

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CROSS-DRESSING, AND THE NEGOTIATION OF CUBAN-AMERICAN IDENTITIES.

CONCEPCIÓN BADOS CIRIA
Universidad de Alcalá

(Resumen)

Cristina García (La Habana, 1958), pertenece a la más reciente generación de escritoras hispano caribeñas afincadas en Estados Unidos. Su obra presenta una actitud crítica hacia los valores idealizados de la Cuba prerrevolucionaria, así como hacia la visión mitificada de la Cuba castrista. Las novelas de Cristina García, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) y *The Agüero Sisters* (1997) dan voz a mujeres cubanas de diferentes razas y clases sociales para tratar el tema del exilio cubano a los Estados Unidos; lo hacen al expresar conflictos intra familiares o interpersonales que derivan de un trauma nacional como la Revolución Cubana. En las dos novelas, Cuba se inscribe como una comunidad imaginada que suscita visiones románticas e idealizadas pero, por encima de todo, Cuba se apunta como el paraíso perdido al que sólo se accede a través de la memoria que se ejercita en el quehacer de la escritura. Los personajes de ambas novelas, tres generaciones de mujeres, mientras se debaten por afirmarse como sujetos, asumen y confirman una identidad híbrida tanto en lo racial como en lo cultural, haciendo eco de una diversidad plural que se expresa en sus músicas, sus religiones y sus acentos. *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters* contribuyen tanto a la discontinuidad como a la continuidad en el debate que concierne la negociación de una doble identidad: la identidad cubano-americana.

In *The Vulnerable Observer*, Ruth Behar, a Cuban-American anthropologist deals with the Jewish term *Diaspora* in relation to the problematics of Cuban people after The Revolution. She chooses the term diaspora as a refusal to submit to the tyranny of categories and affirms that "Cubans outside Cuba are perhaps immigrants, perhaps exiles, perhaps both, perhaps neither, and Cubans inside Cuba are in certain ways perhaps more exiled in their *insile* than the so-called exiles themselves. Diaspora embraces all these possibilities and others, including earlier periods of displacement in Cuban history" (146). In the same threat of thought, Behar, a Jewish descendant herself, promotes the figure of José Martí "who as both Latino and a Latin American forged a dialectic of diaspora and return, which each of our Cubas claims in hopelessly one-sided ways" (145). The fact remains that since The Revolution Cuba has been imagined as either utopia or as a backward police state. Cuba, viewed with utopian eyes, is a defiant little island that has dared to step on the toes of a great superpower and dreamed ambitiously of undoing the legacy of poverty, inequality and unfulfilled revolutions that has plagued both Latin America and the Caribbean. Fourty years after the triumph of The Revolution, the exiled Cubans represent their homeland as an island of poverty and repression, a place where huddled masses yearn for the comforts of life, and will sacrifice everything to leave, plunging into the deadly sea of dreams as *balseros* or Cuban wetbacks. Whithin this

conflicting web of representations born out of the Cold War, 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. Nevertheless, in a situation where there is no bridge linking the two sides of the Cuban community, Cristina García suggests that women's dreams, memories, and personal relationships can begin to heal the wounds of the divided nation. Yet she is drawn to the visions of diaspora as a site for the recreation of identity and for liberation from the credo of fatherland or death.

Cristina García was born in Havana in 1958 and raised in New York. She is the first Cuban American woman of the second generation that shows how women's subtle rereading of Cuban nationality and identity can offer different and crucial insights. In her particular process of becoming American, her work presents a critical attitude toward the idealized values of the pre-revolutionary Cuban culture, and toward the mythical vision of pre-Castro Cuba. She writes as a feminist, meaning that she breaks up with the Caribbean representations of masculinity and femininity which seemed to be guided by a standard construction: while maleness is culturally coded as hyper maleness, constructs of femaleness are more complicated to define. Femininity is either culturally coded as the silenced, absent other (in the form of virgin, mother) or as excess (in the form of whore or hysteric female). Cristina García, according to Coco Fusco, follows the path open in the USA by Cuban women writers and intellectuals such as Lourdes Casal, Ana Mendieta, Nereida García Ferraz, among others (216). These women were key in the initiation of the dialogue that resulted in family reunification. The *cubanía* evoked by Cristina García in her novels floats effortlessly across borders, as family members separated by geography, politics, and even death communicate with one another. Moreover, for Cristina García, the recording of Cuban history, and the reconstruction of Cuban identity becomes the result of a personal transgression, a desperate wish to tell the defendant's version of the story, the unofficial one. As Cristina García affirms in an interview her novels are, emotionally, very autobiographical. She declares:

I wanted to examine very closely the personal cost of what happened in Cuba after 1959. And I wanted to very specifically examine how women have responded and adapted to what happened to their families after 1959. I also was very interested in examining the emotional and political alliances that form within families. There is a larger backdrop of it all, but in the writing itself I just stayed very close to the women. There wasn't any attempt to have everyone pick a point of view on the revolution. (106).

