

**Writing Conflict  
to End Conflict:  
Reconciliatory  
Writing in Cristina  
García's *Dreaming in  
Cuban, The Agüero  
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# Writing Conflict to End Conflict: Reconciliatory Writing in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, *The Agüero Sisters*, and *King of Cuba*

They are disappearing from the planet, and I wanted to get them in the last throes –chronicle what they were doing in their last days, their last obsessions. For they will pass, and the generations behind them will write their own histories. I also wanted to give a more nuanced voice to the sixty-year shouting match between Cuba and its exiles. (Jorge Santos, "Multi-hyphenated identities on the road": An Interview with Cristina García)

Reconciliation is not only about finding common grounds; it is also about understanding our differences. (María de los Angeles Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors*)

## ABSTRACT

The building of bridges between Cuba and the US has been ongoing for a long time, not least by artists. Reconciliation work preceding the commencement of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US encompasses, for example, novelist Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), *The Agüero Sisters* (1997), and *King of Cuba* (2013). I argue that these novels take on the task of lessening polarizations with the aspiration of furthering reconciliation processes through concentrating on the divisiveness between families and politics within the Cuban communities, focusing on the island Cubans and the US Cuban diaspora. García writes conflict to end conflict and this is, I claim, her strongest contribution to the

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reconciliation processes. In the last part of the article I briefly discuss how I use the concept of translation to theorize the relationship between fiction and reality.

Key words: Cristina García, reconciliatory writing, Cuban fiction, translation of culture

The building of bridges between Cuba and the US has been ongoing for a long time, not least by artists. Reconciliation work preceding the commencement of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US encompasses, for example, Cristina García's novels that concentrate on the divisiveness between families and politics within the Cuban communities, focusing on the island Cubans and the US Cuban diaspora. Through her characters, most of them indulging in extreme positions regarding Cuba and the Cuban regime, García's fiction gives life to polarized politics. In this article I argue that García's novels *Dreaming in Cuban*, *The Agüero Sisters*, and *King of Cuba* take on the task of lessening polarizations with the aspiration of furthering reconciliation processes. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, my reading highlights the active mediating and translating role of Pilar and I argue that she is a significant figure of reconciliation. In what follows I use the concept of translation, mainly metaphorically, to explore García's writing as "reconciliatory" and as a way to understand how she links fiction and reality. My metaphorical use of translation is influenced by my disciplinary background in an English Department, where my work primarily has been concerned with the socio-cultural and ideological aspects of literature and authorship, linking fiction and reality, as it were. García writes conflict to end conflict and this is, I claim, her strongest contribution to the reconciliation processes. In the last part of the article I briefly discuss how I use the concept of translation to theorize the relationship between fiction and reality.

## DREAMING IN CUBAN

One of the complexities involved in Cuban (American) identity is, thus, strongly political, which, for example, political scientist María de los Angeles Torres points out as she protests against "the either/or dichotomy of my identity – a dichotomy that [in Cuban America] demands that I choose sides" (15). In *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba* (1995), editor Ruth Behar comments on *Dreaming in Cuban*, the novel written more than two decades before diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US were taken up: "In a situation where there is no bridge linking the two sides of the Cuban community, García suggests that women's' dreams can begin to heal the wounds of the divided nation" (12). *Dreaming in Cuban* was a finalist for the National Book Award, securing its position within the corpus of US Latina/o fiction. Ylze Irizarry writes in 2007 that the novel "was not only pivotal in the career of its author but also a watershed moment for Latina/o literature" (Irizarry n.p.). In the same year, Marta Caminero-Santangelo finds that *Dreaming in Cuban* is "perhaps the best-known work to date by a Cuban American who is the product of exile from Castro's regime" (177)<sup>1</sup>. The novel portrays the divisive effects on families and individuals resulting from the 1959 overthrow of dictator Fulgencio Batista and Fidel Castro's coming to power. There are four main

<sup>1</sup> Cristina García came to the US at the age of 2 in company of her parents who went into exile. Whether or not *Dreaming in Cuban* is a "product of exile" is debatable.



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characters in the novel. Celia del Pino, *revolucionaria* y fidelista, and her daughter Felicia, who becomes infected with syphilis and commits suicide both live in Cuba. In the US, we find Celia's daughter, Lourdes Puente, and Lourdes's daughter Pilar; Lourdes and her husband finding exile in Brooklyn together with their daughter. The novel spans the period from 1972 to 1980, the year Lourdes and Pilar visit Cuba. Through Celia's letters, which begin in 1935, the novel stretches back to pre-revolutionary Cuban history and society during the regime of dictator Fulgencio Batista. Celia's letters are written to her first lover, Gustavo, a married lawyer from Spain who breaks Celia's heart. The real purpose of the letters is disclosed at the end of the novel, when Celia gives them to her granddaughter Pilar who will, as Celia assures herself, Gustavo and the reader, "remember everything" (p. 245). María de los Angeles Torres even reads Pilar as taking on the role of "remembering for the nation," (164), an active rather than a "passive" representative of those who left their homeland (*ibid.*). Pilar Puente is often read as García's *alter ego*, a reading that is not contested by García, who went back to Cuba to meet her own grandmother after 24 years:

When I finally met my own maternal grandmother in Cuba in 1984, I was flooded with a sense of loss for everything that we hadn't experienced together. I wanted to capture something of that lost connection in the relationship between Celia and her granddaughter, Pilar. (Brown: 250-51)

