

## A Space for Resistance and Possibility: Confronting Borders through Narrative and Santería in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*

By Amanda Easton

In an interview with Iraida H. López, Cristina García affirms that writing *Dreaming in Cuban* “was a process of discovery” (López 108). Discovery of the book’s themes, characters, and cultural experiences proves much the same for García’s readers: a process that hinges on belief and conceived through the contextual features of the text, what cultural theorist Mieke Bal, from her work with the collective Cinema Suitcase, describes as a process of free indirect style,<sup>1</sup> namely the many associative links that stories materialize out of and, in turn, create (Bal and Gamaker). These multi-layered resonances within *Dreaming in Cuban* constantly shift and offer persistently new and challenging meanings as well as reveal fissures of liminality through a strategic narrative structure that critics have only topically explored in García’s fiction. A narrative strategy of multiple voices not only allows for the revelation of hybridity that García insists is a familiar positioning,<sup>2</sup> but it also uncovers a space of resistance through telling. The intertwined nature of telling as espoused by Mary Layoun in her essay, “Fresh Lima Beans and Stories from Occupied Cyprus,” and the insistence of authority in the telling act, thereby implicating the reader in order to generate and to confront, proves a significant thesis in this regard particularly for exploring narrative as a means of negotiating border space and a paradigm for an intimacy of convergence.<sup>3</sup> Layoun’s essay exposes the potential for the appropriation of telling in her analysis of Rina Katselli’s novel *Galazia Falaina (Blue Whale)* while demanding the consideration that a small island, namely Cyprus, is a microcosm of hierarchies. Apropos Layoun’s analysis, there exists a desire to confront within such a thorny, complex space, and that resistance may come in the form of the narrative. This essay considers another entangled space, the island of Cuba, as well as the site of confrontation through narrative telling within García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* and her second novel *The Agüero Sisters*, which reveals one of the many codified boundaries of Cuban subjectivity.

This endeavor to critically analyze García’s text is inspired not only by Layoun’s critical commentary, but also by Lisa Lowe’s notion of intimacies from her study of the sugar trade in the eighteenth-century, where concomitant moments in world history and global players shaped, and converged nations with local identities. Lowe’s methodology can be understood as following a triadic braid of relational intimacies (what she identifies as spatial, private and constellational intimacies), and taking into account that each threading reveals the many micro level interconnections that can show the unevenness between colonized and colonizer. More importantly, the study of intimacies reveals the vacancies and absences in the *many* histories inextricably connected through a network of relationships. The purpose of Lowe’s undertaking is to challenge collective definitions of experience and linear histories. Intimacy, in this regard, studies the engendering process of relationships—global, transnational, national, local, and otherwise—and moves beyond historical cause and effect. A conceptualization of an intimacy at work within García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* includes the relationship between Santería and Catholicism as indicative of the intersection of religion, slavery, and the formation of the nation

state and its trajectory for women. How this intimacy writhes its way to the surface in García's work proves significant.

Where other analyses have only hinted in passing at the importance of García's narrative structure, I question how a non-linear and multi-voiced narrative (characteristic of the practice of Santería) better equips female characters who seek to renegotiate their subject positions. As an attempt to open up other temporal and spatial narratives, it is of importance to see that coded and intertwined with García's narrative structure is the echo and residue of the intimacy of religion traveling on the coattails of economic and political processes. Such a contention then begs to anatomize how Santería, in opposition to and yet subsuming Catholicism, operates as a non-linear, alternative historicity thereby exposing other fissures of knowledge. Teresa Derrickson's valuable essay, "Women's Bodies as Sites of (Trans)National Politics in Cristina García's *The Agüero Sisters*," has already begun this project of exploring how globalization marks women by suggesting that García's text offers "a narrative in which both national identity and transnational belonging mark themselves on the flesh of women in decidedly unsubtle—and often very violent—ways" (Derrickson 479). It is fruitful to extend this line of reasoning by zooming in on García's porous narrative structure that hums of religious syncretization and its upshots. Santería, coupled with a neutralizing narrative, gestures to intimacies while simultaneously serving as a site of resistance to linear history in order to establish a wholly polyphonic texture reminiscent, but not necessarily redolent, of Cixous's *écriture féminine* or Irigaray's *parler femme*. Yet, instead of claiming or even questioning whether there is a male or female writing, it is of much greater importance to challenge why and how writing is codified as such and to instead see narrative as both socially constructed and "as a discursive mode which affects semiotic objects in variable degrees" (Bal, *Narratology* 14). This focalization can be best described as a move towards a feminist narratology that Susan S. Lanser speaks of: to imagine narrative acts as sites of possibility. Rather than a compartmentalizing of narrative within gender binaries, such a project would entail considering narrative "in relation to a referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social, and political" (Lanser 614).

