

Telling it to the Dead: Borderless Communication and Scars of Trauma in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*

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Summary

Cristina Garcia's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) is preoccupied with the three key stages in the title of this volume: "healing, working through, and/or staying in trauma". This article contextualises the novel by referring to the life history of the character Lourdes Puente and the trauma of her exile and exodus from Cuba. A scar on her stomach inscribes a rape, a miscarriage and her failed attachment to her mother Celia. It is suggested that the scar constitutes a visible representation of her trauma designed to prevent her experiences from remaining permanently repressed and unclaimed. Only when Lourdes starts a series of conversations with her deceased father is she able to relate to the wound/scar and to pose questions about her trauma. This article addresses the traumatically marked literary language used to depict Lourdes's experiential world, and discusses how death, or rather the company of her dead father, turns into a safe space in which she confronts her traumatic past and heals herself. The article also considers how the novel participates in processes of healing and reconciliation in a wider Cuban context.

Opsomming

Cristina Garcia se roman *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) handel oor die drie sleutelfases in die titel van hierdie bundel, naamlik genesing, verwerking en/of om getraumatiseerd te bly ("healing, working through, and or staying in trauma"). Hierdie artikel kontekstualiseer die roman deur te wys op die lewensgeskiedenis van die karakter Lourdes Puente en die trauma van haar verbanning en eksodus uit Kuba. 'n Letsel op haar maag is 'n ingegrifte teken van haar verkragting, miskraam en mislukte verhouding met haar moeder Celia. Daar word beweer dat hierdie letsel 'n sigbare voorstelling van haar trauma is, wat verhoed dat sy haar wedervarings kan onderdruk en ontken. Eers wanneer Lourdes verskeie gesprekke met haar oorlede vader begin voer, is sy in staat om die letsel met haar trauma in verband te bring en vrae daaroor te begin vra. Hierdie artikel gee aandag aan die literêre taal waarop trauma sy spore afgedruk het en waarmee Lourdes se ervaringswêreld uitgebeeld word. Daar is 'n bespreking van hoe die dood, of trouens die geselskap van haar oorlede vader, 'n veilige ruimte word waarin sy haar traumatiese verlede konfronteer en genesing vind. Verder verken die artikel ook hoe hierdie roman in 'n wyer Kubaanse verband bydra tot genesing en versoening.

Healing, working through, and/or staying in trauma – all three stages are present in Cristina García's 1992 novel *Dreaming in Cuban*. The framework of García's novel is the general Cuban trauma of exile and exodus relating to the 1959 overthrow of Dictator Fulgencio Batista and Fidel Castro's coming to power, and the text portrays the divisive effects that these occurrences had on families and individuals. While trauma can certainly be discussed in relation to all four female protagonists, this article focuses on the character of Lourdes Puente, who is deeply – and doubly – traumatised by her mother's abandonment of her as a child and the rape she suffered in connection with the appropriation of her husband's property. Added to these traumatic experiences is that which Isabel Alvarez Borland terms the "trauma of displacement" (1998: 121), which in Lourdes's case is complex as her arrival in the US is experienced as a relief. What I explore in relation to Lourdes is whether communication and articulation – concepts regarded by many as necessary for healing and the working through of trauma – are rendered ineffective if what you tell is told to the dead. Alternatively, can words told across the borders of life and death be one way of working through trauma?

Dreaming in Cuban brings together themes of dual identities, translation between cultures and languages, exilic Cuban lives and shattered families as a result of both revolution and imperialism. The masterly prose of the novel has secured its important position within the now significant corpus of US Latina/o fiction. The novel revolves around the lives of two women who live in Cuba and two who have ended up in Brooklyn, New York. In Cuba, we find Celia del Pino, a true *revolucionaria*, and Fidelista, and her daughter Felicia, who gradually loses her grip on reality, becomes infected with syphilis and commits suicide. Celia's other daughter, Lourdes Puente, has gone into exile with her husband and their young daughter Pilar. The novel focuses on the period from 1972 to 1980, the year Lourdes and Pilar visit Cuba. Historical events and personal experiences are partly communicated through Celia's letters to her first lover, Gustavo, a married lawyer from Spain, who breaks Celia's heart; an event that will have a significant bearing on Lourdes's life. Through Celia's letters, which begin in 1935, the novel stretches back to pre-revolutionary Cuban history and society during the reign of Dictator Fulgencio Batista. The real purpose of the letters is disclosed at the end of the novel, when Celia gives them to her granddaughter Pilar who will, as Celia assures herself, Gustavo and the reader, "remember everything" (1992: 245). In the case of Lourdes, Celia's letters present a background to Lourdes's experiences and serve to confirm the factual circumstances of her traumas.

