

## Article

# HOW CRISTINA GARCIA LOST HER ACCENT, AND OTHER LATINA CONVERSATIONS

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## Abstract

*After briefly reviewing some prominent efforts to construct a genealogy of Latino literature, I offer the intertextual relationship of Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* to Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* as a gesture towards building bridges between apparently discrete Hispanic-American traditions and complicating patriarchal conceptions of literary tradition based on nationality and bloodlines. Garcia's novel, by "signifying" on particular tropes from *The House on Mango Street*, by recounting the history of the del Pino family in both Cuba and New York, and by showing the conflicted relationships which different Latino groups forge in the United States, positions itself as the inheritor of hybrid versions of Latin American, Caribbean, and North American cultures. *Dreaming in Cuban* thus paints a portrait of Latina experience and of the Latina novel as what Juan Flores calls "pan-ethnic." I will examine the tropological ways in which *Dreaming in Cuban* theorizes identity and literary tradition through its own textuality and intertextuality.*

## Keywords

Cristina Garcia; Sandra Cisneros; magical realism; genealogy





The study of Latinos belongs to a new history of North-South relations that is yet to be written. It can begin only by mapping the richness and unexpected encounters across nations, languages and cultures in the Americas (Román de la Campa, *Cuba on My Mind*, 2000).

In the essay “The Latino Imaginary,” Juan Flores argues that rather than a Hispanic “condition,” a term implying a coherent, given community of similar people, Latino identity is something real because it is imagined, produced by cultural practices and lived experience. “The role of the social imagination and the imaginary in the self-conception of nationally, ethnically, and ‘racially’ kindred groups is of course central,” Flores writes, “but [it] must always be assessed with a view toward *how* they are being imagined (i.e. from ‘within’ or ‘without’) and to what ends and outcomes” (Flores, 2000, 193). This essay discusses how and to what end a common Latina identity and literature are imagined and produced in Cristina Garcia’s novel *Dreaming in Cuban*, through an intertextual poetics of relation, which establishes and interrogates connections to other Latina groups and traditions. Although as Flores notes, this process of imagining takes place across national and racial differences, it also draws on commonalities based on the lived experience of language, gender, and socially constructed ethnicity.

After briefly reviewing some prominent efforts to construct a genealogy of Latino literature, I offer the intertextual relationship of *Dreaming in Cuban* to Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, as a gesture towards building bridges between apparently discrete Hispanic-American traditions and complicating patriarchal conceptions of literary tradition based on nationality and bloodlines. By “signifying” on particular tropes from *The House on Mango Street*, by recounting the history of the del Pino family in both Cuba and New York, and by showing the conflicted relationships that different Latino groups forge in the United States, Garcia’s novel positions itself as the inheritor of hybrid versions of Latin American, Caribbean, and North American cultures. *Dreaming in Cuban* thus paints a portrait of Latina experience and of the Latina novel as what Flores calls “pan-ethnic.” I will examine the tropological ways in which *Dreaming in Cuban* theorizes identity and literary tradition through its own textuality and intertextuality.

The title of this essay comes from an observation of the curious fact that in each of Cristina Garcia’s first two novels, her last name appears spelled differently. On the title page of her second novel, *The Agüero Sisters*, the author is Cristina García; for *Dreaming in Cuban*, her surname is Garcia. Except when I am citing other critics who spell her name with the accent, I will refer to her by the second spelling. While this may seem like a misspelling, assimilating the name to English-language norms, the North Americanized orthography of Garcia’s name is in keeping with *Dreaming in Cuban*’s overall orientation

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towards the United States, the author's project of "losing" her accent and locating herself within a US framework. At the same time, *Dreaming in Cuban* figures the potentialities of this framework as more than just assimilation to a hyphenated Cuban-American status. The phantom accent is what Pilar chooses when she decides to return to New York at the end of the novel; the accent represents all that Garcia loses (and perhaps gains) when she chooses to think of herself as a Latina writer.

The critical discussion surrounding *Dreaming in Cuban* has been robust since its initial publication. Most readings emphasize the novel's positioning, discussing the ways in which the characters and the action move between Cuba and the United States. In these readings, the family's hyphenated identity exists primarily as a synthesis between their homeland (Cuba) and their adopted country (the United States). Pilar, the character brought to the United States as an infant, becomes the site of this fusion. Isabel Alvarez-Borland, in an early essay that has influenced many subsequent approaches to the novel, focuses especially on Pilar as "a Cuban-American ethnic who grows up in New York desperately searching for her Cuban roots" (Alvarez-Borland, 1994, 43).