As we read and reread García's women-centered, seemingly private sphere of Cuban heritage, we should acknowledge and accept the variable narrative paradigms because they afford us the delightful yet inexplicable pleasure of perceiving human nature as it unfolds. What García does best is offer a telling that does not capitulate to a linear articulation of experience. Instead, her narrative structure operates within what Bal calls a negotiable territory: "borders are not lines but spaces—territories that are contested and fought over, but shared spaces nonetheless" (Bal, "Becoming" 9). The collective experiences of García's del Pino women in *Dreaming in Cuban* reveal the power of multi-dimensional dialogism that allows for a constellational reading on the order to fathom the system(s) in operation. Indeed, it is a narrative structure indicative of Barthesian multivalence and the idea is to move beyond a universal structuralism and to acknowledge narrative as culturally bound as well as reflexive.

One of the letters that Celia del Pino writes to her lover Gustavo harnesses the power of the negotiable border experience and grounds the argument for conceptualizing how subjectivity congeals under the hegemonic matrix of a past that is as mutually constitutive as the present, in addition to outlining a chance for breaking such binds through a fantasy space:

The familiar is insistent and deadly. I study the waves and keep time on my wicker swing. If I was born to live on an island, then I'm grateful for one thing: that the tides rearrange the borders. At least I have the illusion of change, of

possibility. To be locked with boundaries plotted by priests and politicians would be the only thing more intolerable. (*Dreaming* 99)

Samantha L. McAuliffe suggests that in “sprinkling these letters throughout the storyline, García is creating a connection to Cuba” and that “[t]his connection is facilitated through language” (McAuliffe 4). McAuliffe explains it as an autoethnographic moment where this connection is a means of recordkeeping the “family history so that it would not be forgotten” (McAuliffe 5). Yet in this scribed genealogical legacy and intimate attempt at correspondence there is also a challenge. That Celia’s narrative here is a letter suggests a reinscribing of an unauthorized form of knowledge.

Jay Clayton affirms such a technique as being oppositional “because of its association with unauthorized forms of knowledge,” and that oppositional (confrontational) forms in literature are “emphasized by drawing on oral forms (folktales, myths, legends, oral histories), by exploring less privileged written genres (diaries, letters, criminal confessions, slave narratives)” (Clayton 62). Celia’s letter, much like her granddaughter Pilar’s diary and the collaborative stories peppered throughout the book, works as a site of resistance to challenge the priests and the politicians who function not on wicker swing time, but instead on a linear time of clearly defined lines of power. Even if altering the border seems an illusion to Celia, the possibility still exists, and the means of alteration can be found in the telling of the story—through language and those practices, like Santería and letter writing, that turn unauthorized sites of knowledge into legitimized ones.

One of Celia’s daughters, Felicia, turns to the worship of Santería as a means of escape and comfort, and like the people of Cuba, Felicia seeks out faith in order to hold on to her soul and a semblance of an identity. It proves imperative then to compare Felicia’s and her mother Celia’s respective relationships with Santería in order to establish why the Afro-Cuban religion works predominantly for Felicia and only marginally for Celia. Andrea O’Reilly Herrera likewise conjectures that Felicia “experiences failure after failure in matters of love...[and]...turns to Santeria for an answer” (Herrera 76-77), but Herrera’s transitory and undeveloped remark warrants much further exploration. Why does Felicia turn to Santería and not some other form of escapism or religious worship? What does Santería provide Felicia by way of love and how does it shape her psyche? What is the role of Santería in this narrative? Because of Santería’s oral practices and transmissions through a verbal network of non-bureaucratic customs, the Afro-Cuban religion offers a positive milieu and outlet for marginalized voices.

The role of Santería in Cuban society maintains a notable importance, one that saturates everyday thought and motivation for many Cuban people. Santeria came to the island as a result of the African slave trade and the economic boom of sugar production in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Noticeably, Lowe’s notion of intimacy comes to fruition here in that religious practice becomes tied up in global economics and market practices and was carried along the trade lines in much the same way. The Yoruba, a people who originated in Nigeria, endeavored to resurrect their belief systems squelched by the effects of displacement, and because of the Spanish colony’s existing Roman Catholic influences, what resulted was “*santeria*, the cult of the saints” (Murphy 83). This blending of religions, a *mélange* of the saints of the Catholic Church with the deities of the Yoruba tribe, ultimately began as an attempt to veil the Yoruba religion, specifically its *orishas* (deities) “under the guise of the Catholic saints” (González-Wippler 3). The slaves reconceptualized their culture, creating something new and

advantageous for their way of life, an authorized form of knowledge production, and García's fictional assemblage of reconstituted narrative knowledge <sup>4</sup> likewise hints at such reactant measures.

