

The Creative Writing's Role in the Formation of a New Linguistic Home in Exile: A Critical Stylistic Analysis of Christina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1990)

Fadia Boualem

Department of English, Djillali Liabes
Sidi Bel Abbes, Algeria

Noureddine Guerroudj

Department of English, Djillali Liabes
Sidi Bel Abbes, Algeria

Abstract

This paper depicts how exiles are psychologically damaged by language loss and how the latter engenders identity crises that affect the characters and destabilize their identity constructs. Linguistically speaking, although expatriates living outside their home countries master English more than their native words, they can circulate both locations comfortably. However, both languages fail to provide them with an efficient means of expressing their identity. The main question raised is whether language contributes to the understanding of the self or complicates the maturation process and engenders an identity crisis. It is for this particular reason that the researcher has chosen Cristina Garcia *Dreaming in Cuban* (1990) to portray how both languages are simultaneously used, creating a third language structure, this narrative that blends English with Spanish without making the reader notice the shift and enabling both the writer and the protagonist to express their bicultural identities. The aim of the current study is to investigate how linguistic meaning is used as a vehicle for constructing identity through a critical stylistic analysis of Christina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1990). The study concludes that this novel cannot be classified as either nostalgic or creative, but blends nostalgia with creativity so as to give birth to a new category of exile writing. The latter preaches hybridity as a remedial reconciliation capable of healing the emotional shock caused by exile.

Keywords: critical stylistics, culture, exile, Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, home, language

Cite as: Boualem, F., & Guerroudj, N. (2020). The Creative Writing's Role in the Formation of a New Linguistic Home in Exile: A Critical Stylistic Analysis of Christina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1990). *Arab World English Journal*, 11 (3) 484-492
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no3.31>

Introduction

The history of exile writing is as old as the history of literature itself. Together with themes of alienation, detachment, diaspora and distance, exile has been one of the most productive issues in literature. Exile and its border-crossing experience is as a rite of passage that marks the life of an exile in different ways. On the one hand, the exile is detached from all sources of national sentiment and belonging. On the other hand, the exile is cast into a new “ethnoscape” that requires the adoption of the original language/ culture in order to avoid the devastating condition of alien hood. Scholars discuss the issue of exile, stating its relation to numerous features: gender, sexuality, nationality, language, race, ethnicity, culture, among many other features. Exile has often been studied in relation to home, place, border, and frontier. Exile, may refer to geographical areas, political or religious ones, occupational categories, and linguistic or cultural traditions delimitating a nation. Therefore, in exile discourses, the question that interests researchers is how one does represent oneself? Shall identity, single, hybrid, or multiple, be classified through linguistic, cultural or national attachments?

Literature Review

This part discusses the related literature concerning the topic under investigation.

Exiled scholars wrote about their experiences, the losses of exile, and their sufferings. It is argued that exile as an experience either fosters creativity outside the homeland or causes nostalgia and various crises for the displaced so that his life is consumed in his nostalgic memories. To put it otherwise, “Criticism of exile writing has tended to analyze these works according to a binary logic, where exile either produces creative freedom, or traps the writer in restrictive nostalgia” (McClennen, 2004, p.2). Said (2002) describes exile writing as contrapuntal since contrary to

most people [who] are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of visions gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal (p.186).

Seen from this dialectic vision, exile writing is hybrid and transnational since the writer is aware of two homes, two cultures, and two settings. Conceived in a dialectic manner, but from a different perspective, Guillén, (1976) distinguishes two kinds of exile writing: exile as nostalgic and counter exile as creative. Later, in *Múltiples Moradas*, Guillén, (1976) suggests “Exiled writers can be described as solar (referring to Plutarch) if they tend to look up towards the sun and the stars, or they can look within (like Ovid) and focus on loss” (as cited in McClennen, 2004, p.7).

