welti, Deputy Chief Medical Examiner of Dade County, points out that for many Americans *Santería* may only be “voodoo dolls pierced with needles, the ritualistic sacrifice of defenseless animals, and totally incomprehensible states of spirit possession”. However, he believes *Santería* is “a fascinating religion with a most interesting history, colorful ceremonies, a rich mythology and a profound philosophy”.

Anthropologist and sociologist Migene González-Wippler has carried out extensive research and published several books on this subject. She explains that *Santería*, also known in Cuba as *Regla de Osha*, comes from Nigeria, country of origin of the Yoruba people, many of whom were captured, brought to the New World and sold as slaves between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. “The Yoruba brought with them the colorful mythology of their religion, known in Cuba as *Lucumí* and in Brazil as *Macumba* and *Candomblé*”<sup>5</sup>. Extensive studies of the Yoruba religious practices have shown a strong link to the ancient Greek religion. “Their deities, known as *orishas*, are believable and extraordinarily human in their behavior” (2). In Latin America, the number of *orishas* fluctuates between twenty and twenty-five, whereas in Nigeria it exceeds six hundred. Upon their arrival at the New World, members of different African tribes were settled in different regions of Latin America, and their religious practices were influenced by their surroundings, as well as by the different languages spoken and the local religious rituals. By borrowing freely from local customs, ideas and religious beliefs, they incorporated large diversity into their own magic ceremonies, giving thus birth to different ramifications of the original religion: the *Voodoo* in Haiti, the *Candomblé* in Brazil, and the *Lucumí* in Cuba.

The Cuban *lucumís* were deeply influenced by the Catholic iconolatry of their Spanish masters. In their efforts to hide their magical and religious practices from the eyes of the Spaniards, they identified their deities with the saints of the Catholic church. This was the beginning of *Santería*, which is a term derived from the Spanish word ‘santo’ (saint), and literally means ‘the worship of saints’. *Santería* is a typical case of syncretism, the spontaneous, popular combination or reconciliation of different religious beliefs. This syncretism can

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<sup>5</sup>GONZÁLEZ-WIPPLER, Migene. *Santería: The Religion*. St. Paul, MN. Llewellyn Publications, 1989, p.1. From now on, all references to this book will be made in the text only by the page number.

be appreciated in the fact that all of the Yoruba deities worshiped in *Santería* have been identified with Catholic saints” (3).

The slaves’ attempts to hide their *orishas* under the names of Catholic saints did not last long. As most of their rites took place in the woods, the Spaniards soon found out about them and started persecuting their practitioners, forcing them to conduct their rites in secrecy. All the rituals, especially the initiations, were surrounded by mystery and strict vows of a secrecy that had never existed in Nigeria and has become ingrained in the believers to such an extent that it is still observed by the practitioners of *Santería* today. This is one of the reasons why it is so closed to outsiders. “The vows of secrecy, which once meant the difference between life and death to the Yoruba, became an intrinsic part of the *Santería* tradition, and the *santeros* are adamant about observing it, even though it is no longer necessary” (4).

*Santería* involves basically four elements: stones, seashells, water and herbs. Without them, there is no *Santería*. Stones, or *otanes*, are vital because the spiritual essence of the *orishas* is present in the groups of stones that represent them. Every offering has to be made on top of the tureen which contains the stones. The seashells, or *diloggún*, have great importance, as they are the mouthpieces of the *orishas* in the divination system. Each *orisha* possesses his or her own set of twenty-one cowrie shells, which is kept in the tureen with the *otanes*. Water, or *omi tutu*, the third essential constituent of *Santería*, is used by a *santero* during any ritual. It cleans and purifies. “It is the true elixir of the saints” (22). Herbs, or *ewe*, are the fourth element: plants, roots, leaves, and flowers. They are used to cleanse, to cure, to cast spells. Again, each *orisha* has his or her own set of herbs. Cleansing ceremonies are known as *despojos*, and every *santero* is a competent herbalist who can combine the herbs to fit the believer’s needs as well as the *orisha*’s designs. In García’s novels the four elements play an important role – such as the herbs Herminia gathers in *Dreaming in Cuban* or the shells set by Oscar Piñango to divine the future. Cermonies are often described not as exotic behavior but as integral parts of some characters’ lives.

*Santería* is thus a magico-religious system that has its roots in nature and natural forces. Each *orisha* or saint is identified with a force of nature, a human quality, and a catholic saint. Syncretism varies from country to country, even from region to region. The same *orisha* may be associated with different saints. However, *santeros* claim that

syncretism does not imply identification. An orisha is not the saint he or she is syncretized with; rather, they share the same characteristics.

In Cuba, above all there is *Oloddumare*, immanent, omnipotent, whose essence transcends comprehension: in other words, God. *Obatalá* is the father, the creator of mankind, and symbolizes purity and peace, syncretized with Our Lady of Mercy; *Yemanyá* is identified with the sea and with motherhood: she protects women and is syncretized with Our Lady of Regla. *Oshún* symbolizes the rivers and protects love, marriage and fertility. She is syncretized with Our Lady of Charity. *Oggún* is identified with all metals and protects doctors, policemen, soldiers and all who work with or near metals. He is syncretized with St. Peter. *Elegguá* is the patron of crossroads and controls change and destiny, being syncretized with St. Anthony. *Oyá* symbolizes the winds and is the owner of cemeteries, the watcher of the doorway between life and death. She is syncretized with Our Lady of Candelaria. *Changó* rules fire, thunder, and lightning, symbolizing power, control over enemies and general difficulties. He is syncretized with St. Barbara.