When investigating the role of Santería in *Dreaming in Cuban*, García's biographical inspiration proves indispensable because it hearkens to the clearly diametric religious outlook between the matriarchal Celia and her daughter Felicia. García articulates that Santería remained foreign to her because of her family's insistence on its "mumbo-jumbo" qualities, but that once she began exploring the religion, she found it wholly intriguing (López 107). Instead of understanding García's interest in and use of Santería as an appropriation or in line with a tourist tradition, it might be a better turn to see both her rendering of Santería and her narrative structure as a recourse for critics to appreciate what Linda Tuhiwai-Smith would call a project of remembering, reframing and restoring. Like García, her character Celia del Pino knows little about Santería, having only limited, unsuccessful exposure to its rituals, and there may be some psychological validity to the fact that Celia's desperate attempt at using religion as a means of support proves fruitless. Celia initially learns a mistrust of religion from her great-aunt Alicia who "did not attend church and derided those who did" (*Dreaming* 93), and it is the visual influences of those childhood years that solidifies her later distrust of anything religious. As a child, Celia observes Catholic devotees who "climbed the knoll on bare, bloodied knees to show their devotion or purge their grief or beg forgiveness in the slow tearing of flesh and bone" and then reflects how their prayers resound "like the din of insects on summer evening" (*Dreaming* 93). The comparison to insects does not establish a heartening or optimistic vision of prayer; rather, it expresses a meek and inhuman-like demonstration of a futile vision or outcome and acquiescence to patriarchal standards.

Catholicism's impact on women in Cuba is of great import; it represents not only the intimacy of the slave trade with its economical antecedents and global political triggers, but also the local effects of shifting paradigms and social structures. Sarah L. Franklin's extensive research on nineteenth-century gender hierarchies in the slave society of Cuba articulates it as such:

In Cuba, where the plantation society would reach heights unparalleled elsewhere in Spanish America, the nature of women's subordination would have a distinctly local context...In a slave society such as Cuba where the subordination of one group to another is required, Catholicism is a useful tool for imposing and maintaining hierarchy and social order. (Franklin 21)

This hierarchy was maintained through the constitutive ideologies of motherhood and morality. Harkening to the Victorian trope of the "Angel in the House,"<sup>5</sup> colonial Latin culture's comparable version was "*marianismo*, or the idea that women are morally and spiritually superior to men" (Franklin 21). This idealized gender role is rooted in Catholic doctrine, and although the cult of the Virgin Mary espoused women's spiritual superiority, they were still "subordinate to fathers and husbands, and to God" (Franklin 21). As a form of subjection that sealed women within a system of a type of femaleness, Catholicism works along the same lines as Derrickson's notion of how women's bodies "are never fully owned and controlled by women themselves" (Derrickson 479). Because of the entrenched hegemony of religious persuasion, the relationship between Catholicism and women for García's characters can also be seen as a tenuous practice in spite of the Revolution's influence.

Alicia, though resistant to religious practices, also provides Celia transient religious edification in Santería, counter to Catholic piety, since she introduces Celia to the ceiba tree, a sacred tree in the religion that promotes respect rather than a hierarchical power play, and it is likened to a maternal spirit, the African/Catholic syncretic embodiment of Mary (González-Wippler 134). The oral knowledge that Alicia passes down to her niece Celia sets up the importance of how women can find guidance through exchanges of knowledge. As a microcosm, this transmission parallels the narrative structure of the book where Pilar is the recipient of the collective knowledge passed through a matrilineal line. No story weighs more important than another does; all of the narratives work as an exchange and with the aim of creating a community of knowledge rather than a top down indoctrination.

It also suggests how the meta-narrative of Catholicism runs concurrent with the legitimization of power and rendering people prostrate. Franklin asserts it as a manifest condition in Cuban culture: “Religion provided much of the rationale behind Cuban patriarchy, and it was both deeply spiritual and deeply personal” (Franklin 22). The palpably affective, visual discourse of the violence of “slow tearing flesh and bone” (*Dreaming* 93) marked upon the hill climbers at the Church of Saint Lazarus evokes the biblical passage that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (*The New Oxford*, 1 Cor. 15:50), thus intoning the implied restrictions on women from power and spiritual enlightenment (read as Western). It also functions within a Foucauldian analysis of discipline fused with the body and the soul, namely that a soul is born out of political production and reinforced within a mode of violence. Speaking of the modern soul, Foucault stresses: “This is the historical reality of this soul, which unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint” (Foucault 29). The narrative thrust in the aunt-niece relationship points to the intimate relationship between political, colonial practices and religion as written on identity. It also offers an alternative to the religious layering of Catholicism. However, this knowledge transmission must ultimately end in a positive experience in order for Celia to acquiesce to any system of beliefs.

After her Spanish lover Gustavo leaves her, Celia’s perception of the world falters and she feels hopeless enough to uncharacteristically turn to a ritualistic practice: “She saw mourning doves peck at carrion on her doorstep and visited the *botánicas* for untried potions” (*Dreaming* 36). Celia appeals to the Spanish Roma women, the *gitanas* (or gypsies), at the retail establishment of a religious-goods store in order to find succor from her lover’s abandonment. She ultimately purchases “tiger root from Jamaica to scrape, a cluster of indigo, translucent crimson seeds, and lastly, a tiny burlap pouch of herbs” (*Dreaming* 36). As Elena Machado Sáez articulates, exchange reigns over Celia’s endeavor to purchase the herbs, noting that Celia buys the tiger root and travels to the “*botánica* as a place of commerce” (Sáez 135) unlike her granddaughter Pilar’s later attempts, which are “specifically enabled by the *botánica*’s function as a store but nevertheless set outside the rules of market exchange since no monetary payment is made” (Sáez 135). Though there is room here to contend the differences in how a commodity is acquired, it is worthwhile to acknowledge that both Celia and Pilar, like Felicia, seek out Santería as a means of healing and an alternative system of negotiating the world around them.