Therefore, García's characters give voice to Cuban women in order to explore textual alternatives for researching and historicizing "divided" or "dispersed" cultural productions. As Coco Fusco points out "while official channels of communication remain blocked or clogged by empty rhetoric, the kinds of exchange that have gone on across borders take forms usually associated with feminine discursive practices: home gatherings, letters, gossip, and other forms of conversation" (216). In the same vein, Gayatri Spivak has already underlined the importance to distinguishing between aesthetic representation (to speak about) and political representation (to speak for). Such a distinction will always remind us that there are subaltern subjects that

cannot speak, whereas there are others who speak for them. For Spivak this distinction represents the difficult predicament of the post-colonial intellectual who wants to "unlearn" the discursive mechanisms that keep the other silent (135). Cristina García speaks for herself as a member of the exiled Cuban community in the USA. Yet she also speaks as a privileged subject, who, from the margins of the American mainstream, tries to undo the epistemic violence that has kept the voices of Cuban women unheard on both sides of the Strait.

Dreaming in Cuban (1992), draws the lives of three generations of Cuban women who experiment revolution and exile in very different ways. The grandmother supports revolution, while her daughters hate it, and the granddaughter looks for a negotiation between homeland, which involves revolution, and exile. The narration begins in 1972 with the depiction of the widowed matriarch of the family, Celia del Pino, who fully supports revolution. The narrator suggests that her love for El Líder, Fidel Castro, has quasi-erotic connotations. Celia del Pino is completely devoted to the revolution, and still fond of El Líder to whom she usually listens in a special recorded message from him, while looking for signals of an invisible enemy. Her passion for revolution and its male instigators makes her dress up for any missions in support of Fidel Castro, who, according to Celia, embodies revolution by himself. We read: "Celia reaches into her straw handbag for more red lipstick, then darkens the mole on her left cheek with a black eyebrow pencil. Her sticky graying hair is tied in a chignon at her neck. Celia played the piano once and still-exercises her hands, unconsciously stretching them two notes beyond an octave. She wears leather pumps with her bright housedress."⁽⁴⁾ Later, a patchwork of dreams, visions, letters, memories and incidents provides fragmentary glimpses of a Cuban family at home, and in exile in the seventies and eighties. We get to know that Celia, when she was young, loved and lost a Spaniard, Gustavo, to whom she has been writing letters for twenty-five years, even though she never got an answer. Celia married Jorge, a Cuban businessman, and had three children, Lourdes, Felicia and Javier. The exiled Lourdes, a fervent anti-communist and the owner of a bakery, communicates with her dead father in Brooklyn and makes her punk daughter's life miserable. Felicia, a *santera*, stays behind in Havana, mad and unhappy. Javier leaves for Czechoslovakia but returns to the island after his wife and daughter abandon him. After many years of separation and yearning, Lourdes' daughter, Pilar, decides to visit her grandmother Celia, with whom she has always had a special relationship. At her father's request, Lourdes returns to Cuba with Pilar, and this trip makes the narration of *Dreaming in Cuban* possible.

Cristina García chooses to mix up gender and genre in *Dreaming in Cuban* while the microcosm of del Pino family stands as a symbol for the discord of the Cuban people on both sides of the Strait. Consequently, she interrupts the flow of traditional history by incorporating many narrators and different genres, yet the novel is lush and melodious giving these pages a Caribbean atmosphere full of music and rhythm. In fact, the letters are the most lyrical part of the novel, since they are like poetic fragments.

If Celia is fascinated with revolution, her two daughters aren't. Because of her disagreement with the new system, Celia's eldest daughter, Lourdes, moved with her husband Rufino Puente to Brooklyn where she opened the Yankee Doodle Bakery, with plans of eventually owning hundreds across the nation. She thrives on American life quickly embracing cold weather, capitalism, and prejudice. She had a terrible experience with some Cuban soldiers that raped her while being alone at her property in the Island. She would never forget that, as

the narrator says: "Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention. She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats cracking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her." (73) Lourdes is very fond of her father, Jorge, who died in New York following cancer treatment, and who continues to communicate with her in very spiritual terms. She usually tells him about her concerns in order to denounce the Communist threat to America: "Why can't the Americans see the Communists in their own backyards, in their universities, bending the malleable minds of the young? The Democrats are to blame, the democrats and those lying, two timing Kennedys. What America needs, Lourdes and her father agree, is another Joe McCarthy to set things right again. He would never have abandoned them on the Bay of Pigs" (171).

