

CREATION OF IDENTITY AS A BRIDGE
BETWEEN CULTURES IN CRISTINA GARCIA'S DREAMING IN CUBAN

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ABSTRACT

The members of the “1.5” generation of Cuban immigrants often face a daunting task. Being neither Cuban nor American, but at the same time being both Cuban and American, they have strong attachments to the island of their birth as well as their adopted country. Pulled in two different directions by politically and culturally divergent nations, they often experience a sense of marginalization and identity loss. Cristina Garcia’s groundbreaking novel Dreaming in Cuban beautifully depicts the struggles faced by members of this forgotten group of immigrants through her semi-autobiographical character of Pilar Puente.

In this thesis I will explore the formation of identity through an examination of Pilar Puente’s character development. By thoroughly examining issues such as family relationships, religion, language, politics, art and history through the lenses of the literary theories such as new historicism, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory, I intend to provide a better understanding of the many struggles faced by those immigrating to the United States. The United States is currently involved in a politically sensitive debate about this country’s current and future immigration policies. Hispanics/Latinos are currently the fastest growing minority group in this country. I believe that understanding the struggles faced by new immigrants can lead to acceptance and appreciation of these bicultural members of society.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my beautiful *Cubanita* wife, Stacy Loren Schneiderman, whose continued support and encouragement helped me through the tough times and made me appreciate the good times. Stacy helped me more than she will ever know.

Introduction

Cristina Garcia's critically acclaimed first novel, Dreaming in Cuban, offers a glimpse of the Cuban immigrant experience in the United States. Garcia introduces the reader to the del Pino family and beautifully portrays three generations of the family's life in both Cuba and the United States. Lourdes and Rufino Puente, members of the del Pino family, fled Cuba with their young daughter Pilar in the late 1950s, as a direct result of Castro's Cuban Revolution. The Puentes' journey is one which hundreds of thousands Cubans experienced between the first exodus in 1959 and the Mariel boatlift of 1980. Isabel Alvarez Borland notes,

The Cuban revolution of 1959 initiated many political and social changes in Cuba and also had a profound impact on Cuban culture. Cubans who could not agree with the new demands of the Castro regime left Cuba for the United States and other continents, although they often did not realize that they were leaving their homeland for permanent exile. Large numbers of Cubans began to arrive in the United States during the 1960s, a pattern of exodus that has been repeated several times across the four decades of the Castro dictatorship. (5)

The Puentes were three of almost a quarter of a million who fled to the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Borland writes, "The first migration, from January, 1959 to October 1962, was composed of about 250,000 men and women as well as their children" (5). The fictional Pilar Puente as well as the young Cristina Garcia both participated in this wave of immigration. Indeed, Cristina Garcia created Pilar's character based on some of her own personal experiences. Katherine Payant notes, "Garcia has said that Pilar, the rebellious adolescent, is her own alter-ego, and Pilar's search in some ways

resembles her own search” (169). William Luis also notes that Pilar appears to be Garcia’s alter-ego and writes, “Pilar, the author’s alter ego, is a child of the revolution; she was born on January 11, 1959, ten days after the victory that forced Batista to flee the island and three days after Castro’s triumphant march into Havana” (219). David T. Mitchell also notes that the novel is semi-autobiographical: “As a Cuban immigrant who was born in Havana in 1958 [. . .], Garcia uses the novel form in a vaguely autobiographical attempt to reassess her individual and familial dislocation between antagonistic national bodies” (52). It is evident that Garcia and her alter-ego Pilar share many similarities. Garcia and Pilar were forced to accompany their parents who were fleeing their homeland and both faced a slim possibility for a future return to Cuba due to the antagonistic political philosophies dividing the United States and Cuba. Rocjo Davis comments on further similarities between Garcia and Pilar:

Thus, the recounting in Pilar’s voice acquires a forceful emotional tone that rings clearly through the entire novel, transforming the story into a female bildungsroman. Furthermore, when questioned in an interview about the nature of the novel, Garcia admits that ‘emotionally, it is very autobiographical. The details are not. Pilar is a kind of alter ego for me.’ Cristina Garcia and Pilar Puente share biographical similarities, and the text may be read as both a valedictory and a catharsis for a young woman dealing with the events and characters in her past. (63).

Davis describes Pilar’s “forceful emotional tone,” which is omnipresent in the novel, a tone that is often displayed by Cuban-American ethnic writers, especially in autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works. Borland suggests that autobiographical

writing is often used as a form of self-reflection. She claims, “Cuban-American autobiographical accounts demonstrate how the historical events of 1959 became intrinsic to their attempts toward self-definition [. . .]. There is in all of them a sense of emotional urgency in the telling of their narratives. For some of these writers, autobiography becomes an exercise in self-evaluation” (135). Davis notes that Pilar speaks in a forceful and angry tone, while Borland argues that this sense of “emotional urgency” is often found in Cuban-American writers. If one accepts the premise that Garcia’s creation of Pilar Puente is indeed based on autobiographical experiences, it is entirely plausible that Garcia is using the character of Pilar to represent Garcia’s generation of immigrants that have been frequently overlooked in mainstream literature. Pilar’s “forceful emotional tone” is Garcia’s voice for the marginalized members of a group that has been underrepresented in literature. Garcia’s portrayal of Pilar puts a face to the previously anonymous generation of Cuban-American women who have struggled to create an identity in their adopted homeland.

The migration of hundreds of thousands of Cubans from their native land to the shores of the United States provides a fascinating historical context in which to study ethnic literature. As with many examples of diasporic literature, Cuban-American literature in general, and Garcia’s novel in particular, lend themselves to an examination of various themes through the lens of postcolonial criticism. Cuba has been a colonized nation for over five centuries, serving as a colony of Spain from the end of the fifteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century. It could certainly be argued that for a large part of the twentieth century Cuba served as a de facto colony of the United States, providing a military base in Guantanamo Bay, sugar, rum, tobacco, and coffee for

American consumers, and a tourist destination providing both gambling and prostitution for Americans wishing to indulge in pursuits illegal in the United States. After Castro's rise to power in the latter half of the twentieth century many would suggest that Cuba continued its colonial status, serving as a satellite of the former USSR. Because Cuba served as a colony for over five hundred years, it is hardly surprising that much of the literature produced as a result of the Cuban diaspora explores postcolonial themes.

Indeed, Cuban-American literature certainly exemplifies postcolonial literature. Ross Murfin and Supriya Roy suggest that "Postcolonial literature includes works by authors with cultural roots in South Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and other places in which colonial independence movements arose and colonized peoples achieved autonomy in the past hundred years" (357). Cubans fought for independence from Spain at the end of the eighteenth century and protested American influence in the middle of the twentieth century, ending in the deposition of Batista's regime and fostering Castro's revolution, producing a body of literature that clearly meets Murfin and Roy's criteria for postcolonial literature.

One of the most fascinating aspects of postcolonial criticism is its interdisciplinary nature. Postcolonial criticism explores literary criticism, history, and anthropology, among other disciplines. This thesis examines Dreaming in Cuban from critical, sociological, historical, and anthropological perspectives, necessitating the application of postcolonial theory. Murfin and Roy argue that "postcolonial theorists [. . .] analyze such a wide range of issues [. . .] because they believe that the strict division of knowledge into academic disciplines contributes to colonizing mindsets" (357). By utilizing a multidisciplinary approach such as postcolonial theory, it is possible to provide an

objective interpretation of Garcia's novel. Murfin and Roy further claim that "Like its object of study, postcolonial theory is *in-between*, a word that some postcolonial theorists also routinely employ in their own analyses" (357). Pilar, Garcia's protagonist is certainly an example of the "in-between." Pilar can best be described as in-between Cuban and American culture, in-between the past and the future, in-between childhood and adulthood, and in-between the Spanish and English languages. Pilar's character is certainly ripe for the application of postcolonial theory.

The "1.5" Generation

Pilar Puente's life experiences are truly representative of many Cuban-American women. Born in Cuba but raised and educated in the United States, Pilar is a member of the "1.5 generation" that Ruben Rumbaut has described:

Children who were born abroad but are being educated and come of age in the United States form what may be called the '1.5' generation. These refugee youth must cope with two crises producing and identity defining transitions: (1) adolescence and the task of managing the transition from childhood to adulthood, and (2) acculturation and the task of managing the transition from one socio-cultural environment to another. The 'first' generation of their parents, who are fully part of the "old" world, face only the latter; the "second" generation of children now being born and reared in the United States, who as such become fully part of the "new" world, will need to confront only the former. But members of the "1.5" generation form a distinctive cohort that in many ways they are marginal to both the old and the new worlds, and are fully part of neither of them. (61)

Pilar's experience as a member of this marginalized group of Cuban immigrants is an extremely difficult one, but her plight makes for an extremely interesting examination of this often overlooked immigrant group. Gustavo Perez Firmat in his book Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way, examines Cuban-Americans' search for identity and labels the "1.5" generation as an "intermediate immigrant generation" which was "born in Cuba but made in the U.S.A." (4). This thesis will focus on Pilar Puente's efforts to accept her Cuban heritage, while forging an identity as a Cuban-American woman in her adopted homeland. By coming to grips with her Cuban heritage *and* her place in American society, Pilar is able to forge a new identity based upon the major forces that influence her life.