Several *orishas* are referred to in the novels I have been discussing. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, when Pilar enters a house that sells herbs and other religious goods and selects a red-and-white beaded necklace, she is instantly recognized by the *santero*/store owner as a daughter of *Changó*. On her way home, her “father” saves her from being raped: she is attacked by a group of young boys who threaten her with a knife to her throat, drag her under an elm and start suckling her breasts. When they find the herbs, they make a cigarette with them and smoke it, but they leave without causing her further harm (202). Pilar is empowered by the strength and determination she “inherits” from her father. It is this empowerment that strengthens her decision to go back to Cuba.

The very title of the chapter implies that Pilar, Lourdes and Celia share the same affiliation: “Daughters of *Changó*”. In this chapter, Jorge admits that he was to blame for Celia’s rejecting Lourdes. He tells his daughter that he went on a long trip because he wanted to break his wife, punish her for being in love with another man. On his return, Celia had gone insane. One might say that Jorge bent but did not break his wife, since Celia ends up recovering her sanity. Although Lourdes does not show affinities with her mother or her daughter, the three women share an iron will.

*Santera* Herminia Delgado, daughter of the *babalawo* (high priest of *Santería*) who initiated Pilar’s sister Felicia as a *santera*, is also a daughter of *Changó*: when Pilar and her nephew Ivanito visit her, “She’s wearing a turban layered high on her head, and

she sits very straight. A bunch of red and white beaded necklaces click together on her lap as she speaks” (231). She acknowledges Pilar’s religious affiliation by taking her to *Changó*’s shrine, which contains the *orisha*’s favorite fruits: apples and bananas. She also welcomes Pilar to the new religion: “*Bienvenida, hija*” (232).

All these women, daughters of *Changó*, share their spiritual father’s characteristics: they are powerful and determined to face and overcome whatever difficulties they come across. However, these qualities of strength and power fail to manifest in Felicia, another daughter of *Changó*. García discloses Felicia’s affiliation only at her funeral, when her friends of the *casa de santo* garnish her body with smoked fish, corn and okra – food sacred to *Changó* (214). Her being a *santera* herself makes it all the more difficult to understand why her life goes downhill, leading her to sink into disease, insanity and death. González-Wippler offers an explanation for *santeros* who die in extreme pain and suffering:

The *orishas* are essentially a source of comfort and help in times of need to the practitioners of *Santería*, but they are also severe upholders of strictly moral behavior. Any deviation from the “straight and narrow” is swiftly and severely punished by the saints. (...) Those who break the strict rules set by the deities pay dearly for their actions. The *orishas* punish, and sometimes kill, by means of the same things they are said to control (69).

One possible explanation for all Felicia’s mishaps – syphilis, insanity, child neglect, obsessions – is that she never showed the strength that was expected from a true daughter of *Changó*. She is incapable of resisting her sexual urges – she gets syphilis as a result of her bad choices. She is also incapable of being a good mother – she neglects her daughters and is no mother to her son. She is incapable of leaving her first husband, who mistreats her, so she intentionally burns his face. She disregards her *santero* instructions and has sex with Ernesto, who dies in a tragic fire accident. She abandons her children for her third husband Otto; when she realizes she cannot choose between him and her family, she kills Otto. Her death can thus be seen as a punishment from *Changó* for her transgressions. Herminia narrates her withering and death:

When you make a saint, the saint takes good care of you. But Felicia showed none of these blessings. Her eyes dried out like an old woman’s and her fingers curled like claws until she could hardly pick up her spoon. Even her hair, which had been as black as a crow’s, grew colorless in scruffy patches on her skull. Whenever she spoke, her lips blurred to a dull line in her face (189).

Felicia's miraculous transformation after she dies can be explained as a sign of divine forgiveness once the punishment is inflicted. As Felicia's friends prepare her body for the funeral, they discover "that the terrible lumps on Felicia's head had disappeared, and her skin was as smooth as the pink lining of a conch. Her eyes, too, had regained their original green" (214). In her book, González-Wippler offers a similar account of a *santero* who had died of AIDS, allegedly acquired as punishment for his bad behavior. He, too, withered and died in great pain, but at his funeral, "when the ritual cleansing ceremonies were done, he regained his lost beauty", looking "as he had before his illness. In death, *Obatalá* had given him both peace and forgiveness" (70-71).

Another possible explanation for Felicia's fate is offered by Maria Teresa Marrero, who points out that "Felicia can be described as a liminal character" living on the border of normalcy, both psychologically and socially. As a white woman, "[Felicia] does what white women usually don't do: she marries 'down'", wedding a black man who abuses her and gives her syphilis. Furthermore, she embraces Afro-Cuban culture openly, which in Cuba "is specifically coded as an interracial act." While she stays under the protection of her black *Santería* family, she is balanced. However, when she returns home after her initiation, she feels her children and her mother condemn her. She tries to overcome this ultimate rejection, but she cannot. "She does not fit in either world, and subsequently her problems can only be resolved through death" (MARRERO: 1997, 153-4). In the novel there is no judgement passed on Felicia's actions either by the characters or by a narrator – or explanation offered about her fate.