From this, it follows that what Guillén, (1996) called “the literature of exile” stresses that exile is not only physical but spiritual as well and thus nostalgic insofar as this category of literature is linked to feelings of nationalism. What he names, “the literature of counter exile” (p.9), however, insists that exile is physical and that this physical displacement is transcended by creativity in exile. While Guillén, (1996) described the literature of counter exile as solar, he remained silent over providing a label for the writing of exile, a task McClennen, (2004) accomplished instead by characterizing the literature of exile as terrestrial because the exile “gaze[s] down at the ground, contemplating his material existence far from his native land” (p. 32). It follows, thus, that exile writing is either nostalgic or creative.

The feeling of nostalgia while in exile is not a new phenomenon. The word “nostalgia” comes from Greek roots *nostos* meaning “home” and *algia* meaning “longing”. Nostalgia, therefore, is the feeling of longing to home.

The nostalgic disorder was first diagnosed by seventeenth-century Swiss doctors and detected in mercenary soldiers. This modern contagious disease of homesickness –*la Maladie du pays* – was treated in a seventeenth-century scientific manner with leeches, hypnotic emulsions, opium, and a trip to the Alps. (Boym, 1998, p. 241.)

Exiled writers, exiled characters, or simply exiles falling in this category tend to be local. Moreover, the feeling of attachment to the motherland among them, although affected by physical displacement, grows stronger and traps them into a self-destroying journey when return to the homeland becomes an obsession. In this case, nationalism becomes a cause

Other exiles, however, tend to be global, rather than emphasizing the sense of loss, they find solace and empathy among other expatriates of different nationalities and thus avoid the torturing effect of nationalism. These exiles are creative and there is a tendency amongst them “to transmute their own bitter experience into an affinity with others in distress” (Hanne, 2004, p. 9). Therefore, instead of reminiscing about their past and living in a nostalgic atmosphere that idealizes home away from home, exiles, in this case, develop a sense of universal empathy.

Like McClennen, Abani, (2004) sees the condition of exile and its discourse as a chiaroscuro between at least two dominant binaries. On the one hand, according to him, are those who regard exile as positive and redemptive, on the other hand are those who consider it harmful. Commenting on those who see exile as positive, Abani, (2004) writes:

On the one hand are those who celebrate exile as redemptive. Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai speak to the possibilities that displacement and exile offer. Salman Rushdie, C.L.R James, and George Lamming believe exile to be a vital condition for writing, a form of alienation that produces a useful double-mindedness. (p.22)

Many other writers have romanticized the position of exile. Even though Said, (2002) described exile in “Reflections on Exile” as a

Crippling and unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place”; he pointed out a romantic benefit of this condition when he argues, “If true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching motif of modern culture? (p.173).

It should be stated that even with the plethora of books and authors examined so far, there is a much more generous number that had to be left out. The argument advanced in this work, however, pivots neither on an exhaustive catalog of texts dealing with exile and related concepts nor upon a demarcated set of books, authors, and ideas that together make up the exile canon. Instead, this argument depends on a different methodological alternative whose concern is to facilitate a sociological understanding of exile as a life condition and as a person. These are the notions that need to be covered now in more analytical detail throughout Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992).

The Discourse of Nostalgia in *Dreaming in Cuban*

Many characters are affected by nostalgia in *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), although for different losses. The narrative involves not only personal but cultural dimensions of nostalgia for the damage of self, the loss of the past, or the loss of a culture.

For Pilar, Cuba represents the geographical equivalent of memory – the place where the past is housed and from which it continues to exert its complex influence. Pilar's nostalgia lies in her longing for her past. Being cut off her birthplace Cuba, Pilar is not privy to the history of Cuba, albeit through the few stories her father narrates to her from time to time. Pilar's longing for the past in *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) is explained by her deduction that history is partial, if not wholly, responsible for her deplorable present-day experience as a Cuban being raised in New York City. Pilar feels nostalgia for Cuba since her knowledge of her birthplace is rudimentary and causes nuances concerning her sense of belonging as she tells the reader, "But every once in a while a wave of longing will hit me and it's all I can do not to hijack a plane to Havana or something" (pp.137-138). The ambiguity surrounding Pilar's sense of belonging is the cause justifying her nostalgia for the past. Pilar expresses her dilemma in these words, "Even though I've been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out" (p.58).

