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Cultural Transmission and the Voice of the Other: Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that, in recent years, the emergence of the transnational space marked by cultural hybridity and racial creolization has initiated a crisis of cultural transmission and transcultural communicability. Given that this crisis is the major theme that Cristina Garcia dramatizes in *Dreaming in Cuban*, this paper seeks to use her debut novel to explore the problematics of transcultural intelligibility or transnational communicability. Drawing upon the trauma theory developed by Cathy Caruth, this paper maintains that in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Garcia writes a narrative that gestures towards the ethics of "traumatic awakening," which demands one's understanding of the other as an enigmatic site of unconscious desires calling for the kind of response that goes beyond any linguistic rules or principles of reciprocity. By reading *Dreaming in Cuban* as a novel that deliberately foregrounds the problematics of the voice of the other, I attempt to intervene in diaspora studies by shifting critical attention away from the problematic of identity, cultural or national, to that of ethics.

KEY WORDS

Cristina Garcia, *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cathy Caruth, trauma theory, traumatic awakening, transcultural literacy

Discussions of novels by ethnic writers often begin with questions of loyalty and authenticity. Two decades ago, Maxine Hong Kingston had to defend her *Woman Warriors* against the accusations that she has misrepresented Chinese culture to western readers. Two decades later, idioms of betrayal and distortion still saturate and haunt discourses of diasporic experiences to the degree that no diasporic writer can be "authentically" diasporic if she or he has not once been accused of treason or betrayal. The last decade, however, has seen a discursive shift from the language of cultural purity and national loyalty to that of hybridity, mobility, and hyphenation. The figure of travel, migrancy, and displacement is gaining so much critical currency that one seems to be always already hyphenated and everyone seems to be equally diasporic, though some are said to be more so than others. It is now no longer necessary for Maxine Hong Kingston to choose between Americanness and Chineseness. She is, as simple as it is, both Chinese and American. However, in the last few years, even the idiom of "hybridity" is proven to be too facile, too easy, and too simplified to describe the experience of trafficking among nations and cultures in this time of exile, immigration, and displacement. After all, how hybridized can one be, so goes the argument[1]? Instead of making easy appeals to concepts of in-betweenness and third spaces, as if being stranded in between two cultures or nation-states is necessarily a progressive position to claim and to inhabit, critics now begin to speculate and theorize on the multiple ties that are linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states. The idea of a transnational space—at once multidimensional and multi-layered—is used, on the one hand, to rectify overly generalized accounts of cultural

globalization and displacement, and, on the other, to "ground" discussion of transnationality in specific historical and spatial contexts[2]. In conjunction with the emergence of the transnational space traversed by national and transnational imaginaries that are not fully compatible with one another is a crisis of cultural transmission and transcultural communicability. This crisis, this paper argues, is the major theme that Cristina Garcia dramatizes in *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Dreaming in Cuban: Identities Politics in a Transnational Space

Dreaming in Cuban is a three-hundred-page saga that chronicles the fortunes of three generations of the del Pino family through a time of political turbulences and forced immigration. As Cuba was torn by the Communist Revolution headed by Fidel Castro into different factions, the del Pino family is also divided over politics as different members of the family align themselves against one another, with Celia del Pino, the matriarch of the family, staying behind with her daughter Felicia in Cuba to defend her beloved country from the threat of American military invasion, and Celia's other daughter, Lourdes, fleeing with her husband, Rufino, and daughter, Pilar, to New York. Celia's husband, Jorge, stays with Celia in Cuba for a few years, and then leaves Cuba for New York in 1968 to stay with his daughter, Lourdes, both because he needs to receive chemotherapy for his stomach cancer, and because he cannot bear to live with his wife, Celia, who, he announces to his daughter, "had fallen in love again" and "thought only of the revolution."[3] The splitting of the family into two geographical locales, Cuba and New York, is reflected in the novel's three-part organization, as the first two parts of the novel consist of chapters tracing the fortunes of different members of the family as they try to survive as immigrants in New York and as communist nationals in Cuba, and the final section of the novel retells the trip taken by Lourdes and her daughter, Pilar, back to Cuba in an attempt to fulfill Jorge's dying wish to reconcile with his estranged wife, Celia, and to realize Pilar's dream of "going south" to "see my grandmother's face" (34). In terms of thematic concern, the novel is primarily about death

since it begins with Celia's attempted suicide by drowning and ends with Celia's walking into the sea, "drifting as a firefly through the darkened seas" (244). But it is also a novel about regeneration. The death of the older generation is juxtaposed with the promise of a different future for the newer generation: Felicia's son, Ivanito, decides to seek political asylum at the eruption of the Peruvian embassy riot, and Pilar, after a painful process of soul searching, becomes aware that that "sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong—not *instead of* here, but *more than* here" (236).

Ever since its publication, *Dreaming in Cuban* has received mixed criticism, with negative reception coming mostly from Cuban American readers. In a recent article, for example, "The Global Baggage of Nostalgia in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*," Elena Machado Sáez argues against what she calls the "traditional readings" of the novel's ending, which see Pilar's journey back to Cuba in search of family connections as a "merely positive recuperation of identity" (131). For her part, Sáez considers Pilar's nostalgia "both a product of her creative imagination and a product of globalization" (131). Obviously, Sáez is not interested in lauding Pilar as an exemplary figure of either diasporic betrayal or ethnic assimilation; instead, she analyzes how identities, diasporic and ethnic, are always already products of globalization, with nostalgia being a motivating force within it, shaped by it, and at the same time also fuelling it. "Through Pilar's final betrayal of Celia, and Celia's subsequent drowning, *Dreaming in Cuban* melancholically posits nostalgia as a product of entrance to the global world, and a better fate than never being part of the global marketplace" (144). Following this line of argument, Sáez then claims that the novel represents globalization as an unambiguous space of translation and mobility. On the one hand, Cuba is doomed if it does not move in sync with a global world of constant trafficking; on the other hand, Cuba is to lose its culture, history and language if it is to join the global market of unending fusing and transmutation. "The novel locates the market," Sáez goes on to explain, "as a space dominated by English as the global language; success therefore entails learning English and leaving Cuba behind" (143).

Sáez is not alone in finding the ending of the novel problematic. In *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*, Kathleen Brogan indignantly accuses Garcia of intending to "kill off" Cuba (95). Clearly, Sáez concurs with Brogan in that both disagree with Garcia's treatment of those highly indigenous characters such as Celia and Felicia who, despite their allegorical function signifying indigenous cultures and patriotic nationalism, are eventually "killed off" or "exiled" from the text towards its end. Such an ending works, Sáez argues, rather paradoxically, both to consolidate the notion of indigenous difference, by coding it as a thing of the past, to be nostalgically mourned for, and to exclude it from the transnational space, precisely as a thing of the past, thereby incompatible with the socioeconomic system of the contemporary global world. Yet, to do justice to Garcia, though an initial reading may yield the suspicion raised by Brogan and Sáen that Garcia means to "kill off" Cuba, a careful reconsideration of the many disjointed chapters of her novel invites a somewhat different reading of the novel. There is indeed a hidden violence in the narrative to dismantle the myth of nationalism which has caused the melancholic dis-ease of the characters of the older generation, both at home and abroad. In a way, Garcia does want to "kill off" Cuba. Nevertheless, Garcia can only "kill off" Cuba if this "Cuba" is symbolic in nature and connotes a fixed meaning that so violates the national imaginary of the people, both Cubans and Cuban-Americans, that it has to be deconstructed so that Cubans can "live on" in a space that is always already transnational, rather than national.