The *orishas* that appear in the second novel were also carefully chosen by García in their representation through the characters. In *The Agüero Sisters*, Reina's biological father is a son of *Changó* – his red-and-white beaded bracelet reveals his affiliation to Ignacio when they have their only encounter. *Changó's* power is spread over Blanca, who abandons her husband and daughter to follow her tall, mulatto lover. Constanica is a daughter of *Oshún*, which is revealed by the *orisha's* color – yellow – and food – pumpkin – used in the *ebbó* ceremony: "Constancia falls to the floor and grabs a nearby pumpkin, smashes it at the *santero's* feet. (...) Pulp and seeds spatter across the room, stain the hem of *Oshún's* gold lame gown" (259). Reina is not a practitioner, but the *santero* acknowledges her as a daughter of *Yemanyá*. When he says that the river – *Oshún* – flows to the sea – *Yemanyá* – he is implying that Constanica must move towards a reconciliation with her sister. *Oshún* rules over the rivers, marriage and fertility; Constanica respects marriage as an institution, and her fertility encompasses

both her offspring and her successful business. *Yemanyá* rules over the sea and motherhood. Reina loves the sea and is strongly connected to her mother and to her daughter Dulce. “It seems to Reina that everything comes to an end on land, rooted in accumulation. The sea is much more forgiving” (199). This preference for the sea over the land suggests that to a daughter of *Yemanyá* the ocean is “home”.

*Santería*, like the ancient Yoruba tradition, “is based on the concepts of *ashé* and *ebbó*” (5). *Ashé* means “so be it”. It is a symbol of the power with which *Oloddumare* created the universe. The *orishas* are the repositories of *Oloddumare*’s *ashé*, and all rituals, invocations and spells are meant to obtain *ashé* from the *orishas*. Once a believer gets *ashé*, all problems are solved, enemies are subdued, money is acquired and love is conquered. *Ashé* also means power and authority. *Ebbó*, on the other hand, “is the sacrifice, the means through which the *orishas* are pleased so they will give us their *ashé*. All the rites and spells in *Santería* are part of the *ebbó* concept” (5). Sacrifice does not always require a sacrificial victim. “Blood is the essence of life and is not to be shed lightly” (5). For small problems, small offerings are called for – fruit, flowers, candles, the *orisha*’s favorite foods. For big problems, larger offerings – and blood is called for when great forces are at play – when the life of a person is in danger, or a major undertaking is involved. The kind of *ebbó* is always determined by the *orisha*, and his or her designs are always interpreted by a *santero* or *babalawo* through the *dilogún*, the divination system also known as “the seashells”.

When Constanica receives the letter from her uncle Damasio which reveals the existence of her father’s diary, she once again feels the need for spiritual guidance to make her next move. She sees the *santero* Oscar Piñango for an *ebbó* and a consultation to the seashells:

He returns with a pitcher of fresh water and a plump guinea hen. (...) He instructs Constanica to tug the bird’s throat in respect for its life sacrifice. (...) Oscar Piñango tears off its head. He directs the blood in widening circles over the *orisha*’s sacred stones. Then he traces the pattern of blood with a thin stream of honey and sprays it all with a mouthful of rum. After the final candles are lit, he stuffs the guinea hen’s carcass to bulging with candies, coconut, and toasted corn, fashioning a small nest of death. (...) Oscar Piñango blesses the sixteen cowries, then shakes them in his hands before throwing them on the mat” (258-9).

When Felicia’s father dies, her *Madrina* calls her for a cleansing ceremony involving blood shedding, “a small offering to Santa Bárbara”. Felicia, although an



initiated *santera* herself, hates rituals involving goats, but it is precisely what *Elleguá* requests. Felicia faints on *La Madrina*'s saint-floor room when the *santero* pierces the goat's neck "with a butcher knife, directing the stream of blood into the cay eggs. The goat quivers, then is still. The *santero* shakes a box of salt on its head, then pours honey over the offering". Felicia's resistance to the sacrifice shows her rebellion against one of the most important principles of *Santería*: the compliance with the *orishas*' orders and demands. Herminia warns her that she might "make the gods angry", and later reminds her that she "can't dictate to the gods" (14-15).

*Orishas* play a very important role in the lives of the followers of *Santería*. In fact, its practice is spread in all social classes, both in Cuba and in the U.S. After the revolution, Catholic practices on the island were prohibited and labeled as "antisocial behavior". Castro, however, never banned *Santería* altogether; "Whenever an initiation or a *bembé* (feast in honor of the saints) is planned, the *santero* in charge of the ceremonies must ask special permission from authorities. This permission is usually granted without any difficulties" (67). One of the possible explanations for this liberality is the huge importance of *Santería* in the cultural, sociological, and spiritual development of the Cuban people. "*Santería* is an intrinsic part of Cuban music, religious practices, and social structure" (68). Another explanation is that *El Líder* is a true believer, being a practitioner of *Santería* himself. González-Wippler states that "all presidents of Cuba have been initiated *santeros*", adding that many Cubans believe Castro only won the war to overthrow Fulgencio Batista because of the many *ebbós* made on his behalf and that he was unable to destroy Batista, who escaped to Spain, because Batista was "a son of *Changó* and a renowned *santero*" (69).

Because of the spiritual comfort and guidance they provide, *santeros* play a fundamental role in the life of a community. It is therefore easily understandable that, when Cubans moved to America to live in exile, they held on to a tradition that is essential to define both their nationality and their identity. Harry G. Lefever discusses the practice of *Santería* in the United States in "When the Saints Go Riding in: *Santería* in Cuba and the United States". He points out that it is difficult to precise the number of practitioners in the U.S. due to the secrecy associated with the religion. He also states that, although there were a few *santeros* in America before 1959, and in spite of the fact that some of the middle and upper-class immigrants who arrived in the 1960s were followers of *Santería*, it was largely the 125,000 who arrived in the 1980 Mariel boat

lift – the *marielitos* – “who took with them the beliefs and rituals that have provided the basis for the *Santería* that is practiced in the United States today” (LEFEVER: 1996, 4).

