

Latina Cultural Studies. Spatial Hybridity and Diasporic Identities

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Abstract

The narrative hybridity created by Latino writers in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century presents an ontological parallelism with Latina women's imagined identity production. Starting from a spatial displacement illustrated through a three-face journey from Cuba to New York, and accomplished by three generations of women from the same family, Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* problematizes the subjectivity fragmentation implicit to a space of perpetual *borderland*, and explores the contingency of belonging to a space *other*. These aspects are portrayed in the linguistic use of English and Spanish as vehicles of identity performance.

Latino Studies has to cover different subjectivities
and hybrid experiences negotiated by the diversity
of immigrants from Latin America to the United States

JUAN POBLETE,
Critical Latin American and Latino Studies

I have never heard any relative of mine speak of the time
when our ancestors were owned by others, but that past
wraps itself around the tales of our beginnings.

COCO FUSCO,
The Bodies that Were Not Ours

Reading Cristina García's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) opens a wide range of critical possibilities towards the narrative innuendoes of her fictional proposal. Critical approaches could thus start from a solid base of structuralist—even semiotic—parameters and continue through an unfixed, unstable postmodern reading of García's discursivity. Her direct—and also implicit—intertextual references to modern examples of fragmented narratives that had a shared “real” referent are used in this novel to equip its narrative with similar discursive structures. These are portrayed as a decontextualized vision of diasporic

¹ This article has been possible thanks to the research network “Rede de lingua e literatura inglesa e identidade” (2007/000145-0) funded by the Galician Government and the European Regional Development Fund, the Research Project “Música y literatura irlandesa y su correlato en la cultura gallega” (PGIDIT07PXIB159223PR), the Galician Government Department of Economy and Industry's Human Resources Program, and the University Institute of Irish Studies, Amergin.

identities in the United States, providing a three-step path in the movement from Cuba into New York (the Caribbean island, Miami, and Queens).

This study attempts to discuss the polyphonic identity that is characteristic of postmodern border spatialities, and also to bring it into dialogue with a subjacent culture of semiotics, in which *semiospheres* (Lotman 1996) suffer from an ontological conflict. The deconstructed subjects participating in the novel by García postulate themselves as performative emissaries and as generators of subjectivities that reconfigure the new border spatiality. Through the geographical and epistemological journey endeavored by these Latina women (which represents the social development of their minority in the United States), García succeeds to explore the identity fragmentation and the border identity that have been characteristic of the last third of the twentieth century in America, and this study attempts to describe, discuss, and argue the epistemological repercussions of such a representation.

The main characters in *Dreaming in Cuban* help García to get her readers involved in a project of multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari 2004) presented through images of identity permeability that have been key in the development of border subjectivities manifested through expanding decentralization; images taken from evasive, non-hierarchical epistemological structures of deconstructed space. Such a panorama of contestation leads to a geopolitical deterritorialization that is reinterpreted by García's Latina protagonists as a tool for ontological reterritorialization of both their "original" country and the two different (in time and space) locations within the United States, namely Miami and New York. This resignification of space is also portrayed through the narrative processes of voice intermission and alternating discursivities, which provides a horizontal, rhizomatic interpretation of events, rather than appealing to legitimized, standard accounts of hierarchized relations.

When at the conclusion of the novel the reader finally realizes that the narrative responsibility rests on one of the characters in the fiction itself, the plot acquires a new discursive dimension that implicitly reflects one of the main themes of fictional representation. National fragmentation and Pilar Puente's generational family history merge in the self-denial of Cuba and the United States as components of a spatial unity, and support a post-national identity through the narrative nuances the characters utilize in the novel.

Cristina García's work shows several issues involving cultural circumstances with regards to subjective fragmentation. The novel recounts the experiences of three women that belong to three different generations of a family: Grandmother Celia lives in Cuba; her daughter Lourdes, who represents the traditional middle step in becoming American, has fled

from Cuba to Miami with her family, where they set their residency right before moving North again, towards New York. It is over there where her daughter Pilar (Celia's granddaughter) grows up as an American teenager, although she continuously travels (physically and with her imagination) to her previous locations. The condition of identity inherent in each of the three main characters in the novel works as a binder of possible traces of disintegration of the subject, always conditioned by the subordinate meaning of the three women. Pilar, who becomes central in the narrative, is the model of a minority culture in a space that does not correspond with that of her cultural tradition. Although this is a character whose condition is defined by its complexity and heterogeneity, her narrative exposes García publicly as defined from the external collective significant network based on the stereotypical image of Latin America.