This commodification of Santería indicates a curious function particularly since the character Constancia’s relationship with Santería in *The Agüero Sisters* is an attempt to flourish in a capitalist market. As a narrative foil, her appeals to the *santero* Oscar Piñango in the spatial location of Florida to aid in “dispelling negative influences...[in her beauty product factory] Cuerpo de Cuba” (*The Agüero Sisters* 190) speaks to another set of intimacies where

neoliberalism functions as a system that [re]creates the desire for Western notions of beauty for a profit. Constancia figuratively and literally buys into this space and yet her sister Reina, visiting from Cuba, does not. The thread here between Cuba and the United States emphasizes the many global, national processes that affect the local sphere, and as Derrickson continues, “Garcia uses Constancia’s business to underscore the manner in which women’s bodies and women’s sexuality are once again shaped by hidden frameworks of international and economic concern” (Derrickson 490). I would add that the layering of Santería here does three things. First, it reinforces the web of intimacies and the infinite ways in which spatial and temporal events simultaneously intersect and structure. Second, it serves as a reminder of those whose narratives are lost, displaced or suppressed and couched in these interlocking systems. And finally, much like the healing and means of resistance that Santería offers the women characters in *Dreaming in Cuba*, it becomes a strategy to both navigate and recreate knowledge systems. In Constancia’s case, even if she capitulates to the Western Beauty Myth and a capitalist business plan, she still brings into play a knowledge that challenges a conventional business enterprise handling of internal affairs.

Amparo Marmolejo-McWatt’s valuable insight of García’s *The Agüero Sisters* affirms the potential for Santería to be “a source for the reconciliation and healing of the Cuban society as a whole” (Marmolejo-McWatt 90). Thus, Santería is an opening for hope and a channel to reconceptualize knowledge, subjectivity, and a reminder that local processes are tethered to larger systems. It bears mentioning that Marmolejo-McWatt’s critical essay likewise considers Santería an important element to García’s fiction, stating: “the author weaves many elements of Santería in a creative and artistic manner, creating a complex religious layer which plays an important role in the unfolding of the narrative” (Marmolejo-McWatt 89). Marmolejo-McWatt’s work compliments nicely here, though her analysis focuses on the character Blanca, whose narrative voice we never hear yet whose presence through the bodily absence of a mysterious death drives the plot of the story. Legends of the *orisha* Ochún/Oshún, a “goddess of love and honey” (Marmolejo-McWatt 90), frame Blanca and reinforce her relationship to Santería, Marmolejo-McWatt insists, “in order to offer a supernatural means of resolving the tensions between characters, particularly the two sisters” (Marmolejo-McWatt 90). What is striking about Blanca’s spoken absence from the text, given Marmolejo-McWatt’s critical interpretation, is that the narrative structure, in its allusions to Santería and Blanca, ultimately gives her a voice. Further, the fragment of bone that she wears in the “flannel pouch on her belt...a human scaphoid” (*The Agüero Sisters* 186) speaks not only of a talisman for luck, but also of the material presence of the body. This is a significance that draws attention to the fact that even if the body is unseen, or embattled in a site of Othering, there is still a narrative that insists on being heard.

Towards the end of the revelatory plot, Blanca’s daughter Constancia finds this bone in a copper box full of her father Ignacio’s personal effects, and “she slips the little bone from its pouch, fingers its knotted end as she begins to read” her father’s writing (*The Agüero Sisters* 297). This scene foregrounds the confessional entry at the end of the book, finally bringing to life, for Constancia, the truth that her father murdered her mother, Blanca. “The little bone, she decides, she will take home to her sister” (*The Agüero Sisters* 298), thereby suggesting not only the bridge of healing that Marmolejo-McWatt suggests, but also the continuation of a narrative that was lost but later recovered through an unauthorized account. Both Constancia and the narrative carry out the promise to bestow the bone as a matrilineal heirloom to the other sister Reina who claimed, “Mami said she’d give it to me when I grew up. I looked for the bone after

she died, but it had disappeared. Maybe it was buried with her” (*The Agüero Sisters* 193). The transmission of Blanca’s voice weaves through those unauthorized forms of narration, namely the recovery of the metonymic bone with its magical powers, the revelation of her murder through written letters and a confession, the vowed oral exchange between sisters, and, as Marmolejo-McWatt astutely points out, the characterization of Blanca through legends and the supernatural powers of Santería. Both *The Agüero Sisters* and *Dreaming in Cuban* render voicelessness as a narrative strategy that destabilizes patriarchy.<sup>6</sup>