Pilar Puente is a young woman working to create an identity that addresses major issues such as language, morality, religion, gender, and place in what she herself identifies as the purgatory of biculturalism. Rosa M. Gil and Carmen Inoa Vasquez address similar concerns in their 1996 work, The Maria Paradox, a psychosocial examination of Latina immigrants in the United States, the title of which alludes to this hybrid existence: "Unquestionably, the struggle to weave Hispanic tradition and North American innovation into a satisfying bicultural lifestyle can make for a great deal of unhappiness and self-doubt if it isn't understood and dealt with for what it is" (22). Pilar is the one character in Garcia's novel that must blend the past with the present, her Cuban heritage with her American life. The other major characters in the novel do not face nearly the same struggle, for Celia can only be Cuban, while Lourdes can only be American. The only other character in the novel that faces such a difficult task is Felicia, who attempts to combine the old with the new—Santeria with Catholicism, Afro-Cuban with white,

sexuality with love—and is driven insane in the process. Felicia never leaves Cuba, so while she faces a difficult and painful journey, her tribulations are certainly different from those of Pilar. Clearly Pilar’s physical, mental, and emotional journey is a daunting task, forming a bildungsroman that is the backbone of Dreaming in Cuban. Borland argues that Pilar’s attempts to bridge two different cultures mirror the task of the ethnic writer and claims,

As an ethnic writer, Garcia engages the U.S. experience directly and cannot separate herself from it. Pilar’s story tries to reconcile two cultures and two languages and two visions of the world into a particular whole. It is precisely the pull between two places that the ethnic character experiences and that motivates her actions within the text. Garcia’s poetic descriptions allow her to display an ability to speak to two audiences at once. (48)

Garcia’s creation of Pilar’s character is an attempt not only to describe the difficulties of a hybrid existence, but also to bridge two different cultures and speak to these groups simultaneously.

A Stranger in a New Land

The reader is first introduced to Pilar early in the novel, as Celia del Pino, Pilar’s maternal grandmother, reminisces about her granddaughter who was physically ripped from her arms when Lourdes decided to escape Cuba and emigrate to the United States. Celia remembers the letters that Pilar sent from New York: “Pilar, her first grandchild, writes to her from Brooklyn in a Spanish that is no longer hers. She speaks the hard edged lexicon of bygone tourists itchy to throw dice on green felt or asphalt” (7). Celia’s

recollections of pre-Castro Cuba are often laced with sarcasm towards the tourist class that visited Cuba primarily for its casinos and brothels. In this case, the “hard edged lexicon of bygone tourists” is portrayed in a negative manner. Celia’s perception of Pilar’s Spanish suggests how the adversarial politics that separate Cuba and the U.S. have been introduced into familial relationships. Having grown up in America, Pilar speaks a Spanish that is not that of a native speaker but awkward and “hard-edged.”

Celia’s observations about her granddaughter also emphasize Pilar’s marginalized identity as a Cuban in America and the loss of her cultural heritage. Celia describes Pilar’s appearance: “Pilar’s eyes, Celia fears, are no longer used to the compacted light of the tropics, where a morning hour can fill a month of days in the north, which receives only careless sheddings from the sun. She imagines her granddaughter pale, gliding through paleness, malnourished and cold without the food of scarlets and greens” (7). Not only has Pilar lost her native language in America, but Celia’s perceptions of Pilar’s appearance also cast Pilar as an outsider to Cuban culture. Celia is saddened by her perception that Pilar can no longer survive in the tropical climate found in her native land. In addition, Celia’s lamentations strongly suggest Pilar’s alienation from her birthplace—Pilar has assumed the pallor of a *gringa*, unable to tolerate the sun of the tropics. In many ways, Pilar has been forever severed from her Cuban heritage.

Despite the loss of identity she suffers because of her immigration to America, Pilar holds vivid memories of the island, strongly binding her to her lost homeland, a Cuba to which she longs to return. Pilar, who is deprived of the tropical lushness of Cuba, compares it to the strangeness of New York. Her recollections depict the sterility and bleakness of the United States in contrast with Cuba:

The air was different from Cuba's. It had a cold, smoked smell that chilled my lungs. The skies looked newly washed, streaked with light. And the trees were different, too. They looked on fire. I'd run through great heaps of leaves just to hear them rustle like the palm trees during hurricanes in Cuba. But then I'd feel sad looking up at the bare branches and thinking about Abuela Celia. I wonder how my life would have been if I'd stayed with her. (32)

This questioning of what life would have been like for Pilar had she stayed in Cuba recurs throughout the novel. Pilar firmly believes that if she were able to return to Cuba, she would be able to form an identity of her own. Borland writes, "Pilar is the daughter of exiles, a kind of skeptical punk who dabbles in art and *Santeria*. As a narrator of and participant in her own story, Pilar believes that, if she can get to Cuba she will be able to reconstruct the puzzle of her fragmented family and thus recapture a missing part of her life" (137). Pilar, a typical, rebellious teenager, longs to return to her native island because her instincts suggest that such a return will help her recapture a part of her missing identity, and she is not unique in having these sentiments. As a member of the "1.5 generation," Pilar, like many others, had no voice in making the decision to leave Cuba. Coco Fusco writes of her similar experiences as a member of this generation denied choice: "The Cuban children of my generation didn't have a choice to leave or stay—the wars that shaped our identities as Cuban or American are ones we inherited" (4). It is clear that this lack of choice raises serious concerns for the "1.5 generation," since they remain divided over whether the decision to emigrate was valid or whether such drastic action was necessary. In many respects, Pilar undoubtedly feels cheated out

of her Cuban culture and heritage due to the decision her parents made. It is hardly surprising that Pilar wonders what her life would have been like had she stayed.

Pilar's ambivalence about her forced exodus is exacerbated by her close relationship with Abuela Celia, despite the geographical and political divides that separate them. Pilar keeps a diary "in the lining of her winter coat, hidden from her mother's scouring eyes. In it, Pilar records everything. This pleases Celia. She closes her eyes and speaks to her granddaughter, imagines her words as slivers of light piercing the murky night" (7). In this respect, Celia and Pilar share writing as a common bond: they both record their experiences, history, and feelings—Celia writes her secret letters to her lost love, Gustavo, and Pilar, too, acts as a historian with the journal she maintains that captures the experiences of the "1.5 generation." It is through writing that both Celia and Pilar are best able to express themselves.

Both Pilar and Celia share a common bond by writing, but this bond is strengthened through their ability to communicate telepathically. Early in the novel, Celia suggests the nature of this communication between the two women, and the following passage supports this idea. Pilar reveals that "Abuela Celia and I write to each other sometimes, but mostly I hear her speaking to me at night before I fall asleep. She tells me stories about her life and what the sea was like that day. [. . .] Abuela Celia says she wants to see me again. She tells me she loves me" (28-29). It is through this telepathic communication that Pilar maintains her interest in her homeland. Suzanne Leonard notes, "Although Pilar and her immediate family fled Cuba when Pilar was two, Pilar claims to remember everything that has happened to her since the time she was a baby. Pilar's longing for her birthplace originates in part from the knowledge of Cuba that her grandmother imparts

via dreams since the two maintain a close psychic connection” (193). Leonard notes that Pilar claims to remember everything that occurred to her since she was an infant and that describes the psychic connection between Pilar and Celia. Both of these factors stretch the boundaries of believability, but Garcia appears to be incorporating magical realism into her text as a method to clarify Pilar’s personal history and reflect upon the difficulties of communication between two characters who reside in countries where communication between inhabitants is often difficult. This magical realism is used repeatedly throughout the novel and works effectively when viewed in the context of the novel’s frequent references to *Santeria*, an Afro-Cuban religion with strong magical influences. The telepathic communication between Pilar and Celia also strengthens the bond between Pilar and her lost homeland. Unlike her mother, Lourdes, who strongly denounces Cuba but patriotically embraces her new homeland, Pilar is sympathetic to Abuela Celia’s country. To Lourdes’s dismay, Pilar threatens to return to Cuba.

Pilar’s initial intention to return to Cuba begins to materialize when Pilar, already angry and disgusted with her life in Brooklyn, discovers her father’s adulterous affair with a blond woman. This disgust further deepens Pilar’s paradox, one in which she must combine her often conflicting American and Cuban selves. Her conflicted feelings are in direct contrast to *machismo*, an attribute of Latino/a culture, which Gil and Vasquez suggest, “maintains a rigidly enforced double standard by which men are expected to have sex before marriage and could be unfaithful afterward” (30). Pilar decides, “That’s it. My mind’s made up. I’m going back to Cuba. I’m fed up with everything around here” (25-26). Pilar decides to use her meager savings for a one-way bus ticket to Miami, where she intends to rent a boat to continue her journey to Cuba. This poorly thought-out

attempt at a return to Cuba is caused by the instinctual attraction to her homeland. M.S. Vasquez notes in The Bilingual Review that “Pilar feels a dominant pull not toward the surrounding majority culture but for her ancestral home, Cuba [. . .]. Pilar’s hunger is felt as a longing for Cuba itself, for reintegration with a place she never truly knew” (58). Dara Goldman argues that this attraction to the island of Pilar’s birth is a common theme in Cuban-American literature:

The [Cuban-American] author presents the search for the identity of characters who are immigrants or children of immigrants. Such works can take the form of a *bildungsroman* or a *kunstlerroman* that culminates in a trip to the island of the protagonist’s ancestors. Through this narrative structure, the pilgrimage to the Caribbean becomes a necessary coadjutor for the self-information of the protagonist. The island itself affords an essential element that presumably cannot be obtained beyond its borders, and the main character’s search for identity therefore becomes an attempt to recover this missing element. That is, the displacement created through migration has engendered a loss that the principal character must overcome in order to achieve complete maturation. (414)

Goldman suggests that a return to one’s homeland is a necessary, driving force to recover elements missing from one’s identity, and that wholeness and maturation cannot be achieved without completion of this journey. Pilar’s initial intended journey to Cuba to recover her past is thwarted, as after arriving in Miami Pilar is forced to accompany her mother back to New York. Pilar’s strong desire to return to Cuba does not diminish, as she continues to believe that it is the only way she can achieve wholeness (Goldman 414). This desire manifests itself in a condition that is common in the Cuban exile

community. Virgil Suarez and Delia Poey note in the introduction to Little Havana Blues: A Cuban American Anthology that:

Because the prospect of returning to the island looms over this community but is, under the present regime, an impossibility, current Cuban-American literature springs out of the condition of exile. The implications of this condition are reflected in a longing for roots, a sense of displacement, the persistence of memory, a need to replay history and an idealization of Cuba itself [. . .]. Cuba is always *el alla*, the elsewhere. (11)

Suarez and Poey write in generalities concerning the Cuban exile community's desire to return to Cuba, but clearly Pilar demonstrates this "longing for roots," this "sense of displacement" and the "idealization of Cuba." Pilar's sense of displacement mirrors the displacement felt by many in the exile community.