Much critical attention has been given to the character of Pilar Puente, who has been read as the author's alter ego. As such, it seems natural that Pilar's conception of her mother has informed the critical understanding of Lourdes. The critic Isabel Alvarez Borland accurately states that Lourdes

“does not fare well in Pilar’s narratives” – Pilar brutally refers to Lourdes as her “fucking crazy mother” (1998: 64). It is, however, hard to subscribe to the critic’s opinion that “Pilar’s mother is ridiculed in the text” (p. 139). In Alvarez Borland’s eyes, Lourdes is a character whose “politics are wrong” and who is “overweight and unbecoming” (p. 139); factors that, apparently, lead the critic to determine that Lourdes is “ridiculed”. The closest Alvarez Borland gets to an indication of the element of Lourdes’s traumatic experiences in the novel is when she observes that “[l]ike most of the characters in García’s narrative, Lourdes is tormented by feelings she does not confront” (p. 139). It might be added that, importantly, Alvarez Borland reads Pilar as the novel’s only protagonist.

In *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Identity*, Marta Caminero-Santangelo states that “by far the most negative portrayal in the novel is not of Castro but of Lourdes, the rabidly anti-Castro exile who places absolute faith in American capitalism” (2007: 178). Caminero-Santangelo clearly reads Lourdes as Pilar (and Alvarez Borland) read her, with Lourdes’s background of traumas, if not overlooked, then in any case given very little attention. Caminero-Santangelo’s focus is on the polarised politics around Cubans and Cuban exiles. To her, Celia is “a staunch defender of Castro”, Felicia is “at best apathetic about the revolution”, Pilar is the “rebellious daughter”, and Lourdes is “the typical radically conservative Cuban exile [with a] dysfunctional drive toward consumption” (pp. 177-178). In her significant intervention, Fatima Mujcinovic reads Lourdes as a character with a post-traumatic stress disorder who may possibly be able to “recuperate her obliterated self” in exile (2003: 175). Mujcinovic’s reading of Lourdes comes close to mine, with the vital difference that the critic shows no interest in Lourdes’s extensive and long-lasting talks with her dead father, thus missing the process that actually helps Lourdes to “recuperate” her self. The complexity of Lourdes – a complexity thus far ignored by the critics cited above – is also suggested by Cristina García, who has said that the rape of Lourdes led to an altered view of her character: “I remember distinctly the day Lourdes got raped, and as I was writing how the events were leading up to the rape and then the inevitability of it, the horror of it, and how I never saw Lourdes the same way after this incident. That was quite a shock” (López 1995: 108).¹ Similarly, I suggest that once

1. Another surprise, García says, came from not knowing that Felicia would be capable of pushing her husband off a rollercoaster (1992: 110). “[F]acets of Lourdes and Pilar” that the author did not understand were introduced to her through the character of Celia, who was, García explains, the “spiritual guide” as well as the “backbone and the strength” of the novel (p. 108). García, who obviously has a particular affection for Lourdes, has also said that the “essential Lourdes” is she who “defends her daughter’s punk portrait of the Statue of Liberty” and who is “tribal and territorial, forthright and aggressive,” even “unintentionally funny” (García in Brown 1993: 251). I

the reader pays further attention to Lourdes's experiences, the likelihood of interpreting her character as "ridiculed" is significantly reduced, making way for a transformed understanding of the processes of trauma and scarring framing her.

Lourdes's experiences of trauma are not known to any living figure in the novel, including, in accordance with trauma theory, Lourdes herself. The letters that her mother Celia writes to Gustavo, Celia's ex-lover, bear witness to how the child Lourdes is abandoned by the mother. Hoping for a son, Celia plans to leave the baby with his father and run away to Gustavo in Spain, but, "[i]f she had a girl, Celia decided, she would stay. She would not abandon a daughter to this life, but train her to read the columns of blood and numbers in men's eyes, to understand the morphology of survival" (p. 42). The baby girl is born, named Lourdes by the father, and before being taken to the asylum owing to her poor mental health, Celia remarks how "the baby had no shadow, how the earth in its hunger had consumed it" (pp. 42-43). As the literary representation of Celia's inner world here suggests, Celia too is marked by traumatic experiences. Celia bears tragic testimony to the trauma that will come to form part of both her and Lourdes's unclaimed experiences: "She held their child by one leg, handed her to Jorge, and said, 'I will not remember her name'" (p. 43). In a letter to Gustavo about the time when the second baby girl, Felicia, is born, Celia matter-of-factly describes how Lourdes acts: "Lourdes is two and a half years old. She walks to the beach on her skinny brown legs. Strangers buy her ice cream and she tells them that I'm dead" (p. 52). Abandoned by Celia, the child Lourdes performs the staging of her mother as dead, transforming pain into survival.