Inscribing African roots in the cultural landscape of Cuba is another task for Cristina García, who tries to emphasize hybridity and *mestizaje* in the discontinuity between ethnicity and nationality. And, in that sense, the author confesses that coming from a Catholic family she knew very little of Santería and had to send for books on this topic to Miami: "Once I became exposed to it, I was completely fascinated. It's part of our cultural landscape and, as Pilar says at one point, it makes a lot more sense than more abstract forms of worship" (107). The devotion to Santería inscribed in two of the characters of the novel, Felicia and Herminia, becomes a politicized racial fiction that has the function of identifying with the oppressed that cannot speak, but it also risks becoming an exoticized representation of all people of Cuban origins in a society that homogenizes otherness according to racial and cultural traits. Stuart Hall, in a fascinating essay, attempts to rethink the "positioning and re-positioning of Caribbean cultural identities" in relation to the African presence" (74). Remembering when he was a child growing up in Kingston, Hall notes that people did not refer to themselves or to others as having been at some time in the past "African". It was only in the 1970's, with the civil rights struggles, the postcolonial revolution, and the reggae music, that this Afro-Caribbean identity became historically available to the great majority of Jamaican people, at home and abroad. He reminds us that the original Africa is not longer there, suggesting that the return to Africa must happen by "another route", that is "what Africa has become in the New World, what we have made of *Africa*—as we re-tell it through politics, memory and desire" (76). Nevertheless, the testimony of Herminia Delgado, a black woman, is important in order to understand ethnicity in Cuba after 1959. She declares that she has won a lot with the revolution: she has been at a battery factory for almost twenty years supervising the work of forty-two women—she used to be a maid before revolution—but still she complains about the fact that men and, white men, mainly, control the country, even though the politicians try to make everybody to believe that all of Cubans are the same, regardless race, class or gender. Herminia confesses that:

Things have gotten better under the revolution, that much I can say. In the old days, when voting time came, the politicians would tell us we were all the same, one happy family. Every day, though it was another story. The whiter you were, the better off you were. Anybody could see that. There's more respect these days. . . One thing hasn't changed: the men are still in charge. Fixing that is going to take a lot longer than twenty years. (185)

In fact, if male hands and minds are still controlling Cuban national identity, *Dreaming in Cuban* is an arena open for women living on both sides of the Strait to write themselves into Cuban history. This is what Lourdes' daughter does. Pilar Puente is an extremist artist who has a strong devotion for her grandmother, Celia. Undoubtedly, the grandmother has become a potent symbol within Cuban culture, on both sides, because she represents a figure that has grown old with our century, with the stops and starts of modernity, outliving the eras preceding and succeeding The Cuban Revolution. Pilar writes a diary in which she explains her emotions concerning her mother and grandmother: "I wonder how Mom could be Abuela Celia's daughter. And what I am doing as my mother's daughter. Something got horribly scrambled along the way." (178) Pilar, who left Cuba when she was a baby—she is, obviously, the alter-ego of Cristina García—affirms that her mother is going too far with her hate for revolution while she is fighting in order to negotiate a hybrid Cuban-American identity.

In that sense, Pilar Puente is the symbol that connects both the devotion for revolution, and the doubts and fear towards its effects on Cuban collectivity. Pilar travels to Cuba in 1980, and once reunited in the island with her mother and grandmother, she feels divided between her love for Cuba and her love for the U.S.A.:

I wonder how different my life would have been if I'd stayed with my grandmother. I think about how I'm probably the only ex-punk on the island, how no one else has their ears pierced in three places. It's hard to imagine existing without Lou Reed. I ask Abuela if I can paint whatever I want in Cuba and she says yes, as long as I don't attack the state. Cuba is still developing, she tells me, and I can't afford the luxury of dissent. Then she quotes something El Líder said in the early years, before they started arresting poets. "Within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing." I wonder what El Líder would think of my paintings. (235)

Pilar ends up by affirming that she belongs to both places, which makes her accept the conflicts and pains she experiments while negotiating the shifts of identity. As she travels across the external and internal borders that separate Cuba from Brooklyn, Pilar points out: "Cuba is a peculiar exile I think, an island colony. We can reach it by a thirty minute charter flight from Miami, yet never reach it all." (219) She is a hybrid, a *puente*, a being of two places at once, but also of one place which is dual, multicultural, and fluid.