Alvarez-Borland moves from her focus on Pilar to discuss the novel's positioning as a whole: "Pilar dramatizes the anxieties felt by an ethnic writer about the issues of voice and identity" (p. 46). Garcia's significance therefore lies in her attempt to "reconcile two cultures and two languages and two visions of the world into a particular whole" (p. 48). In this formulation, Cuban-American hybridity depends on the synthesis of apparently pure Cuban and US cultures. María Teresa Marrero complicates *Dreaming in Cuban's* depiction of Cuba by emphasizing the racial and class elements in play in the novel's relationship to *santería*; at the same time, Marrero concludes that "the importance of Cristina García's novel" is the way it "address[es] 'Cubanness' as a trans-revolutionary issue" (Marrero, 1997, 155). Along with this primary reading of *Dreaming in Cuban* as the story of a Cuban nation divided between island and diaspora, Marrero acknowledges that the novel "deals with questions of acculturation and assimilation as a Hispanic in the United States" (p. 153). Yet invoking the model of assimilation, or even acculturation, without any reference to other Latino traditions within the United States again makes the process appear to involve the synthesis of two self-identical entities (Cubanness and Americanness) into a new, hyphenated status (Cuban-Americanness). Even in Lori Ween's more recent essay, which points to the "hybridity and melding of cultures and languages that we find in Garcia's novels" (Ween, 2003, 135), she ultimately sees Garcia's project as "a concerted effort to translate Cubanness into English" (p. 139). Although each of these critics makes reference to a "Hispanic" or "ethnic" identity in *Dreaming in Cuban*, it seems symptomatic that Marrero calls the novel "U.S. Cuban literature" and Alvarez-Borland and Ween describe Garcia as a "Cuban-American writer."

My goal will be to think about Cristina Garcia not as a Cuban-American, but as a Latina writer, with all of the conflicts and contradictions this approach implies. Latina writers fit, and do not fit, into a variety of literary traditions. Born in Cuba but writing in English about New York and a homeland that she scarcely knows, Garcia's relationship to tradition is uncertain: is she the inheritor of the Cuban, the Latin American, the Caribbean, or the North American literary tradition? One could ask almost the same questions of Sandra Cisneros. Born in the United States and writing in English, she is naturally included in anthologies of US literature.<sup>1</sup> Yet as the daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother, she might be considered a Mexican writer, or even a Latin American one, an identity reinforced by the fact that *The House on Mango Street* is translated into Spanish by noted Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska.<sup>2</sup> Caught amidst these many competing traditions, it seems fair to wonder: as pan-ethnic Latino literature anthologies<sup>3</sup> as well as Latino Studies programs have begun to proliferate, is there such a thing as a Latino (or even Latina) literary tradition to which both Cisneros and Garcia might belong?

Thinking about a Latina tradition requires not only crossing national and ethnic boundaries, but also thinking diachronically, across different historical periods. There is a strong trend within Latino Studies to treat Cisneros alongside other Latina autobiographical fiction; for example, an essay by Ellen Mayock in a special section of the *Bilingual Review* on Caribbean writers looks at Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, and Esmeralda Santiago as creators of the "Latina bildungsroman" (Mayock, 1998, 223) united by their "biculturality." By reading Cisneros, Alvarez and Santiago as part of a Latina sisterhood, this approach can tend to elide both chronology and geography and, as a result, questions of class positioning. I will argue for Cisneros' belonging to a slightly earlier literary moment than this Latina-Caribbean generation of the 1990s, a group that includes Garcia and whose access to the marketplace was in many ways cleared by Chicana writers in the 1980s like Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. In order to construct my genealogical reading of a Latina tradition, I will deploy the dual lenses of signifying and relation to attend to these nuances of generational as well as ethnic positioning.

In *The Dialectics of Our America* Jose David Saldívar gives a provocative answer to the question of a genealogy for Latino literature: Latino and Latina authors alike are the descendants of a Cuban-Marxist tradition. Not only does Latina writing, whether Caribbean or Mexican, flow from a specifically Cuban root, but so does African-American, Caribbean, and Latin American writing. In his own words, his project is to "take the Casa de las Américas' cultural conversation between Havana and the United States as a possible model for a broader, oppositional American literary history and a new comparative cultural studies project" (Saldívar, 1991, 17). His genealogy is far-reaching, and begins to move the discussion beyond bordered constructions of identity and tradition. The main thrust of his argument attempts to trace a genealogy of American

1 The Norton, Heath, and Prentice Hall Anthologies of American Literature all include Cisneros as an indisputably American writer.

2 Cisneros' works appear in a number of syllabi for university courses on Latin America. For example, the "Survey of Caribbean and Latin American Studies" at Saint Lawrence University uses *The House on Mango Street* as one of its primary texts. See <http://web.stlawu.edu/history/syllabi/115.htm>. Another course, a "Survey of Latin American Culture Through Literature," reads excerpts from *Woman Hollering Creek*. In addition, her books have become required reading in many high school literature and language courses.