Moreover, if Garcia can be said to have intended to "kill off" a symbolic Cuba, she also wants to debunk and expose as absurdity any fixed myth about the "American Dream," which has organized the lives of Cuban Americans and reconfigured their subjectivities. For Garcia, at this historical juncture, the word Cuba has multiple meanings for different people at different locales. She wants to highlight the multiple meanings that the nation Cuba signifies as well as the multiple linguistic systems, both English and Spanish, which Cubans use, interchangeably and indiscriminately, in their daily lives. In this, she is,

once again, not alone. Garcia, along with other contemporary Cuban American writers and performers, participate in experimenting in a culturalist project to evoke and conjure up an unstable and undefinable sense of Cuban "feel,"[4] even though this "feel" has frequently been translated into a network of symbolic codes that not only have fixed references but have also been packed into cultural commodities that are fetishized and reified. Their project is to reiterate and embody this Cuban "feel" so that it is both unique and transcultural, singular and *metizmo*, culturally innovative and commercially marketable.

However, to Garcia's credit, while she deploys culturalist rhetoric and acknowledges the contradictory effects of the market, her narrative does seem to exhibit doubts about the power of cultural signs and meanings in effecting progressive social changes and in bettering the material life of Cubans. Culture becomes stagnant in Cuba not because it does not have a triumphant past but because its present nationalist configuration is, at least on its surface, ideologically so hardened and fossilized that Cubans' impulse towards class equality has thwarted the transcultural flow among its many peoples, the kind of transculturality which once made Cuba an exemplary "contact zone" of cultural fusion and racial creolization, rendering this historically active zone now a site that allows no contacts and promises no flows. It is in supplementing her culturalist logic of identity as mutated and hybridized with a poetics of the otherness of voice, a poetics that is attentive to both the said and the unsaid—the tones, pauses, disturbances, and silences—that her debut novel deserves our nuanced attention and detailed analysis.

Though Sáez has been perceptive enough to read the novel not in terms of the necessary opposition between the native and the alien, the national and the transnational, assimilation and betrayal, authenticity and hybridity, she still reads the working of globalization in terms of the fixity of national and geographical boundaries; that is, between Cuba and America, rather than in terms of the mobility of translation. Despite the perceptiveness of Sáez's insights, I will argue that the reading she proffers actually works against Garcia's overall project in writing this novel. In portraying Cuba as a land that is devoid of

regenerating momentum, Garcia is no different from most contemporary ethnic writers whose narrative practices exhibit a consistent skepticism of the redemptive possibilities of postcolonial nationhood. It is not surprising that she should depict Cuba as a land that is stagnant and suffocating. What is of the utmost interest to the reader resides neither in her depiction of Cuba, nor in her presentation of New York, but in her mapping of the transnational space formed by the encounters between Cubans and Cuban Americans. Such a space, neither Cuban nor American, is a cultural as well as socioeconomic space inhabited by both Cubans and Americans, all of whom are involved in its configuration and reconfiguration with their multiple psychic investments and disavowals.

Given the fact that the transnational space is necessarily traversed by both capitalism and nationalism, tension, as well as contradiction, is embedded into the very texture of this multi-layered space. Nationalism, which mobilizes people's desire for autonomy, independence and liberation, coheres on the idea of imagined singularity and commonness. Capitalism, which thrives on the promotion and production of differences, encourages the continuous production and circulation of needs and desires, identities and commodities. Yet, even without the mediation of the market, the flow of capital, culture and power is still in constant motion, with perhaps less rigor and intensity than if it is propelled by the transnational force of the market. If the trafficking in this transnational space is brisk, spirited, and untrammeled by the working of the body politic, this space is alive with possibilities, inviting its inhabitants to exercise their imagination in producing a mobile culture with objects that possess use, exchange, as well as symbolic values. In contrast, if the trafficking is unidirectional in this transnational space, desires will become stagnant, as objects possess but use values or a modicum of exchange values, devoid of symbolic investments. In this light, identities, national and transnational, only assume meanings within, rather than without, this circuit of desires, as well as the network of relations this circuit constitutes. To be cut off from this flow of desires, cultures, and relations is to be reduced to silence and inertia. On the other hand, to be

inundated with signs of cross-cultural translation can be taxing on one's emotions, leading to intellectual entropy as well. Garcia's novel charts the varying enunciative and communicative strategies the characters—allegorical figures respectively signifying Cuban nationalism, nativist religion, and American capitalism—deployed to interact with the national and transnational circuit of desires and relations so that they would not be cut off from this circuit of communication, translation, and intelligibility. She is critical of the universalizing tendency of American capitalism (Lourdes), skeptical of the paternalism of Cuban nationalism (Celia), and, doubtful of the aestheticism of "nations without nationalisms." This cynicism generates a narrative that, without embracing any given practice as necessarily emancipatory, ends with a sense of uncertainty about what the future holds for Cubans and Cuban Americans. Yet, this sense of uncertainty is also what allows Pilar and the reader to hear the voice of the other out of the traumatic relics of voices and in the midst of transcultural and transnational encounters.

Behind the rhetoric of either intercultural hybridity or transnational multi-layeredness, to press the issue further, is hidden an unconscious desire to imagine a shared framework of communicability, other than that of capital, that one needs to know and use in order to live, to love, or to interact with others. Whereas capitalism has a liquidizing force that breaks down national and cultural barriers and is itself a universal language that everyone yearns to master and manipulate, capitalism also introduces differences and reinforces older tensions, rendering a genuine understanding across national, religious, and cultural boundaries difficult, if not impossible. In the midst of escalating conflicts among nations and mounting misunderstanding among cultures of the present time, the fantasy that there should be a platform that allows for transcultural communication, becomes the structural principle of many contemporary fictions. This imagined framework of communicability, by now an academic consensus, involves not only one's knowledge of the working of the symbolic order of one's own, in its post-national and post-Oedipal phase, but also, one's knowledge of the other's history, culture, and language. Instead

of "cultural literacy," one now needs to cultivate "transcultural" literacy, so argues Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, both to survive better, financially, in an increasingly globalized economy, and also, culturally speaking, to interact more effectively with others in a rapidly developing transnational culture (112). Meanwhile, transnationality also affects how a culture is to transmit itself in this age of multiple belongings when ethnicity is but a coded word for the commodification of differences. This paper seeks to use Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* to critically examine the "trans-" of "transcultural literacy." By exploring the textures of this transnational space populated by people who are traversed by the complex production, circulation, and consumption of things, people, ideas, capitals, and desires—many of which are highly stylized and commodified, this paper argues that transnational intimacy and understanding go beyond the issues of identity politics or transcultural literacy, for the global flow of heterogeneous ideas and identifications requires a radical rethinking of the problematics of transcultural intelligibility or transnational translation so that what lies within one's own cultural tradition will be transmitted, if not faithfully, then at least creatively, and, at the same time, what lies beyond the framework of one's cultural intelligibility can be heard, understood, and appreciated, if not transmitted. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Garcia writes a narrative that is structured upon the problematics of cultural transmission and transcultural communicability. By so doing, she dramatizes Cathy Caruth's understanding that awakening to inter-subjective understanding can only be initiated when an uncannily familiar, yet incomprehensible, voice interrupts to request a witnessing of and response to the ungraspable truth that eludes the comprehension of both the one who calls out for help and the other who pleads for help, for both may be too overwhelmed by the white noise of the transnational space to sufficiently understand who s/he is or what s/he wants.

Dreaming in Cuban: Dreaming in a Hybridized Language

Interspersed in the fragmented vignettes of the del Pino family members are the voices of the other members of the family who are uprooted by the experiences of Revolution and Immigration. All of them have suffered different wounds that they have difficulty gaining a full understanding, since they are still too present to the experience to maintain an objective stance to evaluate their experience. Their failure to work through their wounds leaves different residues or scars on their psyche, dooming them to suffer, rather repetitively, post-Revolution and post-Immigration melancholia[5]. Interestingly, the disjointed vignettes of the dying generation—Celia, Jorge, Lourdes, and Felicia—are told by an omniscient narrator with unrestricted access to the characters' consciousness and their psychic reactions to events unfolding around them; whereas the stories of the young generation—Pilar and Ivanito—are mainly presented in first-person narratives[6], allowing the reader a restricted access to their limited understanding of their relation to their parents and what the future holds for them. The omniscient narrator tells a version of the stories of the first generation, as if on their behalf, which they would have told their children, if only they knew how, so that their children may share their diverse ideological convictions and thereby understand their anger, sorrow, and frustrations.