The absence of an episode of one's existence or the inability to reach it, in this case, one's past, calls into question a nostalgic discourse vis-à-vis the past. Pilar's journey back to Cuba, here representative of the past, is thus a consequence of nostalgia. Worth citing at this level is that Pilar was incapable of finding a sense of home in terms of place. Pérez's use of metaphor in *Next Year in Cuba* to explain losses of exile is relevant to the understanding of Pilar's nostalgia for the past that substitutes her nostalgia for a place:

Refugees are amputees. Someone who goes into exile abandons not just possessions but part of himself. This is true, especially of children, who leave before achieving a durable, portable identity. Just as people who lose a limb sometimes continue to ache or tingle in the missing calf or hand, the exile suffers the absence of the self he left behind. (1994, p.7)

The question that may be raised at this level is the following: what is there in the past that Pilar is looking for since she claims, "Shit, I'm only twenty-one years old. How can I be nostalgic for my youth?" (p.198) Since *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) deals with the sense of dislocation and fragmentation at the level of identity, Pilar's nostalgia is best viewed as a quest for roots and connection.

Language Loss

The thematic issue and portrayal of language loss in *Dreaming in Cuban* are legitimate since it is the biggest sacrifice exiles, immigrants and displaced people make as soon as they are transplanted into a new culture. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, language loss is portrayed as confusion that exacerbates exiles' feelings of alienation, more precisely, hyphenation.

The loss incurred by exile is evidently manifested through the metaphor of language loss. Pilar Puente, a member of the third generation, is chosen by Cristina Garcia to reflect on the issue of language loss. Celia tells the reader that her grandchild Pilar writes to her, "In a Spanish that

is no longer hers. She speaks the hard-edged lexicon of bygone tourists itchy to throw dice on a green felt or asphalt" (p.7). Pilar herself conceives of her language loss as a plight when she admits, "I envy my mother her Spanish curses sometimes. They make my English collapse in a heap" (p.59). Therefore, Pilar reveals throughout her reflections on language that one of the most critical losses incurred by exile is the loss of one's mother language. In the same vein, Pilar further thinks, "English seems an impossible language for intimacy" (p.180) that is; why she and her boyfriend Rubén favor the Spanish language when they make love.

Spoken language seems to fail Pilar, Celia as well as other characters in *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), causing them further turmoil. For this particular reason, other characters try to find alternative modes of expression other than the linguistic variable that is, according to them, fraught with handicaps.

Pilar and her grandmother Celia, for instance, communicate not through spoken language but through what Leonard called "semiotics of image" (p.194). In retrospect, Pilar's saga demonstrates a continual movement back to Cuba and reunion with Celia throughout dreamwork and telepathic communication with the latter. This might be viewed as a kind of *modus operandi* responsible for Pilar's idealization of Cuba. Pilar describes one dream, for instance, in which she is on a throne and is lifted up by the people who walk with her toward the sea. Pilar explains that those people "are chanting a language I don't understand. I don't feel scared, though. I can see the stars and the sky and the moon and the black sky revolving overhead. I can see my grandmother's face" (p.34). The fact that Celia appears in Pilar's dream indicates that the two communicate better through a pictographic order rather than through a verbal or linguistic mode of signification. Although Pilar cannot decipher the chanted language she hears, she recognizes her verbally expressionless grandmother, which suggests, "In the dream space the potential for pictographic communication is privileged over oral or spoken forms" (Leonard, 2004, p. 194).

In this sense, language loss or its dysfunctional aspect explains characters' choice of other modes of communication, or as Brameshuber, (1999) writes the images "witness the insufficiency of regular language" (p.54). By its very ethereal nature, dreaming can transcend the space between Cuba and the United States that sets Celia and Pilar apart. It allows them to connect with each other despite the geographical distance. Repeatedly, images are the most resonant, and efficient mode of communication between Pilar and Celia. Pilar reveals in another scene,

I have this image of Celia underwater, standing on a reef with tiny chrome fish darting by her face like flashes of light. Her hair is waving in the tide, and her eyes are wide open. She calls to me, but I can't hear her. Is she talking to me from her dreams? (Garcia, 1992, p.220).