An example of syncretism in action in the U.S. is the cult to Our Lady of La Caridad del Cobre, syncretized with *Oshún* – one of the most popular *orishas* in the *Santería* pantheon. The high mass held in her honor every September 8 at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City attracts a huge number of *santeros*. Many of them wear yellow – the *orisha*’s color – and more than half of the people present to the service – traditionally said in Spanish – wear *Oshún*’s beaded necklace, made of amber-colored beads. This devotion of *Santería* followers to a Catholic saint underscores the strength of syncretism and the power of the belief in the magic of *Santería*, which remain strong even as the exiles establish themselves in another country and assimilate a new culture.

The magical element that is an integrant part of *Santería* is the core of a narrative strategy which is so dear to postmodern writers, especially Latin American ones: magical realism. These two elements combined provide a powerful connection of the characters living in exile with their homeland. Every passage of magical realism highlights this connection.

Brazilian scholar Irlemar Chiampi, in *O Realismo Maravilhoso*<sup>6</sup>, discusses the theory of magical realism in Latin America. The term “magical realism” goes back to 1925, when the historian and critic Franz Roh coined it for the first time to describe post-expressionist painting techniques used by German artists who aimed at reaching an exemplary universal meaning, not by a process of generalization and abstraction, but by representing concrete and palpable things in order to reveal the mystery they concealed (21). From then to the 1940s, when Latin-American criticism appropriated the term, magical realism has come a long way. It is part of a powerful phenomenon in fictional writing that encompasses theme complexity, which is, in its own way, realistic, and a new aesthetics that points to a new – magical – vision of reality (19).

According to Chiampi, the realism of the 1920s and 1930s, which can be observed in regionalist classics and indigenous novels, had grown old, becoming exhausted and mechanical. The description of natural landscapes and of men fighting nature had lost impact because of excessive use of stereotyped symbolism; the denouncing of social inequalities, of the explorer-versus-explored economic model had gotten a pamphletary connotation that no longer appealed to the reader; the

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<sup>6</sup> CHIAMPI, Irlemar. “*O Realismo Maravilhoso*. São Paulo, SP: Editora Perspectiva, 1980. From now on, all references to this book will be made in the text only by the page number. My translations.

psychological motivations of a central hero, the manichaeist approach to the plot, were unable to absorb a changing, heterogeneous reality (20).

As a reaction to this crystallized narrative model, the new Latin American novel was beginning to show the power which would bring it international recognition in the 1960s. Names like Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Agustín Ypañez, Juan Carlos Onetti and Juan Rulfo offered a rupture with the traditional scheme of the realist discourse by experimenting with other solutions to build a pluralistic image of the real. These first literary productions were the seeds of the revolutionary forms that blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s, when new solutions were offered, involving parody and questioning of the novel as a genre. Among these solutions or strategies, Chiampi lists disintegration of the linear logic of the narrative, fragmentation of the chronology, multiplicity of points of view, space and action, a certain erasure of the qualities of the hero, as well as more dynamics in the relationship narrator-reader. The adoption of the term 'magical realism' represented the acknowledgment of a new attitude of the narrator before the real, a new way of depicting it. And this new way, sometimes strange, complex, esoteric and lucid, frequently subverting expectations and surprising the reader, has been identified with magic (21).

It is noteworthy that the widely recognized unofficial manifest of magical realism appeared much earlier in 1949, when Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier published *El Reino de Este Mundo*. In the prologue, Carpentier sets the rules for a new fictional orientation. He begins by criticizing "the exhausting attempt to invoke the marvelous which has characterized certain European literatures of the last thirty years", adding that "determined to invoke the marvelous at any cost, the miracle workers turned into bureaucrats" (CARPENTIER, 1984: 3). He urges other writers to turn to the Americas for inspiration, rather than to European fantasies. He claims that the American continent is the source of unexpected wonders which emerge from the alteration of reality. In Carpentier's own words,

What many forget, in disguising themselves as cheap magicians, is that the marvelous becomes unequivocally marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (a miracle), a privileged revelation of reality, an unaccustomed or singularly favorable illumination of the previously unremarked riches of reality, an amplification of the measures and categories of reality, perceived with peculiar intensity due to an exaltation of the spirit which elevates it to a kind of "limit state" (CARPENTIER, 1984: 4).

Carpentier claims that “the sense of the marvelous presupposes faith”, explaining that only the ones who believe in saints can be cured by saints. He states that “the marvelous born of disbelief – as in the long years of surrealism – was never more than a literary ruse” that becomes tedious after a certain time. Roland Walter expresses a similar reasoning in the essay “The Cultural Politics of Dislocation and Relocation in the Novels of Ana Castillo”, pointing out that only through faith can the intertwining of natural and supernatural elements of reality in a narrative be facilitated and perceived as factual reality (WALTER, 1998: 7). In the conclusion of his prologue, Carpentier proposes a new representation of American reality because, according to his final question, “What is the history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous in the real?” (CARPENTIER, 1984, 5–6).

What Carpentier proposes becomes a new narrative strategy, postmodern in the sense that it de-naturalizes the natural and subverts reality, which fits like a glove the political scenario of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, when several countries were governed by dictators and freedom of press was non-existing. By using magical realism, writers were able to unveil and denounce the arbitrariness of the political regimes without being censored. This is the case, to name but a few, of Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez, Dias Gomes and Jorge Amado. More recently, in the North American scene, names like chicana writer Ana Castillo, African-American Toni Morrison and Cuban-American Cristina García have resorted to magical realism to unveil and denounce post-colonial oppression and exile identity issues. Roland Walter discusses the role of magical realism in Ana Castillo’s novels, pointing out that it has “an ideological utopian function” to find “imaginary solutions to existing social conflicts” (WALTER: 1998, 1). Priscilla Hunter, in her essay “Women and New Women: Confluence of Super Realism in Four Novels of Cristina García and Toni Morrison”, analyzes the purposes of magical realism in these writers’ works, stating that it has “a defamiliarizing function to fuddy our perspective and refocus it, bring into a new alignment and reshape the realities underlying social conflict and cultural contest in America” (HUNTER, 1993: 3). If in Toni Morrison’s case the social conflict has its origin in racial issues, in García’s it is caused by the displacement experienced by diasporic subjects. In all novels, there is a clear need to resist acculturation and preserve a cultural identity. In *Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction*, Karen Christian remarks that many of the magic realist myths of Latin American culture appear in the folklore of Latina/o communities in the U.S. in the shape of miracle