## García's writing in English is, she says, inflected by the Spanish language

Referring to *Dreaming in Cuban*, García has said that "[her] writing in English is an act of translation" (Kevane & Heredia 77), as most of the things that she writes about "would normally be taking place in Spanish" (78). García's professed undertaking of "writing it in English, approximating it in English, trying to rework the English to sound more like Spanish" (*ibid.*) has a clear objective: "I wanted the book to feel as though the reader were experiencing it in Spanish" (Brown 254). García's writing in English is, she says, inflected by the Spanish language: "There's a kind of musicality and cadence in Spanish that works its way into my English" (Kevane & Heredia 78). García experienced that the Spanish translation of her second novel, *The Agüero Sisters*, "felt like more of a restoration than a translation" (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, according to García, translations risk "diminishing" things (Kevane & Heredia 77). In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar articulates the same idea. Being kicked out of a Catholic school and sent to a psychiatrist for the content of her paintings, Pilar is asked about her "urge to mutilate the human form": "Painting is its own language, I wanted to tell him. Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English. I envy my mother's Spanish curses sometimes. They make my English collapse in a heap" (59). Pilar expresses a feeling of never

knowing *fully* what the translation has translated, and that certain things just do not translate (very well). Pilar's envy of her mother's curses in Spanish is somewhat puzzling, given that Pilar's Spanish appears to be good. However, Pilar's fluent *understanding* of Spanish does not mean that she is fluent enough to break out in convincing curses. Nor, perhaps, is there anyone at whom she could curse, convincingly, in Spanish. I understand her feeling of having her English "collapse in a heap" as a feeling of being lost between countries, languages, cultures and politics, matters that the novel sets out to reconcile.

## RECONCILIATION THROUGH "MESSAGES FROM THE DEAD"

García has ascertained that "a lot of immigrant literatures are making English do things it hasn't done before" (Kevane & Heredia 78.) In *Borrowed Tongues: Life Writing, Migration, and Translation*, Eve C. Karpinski supports García's idea that writing in English can be "an act of translation":

[T]ranslation in a wider sense involves more than a language transfer in that it also requires a transposition of an entire system of cultural, political, and historical meanings. This tendency to see language as embedded in culture allows us to consider as translations even texts written in English but originating in other than English-speaking cultures – such as immigrant cultures or diasporic cultures... (27)

The idea of translation as transfer and transposition of culture finds its perfect illustration in an early scene in *Dreaming in Cuban*, a scene that critics have paid attention to and that I will come back to. Celia del Pino is on guard for the Cuban revolution when the novel begins. Seated on her porch in Santa Teresa del Mar, keeping vigil of her piece of the coastline, Celia is about to get a visit from her deceased husband:

At the far end of the sky, where daylight begins, a dense radiance like a shooting star breaks forth. It weakens as it advances, as its outline takes shape in the ether. Her husband emerges from the light and comes towards her, taller than the palms, walking on water in his white summer suit and Panama hat. He is in no hurry. [...] Her husband moves his mouth carefully but she cannot read his immense lips. His jaw churns and swells with each word, faster, until Celia feels the warm breeze of his breath on her face. Then he disappears. (4-5)

Jorge's "visit" takes place at dawn and with Celia being on guard all night, her eyes affected by "the sweetness of the gardenia tree and the salt of the sea" (3). A preceding passage states that Celia repeatedly and "like a blind woman" (5) has read a letter which arrived that morning. From the "decay" in the handwriting, Celia understands that "Jorge must have known he would die before she received it" (6). Rubbing her smarting eyes at dawn, we may assume that she is expecting news of her husband's death. As daylight begins, bringing with it changes and phenomena of lights and shadows, the lights play a trick on Celia, producing a visualization of Jorge. Celia, instead of blinking her eyes to have the image of Jorge change (back) into something "real", stays with

the vision and, I suggest, runs with it. Celia's vision is not to be construed as a mental picture, a hallucination, a dream, or a figure of magic realism. Celia experiences something that many people have experienced. Like when the darkness in a room transforms the bookshelf in a corner into a man or the branch outside a window becomes a huge bird thrashing its beak against the window. A common reaction to such a sensation is to blink one's eyes and use rationality to call back the reality of bookshelves and branches. Celia acts differently. She welcomes the vision of Jorge as his visit ends the wait for the announcement of his death. Celia performs an act of translation, one may argue, an act of translating visions and emotional needs into rational behavior. This reading corresponds well with what García has said about the translational aspects of fiction: "I think fiction is translating intuition, dreams, and interior lives" (Irizarry n. p.)<sup>3</sup> Appropriately, the first section of the novel that includes Jorge's apparition is called "Ordinary Seductions" and the seduction here, the coming of the daylight and the consequential illusions of both eye and mind, troubles the borders between irrationality and rationality.<sup>4</sup>

The day after Celia envisions Jorge, Felicia learns that her father came to announce his death and to say goodbye. Felicia is right there with her mother on this frequency of communicating with the dead. The ensuing exchange between mother and daughter is an example of how the novel, through its main characters and often in a playful way, crosses and destabilizes borders between rationality and irrationality, with the aim set for reconciliation:

'He was here last night! [...]

'Who?' Felicia demands.

'Your father, he came to say good-bye! [...]

'You mean he was in the neighbourhood and didn't even stop by?' She is pacing now, pushing a fist into her palm.