Such shared moments of imagery are necessary for both characters who strive to combat the collapse of communication through linguistic modes. Once and again, the inefficiency of language into conveying messages is stressed throughout this passage that highlights how Pilar fails to hear her grandmother but identifies her glowing face. In this particular sense, the inability to communicate through language renders the latter a motif of severance rather than connection. Although Pilar expresses her preference for the Spanish language that is part of her past and thus herself, she has grown up speaking English. Her skepticism over which style best dovetail with,

and in the process, satiate her thirst to shape a stable identity continues until the end of the novel when back in Cuba, she starts dreaming in Spanish. Pilar reveals, "I have begun dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. There's a magic here working its way through my veins" (p.235). In this sense, Pilar's rediscovery of the Spanish language enables her to generate a vital link with her past.

Similarly, Celia conceives of her relationship with Pilar in imagistic terms that help both characters bridge the gap caused by the second generation. Celia "closes her eyes and speaks to her granddaughter, imagines her words as slivers of light piercing the murky night" (p.7). Celia's statement sheds light on the challenge posed by dream-work and telepathy to defy language handicaps altogether with the physical and geographical separations they might entail. In fact, the novel locates the global market as a space dominated by the English language as a *lingua franca*.

Following this line of understanding, achievement and prosperity require learning English and leaving Cuba behind. Thus, it is no surprise that when Celia drowns herself at the end of the novel, she recites a Lorca poem using English for the first time in the story. Previously in the novel, Celia quotes poetry in italicized Spanish with no interpretation. Garcia's literary translation of Lorca's poem from Spanish into English at the moment of Celia's death hints at Cuba's bleak future. It, furthermore, adds one more exile to the Puente family, i.e., Celia, who willingly alienates herself from Cuba and linguistically self-exiles into the global world dominated by the English language. Celia's choice of a new "linguistic home" for Lorca's poem equals, albeit partially, Garcia's choice of a new linguistic home for Cuban culture and Cubaness. Critics such as Valenzuela classify *Dreaming in Cuban* as inauthentic because Cuban culture is not expressed throughout its original language: Spanish,

Sus trabajos terminan regresando al castellano... Bless Me, Última, la gran novela chicana de Rudolfo Anaya... está siendo traducida estos días a la lengua de Cervantes, vuelve a su hogar cultural.

[Their works end up returning to Castellano ... Bless Me, Última, Rudolfo Anaya's great Chicano novel ... is being translated these days to the language of Cervantes. It is returning to its cultural home]. (as cited in Ween. 2003, p.133)

Although Valenzuela's statement concerning the authenticity of texts may be well-grounded, one would disagree entirely with the classification of *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) as inauthentic. This is mainly because the novel as text blends the two languages to report exile as a world experience and not only a Cuban one. Thus, Garcia may be in line with Abani (2004), who opines that the experience of exile allows writers and novelists, in particular, "to explore an international/ human identity." Henceforth, Garcia's use of the English language as an original language for *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) does not necessarily exile Cuban culture into the English language. However, it allows for the ethnicization and internationalization of the theme of exile.

Moreover, the theme of language loss is portrayed in an equivocal narrative. Understandably, it is suggested in this work that *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) cannot be synonymous with dreaming in Spanish for a variety of reasons. First, Spanish is a part of Cuban heritage, and hence Pilar's dream-work is more of a cultural process than a linguistic one. Second,

although English is the language that reminds Cubans of “the Platt Amendment, of the way the Americans have interfered in our affairs from the very beginning” (Garcia,1990, p.207), Celia explains in one of her letters to Gustavo, Spanish is more so. Spanish is also the language of an old colonizer. Thus, Garcia blends the two styles in one richly linguistic narrative reflecting on both influences on Cuban culture: the Spanish and American ones. *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) is not a result of being able to dream in Spanish only, but also refers to the ability to reveal the past and moor it to the present.