By this point in the novel it is evident that Pilar does not identify herself as an American despite her qualms about the Cuban culture's acceptance of male infidelity. Pilar fantasizes about a better life in Cuba, reminiscing about the last time she saw her grandmother:

I was only two years old when I left Cuba but I remember everything that's happened to me since I was a baby, even word-for-word conversations. I was sitting in my grandmother's lap, playing with her drop pearl earrings, when my mother told her we were leaving the country. [. . .] Mom tried to pull me away but I clung to Abuela and screamed at the top of my lungs. (26)

This recollection illustrates the power struggles Pilar is wrestling with: struggles between Pilar, who wishes to remain with her grandmother, and her mother Lourdes, who

naturally wants Pilar to accompany her to America. While she also resents her mother for having taken her away from her beloved Cuba and grandmother, her situation is further complicated by her strong allegiance to Lourdes when Jorge is unfaithful to her. These reflections illuminate the familial bond between Pilar and Celia.

Familiar Families

The similarities between Pilar and Celia are also supported by other characters in the novel. Pilar's grandfather, Jorge del Pino, notices the similarities between the two women: "My grandfather told me once that I reminded him of Abuela Celia," says Pilar. "I took that as a compliment" (33). Lourdes also recognizes similarities between Pilar and Celia, although in a rather negative light. After viewing Pilar's painting that she had commissioned for the grand opening of her second Yankee Doodle Bakery, Lourdes remarks on her daughter's similarity to Celia: "Why did Pilar always have to go too far? Lourdes is convinced that it is something pathological, something her daughter inherited from her Abuela Celia" (172). Pilar's painting for Lourdes's bakery is rife with political symbolism, which will be examined in depth later in this essay. Both Pilar's maternal grandfather and her mother are cognizant of the similarities between Pilar and Celia, suggesting that Pilar's identification with Celia is not only a close personal tie with her grandmother, but also a strong personal bond with her native Cuban culture. These ties to Celia and to Pilar's Cuban heritage are essential elements that must be grappled with in order for Pilar to accept her bicultural identity.

Pilar recognizes the strength she gains from her grandmother, claiming, "I might be afraid of her [Lourdes] if it weren't for those talks I have with Abuela Celia late at night"

(63). In addition, Pilar realizes that it is Celia who has encouraged her to paint. Pilar recalls, “My grandmother is the one who encouraged me to go to painting classes at Mitzi Kellner’s” (29). Clearly Celia’s encouragement of Pilar as an artist strengthens their relationship. In fact, later in the novel the reader learns that Pilar believes her strength comes directly from Celia:

I feel much more connected to Abuela Celia than to Mom, even though I haven’t seen my grandmother in seventeen years. We don’t speak anymore, but she’s left me her legacy nonetheless—a love for the sea and the smoothness of pearls, an appreciation of music and words, sympathy for the underdog, and a disregard for boundaries. Even in silence, she gives me the confidence to do what I believe is right, to trust my own perceptions. (176)

Pilar believes that her grandmother provides her with the support she needs to continue her struggle for what she believes, despite the fact that Lourdes, while being a typical Latina mother in many respects, encourages Pilar’s painting, although often halfheartedly, and fosters her educational pursuits at Barnard College. Pilar’s inability to recognize Lourdes’s positive traits is certainly common in many mother/daughter relationships, but it is especially typical in Latino culture. Gil and Vasquez note that “some Latinas can only see the negative side of their mothers, while ignoring positive traits because they are so enraged” (61). Pilar is simply going through the maturation process, a process that Gil and Vasquez claim involves “separation and individuation, [. . .] challenging steps for any young child but especially daring for little girls. [. . .] Separation is the ability of children to put emotional and physical distance between their mothers and themselves. Developing as an individual distinct from *Mama* is termed

individuation” (60). Lourdes, in turn, fails to understand many aspects of her daughter’s beliefs. She is often in conflict with Pilar, who shares her grandmother’s ideological views; both are vivid contrasts to Lourdes’s pragmatism.

Interestingly enough, the mother/daughter struggle between Celia and her two daughters (Felicia and Lourdes), particularly Lourdes, is repeated in the next generation with Pilar and Lourdes. In fact, the novel is replete with examples that reveal how Pilar rejects her mother. For example, Lourdes, who wants to instill in her daughter a strong work ethic, forces Pilar to work in her bakery. Pilar is resistant and claims that “She [Lourdes] leaves me nasty notes on the kitchen table reminding me to show up, or else. She thinks working with her will teach me responsibility, clear my head of filthy thought. Like I’ll get pure pushing her donuts around. It’s not like its done wonders for her, either” (27). In fact, Pilar continually criticizes her mother, failing to understand Lourdes’s motivations and often causing conflicts. Garcia’s narrator notes,

Pilar was only ten years old and already mocking everything. Lourdes slapped her for being disrespectful, but it made no difference to her daughter. Pilar was immune to threats. She places no value on normal things so it was impossible to punish her. [. . .] Pilar is not afraid of pain or of losing anything. It’s this indifference that is most maddening. (128)

It is evident that Pilar is acting in rebellion; she is a teenager who refuses to conform to society, despite her mother’s best efforts. Pilar is constantly mocking Lourdes, and when Lourdes joins the reserve police force it provides ample ammunition for Pilar’s arsenal. Garcia’s narrator writes, “Pilar makes fun of Lourdes in her uniform, of the way she slaps the nightstick in her palm. ‘Who do you think you are, Kojak?’ she says, laughing, and

hands her mother a lollipop. This is just like her daughter, scornful and impudent. 'I'm doing this to show you something, to teach you a lesson!' Lourdes screams, but Pilar ignores her" (132). Pilar's scorn for Lourdes's uniform and her describing her mother as Kojak suggests that Pilar believes Lourdes might be trying too hard to fit in with mainstream American culture, at the expense of her Cuban heritage.

The continuing struggle between mother and daughter can be examined on a metaphorical level, as Rocjo Davis writes: "The difficulties between Lourdes and Pilar are a metaphor for all the other mother-daughter dyads. Both perceive clearly the gap between them." (64). Rocjo Davis here identifies one of the major differences between mother and daughter—Pilar is a dreamer, trying to construct her identity, while Lourdes is firmly accepting of her newfound identity as an immigrant in a new land.

Throughout history mothers have often clashed with their daughters. The omnipresent clashes between Lourdes and Pilar can be viewed in both psychoanalytical and political terms. William Luis claims,

The hatred for the mother, expressed in generational terms, follows a motif already explained in Freudian terms as the Electra complex [. . .]. Although the relationships between characters can be understood in psychoanalytic terms, they have political implications, too, suggesting the younger generation's defiance of the older, to become independent of its power and influence. (225)

Pilar's construction of her own identity combined with her fractured relationship with her mother is symptomatic of a need to become independent from the stifling grasp of Lourdes.

Politics, Patriotism, and the Exile Community

Pilar and Lourdes's adversarial relationship is intensified by the fact that Pilar is just as strong-willed and high-spirited as her mother. The friction that ensues is both inevitable and often humorous. In a particularly memorable scene, Pilar—who is aware of her mother's strong American patriotism and strong opposition to Castro's Cuba—gives her mother a book of essays called A Revolutionary Society. Upon opening the gift with the cover that “showed cheerful, cleancut children gathered in front of a portrait of Che Guevara,” Lourdes shouts, “lies, poisonous Communist lies!” (132). Lourdes is horrified by any material which glorifies Castro's revolution, and a book illustrating happy, clean-cut children in front of one of the heroes of the Cuban Revolution is blasphemy in Lourdes's eyes. She promptly takes the book, fills the bathtub with boiling water, and throws the book into the tub. After the book is completely ruined, Lourdes fishes it out with barbeque tongs and places it upon “the platter she reserved for roasted pork legs” (132). Lourdes then fastens a note to it that reads, ““Why don't you move to Russia if you think it's so great!' And then she signed her name in full” (132). Pilar, exhibiting her strong will, retrieves the book and hangs it from the clothesline to dry. Lourdes considers Pilar's Christmas “gift” trash, and has set about to cleanse it, putting it in the bathtub with boiling water to metaphorically cleanse something that she perceives as dirty. Pilar on the other hand has no ingrained hatred of the Castro regime and has tried to “rescue” the book, in essence metaphorically defending the communist ideology.