“García makes clear that the female body is a site where state and global politics play themselves out,” Derrickson astutely points out (Derrickson 481), so what better way to reclaim or circumnavigate political processes on the body than to seek out and engage in a new network, a new dialogic process. The narrative acts within *Dreaming in Cuban* allow for the transmission of Santería, while also practicing what it preaches. Michael Atwood Mason explores the rites and passages of Santería and states that “[p]eople entering Santería often start their affiliation when they need healing” (Mason 28). Celia’s understanding of Santería comes from her cultural situatedness, so while she may not habitually partake in the religion, she understands enough to know who or what to turn to for alternative sources of knowledge. Likewise, when Celia’s initial spiritual demonstration (the drinking of the prescribed herbal remedy) and the attempts of the medical community fail to revive her inwardly disconsolate soul and outwardly suffering body, her great-aunt Alicia appeals to a “*santera* from Regla, who draped Celia with beaded necklaces and tossed shells to divine the will of the gods” (*Dreaming* 37). Eventually Celia views the rites of Santería as superstitious and even the book affirms her doubt regarding its validity: “Although Celia dabbles in *santería’s* harmless superstitions, she cannot bring herself to trust the clandestine rites of the African magic” (*Dreaming* 91). Because Santería does not work for Celia in curing or soothing her bereavement, the religion then does not serve a practical or immediately worthwhile role in her life. Like the Catholic ritual she witnessed in her youth, Celia deviates from this religion and turns to an alternative source of solace and direction: Revolution.

While Celia turns to the Revolution for purpose and emotional guidance, Santería does continue to influence her, especially with regard to any motherly concern for Felicia (a reminder of the power of the *marianismo* trope). Ironically, Felicia views this concern as biased and based on her mother’s allegiance to the country, evidenced in Felicia’s musings about her mother’s “unnatural...attraction to [El Líder as] something sexual” (*Dreaming* 110). Ostensibly, the bond between mother and daughter exists as a result of their comparable psychological traumas,<sup>7</sup> and Santería, an uncomfortable norm for Celia, links the two on some sort of spiritual or intuitive plane. This plane is similar to the transmission of the polyphonous stories passed through a matrilineal line to Pilar, the third generation voice. Isabel Alvarez Borland briefly considers the narrative strategy here, stating, “[i]n terms of the text’s narrative process, Pilar uses telepathy rather than Spanish to communicate with her grandmother” (Alvarez-Borland 138). This telepathy is a similar mechanism of alternative transmission, of unwritten utterances that challenge written history. Pilar’s diary and Celia’s letters that carry forward the stories also function as alternatives to a linear timeline and narrative structure. Much like Marmolejo-McWatt’s notion of a healing bridge, Alvarez-Borland claims that “[t]hrough Pilar’s diary, García builds the psychological bridge back to Cuba” (Alvarez-Borland 141), but it might also operate as a demonstration of *deixis* in that it carries with it the contextual background of sociopolitical intimacies that help to explain and situate the many stories of the del Pino matrilineal line.

Celia knows of the *orishas* from her great-aunt Alicia, and she temporarily digresses from her anti-religious Revolutionary path<sup>8</sup> when she worries about Felicia and “asks the [ceiba] tree permission before crossing its shadow, then circles it three times and makes a wish for Felicia” (*Dreaming* 43). The importance of the ceiba tree proves vital to Santería because of its sacredness; it serves as “the basis of some of the greatest magic in the Religion” (Gonzalez-Wippler 133). The ceiba tree, female and maternal in spirit, must be asked for permission before anyone can attempt to cross its shadow (González-Wippler 134), a tenet of which Celia adheres to. She will not lie prostrate for a Catholic demonstration of flesh and blood because it entails a hierarchical positioning of misappropriated power, but the parable of the ceiba tree works on a level of mutual respect. This observance of the beliefs of Santería for the sake of her daughter demonstrates a maternal connectedness since she appeals to a maternal spirit for hope (keeping in line with an oral tradition) and because she sacrifices her personal allegiance to agnosticism. Thus, Celia conforms to a performance of the rites because her Revolutionary path dictates other forms of sacrifice and in turn produces meaning from the experience—something that Mason affirms is demonstrative of the ritualistic nature of Santería. Pilar, an insightful embodiment of the oral torch to be handed down, asserts as much: “that it’s the simplest rituals, the ones that integrated with the earth and its season, that are the most profound” (*Dreaming* 199). The simplest of rituals, narrative remixing or otherwise, relieve the traumas of geopolitical hegemony, familial rejection, and mental and physical deterioration resulting from domestic abuse. In this sense, I would like to think of narrative, while bound in many ideological constructions, as a messy site of resistance, as an opening for sharing and exposing, as a ritual of opportunity, healing, and reconfiguration.