Like Celia, Ivanito, Felicia's son, links success with the English language and confirms his position by learning English, “I pick up radio stations in Key West. I'm learning more English this way, but it's a lot different from Abuelo Jorge's grammar books. If I'm lucky, I can tune in the Wolfman Jack show on Sunday nights. Sometimes I want to be like the Wolfman and talk to a million of people at once” (p.191). Ivanito's wish to be able to speak to a million people at once, like Jack Wolfman indicates and explains his eagerness to learn the English language that provides him with the opportunity of speaking to the mass of people given its international aspect. Moreover, Ivanito pairs the Wolfman's radio show success with the use of English. In fact, Ivanito's last wish is only achieved in the last section of the novel entitled “Languages Lost.” It is at the Peruvian embassy, en route to beginning his new life in exile, that Ivanito shouts, “Crraaaazzzy!” and finds himself “talking to a million people at once” (p.241). Following this line of understanding, when the occasion is provided to Ivanito to speak to a crowd he favors English over Spanish, a choice explaining his language loss and stressing the advantages of English, especially in communicating worldwide.

Language loss in *Dreaming in Cuban* does not refer only to the loss of one's mother tongue but also refers to the way it cracks family bonds. Davis (2002) best put it when he explained, “When Garcia entitles the last section of her book “The Languages Lost,” she refers to much more than just Spanish, widening the reference to include the breaking of familial bonds between Cubans living on the island and those residing abroad” (p.60). Thus, because of Language loss characters in *Dreaming in Cuban* turn to other modes of communication. Celia and Pilar, for instance, communicate telepathically. Pilar explains how vital the process of telepathy is for her. It alleviates her sense of estrangement as a Cuban living in America and lacks first-hand contact with Cuba, something Celia provides her with throughout their evening telepathic conversations. Pilar explains, “Abuela Celia and I write to each other sometimes, but mostly I hear her speaking to me at night just before I fall asleep. She tells me stories about her life and what the sea was like that day Abuela says she wants to see me again. She tells me she loves me” (Garcia, 1990, pp.28-29).

In Cuba, Celia “knows that Pilar keeps a diary in the lining of her winter coat, hidden from her mother's souring eyes... This pleases Celia. She closes her eyes and speaks to her granddaughter, imagines her words as slivers of light piercing the murky night” (p.7). In this sense, telepathy is not the only means that helps Celia and Pilar surmount the hindrances brought about by the collapse of verbal communication. However, writing is also an outlet for both characters and is portrayed as an alternative mode of expression for repressive verbal communication. Celia's haunted love affair with Gustavo, for example, is not narrated verbally but in an epistolary form that protects the secrecy of her love for Gustavo.

Thematically, Pilar's concern with losing the language of her motherland is displayed through her mania for painting that has become an *idée fixe*. Pilar finds that images convey meanings more efficiently than words do, as she believes:

Painting is its own language, I wanted to tell him. Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English ... Who needs words when colors and lines conjure up their own language? That's what I want to do with my paintings, find a unique language, and obliterate the clichés. (p. 139)

In fact, Pilar conveys her view about the USA to the reader not through her verbal communications but through her painting of the Statue of Liberty. Pilar's punk version of the Statue of Liberty expresses her contempt for U.S. policy towards immigrants and helps Pilar transcend the incapacitating verbal communication. It is for this particular reason that Pilar believes that "a paintbrush is better than a gun" (p.59).

Garcia successfully depicts how exiles are psychologically incapacitated by language loss and how the latter engenders an identity malaise manifested throughout the various diseases that affect the characters and destabilize their identity constructs.

Conclusion

This paper began with a ruminative reflection on exile writing that has hitherto fluctuated between nostalgia and creativity. This analysis was built on the work of Guillén (1996), who in his work *On the Literature of Exile and Counter Exile*, distinguishes two divergent paths an exile subject might take. As explained by Guillén, (1996) an exile chooses either to live by the nostalgic memories of the homeland (like Ovid) or to forget about the past and counter the losses of exile with creativity (a remedy preached by Plutarch).