stories, stating a “transnational” quality of Latina/o traditions (CHRISTIAN, 1997: 126). As Roland Walter states in another essay, “Realismo Mágico e Oralidade na Literatura Chicana e Afro-Americana Contemporânea dos EUA”, magical realism has a “utopic function of liberation, salvation and preservation as a means to resist discontinuity, fragmentation, and individual and collective alienation” (WALTER: 1998, 279 – my translation).

Another writer who resorts to magical realism is Dominican Loida Maritza Pérez, author of *Geographies of Home* (2000), in which she explores the definitions of home through the varying perceptions and memories of a large Latino family that immigrates to the U.S. in order to escape the atrocities of dictator Rafael Trujillo. When asked why she mixes “elements of magic and the surreal” in her fiction, she explains: “These elements were essential because in the novel, as in life itself, which is surreal, I wanted both the magic and the mundane to coexist.” She believes the soul is capable “of much more than science can measure”, and she refuses the idea that life is linear or logical. She wants the readers to perceive reality as “an ever-shifting thing”, and “the act of reading as disconcerting as life is for the characters.”<sup>7</sup>

Exploring new narrative possibilities seems to be a key to postmodern Latina writers. When asked by Scott Shibuya Brown to discuss some of the magical realism in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cristina García states that “The South American variety particularly resonated with me and gave me a tremendous sense of possibility. What I liked to explore is the borderland between what is only remotely possible and what is utterly impossible” (GARCÍA: 2003, 254). What, in novels dealing with Cuban exiles and identity issues, is remotely possible, or utterly impossible? The return to Cuba. For some exiles, this return is remotely possible, but they do not wish to accomplish it for fear of finding a country so different from the one they idealize; for most, this return is utterly impossible for political reasons, which is the case of Heberto, Constancia’s husband, who longs for his homeland but cannot openly go back. This is why he plots to cross the ocean together with other political exiles and attempts to overthrow Castro’s regime. *Dreaming in Cuban*, as well as *The Agüero Sisters*, is permeated with passages of magical realism that point to the connection exiles have with the island – which gives them a strong sense of empowerment through the maintenance of their traditions – to the remote possibility of going back to the island and finding the part of their identity

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<sup>7</sup> Interview online at [http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/geographies\\_of\\_home.html](http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/geographies_of_home.html)  
PEREZ, Loida Maritza. *Geographies of Home*. Penguin Books, 2000

they left behind, and to the utter impossibility of reconstructing the identity they had before exile.

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, magical realism passages are often associated with the color blue, which is present in the Cuban sea, in the Cuban sky, in the Cuban rivers, flowers, and birds. The opening scene of the novel, when the ghost of Celia's husband appears to her to announce his own death, is wrapped in blue: in "a radiance like a shooting star", he walks on the blue ocean, staring at her with blue eyes that "are like lasers in the night". His fingers emit beams that are "five blue shields". The color shines through the house, as "the porch turns blue, ultraviolet", and through Celia, as she realizes that "her hands, too, are blue" (5). At the moment of his death, in New York, the nun who works as a nurse at the hospital reports that she "saw a blue light coming from your father's room. (...) He was fully dressed, standing there erect and healthy, except that his head and hands glowed as if lit from within. (...) He put on his hat, passed through the window and headed south, leaving a trail of phosphorus along the East River" (19). Jorge dies in the U.S. and immediately crosses the Atlantic to see his wife and to see the homeland he had been forced away from – magical realism connects husband, wife, and birthplace, dissolving geographical impossibilities.

Perhaps it is García's attraction for the borderline between the possible and the impossible which accounts for yet another explanation for the blue that surrounds Jorge: cobalt radiation used in his cancer treatment – albeit indirectly suggested. It is irreverent Pilar who muses about this line of treatment: "A strange color for healing, I thought. Nothing we eat is blue, (...) so why didn't the doctors change the color of those damn beams to green? We eat green, it's healthy" (33). Blue represents a supposedly better life back in Cuba, but it also represents death.

Another connection made possible by magical realism is observed in the telepathic conversations Pilar, in New York, has with her grandmother in Cuba. It is a time when the grandmother passes on family tradition to her granddaughter:

Abuela Celia and I write to each other sometimes, but mostly I hear her speaking to me at night just before I fall asleep. She tells me stories about her life and what the sea was like that day. She seems to know everything that's happened to me and tells me not to mind my mother too much. Abuela Celia says she wants to see me again. She tells me she loves me (29).

Relating this passage to Sonia Torres's analysis of the complex situation of Cuba and Cubans, we can say that Pilar attempts to cross a "border" which is that of a

divided nation, a political border. Torres affirms that the narratives produced by Cubans in the U.S. are an attempt to historicize the relationship between the island and its giant neighbor. In a similar way, the telepathic conversations between Pilar and her *abuela* try to historicize the relationship between her two halves: the Cuban and the American ones (TORRES: 2001, 163-4).