3 Recent anthologies organized around Latino literature as spanning multiple ethnic traditions include *Herencia: The Anthology of Hispanic Literatures in the*

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literature, beginning with José Martí, through Gabriel García Márquez and Roberto Fernández Retamar, to a present generation of Latino, Latina and African-American writers. His genealogy is unified ideologically by an interest in resistance to multinational capitalism, and aesthetically by the tropes of metahistorical narrative and magical realism.

While Saldívar does begin to show influence and tradition to be a tangled, relational web, the Cuban-Chicano conversations that he identifies are ultimately one-directional, the Cuban tradition asserting tremendous paternal influence on its descendents. As I will argue, with a Chicano literary tradition becoming more firmly entrenched, it is possible to imagine that conversation becoming a dialogue, displacing descent based in a genealogical model. While Saldívar shows how Cuba inspires both Chicano and African-American literature, he cannot see the reciprocal relationship that, as he wrote in 1991, was becoming possible as a Chicano tradition was being established that could influence a new generation of Cuban-American writers.

The reasons for the anomalous status of Cuban-Americans in Saldívar's theory become evident when one turns to Cuban-American formulations of identity. Gustavo Pérez Firmat, for example, rejects membership in a greater Latino fraternity entirely and shows no interest in pursuing the relationship of the Cuban-American to other Latino groups. The Cuban-American, as far as Pérez Firmat can see, has so little in common with Nuyoricans and Chicanos that mention of these groups is unnecessary. His reasons for this are personal, but emblematic of a greater Cuban-American consciousness as political exiles, rather than economic immigrants. In *Life on the Hyphen*, he envisions a genealogy of exceptional Cuban entertainers, from Desi Arnaz to Pérez Prado and finally Gloria Estefan and Oscar Hijuelos. Rather than looking at the Cuban-American experience in its relation to other Latino groups, he wants to show that "many of the links in the Desi Chain are made up of one-and-a-halfers" (Pérez Firmat, 1994, 4), those born in Cuba but raised in the United States. He hopes especially to "highlight the opportunities for distinctive achievements created by this fractional existence" (p. 5). The model Cuban-American one-and-a-halfer, then, is the creative (individual and in most cases male) genius who achieves tremendous commercial success "crossing-over" and becoming a hyphenated American. The Desi Chain that Pérez Firmat assembles is pure and unadulterated, even excluding those still in Cuba or those born in the United States. Other formulations of Latino or Latina identity are beside the point.

In light of this Cuban-American exceptionality, theorists of Latino identity like Saldívar often have not felt the need to include the Cuban-American in their formulations. Juan Bruce-Novoa, discussing Latino/a literature during the 1980s, writes: "we can eliminate from our discussion the Cuban literary production in the USA up to this point. Their main literary activity comes, so far, from writers who consider themselves exiles more than US citizens or permanent residents, although this will probably change in the near future"

*United States* (2001), *The Latino Reader: An American Literary Tradition from 1542 to the Present* (1997), *Hispanic American Literature: An Anthology* (1997), *The Prentice Hall Anthology of Latino Literature* (2001), and *Latina: Women's Voices from the Borderlands* (1995). A discussion of the decisions to organize around different themes, chronological development, or transnational traditions would obviously be a necessary part of a full understanding of how a pan-Latino tradition is constructed; for now, I will only mention that a number of these anthologies give Cisneros a place of privilege.

(Bruce-Novoa, 1990, 27). Bruce-Novoa, like de la Campa, looks to a yet unwritten future; Saldívar and Pérez Firmat write on the cusp of this future, when Cuban-Americans have entered a new stage of relationship to the United States and to other Latino groups. Bruce-Novoa allows for the eventuality that the Cuban-American would soon outgrow exile, put down roots and become part of a greater Latino family: “The younger generation will probably change this tendency, having grown up for the most part in the USA and experiencing Cuba only through the nostalgic memories of their elders” (pp. 27–28).<sup>4</sup>

4 Even in the work of social scientists, we see this move described. For example, *Cuban Americans: From Trauma to Triumph* ends with the chapter “From Exiles to Ethnics” (Olson and Olson, 1995); similarly, the last chapter of *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* is titled “Diaspora Politics and Identity: Rethinking Theory, Politics, and the Personal” (De Los Angeles Torres, 1999).

I offer the intertextuality of Cristina Garcia as representative of this new generation of Cuban-Americans, turning the model of “descent” Saldívar offers of Cuban influence on Chicano literature into a two-directional flow. By dealing with some of the same themes as Chicana fiction, Garcia makes gestures towards her complicated inheritance as a Latina. In the spirit of Saldívar’s discussion of an African–American–Latino dialogue, I propose Henry Louis Gates’ notion of signifyin(g) as a useful tool for discussing Latina intertextuality. For Gates, thinking about signifyin(g) is part of an attempt to “locate within the African and Afro-American traditions a system of rhetoric and interpretation that could be drawn upon both as *figures* for a genuinely ‘black’ criticism and as *frames* through which I could interpret, or ‘read,’ theories of contemporary literary criticism” (Gates, 1989, ix).