'Felicia, it was not a social visit.' (9-10)

The underlying assumption here, shared by mother and daughter, is that presences of the dead are to be expected in the lives of the living and that communication between the dead and the living is to be expected and dealt with. Going out on a limb, I assert that, generally, Cubans give more presence to the dead than most other people in the Westernized world and García strengthens the ties within the community of Cubans by putting this into words. The subtexts in the brief exchange

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<sup>3</sup> In the interview, Irizarry asks García whether journalism and fiction "share any affinities" (paragraph). García's answer is that "they are both forms of translation, really." García, having worked as a journalist for a long time, thinks of journalism versus fiction as "an exterior versus interior thing. In fiction, you have both, but you also try to translate those interior worlds, which are not usually the purview of journalism. It is not really why; it is more where and how. In a perfect world, a journalist is not the interpreter. This has changed, though, with Fox news!" (Irizarry, n. p.). As always, García is outspoken in her comments on society and politics.

<sup>4</sup> "Up to six in ten grieving people have 'seen' or 'heard' their dead loved one, but never mention it out of fear people will think they're mentally ill. Among widowed people, 30 to 60 per cent have experienced things like seeing their dead spouse sitting in their old chair or hearing them call out their name, according to scientists. The University of Milan researchers said there is a 'very high prevalence' of these 'post-bereavement hallucinatory experiences' (PBHEs) in those with no history of mental disorders" (Roberts, 2016).

between Celia and Felicia allow for the interpretation of an endearing and playful contact between mother and daughter, instead of a dead serious conversation. Readers might smile and the scene, which I thus understand as translating a not uncommon Cuban cultural positioning of the dead, testifies to the humour of the novel.<sup>6</sup>

The dead are also present in the lives of the living in *The Agüero Sisters*. Remarkable, and noticed by both sisters, is the circumstance that the face of one of the sisters is replaced by their dead mother's face. To Reina this makes sense: "You think the dead just lie still, Constanca? Coño, just look at yourself" (1997: 275). Constanca, on her side, "is appalled by the tenacity the deceased have for the living, by their ferocious tribal need for reunions" (1997: 259). Possibly Constanca, who has lived in the US for many years, is less comfortable with visits from the dead than Reina who has spent her whole life in Cuba, accustomed to "listening for messages from the dead" (1997: 158).

García's *King of Cuba* equally testifies to contacts between the dead and the living, as when El Comandante (the fictionalized Fidel Castro) ponders yet another intrusion of his (dead) parents, here on a plane to New York:

The pilot announced that they were flying through an electrical storm [...] When Mamá visited the tyrant during thunderstorms, she mostly complained about her inability to track down Papá in the afterlife. 'He's hiding from me,' she would grumble, adjusting her slack, ghostly breasts. 'Probably shacked up with some cualquierita.' The despot had hated hearing about his parents' marital problems when they were alive, much less so posthumously. (2013: 217)

As when Celia visualizes Jorge, we have external conditions, here in the form of an electrical storm, producing all kinds of sensations. The dead appear to have continuous access to their living family members, visiting them as they find appropriate. One of the two main characters of *King of Cuba* is Goyo from Miami, one of El Comandante's arch-rivals, who is also visited by the dead:

About a month after Papá died, he visited Goyo in the middle of the night. His father looked shrunken in his white linen suit [...] mumbling under his Panama hat. 'Where are you going, Papi?' Goyo cried out, but his father ignored him. (2013: 64)

Curiously, Goyo's father's "white linen suit" and his "Panama hat" correspond to the "white summer suit and Panama hat" that Jorge wears as he appears to Celia in the beginning daylight in *Dreaming in Cuban*. Goyo's father appears "in the middle of the night", presenting the same

<sup>3</sup> In my article "Telling it to the Dead: Borderless Communication and Scars of Trauma in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*", I focus on the character of Lourdes who is traumatized by her mother Celia's abandonment of her as a child and the rape she suffered in connection with the appropriation of her husband's property in Cuba. In the article, I read Lourdes's communication with her deceased father as a way of working through trauma.

<sup>6</sup> There is indeed a lot of humor in García's writing and she refers to it as "the saving grace of humor," offering a version of a common saying in regard to a "Cuban propensity for exaggeration ... If every exile who claimed to have a deed to his ranch on the island actually produced it, the joke goes, Cuba would be the size of Brazil" (Brown 254–55).

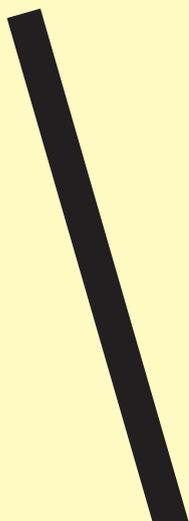


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probable imperfection of vision as when Celia visualizes her husband Jorge. A sudden vision caused by the play of light and dark hooks up with a cultural propensity to run with the vision as it makes possible not only the contact with the dead but closure and reconciliation. The same notion, articulated even clearer, is found in García's novel *Here in Berlin* (2017), where one character declares that: "Cubans [...] frequently have trouble distinguishing the living from the dead" (86). *Here in Berlin* has a more rational way of speaking about the dead and their possible activities (the novel is indeed set in Germany), but the link between the desires of the dead and those of the living is clearly present. The "visitor" frequents cemeteries, "imagining the uplifted arms of the dead," hearing "lone syllables, whisperings she couldn't decipher" and she draws the conclusion that ties in well with García's earlier fiction, also regarding the author's poetic skills: "At times it seems to her that the dead were more conversational than the living. Was she meant to escort a few of them to the page?" (2017: 107).