The political chasm between Pilar and Lourdes is also evident when Pilar observes some of the political extremism that Lourdes and some fellow exiles support. Pilar recalls that

I heard one of my mother's cohorts boasting how last year he'd called in a bomb threat to the Metropolitan Opera House where Alicia Alonso, the prima ballerina of the National Ballet of Cuba and a supporter of El Lider, was scheduled to dance. "I delayed Giselle for seventy-five minutes!" he bragged. If I'd known about it then, I would have sicked the FBI on him. Just last week, the lot of them were celebrating—with cigars and sparkling cider—the murder of a journalist in Miami who advocated reestablishing ties with Cuba. (177)

Observing her mother's support of the violent and malicious actions of Cuban exiles is just one more way in which Pilar notices that she differs from her mother. It is ironic that Pilar views the militant Cuban exiles boasting in Lourdes's Yankee Doodle Bakery. Pilar observes Cuban exiles seeking to undermine freedom and democracy in a bakery named for a symbol of that same freedom. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera claims that

Garcia seems to suggest that the American dream—symbolized by the bakery—is reserved for few and founded upon the exploitation and the labor of the working class immigrant. That the bakery becomes a meeting place for right-wing, pro-Batista exiles is significant, too, for it soon becomes apparent that in attempting to reject Castro's government, Lourdes recreates in microcosm the same kind of abusive system that characterized Fulgencio Batista's regime. (83)

It was Batista's tyrannical regime that fostered Castro's Revolution, and Garcia is clearly criticizing Cuban exiles who embrace Batista's sordid history. Pilar views this group of exiles with disdain and this only serves to further separate her from her mother. While Garcia's description of these clandestine activities is certainly fictional, her description is based on factual historical information. In an article entitled "Cuban Exile Terrorism" the

magnitude of exile violence is documented. It reports, “Actually, since 1970, there have been 92 terrorist incidents in the Miami area alone. 65 of these attacks were bombings or attempted bombings. Others were murders of Cuban exiles for political reasons” (Cuban Information Archives). Garcia was exposed to the political fervor of right-wing Cuban exiles when she worked in Miami, but instead of supporting that group she found herself branded as an outsider for her liberal views. Payant comments,

Another event affecting Garcia’s fiction was working for Time magazine in Miami. Here she met the Cuban-American community for the first time and felt very alienated from them. Accused of being a communist because she was a Democrat, she became convinced that others besides right-wing extremists need to speak as Cuban-Americans in order to heal the profound rifts created by the revolution. According to her and many other Cuban-American writers, the loud voices do not necessarily represent the dominant Cuban-American viewpoint.

(164)

Garcia’s alienation from the Cuban exile community is voiced in an interview with Iraida Lopez when Garcia claims, “Here I was feeling comfortable being Cuban all along, taking it for granted, and suddenly I became a black sheep [. . .]. I feel that I am not a welcome daughter in the community. I feel part of it and yet somewhat rejected. It’s very hard to reconcile” (607). Being an outcast or “black sheep” is certainly a condition that Pilar experiences throughout the novel. Garcia’s creation of Pilar’s character is an intentional counterbalance to Lourdes’s character, which represents the right-wing Cuban-American exile community.

Lourdes and Pilar strongly disagree on exile politics, and this is similar to Garcia's own family experience. Garcia claims in an interview with Allen Vorda that

I grew up in a very black-and-white situation. My parents were virulently anti-communist, and yet my relatives in Cuba were tremendous supporters of Communism, including members of my family who belong to the Communist Party. The trip in 1984 and the book, to some extent, were an act of reconciliation for the choices everybody made. I'm very much in favor of democratic systems, but I also strongly believe a country should determine its own fate. I realize I couldn't write and be a journalist and do everything I've done in Cuba; yet, I respect the right of people to live as they choose. (211)

The political differences between Lourdes and Pilar appear to mirror Garcia's experiences growing up in a home of Cuban exiles strongly opposed to Castro's revolution. Pilar, as Garcia's alter ego, is vehemently opposed to the beliefs of Lourdes.

Clearly, Pilar detests her mother's patriotism for the United States, this results in a political division between the two which is rooted in Pilar's feelings of helplessness when she was forced to leave Cuba. Coco Fusco explains, "[the fact] that a generational split that distinguishes political and cultural sensibilities inside and outside Cuba is now indisputable" (19). The political and cultural differences between Pilar and Lourdes are not only material for Garcia's fiction, but are grounded in reality. Pilar's dissonance is clearly reflective not only of her frustrations with this generational split in political ideologies but of other divisions as well. In another memorable scene, Pilar pokes fun at her mother's choice of music when Lourdes buys a Jim Nabors album of patriotic songs. Lourdes eagerly prepares for the Fourth of July celebration with the grand opening of her

second Yankee Doodle Bakery, while Pilar criticizes her: “Recently, Mom picked up a Jim Nabors album of patriotic songs in honor of the bicentennial. I mean, after Vietnam and Watergate, who the hell wants to hear ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’?” (136). Pilar, in her uniquely scathing sarcasm, provides further commentary on the upcoming Fourth of July: “I used to like the Fourth of July okay because of the fireworks [. . .]. But this bicentennial crap is making me crazy. Mom has talked about nothing else for months. She bought a second bakery and plans to sell tricolor cupcakes and Uncle Sam marzipan. Apple pies, too. She’s convinced she can fight Communism from behind her bakery counter” (136). Andrea O’Reilly Herrera suggests that in Garcia’s novel patriotism can be strongly linked with motherhood and that Garcia consciously uses this trope. Herrera writes, “Throughout Dreaming in Cuban Garcia establishes a parallel between patriotism and motherhood and the theme of maternal loss is metaphorically linked to the larger losses that Cuba, as mother country, sustained both prior to, and in the wake of, the Revolution” (73). Lourdes, as a mother figure, is fervently patriotic towards her adopted homeland. Interestingly, Celia, also a mother figure, displays the same fervent patriotism toward Cuba despite the revolution.

Pilar, who has not experienced motherhood, displays no strong sentiment for America; in fact, she feels disconnected from her adopted country. Pilar’s strong anti-American attitude can be understood in a historical context. In regard to Vietnam and Watergate, Fusco describes her reaction to these historical misadventures, “My somewhat innocent and abstract sense of politics was gone. The turbulent, violence-ridden world my family fled from was banging on our door” (x). Like the fictional Pilar, Coco Fusco is a non-fictional counterpart of the “1.5” generation who was negatively affected by the incidents

that occurred in America during the early 1970s. Cristina Garcia, having grown up in New York, shares a similar history. William Luis remarks

Pilar, and by extension the author, is best understood not as a child of the anti-Communist Miami community, but one who belongs to the anti-Vietnam war era, which was critical of U.S. imperialism. This latter point of view was prevalent among Hispanic groups living outside of Miami, in particular the Arieta group and the Puerto Rican community in New York City, where Garcia was raised. (217)

Like many people of her generation, Pilar feels discouraged by the incidents that tarnished the reputation and integrity of American government. Although Garcia does not provide details of Lourdes's position on these historical events, it is obvious that she remains extremely patriotic, fully supportive of any measures taken by the U.S. government to contain the spread of Communism. These divergent political views serve to further alienate mother and daughter.

Later in the text, when the Puente family celebrates Thanksgiving, Pilar irritates her mother once more when she says, "I may move back to Cuba someday and decide to eat nothing but codfish and chocolate" (171). Lourdes, attempting to maintain a peaceful demeanor during the holiday dinner, ignores Pilar's comment and gives her a disapproving look. Garcia's narrator writes, "Lourdes stares hard at her daughter. She wants to say that nobody but a degenerate would want to move back to that island-prison" (171). Pilar and Lourdes's relationship appears adversarial throughout the novel, as Lourdes cannot or will not understand her daughter's ideas, while Pilar continually mocks her mother's patriotism for her adopted homeland. Pilar's behavior is

representative of the conflicts that exist between the differing generations of Cuban immigrants. Coco Fusco notes, “Although history has intervened to separate us (Cubans and Cuban-Americans), we shared a healthy skepticism toward the nationalist rhetoric of our parents’ generation” (5). For Pilar’s generation, Cuba’s history and politics are lost in the past, existing only in the memories of the older generation of Cubans. That being the case, Pilar fails to comprehend her mother’s condemnation of Cuba.

In one of her conversations with her father, who appears in spectral form to her after his death, Lourdes expresses her frustration at Pilar’s apparent ambivalence towards her. “‘Papi, I don’t know what to do anymore.’ Lourdes begins to cry. ‘No matter what I do, Pilar hates me’” (74). Jorge, however, provides solace to his daughter Lourdes, telling her that “‘Pilar doesn’t hate you, *hija*. She just hasn’t learned to love you yet’” (74). It is interesting to note that Pilar reacts to her mother in much the same way that Lourdes reacted to Celia. Lourdes has never forgotten her mother’s words that she would not remember her daughter’s name. Similarly, Pilar demonstrates that she too can maintain a grudge, continually demonstrating her resentment toward her mother for separating her from her beloved Abuela Celia and her tropical homeland.

Yet while Lourdes’s and Pilar’s mother/daughter relationship is in many ways adversarial, there still exists a strange kind of love, communication, and mutual respect. Lourdes, who really does not approve of her daughter’s desire to become a painter, or of the paintings she creates, commissions Pilar to do a large painting for the grand opening of her second Yankee Doodle Bakery. As a rebellious daughter, who is quite astonished at her mother’s request, Pilar paints a punk version of the Statue of Liberty, complete with a safety pin through Lady Liberty’s nose. By desecrating the Statue of Liberty,

Pilar's painting is not only a rebellion against her mother, but also a bold statement against the United States. Pilar's painting is eerily reminiscent of the work of Ana Mendieta, a Cuban artist that, Coco Fusco claims, "was among the first exiles to renew bonds with her homeland and express in her art the pain of rupture that is so much a part of Cuban history" (121). As such, Pilar's Statue of Liberty, like Mendieta's art, confronts what Fusco calls "the manifold dimensions of the exile and the colonial and neocolonial violence that created our fractured identities as New World Hispanics" (121). Fusco further claims of Mendieta's art, "She sensed that post-revolutionary generations of Cubans, whether at home or in exile, would have to undergo a long and painful process of rethinking ourselves and dismantling imposed histories in order to rediscover our America, its voice, and its art" (124). Pilar's Statue of Liberty, entitled *SL '76*, not only reflects Pilar's disrespect for one of America's symbolic icons, but also mocks the Statue's message of "Give me your tired, your poor, your hungry." Pilar's mockery does not seem so out of place when one considers the anti-immigration, English-only sentiment shared by a disturbingly large number of people in the United States today.

To suggest that the crowd at Lourdes's bakery's grand opening is offended by Pilar's creation would be an understatement. Once the painting is unveiled the atmosphere becomes highly charged. Pilar observes the following scene, almost as an outsider; she maintains an objective distance on it all as a customer yells

in raucous Brooklynese, 'Gaaahbage! Whadda piece of gaahbage!' a lumpish man charges Liberty with a pocketknife, repeating his words like a war cry. Before anyone can react, Mom swings her new handbag and clubs the guy cold inches from the painting. Then, as if in slow motion, she tumbles forward, a thrashing avalanche

of patriotism and motherhood, crushing three spectators and a table of apple tartlets.
(144).