Gates uses the term signifyin(g) in two distinct ways: first, it describes the African-American rewriting with a difference of texts inherited from mainstream white culture. In this case, the marginalized writer carries out an act of Bakhtinian appropriation, taking the Other’s word and putting it to new uses:

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there one must take the word, and make it one’s own (Bakhtin, 1981, 293–294).

In the case of the African-American, as writers “most certainly revise texts in the Western tradition, they often seek to do so ‘authentically,’ with a black difference, a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular” (Gates, 1989, xxii). Through this process, African-American authors write themselves into the consciousness and the literary tradition of the dominant culture. When Garcia speaks in interviews of how “Latino writers” are “really becoming the mainstream, and the literature of the future will be what has traditionally been called ‘the margins’” (López, 1995, 109–110), she is referring to this process by which literary discourse is appropriated by groups historically thought of as “minorities” in the United States.

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At the same time, and this will be central to my argument about Garcia's use of intertextuality, signifyin(g) does not only involve the margin rewriting the center. By signifyin(g) on other African-American texts, the writer in Gates' narrative points to an alternative tradition on which he or she draws. Gates cites the perpetual rewriting of certain tropes of slave narratives by subsequent African-American writers as one such example of signifyin(g). The effect of such tropological revision is to help build a continuous black literary tradition: "Black writers also read each other, and seem intent on refiguring what we might think of as key canonical topoi and tropes received from the black tradition itself" (Gates, 1989, xxii). It is because black writers read and revise one another that the formation of an African-American tradition becomes possible. Instead of tying themselves to a "white master," as Ishmael Reed (1976) puts it in *Flight to Canada*, this form of intertextuality, this "signifyin(g)," points to black models worthy of engaging in dialogue. By emphasizing the "double-voicedness" of African-American literature, that black writers signify on both black and white predecessors with different effects, signifyin(g) allows for a conception of tradition and influence not entirely based in lineage and genealogy.

As important as Gates' idea of signifyin(g) will be to my discussion of how *Dreaming in Cuban* begins to codify a Latina literary tradition, Edouard Glissant's concept of relation points to the limitations of tradition and the historical dynamics tradition can obscure.<sup>5</sup> Glissant offers a cogent argument for questioning what he calls the tree-root conception of identity, which Gates' signifyin(g) can tend to support. Glissant aggressively critiques filiation and genealogy, using the metaphor of the rhizome to present an alternative to the kind of "root-identity" represented by the family tree that excludes non-familial relations. He describes the ways in which this idea of rootedness lends itself to fixed identity and racial purity, tracing the origins of European nationhood, imperialism and intolerance to the tree-root: "The West, therefore, is where this movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in preparation for their repercussions in the world. This fixing, this declaration, all require that the root take on the intolerant sense" (Glissant, 1997, 14). The rhizome becomes a way of imagining identity as both rooted and in process, and of drawing attention not only to the vertical connections of genealogy, but to horizontal relations as well:

The idea of creolization demonstrates that henceforth it is no longer valid to glorify 'unique' origins that the race safeguards and prolongs. In Western tradition, genealogical descent guarantees racial exclusivity, just as Genesis legitimizes genealogy. To assert people are creolized, that creolization has value, is to deconstruct in this way the category of 'creolized' that is considered as halfway between two 'pure' extremes (Glissant, 1989, 140).

Relation, then, allows us to deconstruct the concept of the Cuban-American as in-between pure Cubanness and Americanness. Garcia's intertextuality, a complicated rendition of the signifyin(g) process that Gates describes, nods

5 Andrea O'Reilly Herrera (1997) draws on Glissant in a somewhat different way in her essay "Women and the Revolution in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*". She uses Glissant's ideas about History and history to locate *Dreaming in Cuban* "at the center of contemporary post-modern Caribbean aesthetics" because of its "impulse not only to unmask or 'emplot' [...] the master texts of Western History, but the attempt to reclaim a 'collective memory' and a cultural past which was denied in official records of Western colonial powers" (p. 69).

towards this tangled web of relations and entanglements. By putting Garcia into dialogue with authors from black and white America (Gates and Hemingway), from South America (García Márquez), from the Caribbean (Glissant) and from another US Latino group (Cisneros), I am pointing to these kinds of relational, non-genealogical inheritances that make *Dreaming in Cuban* a Latina text.