Sáez articulates there is a fluid transmission of information going on in *Dreaming in Cuban*. The accumulation of stories presents a bigger significance here than just identifying who weaves the tale. This inculcation of personal history serves to demonstrate the importance of oral tradition and expression of identity through systems of unauthorized knowledge. García’s narrative structure, indicative of the religion of Santería, does just that; it provides a channel for the release of voice—indeed something Felicia seeks to establish. The very nature of Santería proves advantageous for expressions of voice and support. Because Santería stems from an oral tradition and “is nonproselytizing and noninstitutional” (Miller 36); and “it is present-oriented and practical” (Boswell and Curtis 131); and because it “is linked to the idea of family” (Barnet 22), it provides the tenets of support and individual autonomy that Felicia seeks. The parallel between Santería and the narrative mechanism that carries it is a resounding correspondence. Felicia’s relationship with her family (specifically her father) falls short of intimate; her mother’s attachment to the Revolution proves too dogmatic and disparate a vision for the Cuba that Felicia ponders; and her abusive relationship with her first husband Hugo Villaverde results in the emotional scarring of such adversity, particularly in the physical embodiment of ceaseless suffering from her contraction of syphilis. These emotional and physical traumas, all bound by sundry sociopolitical intimacies, compel Felicia to seek out a curative relief, a means of release. Much like the nonlinear plotting of *Dreaming in Cuban*, Santería proves to be that source of holistic healing. Felicia wants to produce her own culture and enter into a new body, for “[t]o enter the tradition fully, [she] must learn to use [her] body in new ways; [she] must master certain gestures and series of actions” (Mason 25). This might be understood as a form of kinesthetic learning because of the importance of the body in the process, so ultimately she transforms herself through the medium of Santería and, in turn, creates a new knowledge system.



From the outset of the story, Felicia challenges any conventional idea of harmony. Her existence is rife with chaos much like our first vision of her: “her head a spiky anarchy of miniature pink rollers.... Felicia screams...throws herself.... Then she flies...loses a sandal...in an inelegant leap” (*Dreaming* 9). Interestingly, in the first paragraph alone, García has foreshadowed Felicia’s life-story in an exacting chronological order, unlike the piecemeal unfolding of her story in the rest of the text. This narrative arrangement works as a site of reflexivity, pointing itself out as a mechanism of alterability. Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s study of the narrative strategies of twentieth-century women writers describes methods that entail “breaking the sequence” and of the oscillation at work in those strategies, which “are the expression of two systemic elements of female identity—a psychosexual script and a sociocultural situation” (DuPlessis 34, 35). In this way, oscillation accounts for gendering and hegemony, but this swinging between two positions opens the door to new questions: what of the continuum between and beyond two positions, or of the simultaneity of positions?

García’s initial characterization of Felicia speaks of time in an interesting way, addressing not just DuPlessis’s theory of oscillation but also of how the grouping of time(s) can reveal meaningful connections as well as motives for contestations of time. For instance, Felicia at one time worked on a chronological, linear line, but in another time, her story blows up linearity and functions in a space wholly reminiscent of her “spiky anarchy” that bounds off the page. Her narrative is a site of resistance and a reminder of the system that even necessitates resistance. The implication is a textual reminder of the all-at-onceness at work in Felicia’s [re]told stories, a vicissitude that also lends itself to Kumkum Sangari’s usage of synchronicity:

[t]he cultural simultaneity of Latin America must be distinguished from the cultural synchronicity available in the so-called ‘first world’. In Latin America it is a matter of historical conjecture in which different modes of production, different social formations, and different ways of seeing overlap as the ground of conflict, contradiction, change, and intervention, both local and foreign. (Sangari 4)

Time in Latin America versus time in the “first world” works very differently for it is predicated on sites of entrenched unevenness and matrices constructed around, by, and through colonial and neocolonial practices. Celia’s act of waiting on the beach, biding her time in a wicker swing, captures this disparate notion of time. She observes the natural environment, and her relationship with it is a marking of *time*—slowed down and bound to the earth—while the waves she anxiously watches have carried on them the economic and political *time* of progress through slave labor for commerce and trade.<sup>9</sup> Like Felicia’s all-at-onceness, Celia’s time and the other shifts in time and telling in the narrative structure serve as an opening up of the rooted, normalized notion of linear time as progress and modernity’s movement forwards. Indeed, Felicia’s story breaks down chronology, resists it, and creates an aperture for other possibilities.

One such possibility is that of Herminia Delgado, Felicia’s friend and a daughter of “a *babalawo*, a high priest of santería” (*Dreaming* 183). García’s use of this character establishes the importance of empathy and human interconnectedness that is impartial to political lines, social classes, or ethnic heritages. Because of Herminia’s respect and attraction to Felicia’s ability to see beyond color, she returns Felicia’s loyalty. Their relationship is then one of borderlessness and true reciprocity, a central tenet of Santería practices, and something that can be trusted, similar to the mutual respect generated through the symbolic ceiba tree. Herminia’s

chapter best captures the book's underlying thematic message of trust and the importance of oral tradition to represent local experience, as evidenced in a profound statement on lost history: "The war that killed [Herminia's] grandfather and great-uncles and thousands of other blacks is only a footnote in our history books. Why, then, should I trust anything I read? I trust only what I see, what I know with my heart, nothing more" (*Dreaming* 185). Rather than relegate unwritten history to the margins as a mere footnote, a blip on a historical timeline, this emphatic first-person reference challenges narration—who speaks it and who writes it—and offers an alternative expression of knowledge that recognizes the intimacies and contextual happenings behind the stories of individuals and peoples. It asserts an "I" in this spatial/temporal history.