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Scenes that require a stretch of the imagination and scenes that verge on the surreal certainly occur in *Dreaming in Cuban*. These passages mostly focus on contacts between the dead and the living and on the impact that the dead have on the living. In my understanding, the apparitions of dead people in García's novels have led to a label of magic realism. Kim Anderson Sasser's inclusion of *Dreaming in Cuban* in *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism: Strategizing Belonging* (2014) speaks for itself. Magic realism is, to Anderson Sasser, very "malleable" and in her view "magical realism [...] is flexible enough to structure diverse projects and even divergent, incompatible views" (2). In contrast to my reading, Kim Anderson Sasser reads the scene where Celia experiences a visit from Jorge as magic realism. Furthermore, she also reads Jorge's "magical appearance," as "dramatiz[ing] a communication breakdown" (2014: 173). It must be the fact that Celia cannot read Jorge's lips that leads Anderson Sasser to conclude that this is a "communication breakdown." In contrast, I understand the soundless apparition of Jorge as, partly, yet one more boundary against magic realism. And the many props of psychological nature left lying about by the author, so to speak, trouble a categorization of the event as magic realist. However, as do I, Anderson Sasser lingers with the opening scene of *Dreaming in Cuban* where Celia sights Jorge. Where I find a desirable goodbye scene much needed for Celia, opening a path towards

reconciliation with Jorge's death and their long and cumbersome life together, Anderson Sasser sees "a moment of failed interaction, and thus disappointment" (ibid.). Though we differ in the interpretation of the passage, Anderson Sasser's reading of the scene confirms the importance of the scene and its literary value. Shannin Schroeder also includes García in the North American variety of magic realism but finds that *Dreaming in Cuban's* "link with the mode is most tenuous," qualifying the idea of "tenuous" as that of being "questionable, shaky, fragile, half-hearted" (2004: 70). Schroeder does not elaborate on what García's style really is about but talks about Celia's sighting of Jorge as an "encounter [of] the supernatural in inexplicable ways" (ibid.). My view, as argued, is that Celia's sighting of Jorge is most explicable.

Cristina García has commented on her relation to magic realism: "The South American variety [of magic realism], however, particularly resonated with me and gave me a tremendous sense of possibility. What I liked to explore is the borderland between what is only remotely possible and what is utterly possible" (Brown 254). García credits Gabriel García Márquez for "just inform[ing] everything", admitting that "[i]n some way he seeps into every sentence," giving "total licence [...] to the imagination" (Kevane & Heredia 77.) Cristina García's literary style in the novels is a wink to magic realism but rationality, transparency, and logical explanations dominate these "magic" scenes. To use her own words in her novel *A Handbook to Luck* (2007), García's "magic [is] largely a matter of making ordinary things appear extraordinary with a touch of smoke and illusion" (10).

## WRITING CONFLICT TO END CONFLICT

Politically and morally we often associated the term of reconciliation with specific countries; South Africa with the well-known Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia have had long-lasting processes of reconciliation processes with the focus on "moral and political issues that arise in the aftermath of wrongdoing and conflict between persons and groups" (Radzik & Murphy). Cuba and its conflicting history in connection with and after Castro's revolution, and the decades-long exodus from the island, might still be far from real and realistic reconciliation processes but there are attempts made in that direction. 2003 saw the publication of *Cuba, la reconciliación nacional. Grupo de Trabajo, Memoria, Verdad y Justicia*, also translated into *Cuban National Reconciliation. Task Force on Memory, Truth, and Justice*. There is a paperback from the same year in Spanish, but the English version is only available on the Web. The project was carried out by Cuban scholars not living in Cuba, and this at a point in time when, in contrast to the countries mentioned above, a change of regime in Cuba had not taken place: "We were not a truth commission. Deciding whether or not to convene a truth commission will be the prerogative of Cubans on the island once a transition from the current regime is in process" (*Cuban National Reconciliation* n.p.)<sup>7</sup> I understand Cristina García's three novels to further the

<sup>7</sup>"Our aim was to do some of the background work that might prove useful to those who actually engage these matters in the future. Only then and by them will it be possible - responding to new political realities in Cuba - to determine what course to follow regarding past human rights violations" (*Cuban National Reconciliation*).

idea that the national reconciliation regarding Cuba must be preceded by a healing of the divided nation. Through her fiction, García takes active part in the processes of reconciliation, advancing an improvement in the realms of behavior, interactions, attitudes and expectations (Radzik & Murphy).

Cristina García grew up in New York, after coming to the US at the age of 2. In 1987, as a journalist for the Miami Bureau Chief for *TIME Magazine*, she felt that her limitations of “one-page articles” would not suffice to describe her new experience in Miami of “being an exile within an exile community”:

I'd never been so shunned in my life as I was in Miami among the Cubans. [...] I had thought in a weird way it would be a kind of homecoming. I mean, I understood the exile, the trauma, from my parents, but to be surrounded by it, that was a whole other order of asphyxiation. [...] It was so striking to me that I think that's what made me want to start writing. (Wallace)

## In *Dreaming in Cuban*, García starts writing conflict to end conflict, with young Pilar shouldering the task of moving reconciliation forward by identifying conflict in order to end conflict.