The question of miscommunication, or even incomprehension, is therefore a core issue that structures the relationship between Celia and her three children. Celia is an unhappy housewife from the very beginning of her marriage to Jorge, who marries her only to leave her to be systematically abused by his mother and his unmarried sister. Celia eventually loses her mind, and when Lourdes is born, "She held their child by one leg, handed her to Jorge, and said, 'I will not remember her name'" (43). In other words, in response to the wounds that the patriarchal family has inflicted on her, she refuses motherhood and, as a consequence, she also disowns Lourdes through an act of deliberate forgetting. Yet, in refusing to remember her daughter's name, Celia

inadvertently renders trauma a maternal legacy that is repeated by her two daughters. In a way, Garcia structures her mother-daughter narratives between Celia, Lourdes, and Felicia along a much used plot of female violation to explain their implication in and entrapment by history and time: Celia's bouts of hysteria, first erupted after the departure of her Spanish lover and then before the birth of Lourdes; the rape of Lourdes by the revolutionary soldiers and the loss of her unborn son; the syphilis that Felicia's husband inflicts on her and the delusions she has which brings her to try to kill her husband and then herself. It can thus be said that the women of the del Pino family are wounded women. They—mother and daughters—attempt to heal their wounds by literally replicating that which is inarticulate about the trauma of gender: they disavow their trauma—their powerlessness—by exhibiting a bodily fascination with Cuban nationalism (Celia), American capitalism (Lourdes), and Afro-Cuban religion (Felicia). Driven to hysteria by her possessive mother-in-law's domestic abuses, Celia gives up her body and the daughter that her disavowed body gives birth to. Later, in giving herself to El Líder's revolution, Celia "consigns her body to the sugar cane..., hardening her muscles with every step, every swing" (44). Loudres's "appetite for sex and baked goods increased dramatically" after her father arrived in New York. "The flesh amassed rapidly on her hips and buttocks, muting the angles of her bones" (20). Loudres consumes bread and cakes—in cream, butter, eggs, and sugar—and is "reaching for Rufino for something he could not give her, she wasn't sure what" (21). Lourdes' "bodily fluctuations," Kathleen Brogan observes, "register her attempt to reinvent herself as non-Cuban by 'incorporating' America through its food or by purging revolutionary Cuba from her body" (101). Felicia, in her turn, whose "unsurpassed drama for the everyday" embarrasses her mother, mortifies her daughters, and puzzles her son, ends up dancing every night with her young son, while attempting to kill herself and her son, as if by so doing she may free her body from the physical world it is trapped in. However, all of them, despite their physical exertions, still feel lonely, for, theirs is "a loneliness borne of the inability to share her joy" (119). Thus, at her old age, Celia comes to the sad but belated

awareness that "Lourdes and Felicia and Javier are middle-aged now and desolate, deaf and blind to the world, to each other, to her. There is no solace among them, only a past infected with disillusion" (117).

Each of them is an embodiment of a different disillusion, a different wound. A Derridean reading would have emphasized that each character functions as a floating signifier, invested with different meanings by different people, whose own desires are displacements of an endlessly deferred "it," always exceeding the object that it pursued. However, in Garcia's novel, not only is each character's disillusion about an object endlessly deferred, but it is also a disillusion provoked by the belated acting out of a historical wound that, years later, still eludes his or her comprehension. In response to their wounds, which they can never fully assimilate into their cognitive framework, they tend to use their own bodies to articulate and act out their rage, dis-content, and incomprehension. Their traumas, in other words, often assume bodily, physical, and corporeal forms. If they can only evoke a past that is "infected with disillusion," with each of them "deaf and blind to the world, to each other," they are "deaf and blind" not because they have not worked hard in reinserting themselves into the world they inhabit, but because, as a dire consequence of their wounds, they have constructed an easy, reductive, simplified, but intelligible cognitive framework to make sense of the world they live in.

In a way, Garcia's narrative has systematically constructed its characters as victims of irresistible forces—nationalism, capitalism, religion, and, even, transnationalism. But oppressive power, Michel Foucault reminds us, also engenders disruption and resistance from within itself. Yet, Garcia's seeming fascination with the language of embodiment and the rhetoric of disillusionment calls into question an understanding of communication that is to be achieved through the peripheral rhetoric of nationalism, capitalism, and religion. From the very beginning the narrative of the del Pino family is an erratic one as it jumps back and forth in time, fluctuates from one episode to another, and discloses information that is scandalous in nature, as if to challenge any attempt to construct out of the series of disjunctive and scandalous vignettes a coherent family story which can then be taken as a

discursive legacy to be passed on. Thus, a sense of anxiety looms large in the older generation's fatal attractions to nationalism, capitalism, or religion, for the narrative suggests that not only is one's attraction another's doom, but the mother-daughter conflict is also a muted allegory of the conflict of ideologies, and even civilizations, in postcolonial Cuba.

If, according to Sara Suleri, the one strategy used most often in postcolonial writing is to "write in a context of a romance gone wrong" (181), Garcia's narrative continues this tradition of the refiguring of romance by repetitively mapping one romance gone wrong onto another. Yet, in imagining Cuba's past as failed romances with one ideology after another, Garcia does not intend to "kill off" Cuba, as Kathleen Brogan indignantly blames Garcia for doing. Instead, she is interested in addressing an interesting question that Pilar's grandmother, mother, and aunt have all failed to consider in their romances with different ideologies. In this novel, Garcia explores, through juxtaposing their untold stories of wounds, how they have failed to understand themselves and how they have failed to communicate their feelings to the others. The cumulative effect of their misunderstanding of themselves, though each with a different swerve, is a sense of repetition and inevitability, for the daughter's story is but a tragic repetition of the mother's, with but a slight variation in time and place. Pilar's task is to read from the disjunctive gaps of their female relatives' stories their omissions and disavowals so that through this oblique and off-centered reading of the past, a different plot can be written, one that does not pit nationalism against capitalism, nor does it practice religion to the exclusion of familial intimacy.

Not only do the characters in Garcia's novel fail to understand their intimate others—family members, loved ones, and neighbors—they frequently find themselves strangers even to themselves as well. Moreover, though they have suffered appalling losses, experience of losses does not guarantee that they will gain an understanding of it, since, more often than not, they unconsciously choose to disavow their pain through voluntary forgetting or psychic transference. Theirs are unspoken stories that seek sympathetic ears,

awaiting the witnessing and transmission of their wounds, as a kind of family legacy, by a sympathetic listener or reader, but, like all good stories of trauma, the very telling of the stories implies a structure of "missed encounter" and "belated" understanding (Caruth 100). In trauma narratives, an ironic logic is operative so that the concentrated efforts to secure understanding also works, obliquely, in a convoluted way, as missed encounters and failed communication. Unconsciously indulging in their personal losses, they choose not to listen to the voice that is crying out from within their buried wounds, nor are they ready to listen to the voice that is crying out from the wounds of their significant others. However, those traumatic memories that are disavowed without being absorbed or assimilated are doomed to compulsively return. The way that the truncated vignettes of the first generation are constructed suggests that not only have they failed to understand the complexity of their entanglements in the labyrinth of their time and place, but their children, the intended addressees of their stories, will not be able to interpret the ungraspable import of their varying symptoms: be they Celia's romance with nationalism, Lourdes' pursuit of the American Dream, or Felicia's devotion to *Santeria*, a nativist religion. Though the older generation yearns to be heard and be understood, they are doomed to be disappointed. They don't know how to tell their own stories; instead, their stories have to be told by an anonymous but omniscient narrator, itself ample evidence of their loss of contact with the complexity and convolution of their desires and experiences.