The strong sense of blood relationships in *Dreaming in Cuban*, the tree-rooted side of del Pino identity, shows how seductive the temptations of the family tree can be.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the representations of Latino and Latina characters who are not part of the del Pino family emphasize the tenuousness of relationships between groups that perceive of themselves as nationally unique, reminding us of the many difficulties in any effort to reach across such boundaries towards solidarity based in gender or imagined ethnicity. Lourdes mentions her interactions with a number of Nuyorican characters, people she views as thieves, drug dealers, and general lowlifes. She claims to see Maribel Navarro, “a pretty Puerto Rican woman in her late twenties” (Garcia, 1992, 66), stealing 50 cents from her bakery and fires her immediately. Working as a volunteer police officer, Lourdes confronts Maribel’s son, “a delinquent” who she suspects “sells plastic bags of marijuana behind the liquor store” (p. 129); fleeing from Lourdes, the boy falls to his death. Having internalized the dominant image of other Latino groups as criminals, Lourdes feels compelled to distinguish herself from her neighbors by taking her father’s advice to “put your name on the sign, too, *hija*, so they know what we Cubans are up to, that we’re not all Puerto Ricans” (p. 170).

While Lourdes’ relationship to other minorities in the neighborhood is based on economic competition and racist stereotypes, Pilar has somewhat more positive interactions with members of other Latino groups. Her first boyfriend, Max, is a Tejano musician; her second, Rubén Florín, immigrated to the United States from Peru at the age of 2. Pilar sees these relationships as based in shared experience and linguistic background; both of them appear to be attracted to Pilar because of their vague, romantic associations with what Cuba and its revolutionary tradition stands for in the Latin American imaginary. Although their cross-purposes may make any sense of common background appear to be idealized and unrealistic, rather than grounded in real lived experience, it becomes for Pilar at least the beginning of an entry into a Latino community. Nonetheless, her relationships with both of these men emphasize the racial hierarchies characterizing any pan-ethnic imagining: Pilar notices that Max’s attraction to her also depends on “the whiteness of [her] skin” (p. 137), while Pilar eventually learns that Rubén has found an even whiter woman, “the Dutch exchange student” (p. 180). Imagined constructions of a pan-Latino community that seek to overcome these stereotypes and contradictions can appear in these moments to have only the most flimsy foundations on which to build.

At the same time, the novel’s signifying strategies suggest that, however shaky the ground, *puentes* can still be constructed. As the story of a well-off Caribbean family, coping with exile in New York while trying to stay connected to their

6 The del Pino surname captures perfectly the family’s obsession with the purity of their line, as seen in the family tree preceding the novel. Lourdes is the best representative of this del Pino identity based on the tree-root; Pilar, on the other hand, embodies her father’s surname as a relational Puente.



relatives back home, critics have long noticed that *Dreaming in Cuban* bears a familial resemblance to Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* that goes beyond the family tree that begins each novel.<sup>7</sup> I would like to point to another set of themes in Garcia's novel that position *Dreaming in Cuban* as intertextual descendent to Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, a canonical text in its own right for the Latina literary tradition in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Garcia has mentioned frequently her admiration for Cisneros; when one interviewer mentions Alvarez and Oscar Hijuelos as Garcia's predecessors, she interjects: "I would add another person to that list, Sandra Cisneros" (López, 1995, 109). *Dreaming in Cuban* hints at its connection to *The House on Mango Street* with a chapter titled "The House on Palmas Street." By rewriting Cisneros' title with a difference, *Dreaming in Cuban* relocates this canonical Latina story to a specifically Cuban site, a strategy typical of signifying as Gates describes it. Through this invocation, *Dreaming in Cuban* reflects on the themes of female freedom and independence which Cisneros' novel raises.

*The House on Mango Street* begins with the typically Latino theme of belonging, movement and migration as its narrator, Esperanza, reflects on her family's various living spaces. Esperanza begins by remembering that "we didn't always live on Mango Street" (Cisneros, 1984, 3). From there, she lists a number of other residences, remarking: "but what I remember most is moving a lot" (p. 3). Yet she moves from the expected lament about the homelessness or the unbelonging of the migrant to observe how these spaces have been marked by stark gendered divisions. In the chapter "Boys and Girls," Esperanza notes that "the boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls" (p. 8). In a universe strictly divided between the public, male world of the streets, and the private, female world of the home, one of the novel's most important structuring archetypes becomes the image of the woman at the window. From this bordered location sealed away in their home but tantalizingly close to the outside, these women gaze out longingly at the public world they cannot join.

Esperanza's great-grandmother, from whom she inherits her name, is the first of these women to be described: "She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (p. 11). This image of the great-grandmother also called Esperanza embodies the imprisonment to which the narrator vows she will never submit: "I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (p. 11). The novel becomes a litany of these women: some of the women are trapped inside by their families; others hide away from a cruel world in which women are constantly threatened with all forms of verbal and physical abuse. The chapter "The First Job" demonstrates the dangers for Esperanza of entering this public world. She describes how a kindly older co-worker comforts her when she is feeling scared and lonely in this new environment, then betrays her trust and "grabs [her] face

7 For this comparison, see especially the essays by Josefina Acosta Hess (2001) and Ludmila Kapschutschenko-Schmitt (1997).