It is at this moment that Pilar's feelings for her mother begin to become clear. While she and Lourdes might always be at odds with each other, Pilar thinks, "And I, I love my mother very much at that moment" (144). It is at this moment, when Lourdes defends Pilar's artwork—although she does not condone its politics—that Pilar begins to recognize her mother's love for her. Moreover, it is at this point in the novel that Pilar begins to demonstrate growth and maturity with her new realization that she loves her mother. Pilar is frequently at odds with her mother, and yet at the same time admits that she loves her very much. Rocjo Davis addresses this paradox when he writes

The novel presents a composite portrait of diverse mother-daughter relationships, offering a multiperspective vision of the possibilities for division and unity, adaptation and adjustment, separation and bonding. The mother-daughter dance of approach and withdrawal is mirrored in the separate and interrelated sections on each of the characters, the shifts in temporality, geography, and narrative voice illustrating the tangled web of affinity between and among the characters and their homelands. (62)

The complicated mother-daughter relationship between Lourdes and Pilar is similar to the complicated relationships seen between Celia and Lourdes and the relationship between Felicia and her two daughters Luz and Milagro.

Art and History in Identity Formation

Despite Pilar's recognition of her love for her mother, she has yet to fully develop a strong sense of identity. Pilar's art is certainly representative of her fragmented identity. As Pilar describes her artistic style, "My paintings have been getting more and more abstract lately, violent-looking with clotted swirls of red" (29). If art is representative of the artist's sense of self, Pilar's work, then, vividly demonstrates the internal struggles she faces. According to Gil and Vasquez, the internal struggles over a bicultural identity must be understood in order to be resolved. Pilar must reconcile her two worlds, her Cuban heritage and her American life, in order to fully develop her identity as a Cuban-American woman. Interestingly, Pilar's last name is "Puente", which translated into English means "bridge," suggesting that Garcia might have consciously chosen Pilar's last name because in order to fully develop her bicultural identity, Pilar must first bridge her Cuban past with her American present.

Pilar's development of her identity is central to the novel's theme. In one scene, Pilar questions the writing of history, a reflection which is closely tied to her quest to discover her personal history. Pilar asks, "Why don't we read about this in history books?" referring to the lack of multicultural influences in the American curriculum, specifically Cuban history. Pilar further probes the issue:

It's always one damn battle after another. We only know about Charlemagne and Napoleon because they *fought* their way into posterity.

If it were up to me, I'd record other things, like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or the

life stories of prostitutes in Bombay. Why don't I know anything about them? Who chooses what we should know or what's important? (28)

This passage not only demonstrates Pilar's curiosity about history but also enlightens the reader as to her rejection of historical constructs that she believes are overly patriarchal in the dominant culture. In addition, while window shopping on Miracle Mile in Coral Gables (a suburb of Miami), Pilar comments on the patriarchal nature of American culture. She remarks, "It's like all the mannequins have been modeled after astronauts' wives. Who could ever have thought a beehive was attractive? I imagine these men sitting in fashion control centers around the world thinking of new ways to torture women" (60). Pilar's comments against patriarchy are not surprising in light of the fact that Lourdes is an extremely strong mother-figure, a woman who has always battled against the traditional constraints placed upon women. Lourdes kept the books for her family's business in Cuba, performing a traditionally male task, opened her own successful bakery in the United States, and worked as an auxiliary police officer in New York. Pilar fails to acknowledge her mother's impact upon her identity, instead crediting herself and her grandmother for her development. Pilar claims, "I have to decide these things for myself. Most of what I've learned that's important I've learned on my own, or from my grandmother" (28).

Later in the novel, Pilar continues to explore her thoughts on politics and history. She writes, "I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we'll have when we're old. Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be" (138). It becomes evident that

Pilar is angry with the manner in which history—and more importantly, the writing of that history—affects her life. Historians, for Pilar, cannot be trusted since they privilege patriarchal ideas and events, such as wars and battles, over others, such as motherhood and women's roles in society, without regard to the consequences of their writings. In this context, Pilar appears to be examining history through a feminist lens, a lens which is often clouded by patriarchal historians who frequently obscure the accomplishments of women. Garcia, like Pilar, distrusts historians. In an interview with Iraida Lopez, Garcia says,

I wanted to very specifically examine how women have responded and adapted to what happened to their families after 1959 [. . .]. Traditional history, the way it has been written, interpreted and recorded, obviates women and the evolution of home, family, and society and basically becomes a recording of battles and wars and dubious accomplishments of men. You learn where politics really lie at home. (609-610)

Garcia criticizes the patriarchal nature of recorded history, calling into question the systematic marginalization of women in history. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera suggests that Garcia's novel acts as a platform to elevate the status of women, making Dreaming in Cuban an important literary work. She contends that

Cristina Garcia rebukes the unifying paternal discourse that [limits] women to reproductive functions or domestic labor and renders them ahistorical. In other words, Garcia has devised a storytelling method that not only speaks of the female self by standing in defiance of traditional narratives of female Caribbean

experience but she elevates women's experience in general, and her experience in particular, and thereby renders both historically and culturally significant. (79)

Garcia has used her novel as a method for addressing the inequities that have resulted from the patriarchal nature of recorded history as well as patriarchal interpretations of that history.

On another level, while Garcia denounces the marginalization of women in history, it is also essential to examine the marginalization of ethnic Cuban-Americans. Suzanne Leonard notes that most Cubans and Cuban-Americans have been bypassed by history. She suggests that "The cultural memory of Cubans and Cuban-Americans is structured by events over which the people themselves have little control. Further, because accounts of war and battle take precedence, everyday stories, and especially tales of the marginalized and disenfranchised, barely register in the collective historical consciousness" (197). The marginalization of women as well as the marginalization of Cuban-Americans provide insight into Pilar's antagonistic feelings towards history. Pilar demonstrates the turmoil her own cultural history has caused her. What is important to Pilar is her grandmother, a longing for whom she demonstrates repeatedly throughout the novel. Pilar holds politicians responsible for separating her from her beloved Abuela Celia, for the loss of her memories, and the loss of her own familial history.

Pilar's loss of personal history provides an obstacle to her eventual understanding of her own hybrid identity. She turns to her family to shed light on her family's past, an effort that is largely unsuccessful:

It doesn't help that Mom refuses to talk about Abuela Celia. She gets annoyed every time I ask her and she shuts me up quickly, like I'm prying into top secret

information. Dad is more open, but he can't tell me what I really want to know, like why Mom hardly speaks to Abuela or why she still keeps her riding crops from Cuba [. . .].

Dad feels kind of lost here in Brooklyn. I think he stays in he stays in his workshop most of the day because he'd get too depressed or crazy otherwise [. . .]. Dad only looks alive when he talks about the past, about Cuba. (138)

Pilar fails in her efforts to find answers that satisfy her need for a past. What she does discover is that history has shattered her family. Lourdes, who lives in the present, is unable or unwilling to share her tragic experiences about the revolutionary soldiers who raped her, while Rufino, who dwells on his memories of Cuba, cannot adjust to his life in America. It is certainly understandable, then, that Pilar is unable to piece together the aspects of history that have created her present-day reality in America. As such, through these characters, Garcia represents the tremendous burden history places on the lives of Cuban exiles, which, in turn, shapes the lives of their children in the United States. Pilar's struggle with determining her identity is a daunting task, as she must sift through her family's Cuban past while reconciling it to her own life as an American.

Religion and Identity Formation

Pilar further demonstrates a continuing struggle with her conflicted identity when she visits a Catholic church. She rejects Catholicism—"I'd swore I'd never set foot in anything remotely Catholic again" (58), and yet she is able to contemplate her history in the stillness of the church. In a darkly humorous scene, Pilar recalls how she was expelled from the Martyrs and Saints School as a child, "I remember how the nuns got upset when I called the Spanish inquisitors Nazis [. . .]. Catholics are always dying to

forgive somebody, so if you say you're sorry, you're usually home free. But this time, they said, I'd gone too far" (58). Pilar reflects on the Church closely, finding inconsistencies that help support her rejection of Catholicism:

Why do they always have to ruin places like this with religion? I think about the king-sized crucifix nailed to the front of my principal's desk. Christ's wounds were painted in Day-Glo colors--the gash on his side where the nuns told us the last of his bodily fluids pored out; the beads of blood staining his forehead, the wounds where his hands and feet hung from spikes. The nuns knew from grief alright. (59)

Pilar's sarcasm demonstrates her rebelliousness, in this case towards her culture's primary religion. Pilar is only able to fathom the inconsistencies of the Catholic religion, and her memories of exposure to Catholicism support her beliefs. She scorns the righteousness and hypocrisy of the nuns who taught her as a young girl. She recalls one sister who intimidated a classmate:

I still remember how in third grade Sister Mary Joseph told Francine Zenowitz that her baby brother was going to limbo because her parents didn't baptize him before he died. Francine cried like a baby herself, with her face all screwed up. That day I stopped praying (before I stopped praying altogether) for the souls in purgatory and devoted all my Hail Marys to the kids in limbo, even though I knew it probably wouldn't do them any good. (59-60)

What is most fascinating about this passage is Pilar's identification with the children in limbo, an empathy that sheds light on her own perception of her hybrid identity; being a hybrid of two cultures, Pilar is destined to a life in limbo, to a life on the border and on

the fringes of mainstream society, and finally, of a life on the hyphen. Perez Firmat details this facet of Cuban-American identity when he writes,

Although it is true enough that the 1.5 generation is “marginal” to both its native and its adopted cultures, the inverse might be equally accurate: only the 1.5 generation is marginal to *neither* culture. The 1.5 individual is unique in that, unlike younger and older compatriots, he or she may actually find it possible to circulate within and through both the old and the new cultures. (4)

At this point in Pilar’s life, however, she is still unaware of her options as a bicultural member of American society. This recognition will come to Pilar much later in the novel, until then, she struggles to understand what she should make of the inconsistencies she finds in her life.