García's fictional chronicling of unsolvable conflicts testifies, I argue, to the desire to end conflict. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Celia and Lourdes represent two extreme political positions regarding the Cuban socialist regime. Celia's position is crystal clear at the very opening of the novel:

Square by square, she searches the nights for adversaries [...] No sign of gusano traitors. [...] From her porch, Celia could spot another Bay of Pigs invasion before it happened. She would be feted at the palace, serenaded by a brass orchestra, seduced by El Líder himself on a red velvet divan. (1992: 3)

Celia is devoted to the Revolution, honoured by the “neighbourhood committee” having chosen her house as a “primary lookout” (ibid.).<sup>8</sup> Celia's daughter Lourdes, exiled in New York, fiercely expresses her resentment to everything connected with socialist Cuba throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, Lourdes is back in Cuba, visiting Cuba so as not to lose her daughter Pilar who, above all,

<sup>8</sup> The passage also alludes to the cult around Fidel Castro as the supposed object of much female Cuban sexual desire.

is the character dreaming in Cuban. Lourdes's position is, just as Celia's, crystal clear; Lourdes is a die-hard anti-Castro Cuban also in the streets of Havana:

'Look at those American cars. They're held together with rubber bands and paper clips and still work better than the new Russian ones. *Oye!* she calls out to the bystanders. 'You could have Cadillacs with leather interiors! Air conditioning! Automatic windows! You wouldn't have to move your arms in the heat!' Then she turns to me, her face indignant. 'Look how they laugh, Pilar! Like idiots! They can't understand a word I'm saying! Their heads are filled with too much *compañero* this and *compañera* that! They're brainwashed, that's what they are!' (1992: 221)

Lourdes's view, now directly expressed to Cubans in Cuba, is familiar to Pilar, a die-hard position shared by many exiled Cubans in the US. Listening to her mother roaring to an audience of a few Cubans in the street – and obviously Lourdes's tirade is in Spanish substantiating García's feeling that her novel was "an act of translation" – Pilar takes in the situation, pulling her mother from "the growing crowd," thinking that "[t]he language she speaks is lost to them. It's another idiom entirely" (1992: 221). Pilar's desire is to bring together both parts of her existence, the Cuban and the New York identities. She strives to move beyond the conflicts by acknowledging and articulating the very same conflicts. To Pilar, the conflicts between Cuba and the US are embodied by her grandmother Celia and her mother Lourdes. The reconciliation is, however, already begun through Pilar's witnessing of the event and her empathy towards her mother. As a result of her visit to Cuba and to Abuela Celia, Pilar reconciles the divisiveness regarding her own belonging. She concludes that she belongs both in Cuba and the US: "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" (1992: 236). Pilar, Lourdes and Celia appear to be inspired by García's experiences of having a family in the US who was "frothing-at-the-mouth anti-Castro," and of her meeting in Cuba in 1984 with her grandmother with whom she developed "a strong relationship" (Kevane & Heredia 70). Through the contact with her grandmother, García has stated that she understood that many accounts that she had heard from her mother in the US were "distorted" and that "nostalgia and anger had clouded her [mother's] vision of events" (ibid.). Fictionalizing the experience, I say that *Dreaming in Cuban* translates the original experience: "It's not just our personal history that gets mangled. Mom filters other people's lives through her distorting lens" (1992: 176).

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, García starts writing conflict to end conflict, with young Pilar shouldering the task of moving reconciliation forward by identifying conflict in order to end conflict. There is, thus, a definitive aspiration of moving beyond the conflicting views. Ellen McCracken presents a very different view in her influential work *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* (1999), finding that "García emphasizes a postmodern indeterminacy, 'grayness,' and multivocal presentation of reality" (23). McCracken fails, in my opinion, to detect the determination and the very opposite of "grayness" in, for example, Pilar's actions and thoughts. McCracken's postmodern reading of *Dreaming in Cuban* is set on an "unfinalizability of the text

[which] parallels its refusal to invoke the closure of a single truth about the Cuban Revolution or the Cuban experience of exile in the United States” (23). McCracken’s way of reasoning is highly debatable given Pilar’s intention of finding (political) closure. Certainly, Pilar’s closure might mean an acknowledgment of the conflicting views but, nevertheless, Pilar’s yearning for “going south” should not be seen as a wish to find “a single truth” about Cuba and about the realities of Cubans in Cuba – Pilar travels to Cuba to find out not only where she belongs but to understand better the very essence of the conflicts. Pilar has a conclusive observation on the hardships of people in Cuba: “I have to admit it’s tougher here than I expected, but at least everyone seems to have the bare necessities” (234-35). Pilar went to Cuba to find facts and a personal understanding of Cuba and the Cuban society, and her visit is, partly, motivated by her wish to experience a counterpart to her mother Lourdes’s total rejection of the Cuban socialist society. Contrary to my understanding of *Dreaming in Cuban* as presenting, or translating, political polarizations in order to acknowledge and move beyond these polarizations, McCracken sees the “multivocality” of the novel as “facilitat[ing] a range of reading positions that, by pleasing many sides, helps to sell books” (24). In McCracken’s reading, García’s first novel is a “postmodern commodity, a novel in which truth is decentered and political correctness eschewed, a book in which people of diverse political persuasiveness can find perspectives with which they agree” (ibid). In *Dreaming in Cuban*, in McCracken’s view, everything goes. Marta Caminero-Santangelo shares my view in *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* (2007) where she understands the multivocality as “presenting a “progressive vision against which the various positions on Castro are measured”: “García presents a nuanced portrayal of Castro’s revolution as addressing certain problems (for example, those of extreme poverty) while remaining seriously flawed according to other liberal/progressive criteria (e.g., with regard to civil liberties)” (177-178).