As a married woman, Lourdes is raped by one of the soldiers who come to declare that her husband Rufino's property has been confiscated by the revolutionary government. After raping her, the soldier uses a knife to make carvings on her stomach, seemingly attempting to write something. Later, Lourdes finds that these inscriptions are illegible (p. 72). Shortly after the rape (and a miscarriage that preceded it), Lourdes leaves Cuba. The memories of all three traumatic events in her life have been buried but will be revisited repeatedly through eating- and sexual disorders. Cathy Caruth has defined trauma in its most general sense to describe "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1996: 11). Caruth points to how this "uncontrolled" repetition, when viewed from a Freudian perspective, is the outcome of an experience which has not been known to the victim at the point of the event, but which keeps possessing the victim,

find this alternative take on Lourdes to be of interest as, in my opinion, she has been read quite ungenerously by many.

acting itself out as long as it has not been worked through. To understand the “possession” of the victim, Caruth uses Freud’s theory of the pleasure principle which, in the context of trauma, sees an “incomprehensible outside of the self that has gone inside without the self’s mediation, hence without any relation to the self” (p. 132). The descriptions of how Lourdes’s body turns into a battle-field for her struggles and the arena on which trauma acts itself out are, in my reading, successful literary articulations of how an “incomprehensible outside of the self” goes inside, finding ways of articulation, though without the participation of the self.

In the case of Lourdes, food items appear to act on their own as they transform her body. After buying a bakery, thinking that there can be no sorrow involved in working with bread, she starts swelling with pecan sticky buns until “[t]he flesh amassed rapidly on her hips and buttocks, muting the angles of her bones. It collected on her thighs, fusing them above the knees. It hung from her arms like hammocks” (García 1992: 20). She gains 118 pounds in a bulimic phase, and then loses the exact amount of pounds later in an anorexic phase when her daughter departs for art school, leaving Lourdes feeling “utter repugnance” (p. 168) as she imagines her daughter sexually involved with men. Lourdes’s compulsive cravings, her “appetite for sex and baked goods” (p. 20) also include immoderate sex with her husband Rufino. Clearly, however, real satisfaction is deprived her: “Lourdes was reaching through Rufino for something he could not give her, she wasn’t sure what” (p. 21). Ellen McCracken has read Lourdes as a figure of “hyper-Americanism” (McCracken 1999: 25) who primarily finds its articulations through an abuse of the body. McCracken details García’s “en-cod[ing] of Lourdes’[s] abuse of her body within a series of parodical signifiers of hyper-Americanism, foregrounding the culture and the economics of excess that sustains both” (p. 25). Though McCracken’s observations have merit, other factors falling outside the concepts of nation or national culture are needed in order to contextualise Lourdes’s eating disorders.²

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2. In “The Control Paradox: Understanding and Working with Anorexia and Bulimia”, Catrina Brown points to how, for women with eating disorders, the body is “the arena to express dissatisfaction and unhappiness. It is the site of their struggles”. Central to anorexia and bulimia is also, according to Brown, “the paradox or contradiction of control”: “Women feel in control of their lives through controlling their bodies, yet the need to establish this false and precarious control suggests they are desperately out of control” (Brown n.d.). In the case of Lourdes and her mother’s abandonment, attachment theory may also be considered:

The attachment system of the brain is conceived as a biologically- and evolutionary-based survival system that evolved to encourage people to connect with other people in times of distress to improve their safety. The rules governing ... [the attachment system of the brain] ... are laid down in early childhood through close attunement between the infant and caregiver,

Descriptions of eating disorders and of the insatiable “appetite for sex” suggest that Lourdes is a woman with repressed experiences and memories. The introduction of Lourdes in the novel likewise emphasises a traumatically marked identity. In one of many allusions to the modes of dreaming in this novel, the reader first encounters Lourdes in a dream: “The continents strain to unloose themselves, to drift reckless and heavy in the seas. Explosions tear and scar the land, spitting out black oaks and coal mines, street lamps and scorpions. Men lose the power of speech. The clocks stop. Lourdes Puente awakens” (1992: 17). In addition to being the literary language of a dream, the references to straining, recklessly drifting continents and the announcement that men “lose the power of speech” introduce the traumatically marked, experiential world and identity of Lourdes. The language in the passage successfully invents ways of simultaneously representing and challenging any possible narrative of trauma, true to the workings of trauma itself. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth posits that the language of “transmitting” trauma must be “somehow literary, a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (1996: 5).³ The use of defamiliarising imagery to introduce Lourdes and her sudden materialisation, or awakening challenges readers to ask how the dream correlates to Lourdes’s reality – and to ask what role death plays in her life. At the novel’s outset the reader is thus made to understand that Lourdes is positioned upon unstable grounds, on scarred land, and in close proximity to the dead. Death is, of course, classically the companion to survival in trauma theory: “[Is] trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?” (Caruth 1996: 7). This theory of trauma, as “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*” (p. 7), aligns well with Lourdes’s character. Death, the companion to survival, takes the shape of

and are actively implemented thereafter. Sometimes attachment goes awry or is incomplete, resulting in too much or too little attachment.

(Schwartz 2010: n.p.)

3. Caruth sees the following possible connections between trauma, its knowing and writing, and the role of literature:

If traumatic experience, as Freud indicates suggestively, is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs, then these texts, each in its turn, ask what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness. Such a question, I will argue, whether it occurs within a strictly literary text or in a more deliberately theoretical one, can never be asked in a straightforward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is somehow literary, a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.