The Music of the Marginalized

It is interesting to examine Pilar’s taste in music because it truly reflects her hybridity and her sense of marginalization. She feels a strong connection with Lou Reed, a Brooklyn native, and attends one of his concerts in Greenwich Village with her boyfriend Max. When Reed shouts to the audience that he is from Brooklyn, Pilar’s adopted hometown, she fails to respond, documenting her sense of alienation. Pilar recalls, “‘I’m from Brooklyn, man!’ Lou shouts and the crowd goes wild. I don’t cheer, though. I wouldn’t cheer either if Lou said, ‘Let’s hear it for Cuba.’ Cuba. Planet Cuba. Where the hell is that?’” (134). This minor outburst reinforces Pilar’s dilemma: she feels no allegiance to either the U.S. or Cuba, further marginalizing her identity. Her attendance at Lou Reed’s concert further reinforces her sense of alienation. Pilar describes her reaction:

“I just love the way Lou Reed’s concerts feel—expectant, uncertain. You never know what he’s going to do next. Lou has about twenty-five personalities. I like him because he sings about people no one else sings about—drug addicts, transvestites, the down and out [. . .]. I feel like a new me sprouts and dies every day” (135). This passage also reveals Pilar’s identification with Reed’s subjects: disembodied people, marginal identities in the dominant culture. Further, it demonstrates Pilar’s connection to someone with “twenty-five personalities,” providing insight into her own fragmentary identity. Pilar’s observations clearly demonstrate her own marginalization, suggesting that she is still struggling to establish her own identity.

As a self-described “punk,” Pilar not only listens to Lou Reed, but also listens to Iggy Pop and the Ramones, music figures from the punk movement that dominated the music scene in the mid-to-late 1970s. Pilar’s choice of music is revealing in that it sheds light on her political orientation. As she has stated earlier in the novel, she sides with the “down and out,” a disposition she inherited from her grandmother, Celia. Pilar explains what she enjoys about these alternative musicians: “I love their energy, their violence [. . .]. It’s like an artistic form of assault. I try to translate what I hear into colors and volumes and lines that confront people, that say, ‘Hey, we’re here too and what we think matters!’ or more often just ‘Fuck you!’” (135). Although Pilar’s music offers her no concrete answers about her identity, she is through music able to identify with a group within the U.S.—the disenfranchised and frustrated segments of American society.

Torn Between Two Languages

At this stage in the novel, the one thing that is certain in Pilar's life is her driving desire to establish herself as an artist. In an interesting moment in which Pilar contemplates her artwork, she discovers a connection between art and language. She notes, "Painting is its own language [. . .]. Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English. I envy my mother her Spanish curses sometimes. They make my English collapse in a heap" (59). Spoken language seems to fail Pilar, causing further turmoil in the formation of her identity. At this point in the text, painting serves as a surrogate language because Pilar is not comfortable with the limitations of both Spanish and English. Borland notes, "Thematically, Pilar's own anxiety about losing the language of her culture is manifested through her obsession with painting and in her ruminations about visual texts. To counter the dilemma of language loss, Pilar finds that visual images communicate meaning much more effectively than language" (138). Because Pilar struggles with the loss of her cultural language, she believes that painting offers the best form of communication. Payant suggests that this is a condition common to immigrants. She writes, "Like many 'hyphenated' people, she is troubled by the loss of her first language, Spanish; abstract painting, a successful visual medium, becomes her own language" (170). Herrera concurs: "In some sense Dreaming in Cuban confirms Glissant's view of art and history, for although Pilar records her experiences and attempts to preserve her family's history in a diary [. . .] she confirms herself the superiority of painting over language" (89). Glissant, a French mathematician and philosopher who has written extensively on Caribbean literature, has often emphasized the limitations of written text when compared with both oral and visual representations. Pilar's belief in the

superiority of painting over language certainly supports Glissant's view. As a bicultural individual, Pilar is privy to two language codes. Nevertheless, both languages fail to provide her with an adequate means of expressing her Cuban-American life. It is for this reason that many other bicultural people, especially writers, employ both languages simultaneously, creating a third language structure, a language that weaves in and out of both English and Spanish in an attempt to better express the new generation's identity. Frances Aparicio describes ethnic writers' weaving together of Spanish and English as a positive innovation and suggests,

While some prescriptive linguists, editors, and authorities in education would judge the interference of Spanish in English as a deficit, a postmodern and transcreative approach would validate it as a positively creative innovation in literature. Indeed, the most important contributions of U.S. Latina/o writers to American literature lie not only in multiple cultural and hybrid subjectivities they textualize, but also in the new possibilities for metaphors, imagery, syntax, and rhythms that the Spanish subtexts provide literary English. (797)

At this stage of the novel Pilar is wrestling with two distinct languages, yet the opportunity for blending these languages provides a potentially positive step in the eventual establishment of her identity. Garcia, as a writer, has also struggled with language, but the creation of her text demonstrates that the inter-weaving of language can indeed serve as a useful tool for artistic expression. In this sense, Garcia's writing the novel is reflective of Garcia's personal struggle to create her own hybrid identity.

In yet another scene, Pilar further investigates the issue of language and how it relates to her art:

I think about Jacoba Van Heemskerck, a Dutch expressionist painter I've become interested in lately. Her paintings feel organic to me, like breathing abstractions of color. She refused to title her paintings (much less do patriotic murals for her mother's bakery) and numbered her works instead. I mean, 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, obliterate the clichés. (139)

While Pilar seems to struggle with finding her place in American society, she demonstrates a strong willingness to struggle for meaning. This passage illustrates that continuing conflict within, but it also demonstrates that Pilar is progressing as she makes a thoughtful effort to define the role that language plays in her life. At this point in the novel, the reader clearly understands that Pilar, who is unconventional, will not settle for the traditional, patriarchal constructs that she inherits from society. Instead, she desires a new manner of expression, which she finds in her art, her new language.

Feminist Leanings

Pilar once again contemplates history, specifically art history, and the role women play in it. Her observations shed light on her internal anger with the patriarchal treatment of women in history, particularly female artists. Pilar notes,

I think about all the women artists throughout history who managed to paint despite the odds against them. People still ask where all the important women painters are instead of looking at what they did paint and trying to understand their circumstances. Even supposedly knowledgeable and sensitive people react to good art by a woman as if it were an anomaly, a product of a freak nature or a direct

result of her association with a male painter or mentor. (139-140)

William Luis suggests that these restrictions/repressions placed upon women artists in America are in effect a form of censorship, making self expression difficult. “Pilar does feel restricted in the way she can express herself, especially in a society that calls itself free. She is disillusioned by the contradiction between what the United States is and what the country is supposed to represent” (219). It is important to note that Pilar’s formative years occur during the 1970s, when social movements, especially the women’s movement, sparked a revolution of thought and action. Pilar’s struggle of creating an identity, then, is two-fold: she must develop an identity as a hybrid member of society, a marginal identity in this country, as well as carve out her role as a woman in an evolving world. Pilar’s formation of identity, then, is further complicated, especially in light of her evolving feminist perspective, which directly conflicts with her traditionally patriarchal Cuban heritage.

Pilar’s experiences in art school serve to exacerbate these frustrations with traditional gender roles. Pilar writes, “Nobody’s even heard of feminism in art school. The male teachers and students still call the shots and get the serious attention and the fellowships that further their careers. As for the women, we’re supposed to make extra money modeling nude. What kind of bullshit revolution is that?” (139-140). Clearly Pilar’s experience in art school mirrors her experience with the patriarchal nature of her Cuban heritage, providing a barrier to finding her identity as a woman in American society.

SL-76: Marginalization on Canvas

Pilar's most notable painting, her "masterpiece," the painting she does for her mother's second bakery, represents all the frustrations, contradictions and inconsistencies that torment her. Pilar outlines her process of painting:

I stretch a twelve-by-eight-foot canvas and wash it with an iridescent blue gouache—like the virgin Mary's robes in gaudy church paintings. I want the background to glow, to look irradiated, nuked out [. . .]. When the paint dries, I start on Liberty herself. I do a perfect replication of her a bit left of center canvas, changing only two details: first, I make Liberty's torch float slightly beyond her grasp, and second, I paint her right hand reaching over to cover her left breast, as if she's reciting the National Anthem or some other slogan.

The next day, the background still looks off to me, so I [. . .] paint black stick figures pulsing in the air around Liberty, thorny scars that look like barbed wire. I do what I feel, so at the base of the statue I put my favorite punk rallying cry: I'M A MESS. And then carefully, very carefully, I paint a safety pin through Liberty's nose.

This I think, sums everything up very nicely. *SL-76*. That'll be my title. (140)

Pilar's *SL-76* seems to satisfy her need for unique self-expression. At last, she has found her language, voicing her complete discontent with the social structures from which she strives to break free. Placing Lady Liberty left of center on the canvas illustrates Pilar's political leanings, that she identifies with the liberal left. By placing the torch of liberty just "out of reach" Pilar is commenting upon liberty and freedom being out of reach for most immigrants. By producing stick figures that appear as "thorny scars that look like

barbed wire” Pilar is in effect decrying the marginalization of immigrants, with scars and barbed wire speaking to the United States’ immigration policy. With the completion of her masterpiece, Pilar comes closer to achieving her own identity.