8 Felicia Cruz gives a detailed accounting of the canonization of *The House on Mango Street* in her essay "On the 'Simplicity' of Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*," describing the book's reception from its initially promising publication to how it has currently "acquired elite status as a 'representative' work of multicultural literatures in the curricula of high schools and colleges" (Cruz, 2001, 912).

with both hands and kisses [her] hard on the mouth and doesn't let go" (p. 55). Later, in "Red Clowns," we again see a public world filled with predatory threats for the young protagonist: "I was waiting by the red clowns. I was standing by the tilt-a-whirl where you said. [...] The one who grabbed me by the arm, he wouldn't let me go. He said I love you, Spanish girl, and pressed his sour mouth to mine" (pp. 99–100).

With all of these threats, Esperanza notices how the older generation of women have withdrawn from the outside world or have been confined to their houses. The freedom of Esperanza and her friends, playing in the streets throughout the neighborhood, is contrasted with Mamacita, whose son brought her to live with him and who now "doesn't come out because she is afraid to speak English" (p. 77); Rafaela, "who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much [...] locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (p. 79); and even Esperanza's mother, who "doesn't know which subway train to take to get downtown" (p. 90). The novel ends with one of Esperanza's young friends, Sally, demonstrating that the cycle of confinement has not been completely broken by the younger generation; after she marries, her husband "doesn't let her look out the window," and so "she sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission" (p. 102). As Jacqueline Doyle and Andrea O'Reilly Herrera show, with this trope Cisneros invokes and revises a long literary tradition of homes, from Virginia Woolf's room to an "Anglo-American 'house of fiction'" (O'Reilly Herrera, 1995, 193) that includes William Faulkner, Edith Wharton, and Henry James. *The House on Mango Street* "both continues Woolf's meditations and alters the legacy of *A Room of One's Own* in important ways" (Doyle, 1994, 6) at the same time that it "stands as [Cisneros'] attempt to better understand, define, and synthesize the (interior) self in terms of the (exterior) Chicano and Anglo-American community" (O'Reilly Herrera, 1995, 193).

Through the same process of invocation and revision, Garcia continues and alters Cisneros' literary legacy. Inside and outside space continues to be the site of gendered contestation, with the women of *Dreaming in Cuban* refusing to be restricted to the inside space of the house. Pilar moves easily through the streets of Brooklyn and the clubs of Manhattan; her parents, Lourdes and Rufino, appear to reverse the public and private, male and female roles, with ambitious and active Lourdes owning a bakery and patrolling the city as an auxiliary policewoman while the passive and pliable Rufino stays at home to tinker in his garage workshop. The outside world remains a place full of threats for these women – Pilar is sexually assaulted in Morningside Park (Garcia, 1992, 201–202), and Lourdes suffers the ultimate intrusion of the public into the private when a group of revolutionary soldiers enters her house and rapes her (pp. 71–72) – but the women refuse to give up their stake in the public world and retreat into domesticity.

In fact, from its opening lines, *Dreaming in Cuban* picks up Cisneros' image of the woman watching the outside world from behind a window, in order to appropriate and revise it. The novel opens with Celia watching her husband walk across the ocean towards her:

Celia del Pino, equipped with her binoculars and wearing her best housedress and drop pearl earrings, sits in her wicker swing guarding the north coast of Cuba [...] her husband emerges from the light and comes toward her, taller than the palms, walking on water in his white summer suit and Panama hat (pp. 3–5).

In this scene, Celia appears to be the passive watcher, as Jorge actively approaches her. Indeed, the chapter “The House on Palmas Street” begins by suggesting Celia's affinity to the women of Mango Street, describing how “it seems to [Celia] that she has spent her entire life waiting for others, for something or other to happen. Waiting for her lover to return from Spain” (p. 35).

Yet the description of Celia waiting on the beach demonstrates the important differences between grandmother Celia and Esperanza's great-grandmother. Most obviously, *Dreaming in Cuban* translates the scene geographically, from the woman staring out the window to the woman looking out to sea. In this way, Cisneros' trope of the woman at her window becomes specifically Cuban in Garcia's novel. By relocating Cisneros' house from the urban decay of Mango Street to tropical Palmas Street, Garcia rewrites the scene of the woman gazing out the window with a Latina-Caribbean difference, showing the centrality of the sea to her Cuban-American imaginary. Furthermore, the scene recasts the passive watcher of *The House on Mango Street* into the politically active women of Cuba's anti-imperialist Revolution. When Celia sits on the beach, watching the ocean, she is not waiting for her husband, or even for her departed lover Gustavo; she “guards their beach with binoculars and a pistol against Yankees” (p. 128). Instead of the great-grandmother Esperanza who serves as a negative model of what the young protagonist of *The House on Mango Street* fears she will become, Celia's independent spirit inspires her daughters and granddaughters to take hold of their lives. Celia not only defends her beach from invasions, she works as a civilian judge, where she “makes a difference in others' lives, and she feels part of a great historical unfolding” (p. 111). In Mango Street, such a powerful and active woman, a woman who intervenes in the course of history, seems unimaginable.