(Caruth 1996: 5)

Jorge (her father), and communications with him in the realm of death, or in the borderlands between life and death, can possibly be read as “a kind of double telling”. The subsequent conversations between Lourdes and her dead father operate in this context and for quite some time in the novel they constitute an oscillation between life and death in Lourdes’s existence.

By the time Lourdes starts having conversations with her deceased father, the theme of borderless communication has already taken many forms and provides a means for characters to work through events and relationships. Shortly after being introduced in the novel, Lourdes gets a call from the Sisters of Charity Hospital, with the news that her father Jorge has passed away. Lourdes’s question to Sister Federica – “Did he say where he was going?” (García 1992: 19) – accentuates her disregard of borders between life and death and serves as a prelude to later meetings and conversations between Lourdes and her deceased father. This literary feature of contacts between the living and the dead also opens the novel, with Celia speaking to her husband Jorge, who has just passed away. Celia cannot distinguish Jorge’s words but “feels the warm breeze of his breath on her face” (p. 75). Celia’s staging of a goodbye to her husband helps her work through and accept his death. Pilar, on a similar note of borderless communication, is nourished by both a real and an imagined communication with her grandmother Celia in Cuba. In addition to letters, Pilar and Celia carry on conversations in the realms of the imaginary. “I hear her speaking to me at night just before I fall asleep” (p. 29), Pilar reflects in Brooklyn, and Celia, in Cuba, “closes her eyes and speaks to her granddaughter” (p. 7). This borderless communication with Celia helps Pilar deal with her mother: “I might be afraid of her if it weren’t for those talks I have with Abuela Celia late at night. She tells me that my mother is sad inside and that her anger is more frustration at what she can’t change” (p. 63). Lourdes, for her part, will engage in talks with her deceased father, partly because there is nobody else to talk to, but perhaps more importantly because trauma needs a listener as much as it needs the “speaking subject” for its narrative realisation.⁴ Not until these conversations with her father take place is she able to pose the questions that concern her traumatic experiences and her fraught relationship with Pilar. Death, or, rather, the company of her dead father, will become Lourdes’s safe space.

Forty days after Lourdes has buried her father in the US, he comes to visit her. Jorge thanks her for a royal burial which included his cigars. During

4. “Telling is crucial,” says Gilmore in a reference to specific trauma theories in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001: 31). These theories, however, also emphasise the role of the listener as much as the “speaking subject”, and certain requirements are placed on the listener: “Trauma lacks an other who will return the story without violence to the speaker by listening to it carefully” (2001: 31). For Lourdes, no one but her father can take this role.

this first meeting on the streets at sunset, Lourdes cannot see him but smells his cigar. The conversation is very brief, and Lourdes reaches her home “with a presentiment of disaster”: “Is her mind betraying her, cultivating delusion like a hothouse orchid? What if she has exhausted reality? Lourdes abhors ambiguity”. She tells her husband about the visitation and deduces that things are “very wrong” (García 1992: 65). After successfully selling pastries the next day, her self-confidence is “restored,” and “she has almost dispelled the effect of her father’s visitation” (p. 67). She thinks that, perhaps, she has “imagined the entire incident” (pp. 66-67). She is represented as resisting the idea that she would be spoken to by the dead, unlike her mother Celia, who apparently takes Jorge’s words on the Cuban shore in the beginning of the novel as both natural and expected. This resistance is apparent when Jorge, seven days later, pays a second visit. Lourdes smells his cigar again, and this second conversation between them resounds with scepticism:

“You didn’t expect to hear from me again?”

“I wasn’t even sure I heard you the first time,” Lourdes says tentatively.

“You thought you’d imagined it?”

“I thought I heard your voice because I wanted to, because I missed you.

When I was little I used to think I heard you opening the front door late at night. I’d run out but you were never there.”

“I’m here now, Lourdes.”

(García 1992: 73)

Despite the imaginative dimensions of this passage – imbued with both psychological inflections and magical realism – Lourdes’s reaching for Jorge should be read as an expression of rational communication with someone who has been loved and lost to death. Besides the fact that her father was sincerely loved and her own resistance to letting him go, these conversations constitute Lourdes’s only viable way of working through her traumas. I thus attribute the “staging” of these encounters to Lourdes’s rational, yet obviously unconscious, resourcefulness. (Cristina García’s resourcefulness is, of course, no less striking.) Elsewhere I explore García’s literary style further, referring to it as crossover aesthetics, or acts of cultural translation. My argument is that the author – for example by having the lights at dawn play tricks on Celia in the opening of *Dreaming in Cuban*, producing a visualisation of Jorge – translates visions and experiences into a middle ground that *resembles* magical realism, but that this approach destabilises the typical irrationality of magical realist occurrences, lending them instead an unexpected rationality.⁵ García, inspired particularly by the “South

5. *Dreaming in Cuban* is discussed in two chapters in my doctoral dissertation, which focus on trauma and issues of translation and crossover aesthetics. In “Latinos and the Crossover Aesthetics”, an essay published as a foreword to Mike Davis’s *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US Big City* (2000),

American variety” of magical realism, has said that her interest has been in exploring “the borderland between what is only remotely possible and what is utterly impossible” (Brown 1993: 254). In García’s last novel, *A Handbook to Luck* (2007), the son of a magician reflects on his father’s occupation and on the “nature” of magic: “Papi said that magic was largely a matter of making ordinary things appear extraordinary with a touch of smoke and illusion” (p. 10) – a claim we might very well use to describe García’s craftsmanship.