Pilar’s art serves as a creative outlet and also offers her the opportunity to “translate” her experiences into a defined construct of self. Perez Firmat describes this phenomenon when he writes, “One-and-a-halfers are translation artists. Tradition bound but translation bent, they are sufficiently immersed in each culture to give both ends of the hyphen their due [. . .]. Only those immigrants who arrived here between infancy and adulthood share both the atavism of their parents and the Americanness of their children” (5). As a “translation artist,” Pilar borrows from both her Cuban heritage and her newly adopted American culture to construct an identity that seems fitting, a bicultural identity that privileges neither culture over the other. As such, Pilar’s portrait of the Statue of Liberty is a signification of her dual cultures. Although her mother fails to see any merit in the work, which is not surprising considering she has difficulty understanding her daughter’s rebellion, the portrait of this American landmark is clearly imbued with meaning for Pilar and the generation she speaks for. Pilar’s *SL -76* offers insight into her frustrations over a perceived lack of liberty for immigrants to America.

There are various interpretations of Pilar’s painting. Suzanne Leonard claims that Pilar’s painting is a mockery of Lourdes’s beliefs and American ideals. Leonard claims, “In America, for example, Pilar scorns her mother Lourdes’ unabashed celebration of capitalist practices (Lourdes runs and owns the ‘Yankee Doodle Bakery’ in Brooklyn) and Pilar attempts to mock Western democratic ideals by creating an irreverent painting

of the Statue of Liberty” (196). While Leonard generalizes about Pilar’s motives in creating this painting, William Luis comments on the specific meaning of the painting.

He writes,

Clearly, the painting should be read within the context of the times. There is an emphasis on leftist politics; liberty and justice are beyond the reach of immigrants; and the statue is caressing her breast, an allusion to the influence of the women’s movement upon the artist. Pilar’s interpretation also illustrates that freedom is still an expensive commodity in the United States. (218)

Luis provides the historical context for examining Pilar’s painting. Luis explains that Pilar’s work has special meaning if examined in relation to the plight of Hispanic immigrants and to the Women’s Movement in this country. He continues,

Pilar’s Lady Liberty, painted with barbed wire, speaks not of freedom but of sacrifice and suffering and even of imprisonment, concepts opposed to those she usually represents. Whereas in the past many European immigrants were welcomed to the United States, filling a rapidly developing economy’s need for cheap labor, today’s (Hispanic) immigrants have not been received with the same enthusiasm [. . .] Pilar’s Lady Liberty is a prisoner of society and has in recent years been denied her true identity. (219)

Garcia is certainly commenting on the plight of immigrants through Pilar’s representation of the Statue of Liberty. There are, however, other interpretations of Pilar’s painting.

Sokolovsky writes, “Pilar’s liberty represents the imagination’s animation of history and memory and reveals the way in which one myth replaces and eclipses the memory of another one. Pilar’s surreal representation of her exiled identity is based on an angry

stylized performance with no borders” (149). In this instance, Sokolovsky appears to echo Luis’s findings because she argues the existence of the myth of an America which held open arms for past generations of immigrants. Sokolovsky differs from Luis in that she suggests that this myth has been replaced by a myth of a nation that is inhospitable to Latino immigrants. Luis suggests that this second alleged myth is not a myth at all, but a true reflection of the Latino immigrant experience.

Creating a Bicultural Identity

Later in the novel, after the eventful unveiling of *SL-76* for her mother’s second bakery and after spending a semester in Florence studying art, Pilar is reflective, questioning many events of her life in an attempt to capture meaning in the formation of her identity. Subconsciously, Pilar recognizes that in order for her to grow and move forward, she must establish her identity. Pilar notes, “Everything up until this minute [. . .] feels like a preparation for something [. . .]. For what, I don’t know. I’m still waiting for my life to begin” (179). As she continues to reflect and recalls her year in Rhode Island at art school, she reveals her frustration with the marginal life she embraced earlier in the novel. Pilar recounts, “I couldn’t face going back to Providence after Italy, so I decided to give mainstream academia a try. Art school was getting to be a drag anyway, cutthroat and backbiting, with everyone seeking praise from the instructors. I didn’t want to end up being dependant on people I didn’t respect much, so here I am majoring in anthropology instead” (179). While Pilar is not ready to embrace conventional society, she does begin to exhibit signs of maturation. She has learned that the subculture she once tried to emulate is not necessarily utopian and is now disillusioned with the

inconsistencies and hypocrisy she found in art school. It is at this stage in her development that she decides to conform somewhat, at least to try mainstream academic pursuits. It is also possible that Pilar's newfound interest in anthropology is an attempt to delve into her cultural history in a further attempt at piecing together the parts of her fragmented identity.

Furthermore, as Pilar becomes removed from the art scene, she begins to demonstrate a change in her perception of language. Pilar reveals that when she and her new boyfriend Ruben make love, "we speak in Spanish" (180). "English," she contends, "seems an impossible language for intimacy" (180). This suggests that Pilar is more comfortable with her mother's language, a language she once envied. At this point she has found a manner in which she can incorporate both English and Spanish into her life, suggesting a positive step in the formation of a bicultural identity. Although Pilar appears satisfied with her ability to move between languages, especially with her boyfriend, she discovers Ruben's infidelity and quickly becomes disillusioned with him.

Pilar's discovery of Ruben's infidelity provides one of the turning points in the novel. While she had previously pursued painting as a form of expression, she decides to explore music as a new form of self expression. She finds a misplaced ad in the "personals" section of the newspaper that advertises an acoustic bass guitar. In an attempt to gain a form of permanence in her life, perhaps as a result of her boyfriend's infidelity, Pilar rushes out to buy the guitar. "It's like a piece of furniture, a fucking *huge* piece of furniture. It's like I'm buying my own heirloom. I struggle uptown with it in a kind of trance," she says (181). Back in the comfort of her dorm room Pilar begins to experiment with her guitar: "The thick strings vibrate through my fingers, up my arms, down my

chest. I don't know what I'm doing, but I start thumping that old spruce dresser of an instrument for all it's worth, thumping and thumping, until I feel my life begin" (181). Interestingly enough, it is the purchase of this bass guitar that begins to give Pilar insight about selfhood. By this point in the novel she has begun to take control of her life, buying an heirloom of her own, constructing her own history. Although she confesses that she isn't totally sure where she is headed in life, she appears on the verge of true self-discovery.

The expansion of Pilar's musical tastes also signifies progress in her struggle for a bicultural identity. For most of the novel Pilar's musical preferences leaned toward punk music, but after she purchases her bass guitar she begins to explore record shops throughout the city, hoping to find something that will help suggest meaning and further establish her identity. Pilar recounts one of her encounters in a record shop: "In the last bin, I find an old Beny More album. Two of the cuts are scratched but I buy them anyway [. . .]. When I thank [the clerk] in Spanish, he's surprised and wants to chat. We talk about Celia Cruz and how she hasn't changed a hair or a vocal note in forty years" (197-198). Pilar is beginning to exhibit a greater interest in Cuban music, but just as importantly she also initiates a conversation in Spanish. This encounter further suggests Pilar's maturation, her coming-of-age as a Cuban-American woman. Her struggle to create her identity is not fully complete, however, as demonstrated in the following passage: "Still, I feel like something's dried up inside me, something a strong wind could blow out of me for good. That scares me. I guess I'm not so sure what I should be fighting for anymore. Without the confines, I'm damn near reasonable. That's something I never wanted to become" (198). It is as if Pilar finds herself on a precipice, at the very

brink of self-discovery, and yet there is something missing that prevents her acculturation as a Cuban-American woman.

Feeling that something is still missing from her life, Pilar goes to a *botanica* in Manhattan. While exploring the shop, looking at all the “amulets, talismans, incense,” and the “sweet-smelling soaps and bottled bathwater, love perfumes and potions promising money and luck” (199), Pilar reflects on religion and concludes, “I’m not religious but I get the feeling that it’s the simplest rituals, the ones that are integrated with the earth and its seasons, that are the most profound. It makes more sense to me than the more abstract forms of worship” (199). Pilar’s reflections suggest that she is willing to at least explore if not embrace *Santeria*, the African-based religion her aunt Felicia practiced in Cuba. Her interest in *Santeria* suggests that she is willing to become proactive in the building of her identity. Coco Fusco notes that “*Santeria* is essentially performative, integrating process and objects, and singling out the transformative power in the act of making meaning out of natural materials and human gestures” (122). As Pilar explores the *botanica*, the reader is able to understand Pilar’s sense of loss resulting from her forced immigration to America, as well as her awareness of her own marginal existence. Pilar explains the disappointment she has felt since her failed attempt at returning to Cuba as a teenager when she ran off to Miami: “But I never made it to Cuba to see Abuela Celia. After that, I felt like my destiny was not my own, that men who had nothing to do with me had the power to rupture my dreams, to separate me from my grandmother” (199-200). At this point of the novel the owner of the *botanica* speaks thinks that Pilar is a believer, a follower of the religion, and Pilar is receptive to him. Pilar listens carefully to the *botanica* owner as he prescribes a ritual for her: “Bathe with

these herbs for nine consecutive nights. Add the holy water and a drop of ammonia, then light the candle. On the last day, you will know what to do” (200). Pilar follows the ritual, and after the ninth day of her baths, she recalls, “I call my mother and tell her we’re going to Cuba” (203).

Return to Cuba

At this point of the text Pilar and Lourdes travel to Cuba, where the final part of the novel takes place. Interestingly, both Pilar and Lourdes feel that it is time to return to the island nation; a time for reconciliations, for facing the truth and past demons, and a time for final good-byes. Rocjo Davis suggests that this return trip to Cuba is a necessity, both for Pilar and Lourdes. Davis writes,

According to Lorna Irvine, the process of discovery—the ‘psychological journey’—of the daughter’s own identity demands a revision of the relationship with the mother, and this often involves three stages: negation, recognition, and reconciliation. The need to go “back to the future” implies the urgency of appropriating the intricate truths about one’s self and history as part of the process of self-affirmation. The immigrant characters in Garcia’s novel—Lourdes and Pilar—need to return to Cuba in order to come to terms with the tangled meanings of mothering, language, and home, and renew their lives in the United States. (63)

On the trip to Abuela Celia’s house Pilar notices four bodies floating in the ocean, rafters killed in their desperation to flee Cuba. Pilar notices that this is not the Cuba she remembers. Clearly Lourdes, who is still just as opposed to the Castro regime as the day she fled Cuba, expects this horror and more. In fact, when she enters Celia’s house, she

rushes into her mother's bedroom and shouts "'Can you believe this *mierda* [crap]?"' Lourdes grabs the picture of El Lider [Castro] off Celia's night stand, "walks to the edge of the ocean [. . .] and flings the picture into the sea" (219). She later gives diatribes to many of the local Cubans about the economic failures of Castro's revolution. She screams to bystanders, "'You could have Cadillacs with leather interiors! Air conditioning! Automatic windows!"' (221). Post-Castro Cuba has certainly met Lourdes's pre-formed negative expectations.