Disappointment, thus, is the underlying mood of this narrative about transcultural, transgenerational, and transnational understanding. Lourdes, at the opening of the novel, is haunted by the voice of her deceased father who pleads with his daughter to return to Cuba on his behalf and seek Celia's forgiveness for his leaving her with his mother after their marriage simply because, at that time, he wants to "punish" her and to "break" her for the affair she had with her Spanish lover (195). Pilar, who is gifted with a telepathic ability to defy geographical barriers to "hear" her Cuban grandmother, Celia, "speaking to me at night just before I fall sleep" (29), is troubled by her failure to continue to hear Celia's voice ever since she was a teenager. Wanting to

reestablish this telepathic rapport with her grandmother, Pilar goes to a New York *botánica*, where she finds "dried snakeskins and *ouanga* bags" and "wooden saints" and "plastic plug-in Virgins" (109), all exotic commodities reminiscent of the Cuban "feel" that she is searching for. Celia, in her turn, is also searching for a responsive listener. Before her passionate romance with Fidel Castro's communist regime, she writes unsent letters to her secret Spanish lover, Gustavo, chronicling her hopes and disappointments in life. Her letters, unsent, are thus unanswered. As time goes by, *eros* is conflated with *polis* and patriotic nationalism succeeds romantic love as a way of venting her desire and verifying her self identity. Despite her unflinching loyalty to the nation, she takes time off from guarding the coastline of Cuba to "speak" to Pilar, her beloved granddaughter, in New York. In the last unsent letter she writes to Gustavo, she declares that "I will no longer write to you, *mi amor*." She decides to stop writing to Gustavo, for she believes that her eleven-day-old granddaughter Pilar "will remember everything" (245). She is so sure that Pilar "will remember everything" that she does not foresee the possibility that Pilar should not know what to remember and that Pilar might choose not to remember anything. Felicia, Celia's daughter who stays with her in Cuba, is busy trafficking with a multitude of Afro-Cuban spirits, as if indigenous religion, specifically *Santeria*, can be a substitute for the family ties she has lost and the parental love that she has never had.

Whereas in Cuba, Celia uses nationalism to give structure to the formlessness of her life, and Felicia turns to *Santeria* to seek solace in communicating with the mysterious beings out there in her attempt to endow a meaning to her loveless life; in the States, Lourdes and Pilar are also alienated from each other. Lourdes embraces American capitalism; Pilar, convinced that "I'm still waiting for my life to begin," refuses to root herself in any given belief or ideology and, instead, chooses to take "adventures" (179) in abstract painting, rock 'n' roll, and nude modeling to seek the meaning of her life. Finally, Felicia' son, Ivanito, born in the post-Revolution Cuba, is hungrily searching for more technological means of reaching out to the world, despite the fact that America's embargo against Cuba has isolated it from the western

world for years. Unlike his mother, Ivanito does not talk to spirits; rather, he works hard to learn and master human languages with the help of a broken radio left on his door by his libertine father. Already rather proficient in Russian, Ivanito tunes in to Key West stations on his radio, and, inspired by the eloquence of one American DJ, Wolfman, he is eager to learn English so that he may one day talk "to a million people at once" (191), a tacit acknowledgement of the global influence of English. All of them, despite their dispersed geographical locations and their opposed ideological penchants, desire to reach beyond their private space, across national and cultural divides, either to respond to a mysterious call or to send out a plea for responsive returns. However, since a whole circuit of communications within and beyond the family has been fractured by Revolution and by migration; they need to imagine more radical forms of transcultural and transnational communication through which not only words, language, habits, but also a whole nexus of intangible "feel" about what it feels like to be a human being, rather than merely as a Cuban or as an American.

None of their desire for responses, however, is truly and unquestionably innocent. Each one of them, as such, is constructed by the circuit of desires that is shaping the ways they see and desire. Celia's patriotic nationalism is seen as a repetition of an unconsummated romance with her Spanish lover. She keeps her nightly vigils not only to "protect her stretch of shore from foreign invaders," but also to please El Líder; that is, Fidel Castro, whom she imagines "is watching her, whispering in her ear with his warm cigar breath" (112). Not only does Celia figure El Líder as a fetish for her frustrated desire for romantic love, but she also imagines Cuba as an expanded family with her being the reigning matriarch, volunteering for all community work and presiding over neighborhood feuds. Devoting herself to El Líder, however, demands her to sacrifice her lover, to whom she no longer writes after the Revolution, to forgo her family which has already been divided by politics, and even to forfeit her earlier dream of "sailing to Spain, to Granada" and around the world (243). Thus, when, upon Pilar's return, Celia asks Pilar accusingly, "*Ay, mi cielo*, what do all the years and the separation mean except a more significant

betrayal?" (240) she may have to include herself in the list of those who are guilty of betrayal. However, the more interesting question to ask, if we examine closely her question to Pilar, is what she has betrayed or who else is guilty of this "significant betrayal." Pilar, to whom this rhetorical question is posed, finds it impossible to "understand what my grandmother tells me. All I hear is her ***voice***, thickened with pain" (240, emphasis added). Celia's incomprehension is returned, that is to say, with Pilar's incomprehension, an ironically apt response that allows the voice of the other the generosity of "incomprehensibity" so that the utterance of the other both remains uniquely other and is open to creative interpretation.

Obviously, Celia and Pilar entertain rather different notions about how cultures are understood and transmitted. The narrative of cultural transmission preferred by Celia is a familial one, based on genealogy and family bonding. Pilar, however, attempts to imagine different ways of transmitting her cultural heritage so that it is open to other possibilities and allows for multiple modifications. Their different notions of cultural transmission thus place them in different orbits of cultural intelligibility, compelling them into writing an uncanny plot of mutual misreading. In terms of Celia's sighing over Pilar's "betrayal" cited above, what actually eludes Celia's comprehension is that her story is made inexplicable only by her insistence on the sentimental and the melodramatic, not because of Pilar's betrayal, or her own betrayal of herself, her youthful passion and desires. Given the fact that Celia's life is a life of trauma, spiced by her pursuit of romance and punctuated by her recurrent bouts of hysteria, it is not clear what is the "everything" that she claims that her granddaughter "will remember" (245), in the last letter that she writes to her Spanish lover. Since in that letter Celia specifically mentions the letter was written when the "revolution" was "eleven days old," is Pilar, whose life seems to be allegorically aligned with that of the nation, supposed to remember and record the history of the young nation? Or, since elsewhere Pilar mentions that her grandmother has passed down to her a "legacy," is the reader led to understand that this "legacy" has less to do with the birth of the nation than with, in Pilar's own words, "a love for the sea and the

smoothness of pearls, an appreciation of music and words, sympathy for the underdog, and a disregard for boundaries" (176). The disparity between what Celia hopes her granddaughter will remember (history of the nation) and what Pilar claims to have inherited from her grandmother (artistic sensibility and humanistic empathy) is significantly revelatory of the poetics of transnational and transgenerational transmission that Garcia subscribes to, which, rather than celebrating transnational communication, sees the failure of translation as a productive opening towards alternative transnational and transcultural dialogues that allow one to say more than what one wants or knows to say. Eventually, the narrative remains ambiguous about what "legacy" is handed down to Pilar and what version of the past she will remember. This ambiguity, in the final analysis, is precisely the "voice" of creative ambiguity that Pilar hears in Celia's accusation, and it is also the legacy that Pilar bears witness to.