García, thus, voices the extreme dividing lines between Cuban *revolucionarios* and die-hard anti-Castro Cuban exiles. She does it in *Dreaming in Cuban*, and no less in her second novel, *The Agüero Sisters* (1997). Visiting her sister Constanca in Miami, Reina reflects on how politics are expressed through choice of words:

Reina likes to listen to the reactionary exile stations in Miami best. They play the best music and the most outrageous lies on the air. [...] The minute anyone learns that Reina recently arrived from Cuba, they expect her to roundly denounce the revolution [...] These pride-engorged cubanos want her to crucify El Comandante, repudiate even the good things he’s done for the country. What’s the use of learning to read, they say, if all you get is that comiemierda propaganda? Of course you get free health care! How else can you afford even a measly cotton swab on your salaries de porquería? The other day, Reina’s vernacular slipped, and she called the Winn-Dixie cashier *compañera* by mistake. Well, all hell broke loose on the checkout line, and a dozen people nearly came to blows! *El exilio*, Reina is convinced, is the virulent flip side of Communist intolerance. (196-97)

Reina’s daughter Dulce blatantly accounts for the state of affairs through grim examples: “I heard of one family committing their grandmother to an asylum to get her apartment in Old Havana, of a brother killing his twin over a used battery for his Chevrolet” (56). Dulce Fuerte, her last name translating into “strong”, also comments on the currency of sex in Cuba: “it takes an occasional

novio [boyfriend] to get by" (52), positing that "[s]ex is the only thing they can't ration in Havana" (51). The inclusion of the Cuban *jineterismo* testifies to García's familiarity with the contemporary Cuban society.<sup>9</sup> Written 5 years after *Dreaming in Cuban*, *The Agüero Sisters* demonstrates more concrete knowledge of experiences and realities of Cubans in Cuba. In this novel, there is less dreaming and more reality. *The Agüero Sisters* voices harsher criticism against the Cuban regime, without necessarily letting this criticism come from die-hard anti-Castro characters like Lourdes in *Dreaming in Cuban* or Goyo in *King of Cuba*. Dulce, exhibiting "explicit exhaustion and impatience [...] with the revolution" (Kevane & Heredia 80), voices an understanding and somewhat reconciliatory voice: "Mamá isn't the most fervent revolutionary on the island, but she's basically tolerant of the system" (García 1992: 52).

## AFTER THEY'RE GONE

Over 600 attempts were made to assassinate Fidel Castro.<sup>10</sup> He died of old age and sickness in 2016. In *King of Cuba*, Goyo Herrera, an octogenarian exiled in Miami, lives to see his nemesis dead, following "the tyrant's" daily health:

His daughter often accused Goyo of staying alive for one purpose only: to celebrate the news of the tyrant's death. He couldn't deny it. Goyo subscribed to an exile website – Hijodeputa.com – that charted, hourly, the Maximum Leaders' body temperature (it was 99.6 degrees the last time Goyo checked, at 7:00 a.m., the apparent result of a minor ear infection). (2013: 16)

Goyo feels betrayed by his daughter, "a blatant liberal who argued against the 'futile' trade embargo" (19). Goyo's sole purpose left in life is, in the first hand, killing the tyrant himself, and, in the second hand, getting news of his death. Goyo is counterposed by the fictionalized Fidel who in García's novel comes across as ludicrous and dangerous. Death is "a fate for lesser men" in the eyes of "the tyrant" who proclaims that he has got rid of the *gusanos* in Cuba, if not in the US, and the fictionalized Fidel is content for having "left his mark on history with ink, and action, and blood" (3-4). The novel presents no (partial) defense of *La Revolución* in contrast to, I would say, *Dreaming in Cuban* through Pilar. Again, García directs the headlamp at the unbending political views that have divided families. In *King of Cuba* there is no (fictional) room for any processes of reconciliation without certain figures gone.

Thus, proposing reconciliation by death, García's *King of Cuba* (2013) does away with irreconcilable principles by having the two protagonists, the fictionalized Fidel Castro and an exiled octogenarian, die at the end of the novel. A gun shot and possible heart attacks leave the reader certain of only one thing, the arch enemies have both died, one of them representing

<sup>9</sup> Julie Rausenberger provides a good explanation of *jineterismo* in "Queering *Jineterismo*: A Genealogy of Sexual Politics in Touristic Cuba": "The colloquial term *jineterismo* refers to the 'riding of tourists' which can include any activity or behavior associated with tourist hustling, including transactional sex" (n.p.)."

<sup>10</sup> In the preface to the second edition of *The Cuba Project: CIA Covert Operations 1959–62* by Fabián Escalante, Javier Salado Villacín states that "638 assassination attempts [were] planned against Fidel Castro" (6).

himself and the other one representing a long collective anti-Castro hatred and bitterness. *King of Cuba*, as I see it, puts forth the idea that certain people must die, both literally and figuratively, before reconciliation can begin. Boldly, one could argue, García kills the fictionalized Fidel three years before the actual death of Fidel Castro. However, García started plotting against the life of El Comandante already in *The Agüero Sisters*. Dulce reflects on the state of things in Havana:

Men from all over the world tell me that Havana is the most beautiful city they've ever seen. So when will we get it back? When will it be truly ours again? *Coño*, El Caballo has four broken legs, and no one has the courage to put him out of his misery. (1997: 53)

“El Caballo,” one of the nicknames of Fidel Castro, with all his legs broken, is wanted dead by Dulce for change to happen. Just like *Dreaming in Cuban*, *The Agüero Sisters* and *King of Cuba* form part of García’s literary project of writing conflict to end conflict. “Processes of reconciliation are designed to contribute to the improvement of relationships damaged as a result of wrongdoing” (Radzik & Murphy). García moves forward with processes of reconciliation regarding communities and individuals, not with reconciliation as an outcome which stipulates the inclusion of “apologies,” “memorials,” “truth telling,” “amnesties,” “trials and punishment,” “lustration,” “reparations,” “forgiveness,” and “participation in deliberative processes” (ibid.).