Instead of *The House on Mango Street's* genealogy of female confinement, Celia comes from a distinguished lineage of actively vigilant Cuban women. Doña Inés de Bobadilla, the wife of de Soto, for example, “was frequently seen staring out to sea” while her husband was away, “searching the horizon for her husband” (p. 43). Although Doña Inés' confinement could appear to replicate the lives of the women of Mango Street, waiting passively for her husband to return from his adventures in the world of men, *Dreaming in Cuban* makes a

point of mentioning that she was also the first female governor of Cuba. This position of political power, available to Doña Inés as early as the sixteenth century, is quite unimaginable for the women of Mango Street. The women of *Dreaming in Cuban* cannot be caged, Garcia suggests; and under Castro, the women's revolution continues to move ahead alongside the decolonization project.

In addition to picking up these tropes from Cisneros, *Dreaming in Cuban's* language and style also signify on *The House on Mango Street*. Both novels clearly follow the form of the *bildungsroman*, but deform that genre through fragmentation in their narrative techniques. Cisneros accomplishes this generic transformation by writing in a poetic prose deeply infused with otherness, bending English to accommodate Spanish phrasing and sentence structure. The style of *The House on Mango Street* has fascinated critics because of its poetic, Spanish-inflected meter and tone.<sup>9</sup> Critics such as Deborah Madsen see this style as exemplary of a Latina aesthetic because of its in-betweenness, "a hybrid English that is required to accommodate Spanish words and phrases" (Madsen, 2000, 131). Cisneros herself describes "how the Spanish syntax and word choice occurs in my work even though I write in English" (Cisneros, 1987, 170). It is this style, this English with a visibly Spanish substrate, that gives *The House on Mango Street* its magical, fairy tale atmosphere.

*Dreaming in Cuban* begins with this mixed, hybrid style, less in its language than in its multiple allusions to events going beyond the rational and the ordinary. One review included in the paperback version of the book compares this style to "the hallucinatory magic of a novel by Gabriel García Márquez," and indeed, the diagram of the family tree preceding the novel immediately invokes the Rabassa translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.<sup>10</sup> The extrarational of *Dreaming in Cuban*, echoing the magic of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, appears in three distinct forms: the ghost of Jorge, the practices of santería, and Celia's telepathic communications with Pilar. Each of these magical elements derives from different sources, but all ultimately are associated with Cuba: Lourdes' belief in her father's ascension to heaven owes to her devout Catholicism; the santería Felicia practices is Afro-Caribbean in origin; Celia's spirituality seems unconnected to organized religion. *Dreaming in Cuban* begins in Cuba and the first section is dominated by dreams and the presence of Jorge's ghost. But in the second section, the dreams that connect Celia and Pilar end: "Celia understands now that a cycle between them had ended, and a new one had not yet begun" (p. 119). Jorge tells Lourdes that "I can't return anymore" (p. 195), and disappears from the story. At about the same time, Felicia, the family's only connection to santería, passes away.

Just as the magical disappears from the plot, Garcia's style shifts away from the poetry and magic associated with Cuba to the entirely realistic style of its final scene. The stylistic accent typical of Sandra Cisneros, this overtly hybrid narrative voice, gives way to Cristina Garcia's own voice, a journalistic prose. Although history is figured throughout the first two sections of *Dreaming in*

9 See the essay "Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and the Poetics of Space," for one particularly important exploration of Cisneros' narrative style (Olivares, 1987).

10 One might argue for the English version of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as an immigrant text, a cousin of Latino literature, translating Latin America into English in a process similar to what Lori Ween describes as *Dreaming in Cuban's* "concerted effort to translate Cubanness into English" (Ween, 2003, 139). The difference between García Márquez and Garcia is, of course, the accent, the addition and subtraction that exceeds Ween's formula; *Dreaming in*

*Cuban* as a force intruding on the personal lives of the characters, the last section, “The Languages Lost,” gives privileged place to the historical events of the Mariel exodus in 1980. The novel’s last dream is the intensely realistic scene “of thousands of defectors fleeing Cuba. Their neighbors attack them with baseball bats and machetes. Many wear signs saying, SOY UN GUSANO, ‘I am a worm.’ They board ferries and cabin cruisers, rafts and fishermen’s boats” (p. 238). By the last section of the novel, the language lost is the magical discourse of the early sections that echoes Cisneros and García Márquez. Considering the straightforward and simple style of the final section, it is more than a coincidence that Pilar, as she points out to the reader, gets her name from a boat belonging to Ernest Hemingway.<sup>11</sup>