A few days after Pilar returns to Cuba, Celia gives Pilar the box of letters she wrote to her lover in Spain before the Revolution, and she also gives Pilar "a book of poems she's had since 1930" (235), poems that are written by Garcia Lorca. Upon receiving these concrete tokens of cultural heritage, Pilar claims that

> I've started dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. There's a magic here working its way through my veins. There's something about the vegetation, too, that I respond to instinctively—the stunning bougainvillea, the flamboyants and jacarandas, the orchids growing from the trunks of the mysterious ceiba trees. And I love Havana, its noise and decay and painted ladyness. I could happily sit on one of those wrought-iron balconies for days, or keep my grandmother company on her porch, with its ringside view of the sea. I'm afraid to lose all this, to lose Abuela Celia again. But sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I have now it's where I belong—not *instead* of here, but *more* than here. How can I tell my grandmother this? (235–36)

Pilar's reminiscence begins with a promise for better communication but ends with the problematics of communication. Having received the letters and the book of poems, which embody the ambivalent "legacy" she inherits from her grandmother, she begins to "dream in Spanish." When she wakes up from her dream, she claims to have become a different person with something inside her already changing, "something chemical and irreversible." "Dreaming in Spanish" is a symbolically significant act for it refers to the reconfiguration of Pilar's subjectivity, signifying her readiness to venture linguistically into the history, culture, and desires of her (m)others. Yet, at the same time, even though a connection is being re-built, Pilar is also aware that every arrival implies an eventual departure. Neither New York nor Cuba can claim her belonging, for the simple reason that she belongs to a multidimensional transnational space that includes both New York and Cuba. The problem for Pilar, however, comes down to, how she can speak to her grandmother, in what language, since Celia clearly has a different sense of belonging and valorizes a different narrative of cultural transmission? How can Pilar tell her grandmother that, in order to really claim Cuba as her home, she has to leave it? Here, when Pilar says that she begins to dream in Spanish, the language itself is not the key to achieve better communication between Celia and Pilar. Garcia suggests, in Pilar's reminiscence, that within language, there are also nuances, echoes, beats, colors, and rhythms that cannot be captured by words but are evocative of the truth of Celia's daily experience in its most bodily, affective, and inarticulate level. It is significant that the novel is entitled "Dreaming in Cuban," for what matters to Pilar is not what she dreams of, but how she dreams her dream, or in what affective language she attempts to communicate with her grandmother.

Listening to the Voice of the Other as Poetics and Ethics

As a result of Pilar's belated awareness of her entanglement in the trauma of history, learning to listen to the voice of the other becomes imperative for Pilar. The narrative has fully demonstrated that failure to

listen can be costly. Felicia dies, uncomforted, because despite her efforts to "cleanse" herself and becomes a *santera*, the day after her initiation ceremony, "Felicia was crestfallen" because "neither her mother nor her children were there to greet her" (188). Javier's disillusionment with politics, marriage, and even science, drives him deep into alcoholism. As a rape victim, Lourdes, humiliated by the soldiers' violation of her body, turns her rage inside out so that she "hungers for a violence of nature, terrible and permanent, to record the evil. Nothing less would satisfy her" (227). However, this hunger for violence transforms her into the very vehicle of exploitation, verbal abuse, and bigotry.

Garcia's understanding of this transgenerational transmission and communication of culture, one that is founded on the straining for the voices of the silent others whose pains and wounds are translated into bodily symptoms waiting to be deciphered and rendered into a different language, is partially revealed when at one point in the novel, Celia is said to have finally understood the discontinuity of history:

> For many years, Celia spoke to Pilar during the darkest part of the night, but then their connection suddenly died. Celia understands now that a cycle between them had ended, and a new one had not yet begun. (119)

Yet, the awareness that a new cycle is yet to begin does not help to ease Celia's anxieties attendant on her earnest search for an alternate principle of familial solidarity at an era of migration, since each of the del Pino family is inevitably trapped in the dominating rhetoric of the territorial state, capitalism, or religion. Celia, as a stout matriarch, has been too trapped by the clichés of territorial nationalism and genealogical familialism to imagine an alternate future. The task is left to Pilar. She is to re-think kinship so that it is open to multiple modifications and transformations in response to the disorienting experiences of migration, and displacement. The need for thinking about new forms of relatedness and commitment is perhaps a claim that the narrative places on Pilar, who is the only one in the novel who can

freely travel across and beyond national and cultural boundaries. In this sense, Garcia's narrative raises the question of whether there might be "new grounds of communicability and for life" (55), to quote from Judith Butler, who, in *Antigone's claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, emphasizes the contemporary need to challenge the relationship between kinship and the "reigning epistemes of cultural intelligibility" (24). Butler claims that

> Antigone represents not kinship in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement, one that puts the reigning regimes of representation into crisis and raises the question of what the conditions of intelligibility could have been that would have made her life possible, indeed, what sustaining web of relations makes our lives possible, those of us who confound kinship in the rearticulation of its terms? What new schemes of intelligibility make our loves legitimate and recognizable, our losses true losses. (24)

The kinship that Antigone represents is "deformed" and "displaced" because it falls outside of the "regime of intelligibility" and thus can only invite misreading and miscomprehension. To render such kinship intelligible, which is otherwise unreadable and thus monstrous, new "grounds of communicability" must be articulated. To re-articulate kinship, however, does not merely require the calling into question the "regulatory norms" that demarcate and delimit forms of family, identity, and love. Simply to dismantle the old tools of thinking does not help to build up a new house. Instead, Antigone's claim, Butler argues, is about putting into practice the ethics of kinship (human relatedness) rather than the ethics of care (moral responsibility); it is about responding to impossible and unthinkable demands rather than simply doing the right thing. The ethics that is Antigone's unlawful claim is, in other words, articulated in a language that is not understood by most people; that is, a language that is not one's own, and is expressed in unspoken and bodily forms. Butler's re-articulation of kinship, Kirsten Campbell avers, re-channels kinship into a sociality,

in terms of an expanding and transformative notions of inter-personal care and responsibility. Since such a sociality of kinship expounded by Butler, in Campbell's view, still subscribes to an individualistic notion of selfhood and kinship, there is an urgent imperative to move beyond it. Instead, Campbell argues, a radical re-conception of kinship should be conducted "in the name of the ethical law" (649), and, as such, this radical ethical relationship to the other is so marked by and fraught with difficulty and incomprehension that most people tend to take it as perversity and refuses to hear it or to understand it.

To understand the "ethics of kinship," we need to return to Cathy Caruth who in the final chapter, "Traumatic Awakening," of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, offers a reading of Lacan's gloss on Freud's interpretation of the dream of the burning child. While this sequence of interpretation, with Caruth reading Lacan reading Frued, itself highlights issues of traumatic transmission, Caruth elaborates, in an anatomical fashion, Freud and Lacan's narratives of the "burning child" dream, and, she concludes her rereading by pondering the ambiguity of whether the child's accusation of the father, "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" comes from within the dream as a plea by the dead child or from without the dream as the father's guilty response to his child's death. The impossibility of deciding whether the father is awaken by the voice within the dream or outside the dream, Caruth posits, suggests that the voice that one hears comes from at least two different sites of trauma: the first site of trauma refers to the father's failure to see, hear, and save the child at the moment of the child's death, and the second site of trauma refers to the father's repeated failure, in his dream, to see, hear, and save the child from burning. To be traumatized, according to Caruth, is to gain a belated knowledge that one does not see in time, does not respond properly when the event happens. Consequently, trauma also initiates belated awakening, for awakening is also a site of trauma in that it represents both response, in a belated fashion, but also a missed encounter with trauma. In other words, awakening is activated when one realizes that one's bonding to the other is "built upon the impossibility of a proper response" (100), and also on the realization

that one nevertheless has to respond. Moreover, this difficult, belated, but necessary response to the other's trauma, Garcia suggests, needs to be articulated "in Cuban," or, in the language that is spoken by those traumatized others.