Lourdes’s address to her dead father and the answers that she obtains force repressed emotions from the past into her present. Though many of the memories are extremely hurtful, she begins to reconnect both to herself and to the world around her. In Caruth’s words, “the inherent departure, within trauma, from the moment of its first occurrence, is also a means of passing out of the isolation imposed by the event; that the history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another” (Caruth 1996: 11). Lourdes breaks the isolation that is the result of traumatic experiences, and the only person available that can serve as a witness and listener is her deceased father. Jorge’s reassurance that Lourdes is not alone enables her to recover those painful memories. During the second contact with her father, Lourdes recalls going to Miami to pick up her runaway daughter, who is constantly pulled south to Celia and Cuba. Miami makes Lourdes feel close to “her mother’s ocean nearby”, and Lourdes “imagined herself alone and shriveled in her mother’s womb, envisioned the first days in her mother’s unyielding arms” (García 1992: 74). Crying, Lourdes tells her father that she does not know what to do, her daughter Pilar hates her. Her father, who from this point onwards is her companion on the difficult route (back) to unearth the hurtful experiences and feelings, assures Lourdes that Pilar’s feelings are not hatred, and that Pilar will learn to love her mother. Despite the pain that re-emerges with her dead father’s appearance in her life, it becomes clear that Jorge has returned to help his daughter remember and to give her hope.

Memories thus play a central role in Lourdes’s conversations with Jorge. In the anthology *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, editors Paul Antze and Michael Lambek preface the essays with a clarification of what memories are in relation to trauma: “Memories are acts of commemoration, of testimony, of confession, of accusation. Memories do not merely describe the speaker’s relation to the past but place her quite

Román de la Campa writes that the origin to a Latino crossover aesthetics can be located in the “space of difference within the Americas, the United States as well as Latin America”, a space that Latinos claim or retain (p. xiv). The crossover aesthetics are also an articulation of a Latino plurality in de la Campa’s understanding: “regardless of class and ethnicity, [the Latino] begins to acquire a sense of plurality deriving from a dual linguistic and cultural bearing” (p. xiv).

specifically in reference to it” (Antze & Lambek 1996: xxv). Yet memories are not always within reach, as Leigh Gilmore points out when she asks whether “the mechanisms by which we remember [are] similar to the ones that permit (or compel) us to forget?” (Gilmore 2001: 47). While this question presents rather commonplace ideas in relation to trauma theory, Gilmore’s suggestions that memory might be “simply faulty, like a machine that breaks down from time to time” or that, perhaps, it “fail[s] because it must” are directly relevant to an understanding of Lourdes (p. 45). With the help of her father, Lourdes begins the road towards healing.

Nothing at this point in the novel, however, indicates that her conversations with Jorge will help her solve matters in real life. She feels that she is herself only with him, and that “[e]ven after his death, they understand each other perfectly, as they always have” (García 1992: 131). She goes into another anorexic phase, and exhibits typical patterns for this eating disorder: “Lourdes Puente welcomes the purity, the hollowness of her stomach” (p. 167).⁶ She has given up her immoderate sex with Rufino, and has not had sex with him after the death of her father. She reflects upon the earlier phase of sexual obsession: “It’s as if another woman had possessed her in those days, a whore, a life-craving whore who fed on her husband’s nauseating clots of yellowish milk” (p. 169). Though free from the obsession of sex, the elimination of food and her turning to the substitute of “liquid protein” (p. 170) demonstrate that Lourdes remains traumatised. Were we to read the conversations between Lourdes and Jorge as Lourdes actually talking to herself, we might note that when she goes into this new phase of eating disorder, she expresses concern for herself: “Jorge del Pino is concerned about his daughter, but Lourdes insists that nothing is wrong” (p. 170). Apart from this articulation of anxiety, Jorge’s regular visits reassure her that she is on the right path. Jorge advises her to expand her business and to put her name on the sign of the new pastry shop so that “they know what we Cubans are up to, that we’re not all Puerto Ricans”. Above all Jorge and Lourdes discuss politics, focusing on the “cancer” of socialism in Cuba and on the importance of “denounc[ing] the Communist threat to America” (pp. 170-171).⁷ Lourdes and Jorge meet and talk regularly for seven years – seven years of conversations across the boundaries of life and death, which,

6. Mark Schwartz writes that individuals whose “attachment [to a primary caretaker] goes awry or is incomplete”, may come to believe that “only food, or the restriction of food, will reliably quell the internal emptiness” (Schwartz 2010: n.p).

7. Feminism, Latina/o identities, and the almost mythical fear of communism and socialism in the US are all topics brought up in the conversations between Lourdes and her father. All of them have a bearing on *Dreaming in Cuban*.