An essential way of keeping in touch with the past, with the homeland and with the traditions which constitute one's culture is through memory. In "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Narratives: The Case of Caribbean Latina Fiction", Maria Luisa Ochoa Fernández observes that remembering is crucial in exile literature, considering that being in touch with two cultures gives the writer a "unique position to tell their stories, their family stories"<sup>8</sup> (13). Pilar is the character who magically holds the torch of memory, since her mother refuses her Cuban heritage: "I was only two years old when I left Cuba but I remember everything that's happened to me since I was a baby, even word-for-word conversations" (26). Her grandmother foresees this prodigious memory, as she writes to her lover in Spain: "The revolution is eleven days old. My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today. (...) She will remember everything" (245).

Whereas Pilar is the repository of her family's memory, Lourdes wants to forget her "Cubanness". Rejected by her mother and forced to leave her country, she allegedly breaks all the bonds with Cuba, allowing only her father to come back from her past to treat a cancer in the U.S. It is not by chance that her magical bond with her history takes place in the shape of conversations with her father's ghost. After his death, Jorge del Pino frequently appears to his daughter. The two of them have long talks. In fact, Lourdes seems closer to her dead father than to any living person. During these conversations, he tries to soften her heart and to convince Lourdes that both her mother and her daughter love her: "Pilar doesn't hate you, *hija*. She just hasn't learned to love you yet" (74).

When Lourdes is raped by the Cuban soldier, magic realism sharpens her sense of smell so that she can foresee – or better saying, "foresmell" her raper's future:

She smelled his face on his wedding day, his tears when his son drowned at the park. She smelled his rotting leg in Africa, where it would be blown off his body on a moonless savanna night.

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<sup>8</sup> FERNÁNDEZ, Maria Luisa Ochoa. Online at <http://www.uhu.es/hum676/revista/ochoa.pdf>

She smelled him when he was old and unbathed and the flies  
blackened his eyes” (72-3).

It is almost as if in this moment of “experience-of-limits” Lourdes gains access to “memories” that have not happened yet. The disclosure of the soldier’s future helps Lourdes transform this painful memory into a more bearable one and feel avenged to a certain extent. If the rapist makes her life miserable, he will have a miserable future himself, and his victim may find a certain relief in this knowledge.

If in *Dreaming in Cuban* magical realism serves the purpose of connecting characters with their homeland, their past, and their memory, in *The Agüero Sisters* its purpose is to discuss identity issues. Constancia, like Lourdes, denies her “Cubanness” and embraces the American Way of Life, trying not to remember the life she left behind when she moved away from Cuba. She tries not to think of her mother’s rejection, her father’s suicide, and the mystery surrounding her mother’s death. However, these unresolved issues surface with the aid of magical realism, transforming her face into her mother’s and thus making her identity conflicts explicit, forcing her to return to Cuba in order to disclose the truth, accept her heritage and recover her face and her identity.

This journey back to her origins is ultimately a reconciliation with her “hybrid existence in-between cultures” (FERNÁNDEZ, 1). Only through this return will she reach what Perez Firmat, when defining biculturalism, calls “the equilibrium, however tense and precarious, between the two contributing cultures” (FIRMAT: 1994, 6).

This reconciliation starts with Constancia’s transfiguration, made possible through magical realism. It gives her the possibility of accepting herself as a synthesis of two cultures, and viewing this biculturation “as a source of enrichment” (FERNÁNDEZ, 6).

Reina, on the other hand, does not need reconciliation with her hybrid self, for she spent her whole life in Cuba and decided to go to America in an act of free will. It is by choice that she leaves her place of birth, and she feels comfortable in both countries. Her body, patched with skin grafts from various donors, is a symbol of her hybridity, of the synthesis of the several peoples that originated the Cuban people. Her reconciliation involves her sister instead. At the same time Constancia, in Cuba, learns the truth and reconciles with her past, she is finally able to bond with Reina. The bond Constancia feels in Cuba is shared by her sister in America with the aid of magic realism. On the night when Constancia has the truth about Blanca revealed – Ignacio pretended to shoot a humming-bird but aimed at his wife instead – Reina, sharing the same night, the same



stars, the same moon, allows this moon that shines both in Cuba and in Florida to fertilize her, connecting her with her mother and her sister at one time, feeling the fluttering inside her:

Reina senses the moon sinking in within her, lowering itself in her womb. She arches her back, and a tiny clot quickens in the storm of moist lightening, quickens until the first fragile tendril takes root. It shatters the dense heavens within, brings Reina a wave of contracting, immaculate pleasure. (...) Tonight, Reina knows, she will sleep deeply, a complete, satisfied sleep. In another month, the bit of flesh at her center will grow to a delicate skeleton, to the size of a humming-bird. Already, Reina feels it fluttering in its net of blood, fluttering its steady work toward eternity (294).

The reference to a humming-bird both in the description of Blanca's death and of the new being that is magically forming inside Reina may suggest that she has finally accepted her mother's death and is willing to move on with her life. Reina's pregnancy magically connects island and continent. The moon that fertilizes her is the same moon that witnesses Constancia's acceptance of her history, and her coming to terms with it.

The four characters – Lourdes, Pilar, Constancia and Reina – are fragmented, hybrid subjects seeking for an unattainable unity. Lourdes rejects her origins, but keeps a connection with her Cuban father, and discovers her “Cubanness” when, back to Cuba, she dances with her nephew Ivanito; Constancia also rejects her heritage but keeps a connection with Cuba by resorting to *Santería*; Pilar wonders about her “Cubanness” and ends up finding out she synthesizes all elements of both cultures, with a predominance of her “Americanness”; Reina attains complete reconciliation with her hybridity by making amends with her sister, but she never denied the different cultural contributions that have shaped the Cuban people – and her body, made of grafts of different donors, is the very symbol of this hybridity. *Santería* and magical realism are the elements used by Cristina García to underscore the importance of tradition, memory and biculturalism in the construction of her characters.