In "The Wound and the Voice," the introduction to *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth also links "traumatic awakenings" to the idea of an uncanny "voice." The child's plea, then, is a plea of "the crying wound" (8). The wound that speaks is not only the child's own but also the father's. It is thus possible to understand the story as a "story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to *the encounter with another*, through the very *possibility and surprise of listening to one's wound*" (8, emphasis added). Caruth thus suggests that "such a listening to the voice and to the speech delivered by the other's wound" (9) constitutes a new mode of reading, which, Petar Ramadanovic, in taking up Caruth's suggestion, claims to be a mode of reading befitting the present age of diaspora[7].

Coming back to Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar's obligation to her grandmother is, as I suggest above, not to repeat the fate that befalls her grandmother, her mother, or her aunt. Instead, the bonding she has with her grandmother requires her not only to tell what it means for her not to see her grandmother's suffering and hear her voice, but also to tell what it means for her grandmother not to see and hear her daughters' wounds and sorrows, and for her daughters not to see or hear each other. The voice that Pilar hears, both before and after she returns to Cuba, is, therefore, not precisely a magical voice, but a voice, neither hers nor her grandmother's, that stands for "the possibility and surprise" of listening to a "disembodied" communication by which she bears witness to the trauma of another. Such an ethics of listening to the voice of the other, that is to say, requires Pilar to hear the otherness of the voice that is addressing her, a voice that comes both from outside as a request from her grandmother and her mother, and from within her as the unarticulated and unthinkable desire, hers and the other's, that she is not even aware of.

However, the ability to listen to "the voice of the other" cannot be

an inborn talent that one is, magically and mysteriously, gifted with. Though Pilar is born with this talent—as a child, she hears her grandmother's voice, listens to it, but does not understand it—she loses this ability as she grows up. Only after she experiences the humiliation of being sexually harassed by three young boys in Morningside Park does she regain her telepathic ability. This time around, however, she not only hears her grandmother's voice, but she also "hear[s] fragments of people's thoughts, glimpse[s] scraps of the future. It's nothing I can control. The perceptions come without warnings or explanations, erratic as lightning" (216). To hear the voice of the other is one thing; however, to understand the otherness of the voice is a much more difficult task. Garcia uses the Morningside Park harassment incident to dramatize that "traumatic awakening" which refers to one's "awakening," in the midst of trauma, to one's complicity with and connectedness to all the others who are deprived of their voices by the brutal world they inhabit.

Nostalgia for the Voice of the Other/Future

To put it somewhat differently, it can even be said that the novel is structured around both "the possibility and surprise of listening to a voice" and "this impossibility of response" (Caruth 100). On the one hand, as Celia, Lourdes, and Felicia grow older, they experience an affective crisis, hoping that their children would understand their unspoken wounds, while finding no language to express their feelings. Yet, on the other, none of their children, neither Pilar nor Ivanito, seem willing to understand their parents' minds, nor can they decode their parents' bodily responses to their traumas. More importantly, the older generation does not seem to have a clear understanding of the nature of their sorrow and dis-ease. That is to say, they don't really have the language to express the emotional and spiritual emptiness that is gnawing inside them. In a way, much of *Dreaming in Cuban* is about the characters' affective crisis. Celia, despite her fervent devotion to communist revolution, continues to write long and passionate love letters to her Spanish lover, Gustave. Her yearning for romantic love,

through which she may verify her self worth, betrays a splitting of her subjectivity between politics on the one hand and romanticism on the other. The novel begins with Celia's staring at the sea, as she tries to spot any potential sign of American military invasion, in a gesture of maternal protection over her people and her land. Interestingly, the sea imagery appears again at the end of the novel, as Celia plants her feet firmly into the sand, "rooted as the palms" (243), walks into the water, and is gradually swallowed by the tides and the waves of the sea.

Celia, with her "rootedness" in Cuban soil, is evoked here by Garcia as a repository of tradition and a stockpile of anti-imperialist nationalism. Yet, the narrative's fascination with Celia seems to be quite double-edged. Celia, as a Cuban grandmother, is possessed by a grandmotherly desire to pass down the family tradition and to impart the family secrets to her daughters and granddaughter. Since one of her daughters embraces American capitalism and the other daughter takes up indigenous religion, the family narrative which Celia favors, inflected as it is with a nationalist sentiment, is left unheard and un-transmitted. The lack of a mother-daughter dialogue is symbolically significant, however. Each of them is searching for a different language to write his/her individual life stories. Unknown to them, the plot they have chosen to structure their life stories is nevertheless dictated by a nation-state torn by competing ideas, dreams, ideologies, and socioeconomic realities. Celia, a victim of unspoken domestic violence and patriarchal neglect, misreads communism's call for political equality as an address of love to all those weighted down by the unbearable force of American capitalism and patriarchal paternalism. It goes without saying, she has always looked for love in the wrong place, and, as a consequence of her misreading, Celia is left with post-Revolution melancholia and post-national disappointment, as I have pointed out. What has gone wrong, however? Perhaps in her passion for political equality and with her desire to speak for all and to do the right thing, she has forgotten the old lesson that the political, the cultural, and the economic are almost always interconnected. She cannot possibly hope that political autonomy and class equality can be achieved out of a scenario of Cuban's economic isolation, seclusion,

and even bankruptcy. The proud Latin-American nationalism that so excites Celia's blind passion, unfortunately, has, ever since the accession of Castro to power, cut Cuba out of the circuits of finance capital and commodity exchange and flow of ideas, while "leaving the countless human beings to stagnate in the liminal state of . . . 'unexploitability'" (Larsen 35). Garcia's narrative tropes Cuba's exile from the transnational space as an act of misreading on her part: Celia has so misread her own desire that it becomes fixated on either romanticism or nationalism. Her desire, in other ways, does not flow. Correspondingly, Cuba, as a nation, becomes stagnant, as it is disarticulated from the global flow of desires, products, and power.

At one point in the narrative, at the phase when Celia's patriotism drives her to join the sugar-cane cropping team to boost Cuban's economy, Celia reminisces on the kind of economic prosperity the sugar industry will bring to Cuba, if sugar is to be exploited as a commodity to be sold and circulated in the global market:

> Celia imagines the cane she cuts being ground in the *centrales*, and its thick sap collected in vats. The furnaces will transform it to moist, amber crystals. She pictures three-hundred-pound sacks of refined white sugar deep in the hulls of ships. People in Mexico and Russia and Poland will spoon out her sugar for coffee, or to bake in their birthday cakes. And Cuba will grow prosperous. (45)

Celia's reminiscence turns out to be a daydream in every sense of the word, belying Celia's ignorance of the inseparability between the political and the economical, an ignorance that verges on self-deception, if not plain stupidity, especially when the world is getting more dominated by global capitalism. Neither sugar nor tobacco, two commodities that, in Fernando Ortiz's estimation, have functioned to usher Cuban into transculturalism[8], can escape the monopoly of international politics. Economic development, in the case of Cuba, is at the mercy of the whims of the nation-state; that is to say, the whims of Fidel Castro. The national policy adopted by Cuba determines its fate of exclusion from the transnational circuits of

capital, commodities, and power. On a local level, communication among Cubans is couched in official rhetoric of nationalist clichés and the delusional plot of self-same solidarity. Yet, behind the invigorating official discourse of optimism looms an unspoken anxiety that something is amiss in Cuba. Whereas Celia justifies Cuba's severe censorship on the ground that "Cuba is still developing..., and can't afford the luxury of dissent" (235), for Felicia, "all she sees is a country living on slogans and agitation, a people always on the brink of war" (107). Yet, in Celia's conflicting desires, both for a past that she wants to hand down to Pilar and for a yet-to-be-realized future that is the tomorrow of Cuba, one that is without racial, class, nor even gender differences, can be seen most clearly Celia's post-Revolution anxieties as well as her displaced nostalgia.