Pilar is forced to act performatively (Schechner 2003) against the representational machinery given by the taxonomic view of society, resulting in a fundamental spatial oscillation for her identity between body as discourse and subjectivity as palimpsest. In this sense, the external narrative entity interferes in the construction of Pilar's reified identity. She acquires agency as she argues the validity of her silence and invisibility, while the narrator's subjective voice rewrites her as a new citizen in a society that is deranged from its cultural roots. Pilar reinterprets herself as belonging to a space Other in which cultural references specific to New York and to Cuba are distant and do not reproduce any nationalist or patriotic tie, and she manifests her subjectivity through narrative by constantly swapping voices and places. As a perfect example of Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's conceptualization of a "1.5er", i.e., a Cuban-American who was a child at the time of migration to grow into an adult in the United States,² Pilar is able to function in both cultures (Cuban and American) and to harmonize their cultural differences, but she fails to fully identify with any of them.

Pilar's ontological state of cultural nothingness represents an inheritance from her mother Lourdes represented as an archetype of diasporic Cuban women in the 1950s. The particular spatial condition of nomadic Lourdes is squandered by forms of static and unchanging existential burdens that prevent it from acquiring full conscience as a hybrid identity. Questioning the physical shape of mobility in epistemological transformation of human knowledge, Lourdes embarks on a cultural journey to the North and keeps leaving traces of spatial reconfiguration through the cultural artifacts that she and her family transport

² Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1994.

take with them. Several references to “not belonging anywhere” are repeated throughout the novel, and García manages to confer that emotion not only to the characters that actually perform a physical movement from Cuba to New York, but also to the ones whose displacement is purely psychological or existential (Celia is continuously “moving” to Spain, where her ex-lover lives, for example).

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, the characters with more cultural prominence are the two women who find themselves in a process of transitional identity. Their counterpart representation lies on the fictional references to the Cuban citizens who chose not to physically move from their place of birth and life after the political and social events held in the crucial date of 1959 in the island. Celia, Lourdes’ mother and Pilar’s grandmother is, as has been said, the epitome of these politically committed and socially paralyzed citizens. Being the most versatile and most complex of the characters in García’s narrative, Celia experiences an internal displacement, a distance of national subjectivity, which is reinforced by a necessary auto-alienation to undergo the rapid transformation precipitated by the hegemonic interference of another culture in her place of residency. Hers is an internal displacement caused by the physical separation from her family, in their way to the United States, and from her lover, who has returned to Spain. These are the ghosts of Celia’s past, presented through a narrative to the reader with a complete lack of physical presence, with an “emptied” strategy that seeks to inflict trails of her subjectivity upon the parameters of the implicit reading, anticipating a playful fictional manipulation. Such hermeneutical manipulation arises from the voice of contemplating Celia when she paints a picture of her husband amalgamated with that of the sunset before her eyes. The reader, involved in that transitional emotion, participates in Celia’s reinterpretation of society, one that is progressively transferred to subjects in motion.

The different realities being exposed in this novel become destabilized by means of a playful inversion of roles of the participating diageitic entities: the one who is acting as the extradiageitic narrator becomes a contestant figure in the moment when the original letters are being used as part of the narrative process in the novel, as the reader becomes puzzled with whether it is Celia who is responsible for her writings or it is Pilar’s convenient reinterpretations of her grandmother’s writings. This is explicitly referred to in the text when Felicia (Lourdes’ sister) states that “imagination, like memory, can transform lies to truths” (García 1992: 88). Celia holds a privileged place in the rhizomatic structure proposed by the author, as she becomes an inert moving actant sitting on a rocking chair on the porch of her

home, becoming so a metonymic figure of the spatial reconfiguration proposed by the narrative structure.