I suggest, are also seven years of Lourdes being in “therapy”. After these seven years, their contact starts fading and Jorge “complains of an energy waning within him, and is convinced that the time he’s stolen between death and oblivion is coming to an end” (p. 193). To Lourdes, her father seems to be “dying all over again, and her grief is worse than the first time” (p. 194). This can certainly be read as Lourdes reaching the last stage of mourning, and only now accepting his death. Painfully aware of the little time they have left, Lourdes grapples with the broadest and most difficult questions of all. Did her father love her mother Celia? Did Celia love Jorge? Yes, Jorge says, yes, he certainly loved Celia, and he believes that Celia loved him, “in her way” (p. 194).

One month later, when Lourdes’s father visits her a final time, she finds out that her mother had indeed loved her, and Jorge also admits to having attempted to “break” or even “kill” Celia, punishing her for her former love of “the Spaniard” (1992: 195). Jorge also confesses to having taken Lourdes from Celia, wanting to “own” Lourdes for himself. He then urges her to return to Cuba and set things straight. When Lourdes insists that her father does not understand, that she cannot go back, he tells her that he knows about the rape, assuring her that Celia never knew. This last conversation clearly demonstrates, as Antze and Lambek point out, that “memories are never simply records of the past When memories recall acts of violence against individuals or entire groups, they carry additional burdens, as indictments or confessions, or as emblems of a victimized identity” (1996: vii). At this point, with the memories of the traumatic experiences and even the scar on her stomach having turned into words, Lourdes sees going to Cuba as a possibility.⁸

To understand Lourdes in context with her relation to Cuba and her (former) resistance to travelling there, it is important to observe that Lourdes thinks of her arrival in the US as “immigration,” not “exile”. In contrast to

8. Ellen McCracken has read the last conversation between Lourdes and her father as a feminist intervention:

Her father’s visit becomes the site of a feminist recuperation when he admits to Lourdes his misogynistic treatment of Celia and attempts to heal the rift between mother and daughter that his actions instigated. He admits in an “even” tone to knowing about his daughter’s rape by the government soldiers, suggesting at the very least that he engaged in the complicity of silence with this crime.

(McCracken 1999: 26)

My only objection to McCracken’s interpretation is that Jorge’s “complicity of silence” is not with the crime of the rape but with the resulting trauma. This can perhaps be seen as remedied, though very late, by his addressing of the event that compels Lourdes to remember it.

her husband Rufino, who “would never adapt” and who “could not be transplanted” (p. 129), Lourdes does not include herself in the large groups of people who suffer through their displacement and loss of language:

She ponders the transmigrations from the southern latitudes, the millions moving north. What happens to their languages? The warm burial grounds they leave behind? What of their passions lying stiff and untranslated in their breasts?

Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention. Lourdes relishes winter most of all – the cold scraping sounds on sidewalks and windshields, the ritual of scarves and gloves, hats and zip-in coat linings. Its layers protect her. She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her.

(García 1992: 73)

Lourdes’s positioning of herself as an immigrant is quite remarkable, as most Cubans leaving Cuba at this point in time would see themselves as exiles having left for political reasons. The fact that García equips Lourdes with a different relation to Cuba and to her past suggests the complexity of the novel. Cuban American author Gustavo Pérez Firmat, unequivocally defining himself as an exile and not an immigrant in his writings, offers interesting images for Lourdes and Rufino’s different conditions:

The exile and the immigrant go through life at different speeds. The immigrant is in a rush about everything – in a rush to get a job, learn the language, set down roots, become a citizen. He lives in the fast lane and if he arrives as an adult, he squeezes a second lifetime into the first, and if he arrives as a child, he grows up in a hurry. Not so with the exile, whose life creeps forward an inch at a time. If the immigrant rushes, the exile waits. He waits to embark on a new career, to learn the language, to give up his homeland. If immigration is an accelerated birth, exile is a state that looks every bit like a slow death. For the exile, every day is delay, every day is deferral.⁹

(Pérez Firmat 2005: 38)

9. The lines are from the poem “Still Life” in *Scar Tissue*. Pérez Firmat was born in Cuba and raised in Miami and is the author of the well-known work *Life on the Hyphen* from 1994. The poem “Afterlife on the Hyphen”, also from *Scar Tissue* from 2005, illustrates how the hyphen has changed in significance for the author, an author who, as his writings clearly demonstrate, always waited for the possibility of returning to a Cuba without Castro and socialism: “A hyphen is a scar For years I celebrated hyphens I liked the flavor, but it wasn’t filling. Life on the hyphen is wound ...” (2005: 43).