## CONCLUSION

In an interview Cristina García gave in 2003 to the online newsletter “At Home on the Page”, she said:

The thing I hate most in the Cuban context is this attempt to limit what it means to be Cuban. Not too long ago at a reading I gave in Puerto Rico, a man stood up and said, "You can't be Cuban because you write in English." The point for me is that there is no one Cuban exile. I am out here in California and may not fit in anywhere, but I am Cuban too. I think I am trying to stake out a broader territory (GARCÍA, 2003:1).

If it is difficult to define what it is like to be Cuban in the U.S., it is even more difficult to define what it is like to be Cuban in Cuba. In the introduction to *Bridges to Cuba: Puentes a Cuba*, Ruth Behar explains that the blockage imposed on the island by the American government suddenly severed a hundred years of communication between the two countries. The fact that the émigrés rejected their homeland, combined with the rigid censorship imposed by Castro about what could and could not be said about Cuba only resulted in distorted visions of Cuba, with outsiders seeing the island either as a utopia of happiness and equality or as a hell of deprivations from which *balseros* tried to escape. Consequently, there is little room “for a more nuanced and complex vision of how Cubans on the island and in 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, 1995: 2). As a one-and-a-halfer, Behar speaks from a place of authority. Like Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban*, she longed to return to Cuba and see the island with her own eyes. When she finally did so, she concluded that “the border with the United States is an open wound” (6-7) – a statement very similar to the one made by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands* and already referred to in this dissertation. Having to face her family’s terror that she would be killed or forever held as a prisoner on the island, she was surprised to find there a parallel second generation of young Cubans who had been taught to “view the bridge to the United States as burnt and broken” (7). The many other exiles she later met in different cities in the U.S., all second-generation Cubans, were also trying to “articulate their sense of Cuban identity, without wallowing in nostalgia or being naïve about the shortcomings of the revolution” (7).

James Clifford affirms that the responses to dwelling-in-displacement vary according to how temporary or permanent the diaspora is and according to the possibility of returning periodically to the place of origin (CLIFFORD, 1994: 310). I

would also add that these responses depend on the circumstances in which the displacement occurred. Cuban artist Ada Mendieta, for instance, was separated from her parents and sent to Iowa through the Peter Pan Operation, which aimed at saving young Cubans from the “evil influences of communism”. She never overcame a sense of orphanhood, even though her art was widely acknowledged and praised – she was the first Cuban-American artist to have her work exhibited in Cuba (BEHAR, 2005:10). Garcías’s characters also display a variety of responses to exile. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Lourdes fiercely refuses her “Cubanness”, embracing the new culture and trying to erase the original one. Her husband, on the other hand, never really fits in. “It became clear to Lourdes shortly after she and Rufino moved to New York that he would never adapt (...). He could not be transplanted” (129). Pilar is deeply connected to the island, although she was taken to exile at a very young age. In *The Agüero Sisters*, Constanica perpetuates the capitalistic practices of her family in Cuba by paving her way to fortune and success with the nostalgia of the Cuban-American community in Miami. At the same time, she keeps a critical eye on both American and Cuban societies. When her daughter Isabel tells her mother about the natural childbirth classes she has been taking, she says her instructor compared having a baby to pushing out a large grapefruit. “*Una toronja?* After all these years, Constanica is still astounded at the understatement of certain Americans” (213). In another passage, in Cuba, she gives the hotel clerk a ten-dollar bill and makes “an instant friend” (291), in a reference to the harsh living conditions endured by post-revolution Cubans and their eagerness to accept American currency. Constanica’s husband Heberto, together with other Cuban men, plots to invade Cuba and overthrow Castro’s regime, being killed in an unsuccessful attempt to do so. His wife, however, does not view him as a hero; on the contrary, she has a very low opinion of him: after she cremates his body and put his ashes in a cream jar, she places a little portion of the ashes in her mouth and “wishes it would dissolve completely, reveal something significant. But stubbornly, *just like when he was alive, Heberto remains maddeningly inert*” (292 – emphasis mine). Reina, an exile by choice, voices García’s ironic criticism of the Cuban-American Way of Life. “*El exilio*, Reina is convinced, is the virulent flip side of Communist intolerance” (195). The nationalistic rhetoric of Castro’s enemies is also targeted:

Reina likes to listen to the reactionary exile stations in Miami best. They play the best music and the most outrageous lies on the air. She’s amused by their parading nationalism, like a bunch

of roosters in the make. Who was it that said patriotism is the least discerning of passions? (196)

The powerful fiction of García echoes real-life experiences of many exiles. Critic and Professor Maria de Los Angeles Torres writes about hers in “Beyond the Rupture: Reconciling with our Enemies, Reconciling with Ourselves”. Los Angeles Torres was sent to Miami shortly after the Bay of Pigs invasion. Her family followed her soon after, but for the few months she was alone, being kindly taken care of by friends and relatives, she could not overcome the pain of separation. She missed her parents, her familiar routines, her school, and she perceived Miami as “disorienting and dehumanizing”. When her parents and sisters arrived, she realized she had become a member of a transnational family: her mother was constantly worrying about the many relatives she had left behind. Life as Torres had known it was left in the past (LOS ANGELES TORRES, 1995: 26). García’s characters also belong to transnational families: In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Lourdes’s mother and sister remain in Cuba while she leaves with her husband and daughter. Since communication with the island is still very difficult in the novel time span, the characters resort to magical realism to connect, either through Pilar’s telepathic conversations with *abuela* Celia or through the visits of Jorge’s ghost to Lourdes. In *The Agüero Sisters*, Reina also remains in Cuba for many years before she decides to move to Miami.