One of the other things Pilar notices upon her arrival in Cuba is the "billboards advertising the revolution as if it were a brand of cigarettes" (215). Propaganda art was the most common type of art found in Cuba in 1980 (when Pilar visits Cuba). Antonio Eligio notes, "[During] the so-called Grey Years of the seventies, the government's bureaucratic control of culture resulted in the support mostly of propagandistic art and the isolation of many important artists" (63). This was evidence of a trend started in the late 1960s. Penelope Goodfriend notes, "In the late 1960s the government tried to compel artists to shun 'decadent' abstract art and adopt the realistic style of the Communist Party's Mexican sympathizers, such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. These artists had turned from easel painting to the more public statement of murals" (197).

Jeremy Lehrer concurs:

While Fidel Castro's regime suppressed many artists, it embraced and nurtured poster art—provided, of course, that it was government-approved. Political posters created by Cuban artists and distributed throughout the world expressed Cuba's solidarity with other countries, critiqued U.S. military and foreign policies, and promoted the ideals of communism and the Cuban revolution.

Perhaps Pilar's first impression of art on the island was that of propaganda posters lining the highways and adorning buildings. This would certainly not be the type of abstract painting that Pilar created back in the United States. From early in her trip to Cuba, the seeds of doubt have been planted as to whether Pilar will stay in Cuba.

Pilar, however, utilizes her time in Cuba to become more reflective. She begins to ponder the politics that have torn her family apart. Pilar thinks, "we're all tied to the past by flukes. Look at me I got my name from Hemingway's fishing boat" (220).

Interestingly, Pilar's being named for a boat provides an ironic twist on one of the greatest flukes of Cuba's revolutionary history. Fidel Castro launched his first assault on Cuba with a used yacht, which he had purchased from an American. That the boat was even seaworthy is a miracle. It had been built in 1943 and had sunk in a hurricane in 1953 (Szulc 367). Once the ship was salvaged and repaired, Szulc notes that Castro had it "so insanely overloaded [that] it practically sank in a storm during the crossing [from Mexico to Cuba] (she reached the Oriente coast in the wrong spot in what Che Guevara described as a 'shipwreck,' not a landing)" (43). The fact that Pilar was named for a boat and that a boat (purchased from an American) led to Castro's eventual victory over Batista's forces is the type of fluke that Garcia incorporates throughout the novel.

It is obvious that Dreaming in Cuban is rife with flukes. While in Cuba, Pilar also realizes that "Cuba is a peculiar exile, I think, an island-colony. We can reach it by a thirty-minute charter flight from Miami, yet never reach it at all" (219). Pilar has returned to Cuba, but the Cuba of her dreams and memories does not truly exist—the Cuba of her dreams is in effect unreachable. Sadly, it is during this visit to her homeland that Pilar realizes that she is no longer part of Cuba's culture. Even the Spanish language that she

and her mother use “is another idiom entirely,” a realization Celia voiced earlier in the text as she read Pilar’s letters from America. Further, Pilar cannot even dance like a Cuban; she moves “jerkily, off the beat, sloppy and distracted. She dances like an American”(224). Pilar acknowledges that her idea of Cuba has been falsely colored by her pleasant childhood memories, a reality that no longer exists. She laments, “I have to admit it’s tougher here than I expected” (234-235). Pilar’s realization that the Cuba of her dreams is not the reality of present-day Cuba is an experience shared by many exiles who return home. Payant notes, “Pilar had feared the ‘Cuba’ of her dreams might not exist, and not surprisingly, her fears are confirmed. Furthermore, she does not belong in the real Cuba. Like many exiles who search for self by returning to the geographical space of the homeland, she is unsuccessful” (171-172). While reflecting on the differences between the real and “imagined” space of Cuba, Pilar realizes that she misses America: “It’s hard to imagine existing without Lou Reed. I ask Abuela Celia if I can paint whatever I want in Cuba and she says yes, as long as I don’t attack the state. Cuba is still developing, she tells me, and can’t afford the luxury of dissent” (235). Celia’s words echo the Cuban Constitution, particularly article 38 of that document. Laduke provides the crux of the Cuban Constitution regarding art:

- a) Art is free as long as its content does not come into collision with the principles of the Revolution. The forms of expression in art are free.
- b) The State, solicitous about raising the cultural level of the people, shall promote the development of artistic education and creative talent and shall cultivate art and the capacity to appreciate it. (34)

It would almost appear as if these two parts of the Cuban Constitution were antithetical to one another, and in fact, art and politics are frequently at odds. Antonio Eligio writes that

Strained by censorship and oversensitiveness, and unresolved debates on art and politics, relationships between artists and institutions became precarious. Artists were confronted with a depressed cultural space, in which subsidies were scarce and openness was discouraged, as well as a community of hostile-to-indifferent émigré colleagues whose migration taxed the artistic environment in Cuba. (65)

Jeremy Lehrer supports Eligio's claims and reports that "Artists and political systems tend to have contradictory objectives, but the creative mind is undoubtedly central to formulating and propagating political philosophies. In Cuba, the intersection of politics and art has proven to be hostile to artists, with a few notable exceptions" (12). In some respects, Pilar as an artist was very fortunate to be able to return to Cuba. Historically, most artists are never given that opportunity. Antonio Eligio documents the limitations placed on artists traveling to Cuba when he writes, "The perennial hostility between Washington, Miami, and Havana has greatly restricted exchanges between artists in Cuba and Cubans in the United States" (72). Divergent political beliefs have created a gulf that often separates artists from their homeland.

Pilar's journey does mirror the journey of one Cuban American artist, as Eligio relates: "In the early eighties, Mendieta, who had emigrated from Cuba to Iowa as a child as part of Operation Peter Pan, traveled to the island to rediscover her cultural origins" (72). Like Mendieta, Pilar is given the opportunity to discover her cultural roots. She soon comes to realize that there is a rupture between her cultural roots and the current political situation in Cuba. Pilar ponders what El Lider would think of her artwork,

clearly suggesting her opposition to the revolution's censorship and repression of the Cuban people. "Art," she says she would tell El Lider, "is the ultimate revolution" (235). Pilar recognizes that if she were to stay in Cuba, the freedoms that she enjoys as an artist in the United States would be curtailed and that many of the things she has taken for granted in America would be out of reach on the island. This realization demonstrates the maturation of Pilar as a character, and opens the door to her achieving her identity as a Cuban-American in society.

Pilar Puente, Bicultural Woman

Pilar's trip to Cuba provides her with the answers she seeks. She recognizes that she can travel to Cuba, but the Cuba of her memory and dreams is not necessarily grounded in reality. David T. Mitchell comments on the dichotomy between physical space and cultural identity when he writes, "The island nation is physically accessible by charter flight and can be traversed from one end to the other in a matter of hours, but Pilar recognizes the differences between accessing a geographic space and its imaginary cultural moorings" (58). While Pilar loves the language, the sights, the Cuban culture, she becomes fully aware that she does not belong there:

I've started dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. There's magic here working its way through my veins. There's something about the vegetation, too, that I respond to instinctively [. . .]. And I love Havana, its noise and decay and painted ladyness. I could happily sit on one of those wrought-iron balconies for days, or keep my grandmother company on her

porch [. . .] I'm afraid to lose all this, to lose Abuela Celia again. But sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong—not *instead* of here, but *more* than here. (235-236)

Pilar recognizes that the Cuba of her dreams is not the Cuba of the current reality. She is beginning to come to terms with her hybrid existence, and the fact that this hybridity offers a plethora of possibilities for her future. Irene Brumeshaver-Ziegler writes that

Her [Pilar's] insight that she belongs to New York 'not *instead* of here, but *more* than here,' proves that she will not make the mistake of simply reversing the opposition Cuba-New York. Instead, she has learned that between black and white there are many shades of grey, that she does not have to choose one or the other but can enjoy a variety of possibilities. (46)

Pilar's realization that she does not have to choose either Cuba *or* the United States demonstrates that she is maturing and that she accepts the benefits of living as a bicultural member of American society. Dara Goldman suggests that Garcia's decision to have Pilar return to New York is representative of a trend in Caribbean literature:

Garcia's work epitomizes a prevalent trend in U.S.-Caribbean production: it questions the structures that potentially disenfranchise the diaspora, but never truly dislodges them as the principal pillars of cultural discourse. In this approach to the insular discourse of Caribbean identity, the island is reinforced as the lost home that must be mourned but that can not be recovered. (419)

Pilar will miss her native island, just as she will miss Abuela Celia when she returns to New York. She will mourn these losses, but she is now capable of recognizing her cultural heritage and of achieving wholeness.

Pilar does decide to return to the United States, a decision based at least in part on her observations of life in Cuba. Luis writes, “Garcia concludes her novel with the mass exodus of Cubans in 1980, indicating that Pilar, and for that matter the author herself, has come to terms with her position regarding the Cuban revolution [. . .]. After witnessing for herself life in Cuba, Pilar becomes independent of the influence of Celia and the Cuban government” (222). Pilar has found her home and her identity at last. Her place, she realizes, is in America as a bicultural member of society, as a Cuban-American woman.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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