The Agüero Sisters (1997) inscribes the same narrative conventions as *Dreaming in Cuban*. The plot is as follows: by means of fragmentary discourses which include autobiographical narratives such as memories, confessions and a diary, Constanca and Reina Agüero read their history elliptically, coming back again and again to the same point without progressing directly ahead. We learn gradually that they are descendants of cultivated peasants who relocated to Havana, and eventually enjoyed modest success as scholars and artists. Their father, Ignacio Agüero, was a professor of biology at the University of Havana, and their grandfather, who came to Cuba from Spain at the end of XIX century, was a famous lector, who read novels and poetry aloud to an audience of cigar-makers. For most of their lives, Constanca and Reina had been separated from each other, and Constanca leaves Cuba entirely at an early age to live in exile in Miami, where she manages to establish a successful cosmetics business. The decisive event of their childhood was the disappearance of their mother, whose

absence effectively breaks up the family and haunts both of the girls for the whole of their lives.

Living with the past, exploring loss, confronting death, and the nature of memory are the main themes in a novel that was inspired by a real event. Cristina García remembers when her aunt came from Cuba to visit her sister in Miami:

It was supposed to be a six-month honeymoon reunion for the two of them but it ended after only a month with much acrimony on both sides. I didn't witness the reunion, but for years afterward I heard each sister complaining about the other. That got me thinking about what happens to siblings and family when they have been apart for a long time and how they go about reconciling what divided them in the past and in the present. (305)

The divided family stands, again, for the allegory of the divided nation, and, as a result, the novel incorporates different and multiple voices, which narrates the painful and terrible effects of exile on families separated by political and ideological concerns.

Reina, the youngest sister, once a devoted revolutionary, remains in Cuba until she has an accident while working as an electrician in the fields. Once in hospital she begins to question the system and decides that she has done too many things for The Revolution. She confesses her doubts about blaming Americans for all the problems in Cuba: "There is a speculation that a yanqui virus or infected fish is to blame, though this last theory is quickly dismissed because fish is impossible to obtain. Reina Agüero watches as the blind patients stumble down the corridors, their arms waving like frontal antennae, cursing the revolution and El Comandante himself. Ten years ago, Reina wouldn't have put up with their blaspheming. Now, she doesn't even flink." (34) Reina is 48 years old, but still beautiful and full of life when she decides to leave the island for Miami to meet her sister Constanca. The encounter between the two sisters provides the reconstruction of the family history and, slowly, the truth behind their mother's death is revealed through the flashbacks of their father, whose bird-hunting expeditions become the source of a tragedy. To some extent the history of the Agüero family is a shorthand history of Cuba herself, especially in the person of Ignacio, who is born on Cuban Independence Day, and lives through the revolutions and dictatorships that marked the politics of the island. The narrative is filtered through many voices, both past and present, including the women's parents, and Reina's daughter, Dulcita, a sometime prostitute who is sick to death of poverty-stricken in Havana, and who leaves for Madrid with an old man. Dulcita embodies the young generation of Cubans that suffer, nowadays, the contradictions and pains of the system in the Island. She is haunted by the presence of an absent father, a famous hero in The Revolution, who never took care of Dulcita when she was a baby, and whose memory make things very difficult for her. Later on, unhappy and sad in Madrid, she flies to Miami to live together with her mother and aunt. Thus, the ending of the novel is somehow epiphany since the sister's eventual reunion anticipates the possibility of a national reconciliation.

Constancia Agüero is the counterpart of Lourdes Puente in *Dreaming in Cuban*. She hates communists and war, something she believes is organized by men. She is a very rich and beautiful woman, married to Heberto Cruz, a man that secretly lights a Cuban cigar every night while longing for a successful invasion of the island. In fact, Constanca is a very tragic character in the novel. She was abandoned by her mother when she was a little girl, and later,

repudiated by her first husband, Gonzalo Cruz, the father of her son Silvestre. Constanica feels guilty because just after the triumph of revolution, she sent her son Silvestre to a boarding school in USA, an event that made him hate his parents forever:

In 1961, it was rumored in Cuba that children would be rounded up and shipped to boarding schools in the Ukraine. Panicked, parents sent their sons and daughters to orphanages in America, where they hoped to retrieve them after the crisis passed. Constanica sent Silvestre to Colorado . . . In less than a week, Silvestre was in the hospital with a 107-degree temperature and a bad swelling up and down the right side of his body. By the time his fever subsided, he was irreversible deaf. A year later, Constanica left Cuba and went with Heberto and baby Isabel to pick up her son. (82)