In his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha explains the relations between narratives and the production of a nationalist emotion:

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation-or narration-might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the West. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force. (1990: 2)

The way the collective identity of Cuba is at stake in the historical episode that surrounds García's novel is projected on to the narrative complexities of her main female characters. Indeed, the fundamental geographical arguments that were being pronounced in Pig's Bay parallel the spatial circumscriptions negotiated by both Lourdes and Pilar when they move away from the island and start a new life in a separated cultural environment. In her article "National Families and Familial Nations: Communista Americans in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*", David T. Mitchell argues that

[i]n introducing the question of national loyalty and political affiliation, Celia and Lourdes deploy available national counter-narratives in order to locate a more "public" arena for their competing senses of familial disloyalty and personal invasion. [...] Pilar's story maintains a particular distance from the public arguments in which her family engages, and in the process her story becomes a type of metadiscourse upon the idiosyncratic nature and modes of national identification. (1996: 58)

This is the representation of three generations of the same family whose links to a national paradigm appear axiologically epitomized by the space environment they are forced to inhabit. That is their common element; a differentiating feature with respect to the interior design of their imagined national reality, which becomes a key factor in the balkanized narratives used in the novel to represent the detachment from traditional and arboreal compositions of identity. As Andrea O'Reilly Herrera puts it,

[n]ot only does she [Pilar] "transform" the Statue of Liberty on her canvas, but upon her arrival in Cuba she decides to preserve her grandmother's memory by painting her portrait; she asks Celia how she would like to be remembered, a question which suggests both the contrived and subjective nature of memory. Rather than portraying her grandmother as she sees her, Pilar paints a blue watercolor of Celia, a portrait which is somewhat abstract and highly interpretive, rather than mimetic or "realistic". (1997: 81)

Indeed, Pilar uses her pictorial abilities to reproduce the image of Celia, but I would argue here that she does so applying a similar method as the narrative puzzle García puts forward in the novel. Pilar does portray her grandmother as she sees her, as an abstract, aporetic figure that represents the contradictory nuances of Pilar's identity. Both in this portrait and in Pilar's narrative, Celia becomes an imagined construct, and is subject to Pilar's permanent intentions of reterritorialization.

In the case of Celia and her understanding of the Cuban diaspora, her physical attachment to her original territory interferes with a sense of commitment halfway between social and existential to migration. Her melancholic resentment against separations alienates Celia's national bonds, and makes of her daily life a paradoxical relationship with her cultural and political baggage. Undoubtedly, this shared (by her and the island) feeling of auto-marginalization is connected to Pilar in the distance, who for much of the novel is in direct communication with Celia through telepathic practices. O'Reilly continues:

Through the trope of the divided family Cristina Garcia not only suggests the dysfunction that exists both in Cuba and the United States, but she offers an historical perspective on what Glissant refers to as "the unchecked process of disintegration" or "nonhistory" that the Caribbean in general, and Cuba in particular, has undergone since its first colonial intervention. (1997: 86)

What leads to the obsessive pursuit of Celia's and Pilar's identity as entities physically materialized in a particular place is not so much the attraction to a particular geographical area or to a specific embodiment, but the continuous production of new heterotopic spaces for their ontological identifications.

The three protagonist women share a hollow spatiality which defines their ontological status. While Celia and Pilar (grandmother and granddaughter) reflect the contradictions of identity in a single physical space, Lourdes is away in her spatial limbo: "Lourdes, as a representative of the exile generation [...] is ridiculed in the text. She speaks a language that cannot be understood by Cubans in Cuba" (Alvarez-Borland 1994: 139). In the case of Lourdes, the relationship she has built with her nation of origin is based on an alternation of deterritorialization and re-territorialization that ends in a state of imagined territoriality. Celia and Pilar work their telepathic abilities in order to re-establish those spaces of immanence as heterotopic places where they can materialize their mutual identifications, and to be able to build a narrative compound that gives base to their ontological communication.

Through its complex narrative configuration, Cristina Garcia's novel problematizes the modern spatial imperative to express ontological identification with space, and she has been

able to construct a cultural discourse—in which hybridity plays a key role—to reproduce the epistemological reconfiguration process of Latino diaspora provided by the postmodern paradigm shift. The narratological hybridity created by Garcia in *Dreaming in Cuban* functions both as a formal representation and an identity performance of the main characters, and it brings into discussion the different articulations of narrative and space as models of identity reconfiguration in the production of hybrid identities. Celia's, Lourdes', and Pilar's uses of discourse to imprint a reterritorialization of their identities in this novel succeed in providing a valuable approach to the discussion of Latina identity in the United States at the turn of the century.

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