Had her experiences of trauma not thwarted her desire to be born into another language in the US, Lourdes's immigration might have succeeded.¹⁰

The context for Lourdes's trip back to Cuba involves far more than her own traumatic experiences of events that happened there. The general resistance, to put it mildly, among exiled Cubans to visiting Cuba is suggested when Pilar wants to stay there longer. Lourdes "refuses because she doesn't want to give Cuba any more hard currency" (García 1992: 234). Here she presents one of the most common arguments against visiting Cuba – the belief that, deprived financially, Castro's Cuba will fall. For a number of reasons, a visit back to Cuba is, or at least was at the time *Dreaming in Cuban* was written, highly controversial. According to David Rieff, such a visit was "the biggest step that any [Cuban] exile can make" (Rieff 1993: 25).¹¹ While Pilar starts dreaming in Spanish back in Cuba, reflecting on the hardships of people there but remarking to herself that the people seem to have "the bare necessities" (235), Lourdes's view on Cuba does not change through her visit; all her beliefs on how poorly Cuba has fared under socialism and under Castro prove true to her. To Lourdes, the visit to Cuba is, though perhaps not consciously, undertaken to work through her traumas. Emphasising the general progress of this process, as well as indicating that there might have been more witnesses to Lourdes's traumatic acting out of trauma in the US are Pilar's reflections. Pilar, who has never known about

10. In her article "Multiple Articulations of Exile in US Latina Literature", Fatima Mujcinovic suggests that exile for Lourdes has "offer[ed] liberating possibilities" (2003: 177) and a "comforting distance from the source of pain and trauma" (p. 177). Mujcinovic points out, however, that Lourdes is unable to negotiate her past traumas and that, consequently, her life in exile will never succeed.

11. Rieff's book is useful for understanding more about Cuban exiles in Miami and the sentiments that have fuelled the polarised discourses on Cuba and its development under socialism:

Cuban Miami, for all its outward prosperity and jauntiness, is a city in pain, a place where the dead are never far from people's minds, and in which the past and the present are constantly being elided. Those remaining behind are, from this point of view at least, quite within their rights to be furious with those who visit Cuba and return. They have forced the issue.

(Rieff 1993: 22)

Exiled Cubans in the US have, at least in earlier historical periods, been seen as traitors, which the Cuban term of *gusanos* [worms] for those who left Cuba for the US establishes. The terms, the sentiments and the discourses underpinning them have become somewhat outdated as a result of new generations and political changes.

Celia's rejection of Lourdes or about the rape, suddenly remembers the childhood witnessing of her mother's incomprehensible struggle with her past:

When I was a kid, Mom slept in air thin and nervous as a magnetic field, attracting small disturbances. She tossed and turned all night, as if she were wrestling ghosts in her dreams. Sometimes she'd wake up crying, clutching her stomach and moaning from deep inside a place I couldn't understand. Dad would stroke her forehead until she fell asleep again.

(García 1992: 221)

The pained stomach invokes the rape, the miscarriage, and possibly the failed attachment to Celia. Through the physical wound – the illegible knife scratch marks on Lourdes's belly inscribed by the soldier who raped her – the author seems to be handing over a legible representation of trauma, one designed to prevent the experience from being eternally repressed and unclaimed. The suggestion is that perhaps there will not be any other memory of the trauma than this wound made scar. As such, the wound/scar is a possibility, rather than an impossibility. To interpret the illegibility of the carvings made by the knife as a representation of trauma lying beyond the reach and comprehension of Lourdes is, I believe, undermined by the conversations with the deceased Jorge. The wound, turned into a physical scar, assumes the form of a memory and serves as an opening to working through and healing.

Lourdes visits the estate where she lived, suffered a miscarriage, and was raped:

What she fears most is this: that her rape, her baby's death were absorbed quietly by the earth, that they are ultimately no more meaningful than falling leaves on an autumn day. She hungers for a violence of nature, terrible and permanent, to record the evil. Nothing less would satisfy her.

(García 1992: 227)

Her fears here, I would suggest, are exactly those which bring hope and indicate that Lourdes is no longer staying in trauma. The fears are now articulated, brought back from wherever they had been dwelling before she began her conversations with her father. Is this earth that Lourdes fears also capable of absorbing her rape and her dead baby? Can it possibly be the "warm burial grounds" left behind that Lourdes earlier attributed to other immigrants? If this reading holds, the "passions lying stiff and untranslated in their breasts" that the (other) immigrants harbour, can now also be claimed, and translated, by her. One of the very last things we hear of Lourdes is when, lying on her childhood bed in Celia's house, she hears how "[o]ld sentences lurk beneath the mattress". From this, she understands that she will not be able to communicate Jorge's last wish to Celia: "The words refuse to form in her mouth. Instead, like a brutal punishment,

Lourdes feels the grip of her mother's hand on her bare infant leg" (García 1992: 238). It appears that no reconciliation with Celia takes place. Yet what we see, I suggest, is the claiming of experiences and a transformation of wound to scar. In other words, Lourdes's existence might become one of memories instead of trauma, of distinct thoughts instead of traumatic recall.