Silvestre embodies the terrible effects on children born after 1959 in Cuba, to the extent that he ends up by killing his own father while he is in hospital. At the same time, Constanica, who has assimilated into her adopted country's culture as completely and deeply as she could, has carved a life listening to miracle radio programs and keeping her loveless marriage afloat. Moreover, she is devoted to La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and every Friday she pays a visit to her own santero, Oscar Piñango, in order to avoid negative influences. Once again, as Lourdes Puente did in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Constanica Agüero tries to return to Cuba, through the African presence of the island: she re-thinks Cuba and its cultural manifestations by means of the aesthetics of desire. At the same time, Constanica represents the analogy of Cuba with the Jewish Diaspora: she makes a distinction between the wandering nation of Cuba and the revolutionary state headed by Fidel Castro, in which history both begins and ends.

As the Indian English novelist Salman Rushdie has written, it is impossible for emigrants to recover the homeland they left behind. The best they can do is "to create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands" (9). Following this assertion, the notion of an imaginary homeland is helpful to think about childhood and womanhood. For Constanica, women's body is a homeland—a place where knowledge, memory, and pain is stored by the child, since she was abandoned by her mother when she was only a year old. Moreover, since Constanica is obsessed with feminine beauty, she manages to establish a successful cosmetics business helped by her sister Reina. The factory is an allegory of her homeland, a lost homeland that symbolizes her lost mother, who was, in her imagination, the most beautiful woman. This is what the narrator says about Constanica's factory:

Constanica intends to launch a full complement of face and body products for every glorious inch of Cuban womanhood: Cuello de Cuba, Senos de Cuba, Codos de Cuba, Muslos de Cuba and so on. Each item in her *Cuerpo de Cuba* line will embody the exalted image Cuban women have of themselves: as passionate, self-sacrificing, and deserving of every luxury. Last week she found a defunct bowling ball factory she plans to convert into a cosmetics plant with money from her account at the Nicaraguan bank. (131)

The fragmented bodies of women are associated with the fragmentation of the

homeland and, at the same time, Constanica's feelings evoke a rewriting of Cuba as an object of desire for women, breaking up with the inheritance of Cuban cultural identity—somehow male-oriented. Constanica's symbolic loss of a mother figure—represented in the loss of her homeland—helps her to understand her identity as different from the fiction that had been propagated by her symbolic father—represented by the rhetoric of assimilation into Americanness. She affirms her *Cubanness-cubania* with the association of mother-woman-homeland, and in that sense she reinvents new sexual metaphors underlying Cuban national identity.

To conclude, *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters* approach Cuban diaspora directly, inscribing interfamilial or interpersonal conflicts derived from a national trauma such as The Revolution. Garcia's characters' discourses, framed by the impact of revolution and diaspora, promote both a homeland imagined as a fetish and a homeland imagined as a wounded nation. Lourdes Puente and Constanica Agüero embody two generations of Cuban-American women trying to live on both sides of the strait, although they do not totally belong in none of them. Moreover, these women inscribe psychological and spiritual problems while reconstructing and remembering the history of their lost homeland. As both novels confirm, Cuba stands as an imagined community which promotes romantic and idealistic fabrications but, above all things, Cuban culture can best be understood as the product of an intellectual and historical relationship between those who stayed in Cuba and those who left the island after 1959. For it is the relationship between the nation-state and its "others" that has become the central tragic Cuban counterpoint since Fidel Castro dared history not to absolve him. Yet, Cuba is homeland, place of origin and mother; it is also a lost paradise, a nostalgic site divided by politics and dissent. In the same threat of thought, the novels of Cristina García assume and affirm a hybrid racial and cultural identity of diasporic unity within its diversity, authentically expressed in her music, her speech and her religion. Both novels contribute to continuities as well as discontinuities in this debate on the political and cultural negotiations of Cuban-American identities.

REFERENCES

- Behar, Ruth. *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer. Anthropology that Breaks your Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Fusco, Coco. "Miranda's Diary", in Ruth Behar, ed. *Bridges to Cuba-Puentes a Cuba*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- García, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992.
- García, Cristina. *The Agüero Sisters*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1997.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural identity and Diaspora", in Jonathan Rutherford, ed. *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." *Framework* 36, 1989. 74-76.
- López, Iraida H. ". . . And There Is Only My Imagination Where Our History Should Be: An Interview with Cristina García" in Ruth Behar, ed. *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1992

Spivak, Gayatri. *The Postcolonial Critic*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.