Language loss represents identity crises in *Dreaming in Cuban* (1990). The novel reveals dis-eased and disabled bodies relocated in new "homes" and inextricably intertwined with memories and national histories.

Garcia's creation of Pilar's character is a way to picture the hardship of dwelling at the borderlands of cultures, and bridge two different cultures and speak to both cultural groups concomitantly. Garcia's choice of Pilar to be the holder of the torch of hybridity is grounded in the new language structure she created.

Moreover, Ochoa argues that *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) is a hybrid text where hybrid technical devices are used, "first-person accounts (i.e., through diaries, letters, etc.) mixed with the rest of the narration in the third person" (p.114). Being the arbiter of the past helps Pilar in piecing together her fragmented identity. The stories Pilar gathers narrate the harsh realities of a family split between two countries because of Castro's regime. Pilar records the family's stories in a diary she preserves "in the lining of her winter coat, hidden from her mother's scouring eyes" (p.7). Pilar's diary eventually becomes the reader's text as Alvarez (1994) indicates, "The novel is sometimes told in Pilar's first-person voice (when she narrates events related to her own life in the U.S.) and sometimes in her omniscient voice, as in the stories of Celia, Lourdes, and Felicia" (p.46).

About the authors:

BOUALEM FADIA is, currently, a Ph.D. student in British and American Studies at Djillali Liabes University, Sidi Bel Abbas- Algeria. Fadia is also an Assistant Professor of rank "A" in l'Ecole Normale Superieure –Taleb Abderrahmane_ Laghouat. Her main areas of interest are Contemporary English literature, Postcolonial studies, and Minority literature. ORCID ID is: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0796-0915>

GUERROUDJ NOUREDDINE is a professor at the University of Djillali Liabbes, Sidi Bel Abbas (Algeria), Department of English. He is fascinated with the Didactics of academic writing, Contemporary English literature. ORCID ID is: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1757-0029>

References

- Abani, C. (2004). Resisting the Anomie: Exile and the Romantic Self. In M. Hanne (ed.), *Creativity in Exile*. (pp.21-30).New York: Rodopi.
- Alvarez, B. (1994). Displacements and Autobiography in Cuban-American Fiction. *World Literature Today*, 68 (1). 43-48. https://crossworks.holycross.edu/span_fac_scholarship
- Boym, S. (1998). Estrangement as a Lifestyle. In S.R. Suleiman (ed.), *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances* (pp. 241- 262).Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Bramshuber, I (1999). Cristina Garcia, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992): Collapse of Communication and Kristeva's Semiotic as Possible Remedy. *Language and Literature* 24, 43-64.
- Davis, R. G. (2002). *Back to the Future: Mothers, Languages and Homes in Cristina Garcia's "Dreaming in Cuban"*. *World Literature Today*, 74, (1), 60-68.
- Hanne, M. (2004). *Creativity in Exile*. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi editions.
- Garcia, C. (1992). *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York .Ballantine Books, Random House Publishing.
- Guillén, C. (1976). *On the Literature of Exile and Counter Exile*. *Books Abroad*, 50, 271 – 280
- Leonard, S. (2004). *Dreaming as Cultural Work in Donald Duck and Dreaming in Cuban*. *MELUS*, 29, (2), 181-203.
- McClennen, S. A. (2004) .*The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures*. USA: Purdue University Press.
- Ochoa, F. (2003). Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Narratives: The Case of Caribbean Latina Fiction. *American@*, 1 (1), 104-121.
- Pérez, F. (1994). *Life on the Hyphen. The Cuban-American Way*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Said, E. (2002). *Reflections on Exile. Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. USA: Harvard University Press.
- Ween, L. (2003). Translational Backformations: Authenticity and Language in Cuban American Literature." *Comparative Literature Studies*, 40, (2), 127-141