Concepción Bados-Ciria has suggested that the role of Santería through Felicia and Herminia "becomes a politicized racial fiction that has the function of identifying with the oppressed that cannot speak, but it also risks becoming an exoticized representation of all people of Cuban origins in a society that homogenizes otherness according to racial and cultural traits" (Bados-Ciria 132). Bados-Ciria's cautionary call evokes Sangari's concern in her explication of, what she terms, the nonmimetic narratives of Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie, works that "seem to lay themselves open to the academized procedures of a peculiarly Euro-America, historically singular, postmodern epistemology that universalizes the self-conscious dissolution of the bourgeois subject" (Sangari 1). Universalizing a text under a postmodern methodology is in and of itself an ideological inevitability for no theory is free floating and is always within a context. What is of use then is to conceptualize the connective tissues between temporal/spatial histories, and the scales on which they exist, as much as the histories themselves.

Herminia asserts that the ceremonies of Santería for Felicia "were a kind of poetry that connected her to larger worlds, worlds alive and infinite" (*Dreaming* 186). In this case, the language (the poetry) of Santería that allows for new, different, and immeasurable knowledge through metaphorical representations is the embodiment of the restorative project. Although Felicia struggles with the blood involved in the sacrifice of animals (yet another resonance of flesh and blood), she agrees to make an offering to Santa Bárbara and partake in a ceremony to cleanse her of "dystopia." The significance of Santa Bárbara lies in the dual meanings beyond the veneration of this saint. An androgynous deity, St. Barbara's *orisha* counterpart is Changó. The hybridity here could explain much through Felicia's relationship to Santería as well as underscore the entanglements of pre-slavery African spiritualism with the violent interventions of Euro-Christianity. In the Catholic tradition, St. Barbara was maltreated by her father and ultimately killed by him, and in the Yoruban history, Changó may represent one of "the most powerful and important orisha[s]" because of his heroic and warrior-like attributes (Barnet 47-48). Appeals to Santa Bárbara then hold a symbolic resonance because Felicia turns to the *orisha* after the death of her father in what may be an attempt to resolve the trauma of his apathy towards her. Santa Bárbara also represents the pivotal moment in Felicia's life to renounce the negative burdens of being female under ideological pontifications and to instead embrace Santería's poetry. Santa Bárbara, then, indicates not only a turning point for Felicia, but confirms what La Madrina's asserts are "the complicated surfaces of the globe" (*Dreaming* 14).

Santería's premise lies in the worship of "seeking the guidance of spirits in meeting the ordinary problems of life" (Murphy 84) without having to contend with hierarchal patterns and further disassociation from the community when seeking solace and answers. Because of the pseudo-familial relationships involved in Santería, the religion offers Felicia some semblance of connectivity to other human beings—a possibility of an extended and encouraging family who

values her personhood. Yet circumstances outside of her control usurp Felicia's efforts to enter Santería as a *santera* for she is hindered by her syphilitic condition to the point that she exaggerates rituals. Her overuse and attraction to coconuts perhaps best illustrates this mutated form of ritual practice, and these fruits serve as narrative guideposts, signaling both Felicia's fragile state as well as potential curative conduits. In Santería, coconuts proliferate in major ceremonies, "and some of the most famous spells of the Religion are prepared with this fruit. It is also highly valued as a cure for several diseases" (Gonzalez-Wippler 122). After a moment of clarity in her attempt to murder her husband, Felicia's downward spiral accelerates and she begins her own protective ritual of making coconut ice cream for her three children and herself representing a break not only in her psychological state, but also a break from "her original pattern, her hymn of particulars" (*Dreaming* 39). The play on the word "hymn" here suggests that Felicia cannot tolerate the tropes of Church-backed religion. During her earlier indoctrination into the faith, she recalled how the voice of Saint Sebastian superseded her own: "She can't stop his words...He doesn't let her think" (*Dreaming* 77). Felicia attempted to appropriate his name as her own confirmation name "[b]ut the nuns refused" (*Dreaming* 77) and insisted she take the name of María—yet another constitutive exhortation to the ideology of *marianismo*. Like the Yoruba, Felicia wants to "reconstitute...identity and equilibrium by means of [ritualism]" (Murphy 83). Because she found happiness at one time with the ritualistic practice of collecting seashells, the summer of coconuts then takes their place to provide the same.

After a series of further debilitating experiences of trauma (loss of children—specifically her son Ivanito—continued loss of memory, and the deaths of two subsequent husbands), Felicia fully engages in Santería much as her mother Celia engaged in the Revolution. After Felicia's initiation, she speaks of clarity and that "the sun enters here" (*Dreaming* 188). Herminia attests to Felicia's newfound serenity: "her face serene as a goddess's. I believe to this day she'd finally found her peace" (*Dreaming* 188). Like her mother, Felicia's purpose is realized, endowing her with a temporary equilibrium to replace what was once a life of anarchy, heartache and the endurance of hegemonic systems—that is until La Madrina's divination of the shells that had confirmed her eventual and inevitably tragic death comes to pass.