Dreaming in Cuban is one of the best-known Cuban American novels, and the success with which it gives voice to complexity has been the source of much of its acclaim. This complexity includes the creation of characters like Lourdes Puente whose depiction, at first, may come across as anything but complex. In Pilar's eyes, for example, her mother's resistance to complexity is interpreted as a way to exist: "Mom's views are strictly black-and-white. It's how she survives" (p. 26). The "black-and-white" views of Lourdes refer, if not exclusively, then at least significantly, to political views. The ideological tensions that have been present since 1959, not only between island Cubans and exiled US Cubans but also between Miami Cubans and "other Cubans", constitute one part of the landscape in which the novel was written. In *Ellas hablan de la isla* [*They speak of the island*], Cuban critic Vitalina Alfonso asks García if *Dreaming in Cuban* could have been written from the same perspective had she lived in Miami. The author's answer is unambiguous: "Had I grown up or lived in Miami I could absolutely not have written that book" (Alfonso 2002: 157; my translation). In the same interview, García admits to censoring herself in readings of the novel in Miami. One may reasonably suppose that this self-censorship includes omitting certain passages about Lourdes. Fittingly, García also has her own scheme for categories of Cuban identity: "My relationship with Miami Cubans is often uncomfortable. Miami is such a political hothouse that suffers little dissidence. It can be an intolerant place. It is frequently monolithic in its approach to Cuba. As far as Cuban identity goes, there are three concentric circles – the Cubans, the Miami-Cubans, and the other Cubans. I'm in the third ring three times removed!" (Kevane & Heredia 2000: 70-71). The character of Lourdes Puente would, I suggest, be impossible without the fraught political context associated with Miami Cubans.

The pain and the repressed memories, which in this article I have attributed to Lourdes, also need to be extended beyond the individual level. "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (Morrison 1998: 42). This laconic yet weighty phrase from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* opens interpretative possibilities, not only in regard to Lourdes but to the novel in its entirety as playing a part in a Cuban reconciliation process. I have read Lourdes's communication with her dead father as initially painful yet subsequently beneficial. As such, she can be seen in congruence with the character of *Beloved* who embodies the hurt that comes when the dead come alive but also contrasting, to a great extent, *Beloved* who comes back to haunt both Sethe and the larger community, invoking repressed memories of the murdered and dead slaves. How do we then read the "dead coming

back to life” in the context of national and transnational Cuba and the much-needed process of reconciliation? Caruth provides a framework for understanding how a novel like *Dreaming in Cuban* can participate in processes of reconciliation, in this case between Cubans on the island and exiled US Cubans, and importantly through the literary representation of characters that hold irreconcilable beliefs and political outlooks: “The meaning of the trauma’s address beyond itself concerns, indeed, not only individual isolation but a wider historical isolation that, in our time, is communicated on the level of our cultures” (Caruth 1996: 11) Without the conversations between Lourdes and her deceased father, which, should we feel sceptical about talking to the dead, we can choose to look upon as Lourdes talking to herself, there would be no trip to Cuba, no going back to start mending the wounds, no opening for an understanding between the seemingly irreconcilable political positions of Lourdes and Pilar, the former in love with capitalism, the latter desiring to understand the “precise nature of present-day conditions on the island” (Rieff 1993: 37).

As for a wider Cuban context, a reconciliation process needs to be based on the gathering of stories, experiences, memories, identities, dreams and, importantly, differences. These all need to be brought together, side by side, to form a (trans)national history. As I have argued throughout this article, *Dreaming in Cuban* suggests that the dead need to be involved, listened to, and addressed; we need to turn to the dead, both on an individual level and on a historical level.¹² What might then follow is reconciliation. *Dreaming in Cuban* has been seen, also outside literary studies, as participating in processes of healing and reconciliation. Political scientist Maria de los Angeles Torres observes in *In the Land of the Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* that “[r]econciliation is not only about finding common grounds; it is also about understanding our differences” (1999: 21). In a reference to *Dreaming in Cuban*, de los Torres points to how Pilar has been “assigned the role of remembering for the nation” which, the political scientist argues, “defies the passive role commonly ascribed to those who leave their homeland” (p. 164). Cultural critic Coco Fusco looks upon Cristina García as one of “those who have consistently attempted to lessen the polarisations” (Fusco 1995: 20), and views the novel as an example of how “those involved in culture are not waiting for political change to happen first” (p. 19). Much scholarly focus has been given to Pilar’s character and role in *Dreaming in Cuban*. Whilst this is certainly merited, a focus on Lourdes is also essential, as I have shown, both to open and to mend wounds. The challenge of Lourdes’s character lies both in translating her traumatically marked identity into understandable language and in

12. Rieff’s words on how Miami is “a place where the dead are never far from people’s minds” (1993: 22) come to mind, as do Afro-Cuban slaves, Cubans dying of poverty under Batista, and the many Cubans who in their attempt to leave Castro’s Cuba have drowned in the waters between Cuba and Florida.

recognising that Lourdes's extreme anti-socialist and anti-Castro sentiments are a reality that needs to be considered, even for "dreamers" like Pilar who seek to move beyond differences. Without Lourdes, *Dreaming in Cuban* would not be about representing differences, with the possibility of understanding them. Without Lourdes, there might be nothing more than dreaming.

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