Celia is nostalgic. In aligning herself with the Revolution and fighting against American imperialism, she finds herself empowered. In the public space, she positions herself as a fortress of Cuban nationalism. In the private space, she places herself as the mediator through whom the family genealogy is to be transmitted. What she has forgotten, in her impulse to remember the past and to reveal all the family secrets—abuses, neglects, bickering, madness, exploitation—is that the past she remembers is only one version of the past out of many. "The origin," Michel Foucault perceptively writes, "lies at a place of inevitable loss," thereby the "genealogical method" can only be found in the jerky moments of the past, in "the subtle, singular, and subindividual marks that might intersect in them to form a network that is difficult to unravel" (83). The many different "subtle, singular and subindividual marks" easily invite multiple interpretations, rendering Celia, self-proclaimed writer of her family genealogy, a "'fragile' inheritor of a nosily fissured, broken, and ruptured narrative. Yet, Celia is insistent in summoning up, through a backward glance, a coherent narrative of the family that is paradigmatically continuous over time into the future.

In this sense, it can be said that Celia is inflicted with a sense of "restorative nostalgia," in Svetlana Boym's useful phrase; for Celia earnestly "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,"

and does not consider the genealogy she thus constructed as nostalgia, "but rather as truth and tradition" (xviii). Towards the end of *Dreaming in Cuban*, when Celia, finally realizing that Pilar is not to stay, sighs "What do all the years and the separation mean except a more significant betrayal?" (240) Pilar meets her grandmother's accusation with silence, for she hears her grandmother's "voice," though not the exact words. Pilar knows that she has already assumed the position as the "fragile" inheritor of the family's "fissured" and "ruptured" genealogy, though the past that she is to write is going to be significantly different from the one that her grandmother is nostalgic of.

Nostalgia is double-edged and dual-directional. While Celia is nostalgic, her nostalgia is "restorative" in the sense that she desires to retain the family tradition by looking back at and reclaiming an imagined past, but her nostalgia is at the same time very "reflective," in the sense that this past is deployed to justify the promise of the Communist Revolution in ushering in a better tomorrow and in building an ideal nation-state in the days to come, even though she has scant idea about the shape and mechanism of the modern nation-state. In devoting herself to the nation-building project, she holds in mind tremendous hope for the changes in the nation that are yet to be realized for it is to be a utopian space free of poverty, oppression, and exploitation. Thus, towards the realization of this nationalist ideal, she positions herself as an educator, encouraging her fellow-citizens to put up with the imperfect "now" in the hope of ushering in a possible future. In a way, while her sense of the past is built upon an unacknowledged sense of loss, her vision of the future is projected onto a perceivable future that, in the course of her life, is to be lost, though it is a loss that she is not to bring herself to admit or to acknowledge. Here, clearly, a principle of exchange is operative. Celia exchanges a narrative of personal loss and disappointment with another narrative of national gain and redemption. What she does not foresee is that the autobiographical is almost always circumscribed by the parameters of the law, the law of patriarchy, the law of the nation, and the law of global capitalism. Against the backdrops of paternal nationalism and

global capitalism, all the biographies that she wills to write are doomed to become narratives of disappointment.

Burdened by both restorative and reflective nostalgias, Celia lives, unknown to herself, in the jagged and teethed juncture of multiple temporalities. For her, the "now" she inhabits "implies a contemporareity that is radically noncontemporary with itself, a ghost-haunted, apparitional now that is simultaneously the moment of loss, the long after-history of loss, and the moment of the discovery of loss; a centuries-long now that...functions...as something like an analogue of Derrida's hauntological contemporareity or Gilroy's 'nonsynchronous' time of diaspora" (Baucom 8). To put it in prosaic English, Celia is so punctuated by multiple temporalities that she, in the midst of temporal confusion, misreads the past and the future, and, in the process, finds it difficult to listen to the voices of the others who are trapped in a different space-time, or, to find a responsive listener who is in tune with her sense of time and space.

Her daughter, Felicia, who marries a self-indulgent libertine, Hugo, when she is only an adolescent, is later drawn to *santeria*, a nativist religion that is practiced almost exclusively by lower class Afro-Cubans rather than by white Spanish descendants like Felicia herself. Her fascination with *santeria* begins when she meets Herminia Delgado, the daughter of a *babalawo*, a high priest of *santería*, at the age of six. Disappointed in her marriage with Hugo, who occasionally returns to Felicia, only to "blind Felicia for a week with a blow to her eyes," and, at another occasion, "to sire Ivanito and leave his syphilis behind" (47), Felicia is driven to madness. She becomes so hysterical that she claims that "she can hear things very vividly....They call to her all at once, grasping here and there for parts of her, hatching blue flames in her brain" (75). Her mind is so swarmed with disjointed images of her sorrowful past—her elopement with Hugo, Hugo's unannounced departures and returns, his outbursts of temper, and the syphilis that he inflicts on her—that she sees the people outside as "paintings, outlined in black, their faces crushed and squareish" (75), and she hears them talking "but cannot understand what they say. She never knows the time" (76). As her condition worsens,

> She opens her mouth but her thoughts erase themselves before she can speak. Something is wrong with her tongue. It forms broken trails of words, words sealed and resistant as stones. She summons one stone and clings to it, a drowning woman, then summons another and another until she cries, "Mami, I grieve in my dream." (83)

Her dialogue with the spirits proves fruitless in easing the sorrow and grief that has so accumulated inside her. When she cries out, "Mami, I grieve in my dream," she is making a request to the (m)other to pay heed to her grief. Here, it is not necessarily her mother that she is addressing in her petition for help. Whoever listens to her call for help assumes the maternal role for her. That's why Felicia considers Herminia "more than a sister to me....You saved me, like you promised on the beach" (189).

Though Herminia is not able to save her from a doomed marriage, madness, frustration, and death, she has always listened to Felicia's call for help, and, in so doing, proves herself more a sister to Felicia than Lourdes, Felicia's biological sister:

> "Will you save me?" she [Felicia] asked me.
> "Sure," I [Herminia] answered, again and again. (189)

Felicia's plea is a plea for love and for empathetic response. Herminia answers her plea with a positive response, though Herminia's response offers Felicia more of a spiritual comfort than medical intervention. The two, who are biologically unrelated, are now bonded together in their mutual love for each other as well as by their religious belief. It is this bonding facilitated by *santeria*, rather than by genealogy, that Felicia is nostalgic for.

Though Felicia has done many things that disappoint her parents and embarrass her daughters, at the end of her life, she does try to "cleanse" herself by being initiated into Santeria as a *santera*, or priest. In so doing, she crosses racial and class boundaries, while acquiring an identity that is supplementary to her civic identity as Cuban. However,

by so deeply immersing herself in the primitive mysticism of *santeria*, she is attempting a risky move. To become a *santera*, she is responding to calls that she has heard for a long time from within herself; however, she simply doesn't have the right language to render the voice, that is calling her, comprehensible to her mother, her daughters, and her son so that they may understand her better, for, as a *santera*, "Felicia could not dilvulge his [the god's] words" (187). As a consequence, though she has tried hard to organize her life by conversing with the gods, and by doing everything "she was supposed to do as a novice *santera*," she does not win the recognition from her family as she expects. So when she returns to her old house after the initiation ceremony is over, "neither her mother nor her children were there to greet her" (188). Felicia is "crestfallen," but at first she explains away her family's apathy to her attempt to start a new life as gods' test of her faith. By turning her family against her, gods are putting her through a test of her beliefs simply to see if she is a true believer. Yet, as time drags on, she becomes edgy about her family's continuous indifference. When she hears from Herminia that her mother is afraid that her conversion may be a disguised symptom of her madness, she becomes very indignant, for she cannot understand why they cannot see that "this is completely different. I have a clarity now" (188). Felicia dies disappointed, for she never receives the warm response of recognition that she hopes to receive from her family.