I turn to the words of political scientist María de los Angeles Torres, who writes about the politics of the Cuban exiles, and who, like Cristina García, came to the US as a child: “Reconciliation is not only about finding common grounds; it is also about understanding our differences” (21). García gives voices and bodies to characters for the “understanding of differences,” but what about the “common grounds” needed for reconciliation? Are these taken as obvious? Of course, there is kinship, cubanía, and, above all, language.<sup>11</sup> But is language, here Cuban Spanish, enough for the sharing of “common grounds”? In *The Agüero Sisters*, García draws attention to how the Spanish language differs from Cuban to Cuban, depending on geographical, historical and political location. Reina Agüero arrives in Miami in the community of exiles and reflects upon which language she should best use to make herself understood:

Reina wonders if her English will serve her better here than her quotidian Spanish. In Miami, the Cuban Spanish is so different, florid with self-pity and longing and obstinate revenge. Reina speaks a different language entirely, an explosive lexicon of hardship and bitter jokes at the government’s expense. And her sister sounds like the past. A flash-frozen language, replete with outmoded words and fifties expressions. For Constanca, time has stood linguistically still. It’s a wonder people can speak to each other. (1997: 236)

Perhaps more than language, the “common grounds” consist of the sharing of culture, partly the culture in which the dead are sought by and understood as seeking the living. Three years after *Dreaming in Cuban* was published, cultural critic Coco Fusco gives a prominent position to García

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<sup>11</sup> Coco Fusco emphasizes García’s cubanía: “The cubanía evoked by Cristina García in her novel *Dreaming in Cuban* floats effortlessly across borders, as family members separated by geography, politics, and even death communicate with one another” (20).

and her novel as advancing reconciliation processes: “That a generational split distinguishes political and cultural sensibilities inside and outside Cuba is now undisputable; those involved in culture are not waiting for political change to happen first” (19).

Cristina García gets the last words in this section on reconciliation work. In an interview in 2016 she speaks about the inspiration to *Dreaming in Cuban*, but her words certainly harmonize with *The Agüero Sisters* and *King of Cuba* as well:

What inspired me was the fact that my parents’ generation is on its last legs. I wondered if anyone, aside from their own self-aggrandizing, had really chronicled them or done them justice in fiction. Of course, I couldn’t help skewering and parodying them a little – it was too irresistible; I’m only human. But it was time. [...] I also wanted to give a more nuanced voice to the sixty-year shouting match between Cuba and its exiles. (Santos 207)

Between the covers of her novels discussed here, García stages this “shouting match,” chronicling the “last obsessions” of (arch) enemies (*ibid.*). And consistently, alongside her “skewering and parodying,” García shows sympathy and understanding for her characters and for their need to hold on to certain (political) opinions: “Mom’s views are strictly black-and-white. It’s how she survives” (2016: 26).

## CODA: FICTION AS A TRANSLATOR OF REALITY

As an immigrant in the US, Lourdes’s heart goes out to that which is left without translation:

She ponders the transmigrations from the southern latitudes, the millions moving north. What happens to their languages? The warm burial grounds they leave behind? What of their passions lying stiff and untranslated in their breasts? (García 1992: 73)

Cristina García comes to the protagonist’s rescue, translating passions and languages through her fiction. To claim that fiction is a language of its own is not uncommon and not contentious. To claim that fiction translates reality, however, is less common. Ideas of reality as *interpreted* or *represented* by fiction respectively translated by fiction all originate from the notion that there is a relation between fiction and reality, that fiction and reality hook up in certain ways. (I simply skip over the poststructuralist model which, generally and unreservedly, severs text from reality). I understand García’s novels here discussed as a sort of “life writing”, and Karpinski’s *Borrowed Tongues: Life Writing, Migration, and Translation* provides support for my model of seeing fiction as translating reality: “In the landscape where migrancy and translation are inextricably linked, people affected by larger historical shifts, past and present, turn to life narrative as a means of translating their lived experiences into texts” (1). Karpinski stresses that “[t]he act of translation is necessarily dialogic” and that, and here Karpinski invokes Ricoeur, the “translator who recognizes the absolute otherness of the other” will be rewarded (35). García excels, I believe, in recognizing the “otherness of the other.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Karpinski writes that “[a]ccording to Benjamin [Karpinsky references Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator”], translation is transformative rather than imitative in that it makes the target language ‘grow’ at the same time as it ensures survival of the original by making a foreign text perform new meanings in the target culture” (8).