García's exploration of Santería in relation to Felicia offers a kind of discursive symbolism; we cannot perceive the full weight of Felicia's story (or any of the characters for that matter) if it were to be [re]told through a linear storyline. Thus, we need Felicia's sporadically placed traumas, whether diseased-induced or rife with emotional baggage, in order to appreciate her story and to realize the significant influences, aperture, and salvation that Santería offers her. The narrative functions then as a site of identity politics. Swathed in profuse articulations of political tropes, the distressing intricacies of familial dynamics, and the interlaced relationship of the mind, body, and soul, Felicia ultimately finds relief in a ritualistic outlet. When life becomes too chaotic, customs steeped in inner reflection and outward purging through ceremonial rites offer a refuge from the turbulence of interlacing systems and a return to that which feels effortless. This may be the illusion that Celia speaks of during her vigils on the shoreline of Cuba. While hers is a potentially bleak border image rife with the intolerability of priests and politicians, it is still malleable and a verge of something else. That threshold is the narrative, one that focuses on the importance of unshackling the din of many voices throughout a network of interlacing lines to challenge the existing matrix that binds them. García's characters and narrative structure provide a vehicle for that reverberation and establishes that the private realm of experience offers much by way of exposing how humanity can improve upon itself through a

myriad of possibilities for creating harmony as well as exposing the push-pull mechanisms that forge identities and the junctures that resist them. It is, simply, a recognition of storytelling.

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## Notes

1. Frank K. Stanzel’s examination of free indirect style seems to align with Bal, explaining that in contrast to a grammatical notion of free indirect style, “the literary explanation...has concentrated more and more on its extrasyntactical aspects” (191). See Stanzel’s *A Theory of Narrative* (1986).
2. See García’s interview with Ivelisse Rodriguez in *Kweli Journal* (web).
3. I use the term *intimacy* here as conceived by Lisa Lowe in her essay, “The Intimacies of Four Continents.”
4. As I understand Jean-François Lyotard’s use of *narrative knowledge*, it is a counter to the Western grand meta-narratives of legitimized scientific information and politics that claimed universalizing truths and enlightenment.
5. See Coventry Patmore’s popular poem “The Angel in the House” (1852).
6. Like Blanca, the male character Ivanito from *Dreaming in Cuban* represents another disenfranchised and muffled voice that demands further investigation.
7. See Adriana Méndez Rodenas’s work on the mother/daughter plot in “Engendering the Nation: The Mother/Daughter Plot in Cuban American Fiction” in *Cuban-American Literature and Art: Negotiating Identities*. Eds. Isabel Alvarez Borland and Lynette M.F. Bosch. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2009: 47-60.
8. In 1959, Fidel Castro enforced anti-religious policies and declared Cuba as atheistic; therefore, Celia is working under the auspices of revolutionary practices and nation building identities.

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<sup>9</sup> Lowe's intimacies harmonize here since her line of reasoning details how the global economic relationship among four continents at the time of the British abolishment of slavery in 1807 shaped local configurations, knowledge, and divisions of labor. While Lowe concentrates on "the *figure* of the Chinese woman" (196) in her study of the matrix, it is not too much of a logical leap to see García's narrative structure, the characters that function within this structure, and the role of a particular religion, the *figure* of Santería, as revelatory mechanisms.

This item: *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina Garcia Paperback \$25.71. Only 1 left in stock. Ships from and sold by Amazon US. *How Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent* by Alvarez Paperback \$32.61. A rich and haunting narrative . . . An intricate weaving of dramatic events with the supernatural and the cosmic . . . Evocative and lush."--JACKIE JONES, San Francisco Chronicle. "Impressive . . . Her story is about three generations of Cuban women and their separate responses to the revolution. Cristina Garcia is the author of seven novels, most recently *King of Cuba*, and the forthcoming *Berliners Who*. She has published poetry, books for young readers, and edited anthologies on Latino/a literature. Her work has been nominated for a National Book Award and translated into fourteen languages. Taking as its point of departure the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Cristina Garcia's debut novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) directly explores what the author herself characterized as the effects or "costs" of the revolution and the consequent diaspora on individuals and families. Garcia treats this central theme by chronicling the lives of three generations of a family divided politically and geographically as a result of the revolution. Discover the world's research. 19+ million members. [Cristina Garcia's] story is about three generations of Cuban women and their separate responses to the revolution. Her special feat is to tell it in a style as warm and gentle as the "sustaining aromas of vanilla and almond," as rhythmic as the music of Beny Moré. Time Cristina Garcia's acclaimed book is the haunting, bittersweet story of a family experiencing a country's revolution and the revelations that follow. Cristina Garcia is the author of six novels, including the National Book Award finalist *Dreaming in Cuban*; children's books; anthologies; and poetry. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Whiting Writers' Award, among other honors, and is currently University Chair in Creative Writing at Texas State University-San Marcos. Visit her website at [CristinaGarciaNovelist.com](http://CristinaGarciaNovelist.com).