Pilar is also nostalgic. It is nostalgia that drives her to walk into a *botánica*, which that sells ethnic commodities in New York, looking for Cuba. The minute before she walks into the store, she feels nostalgic and restless. Yet, she immediately dismisses the thought: "Shit, I'm only twenty-one years old. How can I be nostalgic for my youth?" (198) Pilar's nostalgia for her youth is actually a displaced nostalgia for a past that she has neither witnessed nor known firsthand. In other words, she is nostalgic for a past that is imagined and is future-oriented. In this sense, hers is different from Celia's or Lourdes' nostalgia. When she walks out of the *botánica*, she goes through a "traumatic awakening," thus resulting in her embarking on a journey back to Cuba and in her "dreaming in Cuban"; that is, in a multi-linguistic system that is

comprised both of English and of Spanish, as well as other non-linguistic codes. Once she begins to "dream in Cuban," she regains her ability to hear the unspoken voice from her grandmother, mother, and aunt, thereby bearing silent witness to those desires and yearnings that they have themselves forgotten and repressed. At the end of the novel, Pilar leaves Cuba with the knowledge that she is to survive the death of Celia, her grandmother, so that she may bear witness to what it means for them not to hear each other, and, how, in order to hear the voice of the other, she needs to go beyond the rhetoric of nationalism, capitalism, or religion in search of a different platform of communication, one that is more attentive to the nuances, tones, and rhythms of one's bodily, affective, and cognitive experiences, especially those that elude the grasp and boundary of the human language.

Dreaming in Cuban may not be a masterpiece, but Cristina Garcia does attempt to restrain from memorializing cultural legacy and ethnic specificity in her novel. In so doing, Garcia writes this novel to propose a mode of transcultural and transgenerational communication that defies national and generational boundaries. Such a mode of transcultural dialogue, as Garcia shows in her novel, is based less on the genealogy of kinship than on an ethics pertaining to one's understanding of the other as an enigmatic site of unconscious desires calling for the kind of response that goes beyond any linguistic rules or principles of reciprocity.

NOTES

[1] This refers to the article, "How Hyphenated Can You Get?: A Critique of Pure Ethnicity," written by W. H. Verhoeven, in which he criticizes some ethnic writers' deployment of hyphenation as a rhetoric trope of cultural mixing to be politically and historically ungrounded.

[2] For a compelling account of the shift of critical attention from the identification of who "transnationals" are to the recognition of the "transnational space" as "both multidimensional and multiply inhabited" (438), see Philip Crang, Claire Dwyer, and Peter Jackson's "Transmission and the

Spaces of Commodity Culture," *Progress in Human Geography* 27.4 (2003): 438–56. Avtar Brah also argues in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* that "diaspora space as a conceptual concept is 'inhabited' not only by diasporic subjects but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of diaspora space includes the entanglements, the intertwining of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (209). So doing, Brah is urging the academic community to shift our critical attention away from the issue of "who" in identity politics to that of "how"; from who are and are not authentic transnationals, to other more important issues; that is, the formation and impact of the transnational imaginary. In referring to the concept "diasporic space" from Brah, I do not intend to conflate the "transnationals" with the "nationals"; rather, I use the concept to, first and foremost, highlight the danger of identity politics in general, and, more importantly, to propose a reading strategy that focuses less on identity politics—who we are and what we are to become—than on the transnational "traffic" in ideas and desires. Though I do not want to suggest that transnational space is synonymous with diaspora space, I use the two, almost interchangeably, for the convenience of discussion.

[3] Cristina Garcia, *Dreaming in Cuban*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1992), 194. Subsequent references are given in the text.

[4] In "Translational Backformations: Authenticity and Language in Cuban American Literature," Lori Ween takes issues with the readiness of reviewers to make use of the idea of a "Latin Feel," to signify "Latin American authenticity as untranslatable and indefinable" (129). However, I believe that "Latin Feel" is used in Cuban American literary criticism not to authenticate or essentialize the specificity of Latin American literature, but to refer to the untranslatable and intrinsic aspect of any literary writing, which comes very close to what Walter Benjamin terms as the "aura" of literature.

[5] In referring their sadness and sorrow as "post-Revolution" and "Post-Immigration" melancholia, I'm here appropriating the term "postcolonial melancholy" that Paul Gilroy uses in his *Postcolonial Melancholia* to characterize the white Briton's insistence on holding unto a lost vision of the greatness of the empire and the consequent sense of anxieties, fears, and melancholia that the awareness of the decline of empire has thus generated. See

especially chapter one.

[6] Pilar's sections are all told by the first-person perspective, whereas only the first of the three narratives about or by Ivanito is narrated by an omniscient narrator with the other brief monologues narrated by Ivanito himself.

[7] In an extended review of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, Petar Ramadanovic argues that Caruth's noion of trauma as unclaimed experience, "together with our entanglement in each other's histories, charts a history of the modern subject as a history of implication." This subject of trauma, Ramadanovic claims is "culturally and politically a diasporic subject, *en route* towards subjectivity" (55), a subjectivity that is not yet known and is still becoming.

[8] In 1947, the renowned Cuban historian and anthropologist Fernando Ortiz made the claim that the history of Cuba is a long and "intermeshed" process of "transculturaltion." He listed in *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* the waves of immigrants who came, at different times, to make up of what he terms "Cubanity." Ortiz suggests, what is distinctively Cuban is produced out of the traumatic encounters of different waves of immigrants, some arriving voluntarily and most being forced to come to till the land to grow "tobacco and sugar," two products that he specifically includes in the subtitle of his book to signify how "Cubanity" is materialistically produced. Ortiz, instead of arguing that Cuban identity is a geographical given so that one is born a Cuban, takes a socioeconomic approach to the problematic of cultural identification. In *Cuban Counterpoint*, he writes a materialist allegory of the formation of Cubanity by investigating how seemingly insignificant everyday products such as sugar and tobacco have historically functioned as the very means to facilitate transcultural trafficking in habits, styles, beliefs, and affiliations. Transcultural trafficking in sugar and tobacco, however, has often been a historically devastating experience for the peoples from different parts of the world who are violently thrown into this circuit of transcultural encounters, oftentimes against their wills. Ortiz gives the example of the disappearance of the neolithic Indian "because of his inability to adjust himself to the culture brought by the Spaniards" (98) to illustrate how the influx of another culture may not be an equally benefiting experience for all peoples involved. Eventually, with the arrivals of different waves of immigrants and the

infusion of many cultural traditions, the old cultures gradually lost their distinctiveness; in their stead, a new culture emerges and a new transcultural identity comes into being. However, if, as Ortiz claims, transculturalism is the hallmark of Cuban's "national imaginary," the collective production of a "national imaginary" is arrived at after a tortuous and traumatic process of violence and transculturation, inclusion and exclusion, he fails to address the question of what the driving forces are that dictate who and what are historically included and excluded. According to what historical principle of selection does transculturalism function, political power, economic strength, or cultural capital? In using "tobacco and sugar" as his primary examples to illustrate the exchange and translation of commodities and their values, Ortiz indirectly point out that the process of transculturalism involves the socioeconomic production, negotiation, and consumption of real products such as tobacco and sugar. What motivates this flow of desires and keeps the transcultural encounters operative is no other than a transnational market that, in Ortiz's example, demands the production and circulation of sugar and tobacco. Yet, the maintenance of the "tobacco and sugar" industry in Cuba also helps to perpetuate the slavery economy which works, in principle as well as in reality, against the fusion and erasure of differences that transculturalism is said to have already accomplished. Is it possible that transculturalism, despite all expectations, fails to set into motion corresponding changes in the socioeconomic textures of the society, especially the class structure of Cuban society?

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