Along with this stylistic shift, as the novel goes from the mixed language of what might be called magical realism to the documentary realism that comes through in Garcia’s own journalistic style in the last chapter, the novel’s characters abandon Cuba. As Pamela Smorkaloff puts it, “the novel posits a movement *toward* the United States” (Smorkaloff, 1999, 46); nowhere is the movement towards the United States, and away from Cuba, more apparent than in the novel’s last section. Although early in the novel, it seems to Lourdes that everything is “going south” (p. 24),<sup>12</sup> the novel ends not only with the flight of the Marielitos but with Ivanito waiting to get on a plane to leave the island, Lourdes and Pilar returning to the United States, and Celia swimming north to what will surely be her death. Amidst this troubling moment of apparent purification – Cuba is essentially cleansed of all del Pinos by the end of the novel – Pilar sides with her mother in helping Ivanito leave, and lies to her grandmother about it. She tries to explain her betrayal of her grandmother and her abandonment of her idealized Cuba in what appears to be the novel’s final statement on Pilar’s positioning: “I know now it’s where I belong—not *instead* of here, but *more* than here” (Garcia, 1992, 236). Katherine Payant sees in this formulation a sense of unbelonging, that Pilar “doesn’t feel ‘at home’ in Cuba or New York” (Payant, 2001, 172). Yet recalling what Pérez Firmat describes as the both/and proclamation of the one-and-a-halfer, Pilar wants us to read this not as a rejection of Cuban-ness, but as an affirmation of a more complicated American-ness. Pilar decides to leave because she thinks that staying in Cuba is to limit herself: as she thinks of it, to choose Cuba, she would be choosing to be Cuban, but to choose the United States, she chooses to be Cuban and American.

There is certainly a cynical reading of this affirmation: to be Cuban in the era of trade embargo and travel restrictions would mean to be confined to Cuba, while to be Cuban-American means to be able to travel between the two.<sup>13</sup> As much as this is implied in Pilar’s statement, the novel’s depiction of US identity offers a more generous reading of Pilar’s decision. Bearing in mind the way that Garcia constructs American culture and tradition, we understand that this is American-ness with a difference, or perhaps more accurately, American-ness filled with difference. This identity is more than just Pérez Firmat’s hyphenated

*Cuban* is not simply an act of translating Cubanness, as much as an effort to write Latina-ness.

11 This reference to Hemingway is another intertextual element of *Dreaming in Cuban*’s relationship to the United States and American literature that would be interesting to follow in more detail. Although Hemingway has been assimilated into the US canon relatively seamlessly, a linguistically divided novel such as *For Whom the Bell Tolls* – a novel featuring a major character named Pilar – belongs to the more complicated, hybrid version of American literature that *Dreaming in Cuban* evokes.

12 Lourdes later observes that, contrary to her earlier impression, sociological fact is that most people are actually “moving north” in “transmigrations from the southern latitudes” (Garcia, 1992, 73).

13 In the essay, “The Routes of Global Nostalgia in Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in*

*Cuban*”, Elena Machado Sáez (2002) uses the trope of translation within the novel to make a similar argument.

14 Virtually all of the American characters of *Dreaming in Cuban* are hyphenated: the Arabs and Jews living side by side in Brooklyn (Garcia, 1992, 58), the Russians and Pakistanis who work in Lourdes’ bakery (p. 31), as well as the Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and other Latinos represented in the novel.

status: in Pilar’s formulation, choosing the United States is the only way she can encompass the Cuban, Latin American, Caribbean, American, and Latina parts of her identity. In making this choice, Pilar redefines American-ness: instead of imagining the United States and Cuba as representing opposing poles of purity, she chooses an always already hyphenated America, the immigrant New York where half the novel is set.<sup>14</sup> Although relations between these immigrant communities are not idealized, they represent the promise that Flores refers to, of a politics built on a produced common experience.

Pilar redefines American-ness to be this relational, always already hyphenated, Latina state; Cristina Garcia rewrites American literature to create a Latina canon and make this margin her center. The novel’s signifying strategies become a metaphor for Latina identity: as much as Pilar’s identity is filled with these contradictions and adds up to more than the sum of its parts, *Dreaming in Cuban* moves between stylistic registers and contains multitudes. Pointing outwards in every direction – towards García Márquez, towards Alvarez, towards Cisneros, towards Hemingway – the novel’s textual strategies offer a relational poetics that emphasizes Latina writing as “pan-ethnic” in Flores’ sense: not reliant on genealogy as bloodlines, but as part of the cultural creation that helps forge a common identity. With its multiple affiliations and its suspicion of rootedness, *Dreaming in Cuban* refuses to be categorized as Cuban-American literature; instead, it presents itself as evidence of a thriving Latina literary tradition.

### About the author

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