Los Angeles Torres goes through a process of memory erasure that can be compared to Pilar’s. She has trouble remembering “the smell of humid red dirt”, and as time goes by she starts practicing her Spanish by copying poems in her notebook. Her point of reference shifts from Cuba to the United States, and she refers to other exiles leaving the island as “coming” to the U.S. (LOS ANGELES TORRES, 1995: 29-30). Unlike Pilar, though, who discovered that she belonged more in the U.S. than in Cuba, Torres engaged in a political battle to be a part of Cuban life. She states: “I will continue to return; Cuba is my home”. She knows there are many political obstacles to surpass, as the Cuban government is extremely sensitive to criticism, but she knows she “must continue the dialogue, however painful it may be” (41). Her effort to belong in the two places has created a third possibility:

When I return a few months later I start a new conversation, in Miami. About an hour later I am sitting on a rocking chair upon the porch of my home on La Calle 20; Josesito comes by, and we pick up the same conversation I had started in Miami. Somehow the time between this and our last conversation has

been suspended. We are creating a third persona, one that watches as both sides struggle alone and away from each other, that brings our lives together even as our day-by-day life is separated by hostility and fear. It is the persona of shared friendship and shared passions. We return to the place where we parted and we feel the connection (LOS ANGELES TORRES, 1995, 42).

Unlike Los Angeles Torres, Cristina García never viewed her “Cubanness” as a political statement. Speaking to Irida H. López in “‘...And There’s Only My Imagination Where Our History Should Be’: An Interview with Cristina García”, she observes: “For me, being Cuban was very much a family affair. My life was bifurcated in that sense. At home I felt very Cuban and that identity was very much instilled in me”. However, she adds that this Cuban identity was not relevant in other aspects of her life. In school, for instance, most of her classmates were Irish and Italian. She was not a part of any Cuban community and “knew virtually no other Cubans except for cousins, and a couple of Puerto Ricans”. She gives her mother, who always made her speak Spanish at home and always conveyed a great sense of pride to her, all the credit for keeping a very defined Cuban identity (LÓPEZ, 1995: 103). Not until she returned to Cuba at age 26 did she get “a larger sociopolitical context for being Cuban”, and not until she got a job at a newspaper in Miami did she meet the local Cuban community for the first time in her life, becoming a target to prejudice; her peers called her a communist because she was Cuban, whereas Cubans rejected her for being a democrat: “It was a shock, it really was” (103-4).

García sides with Los Angeles Torres when she emphasizes the importance of memory for diasporic people; it is a means of salvaging what’s meaningful to them. Because she sees traditional history as a tool that “obviates women and the evolution of home, family and society, and basically becomes a recording of battles and wars and dubious accomplishments of men”, she chooses to highlight the role of women in the rescuing of the family history and their vision of important historical events such as the revolution (107). This is the reason for her characters’ concern with memory. Felicia whispers in her son’s ear that “Imagination, like memory, can transform lies to truths” (88); Pilar sees how Lourdes manipulates history and Pilar herself does not know whether she remembers or imagines her history. Celia keeps track of both personal and public history in the letters she writes – but never sends – to her lover in Spain.

Constancia and Reina relive their childhood over and over, in an attempt to make some sense out of their mother's death.

Cristina García and Maria de Los Angeles Torres are not the only Cuban writers concerned with women exiles. Achy Obejas, another daughter of the *diálogo*, addresses similar issues in her novels and short stories. They all seem, as Sonia Torres points out, less interested in the revolution, less obsessed with Castro, and more willing to discuss social inclusion and cultural identities, more curious about traditions that represent a translation of "Cubanness", like *Santería*. Furthermore, they have put aside the question of belonging in either country; they accept their hybridity, their transnationality, their synthesis of two cultures (TORRES, 2001: 159-60).

In "Doña Aída, with Your Permission", Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez narrates how she was approached by "Aída Cartageno Portatatin, the grand woman of letters in the Dominican Republic", who embraced Alvarez and, in front of the microphones, reamed her out in Spanish: "*Eso parece mentira que una dominicana se ponga a escribir en inglés. Vuelve a tu país, vuelve a tu idioma. Tú eres dominicana*". Alvarez asks for permission to disagree by stating that she is not a Dominican writer because she does not master the language it takes to write in it. Besides, she does not live on the island and cannot therefore translate what it is like to be a Dominican the way a true Dominican would. On the other hand, she admits that she is not *norteamericana* either, as she does not have her roots in the United States and cannot translate what it is like to be an American the way an American would. She remarks that exactly by "being in and out of both worlds, looking at one side from the other side" gives her a perspective that is both rich and tense, clashing and contradictory (ALVAREZ, 1998: 171-3). She ends her essay by addressing Doña Aída:

Ay, Doña Aída, you who carry our mixtures in the color of your skin, who also left the island as an exile many times and so understand what it is to be at home nowhere and everywhere, I know I don't really have to ask your pardon or permission. Beneath our individual circumstances and choices, we have fought many of the same struggles and have ended up in the same place, on paper (ALVAREZ, 1998: 175).

In "A Nova Diáspora e a Literatura de Autoria Feminina Contemporânea", Sandra Goulart remarks that diasporic female subjects tend to produce narratives which are polyphonic and reveal strong autobiographical influences. Their particular narratives attest to the multiplicity of experiences of women living in displacement (GOULART,

2006: 196). The works of Ruth Behar, Maria de Los Angeles Torres, Achy Obejas, Julia Alvarez, and Cristina García, among many others, give abundant proof of that.

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