In contrast to an interpretation, a translation signals its otherness. Similarly, fiction signals its otherness regarding reality, without necessarily renouncing its close relation to reality. My model makes it possible to speak of an improved precision between fiction and reality precisely through the signaled “otherness” of the translation. At one point in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar’s words on her mother Lourdes’ English express this idea of an enhanced precision through translation: “And her English, her immigrant English, has a touch of otherness that makes it unintentionally precise” (176-77). Lourdes painstakingly translates words from Spanish into English and the “precision” that Pilar finds in her mother’s English comes from the words and phrases being stripped of embedded cultural and linguistic structures. Pilar’s observation reflects the idea of a translation always signaling its own otherness, or foreignness, while still maintaining its faithfulness.<sup>13</sup>

Fiction is an art form in which realities thrive. With Helena María Viramontes, Chicana author and essayist, and author Doris Lessing, I attempt to close in on the link between fiction and reality. And just as a translation refers to an original, I see fiction as referring to reality. Viramontes has an elegant way of articulating the vulnerable but tenable link between fiction and the world outside of fiction. In her essay “The Writes Ofrenda,” Viramontes writes about a fear that she shares with many women of color and the many hardships the communities of color – among these the Chicano/a community– face: “My brothers and sisters suffer the scourages (sic) of alcoholism; drug, child, physical abuse; domestic violence; police brutality; unequal access to healthcare and education; environmental racism; toxins from the burning of other people’s profits, and on and on” (128). Viramontes sees her writing as standing between hope and hopelessness: “Writing is the only way I know how to pray” (ibid.). The connection between fiction and reality that she experiences is distinctly expressed: “Fiction is as close as I can get to understanding reality” (127). As little as Viramontes expands on this, what she invokes is what could be called the power of fiction. Doris Lessing, a master of many genres, hints at what one could think of as the same power of fiction. She is no more explicit than Viramontes as to why fiction has its special power: “I have to conclude that fiction is better at ‘the truth’ than a factual record. Why this should be so is a very large subject and one I don’t begin to understand.”<sup>14</sup> In *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing, among other things, examines the relationship between language and experience and finds language faulty as she finds that “there is a thinning of language against the density of our experience” (273). Though frustrated with “words,” I understand Lessing to hold fiction as being more reliable than other modes of language when it comes to transmitting and knowing “the real experience”:

Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want. Perhaps better with music? But music attacks my inner ear like an antagonist, it’s not my world. The fact is, the real experience can’t be described. I think, bitterly, that a row of asterisks, like an old-fashioned novel, might be better. (549)

<sup>13</sup> As far as I understand, the matter of whether a translation of, for example, a poem or a novel should signal its “otherness” regarding the original is debatable.

<sup>14</sup> Lessing’s words come from her 1993 “Preface” to *The Golden Notebook* and are also quoted in the “Biographical Sketch” that forms part of the Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition published in 2007 (10).

Lessing understands experience to surpass words but not its knowing. Her struggle is to find words, patterns, and structures that render the knowing of the experience. Despite the somewhat enigmatic connection between “asterisks” and a “novel,” Lessing must be understood as regarding the novel as being her best mean to “describe” experiences.

The idea that (the language of) fiction translates (the language of) reality is, I propose, viable and applicable. Invoking Viramontes and Lessing, I posit the reader as competent in both “languages,” the language of fiction and that of reality. This competence makes it possible to assess the translation, for example a novel like *Dreaming in Cuban*, and, to speak with terminology from translation studies, to assess the correspondence between the so-called source language (reality) and the target language (fiction). Importantly, one should bear in mind the vast difference between translating, for example, a scientific report versus a poem. Correspondence between the source language and the target language is important in both cases but the correspondence takes different forms. Also, the more proficiency we have in reading, writing, and understanding (the language of) fiction, the easier it will be for us to assess the translation, that is, the adequacy of fiction in its mode of translating reality.<sup>15</sup>

The model of fiction as translation of reality is, of course, an aspiration to get intimately close to reality, through words. To venture into discussions around the nature of reality and the ways we dispose of to “read” and understand reality would entail depths and lengths of discussions that fall beyond the scope of this article. Whether (the language of) reality *can* be accessible in other ways than in translation is not the topic of discussion here. So, should my interest in seeing fiction as a translator of reality be regarded as an attempt at “upping” the status of fiction as a means of expressing a close(r) relation to reality? To a certain extent I would say yes. I believe that this model is more successful than ideas of *representation* and *interpretation* that, I suggest, practically have played out their roles due to a maze of connotations and explanations of how, exactly, these link fiction to reality.

*Dreaming in Cuban* started out as a poem and after writing about a hundred pages the author was “surprised” to find out that she was working on a novel (Brown 249). García describes that “the sense of not fitting in either in Havana, or in Miami, the heart of the Cuban exile community, made me start questioning my own identity. Where did I belong? What did it mean to be Cuban? And the poetry made me feverish to write” (ibid.). In this interview, García also clearly lays down what being Cuban means to her: “There are many ways to be Cuban and I resist the notion that to be Cuban is to hold particular political views or act in certain circumscribed ways” (ibid.). Critics, scholars, politicians deal with realities and reconciliation work, and, as I have argued, so does Cristina García in her fiction.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Translation studies and theories include an abundance of ideas on the relation between an original and its translation. Karpinsky goes through theorists like Paul Ricoeur and his ideas on “equivalence without adequacy” and “equivalence without identity” and Derrida and his thoughts on “the performative dimension of translation” as opposed to “the representative or reproductive” (Karpinsky, 2012, 8–9). The concept of “equivalence without adequacy” belonging to Ricoeur’s essays *On Translation* and cited by Karpinski would certainly be worth exploring in an extended exploration of fiction as a translator of reality (35).

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