



# Women, Spirits, and the Island: Magical Realism and Gynocentric Memory in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*

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## Abstract

*This article delves into the ways in which Dreaming in Cuban (1992) by Cristina García utilises magical realism as a gynocentric storytelling technique to express cultural memory among three female Cuban generations: Celia del Pino, Lourdes, and Pilar. In her work, García weaves together a feminine epistemology that emphasises the active living, transmission, and transformation of memory via the use of supernatural aspects, including telepathic contact, ancestral spirits, prophetic dreams, and embodied hauntings. Pilar uses art and intuition as a mediator between realms. At the same time, Celia stays spiritually tied to the island, Lourdes violently erases her history in Brooklyn, and both women navigate emotional tragedy, political turmoil, and diasporic relocation in different ways. The magical realism structure of the book allows for a rethinking of Cuban identity that places an emphasis on the agency of women, the strength of the human spirit, and the bonds between different generations. In this case, magical realism serves as a feminist approach, refusing to be used as an ornamental literary device. It challenges patriarchal history and seeks agency via emotional, spiritual, and corporeal forms of memory. By showing how magical realism, particularly based on women's experiences, may be a potent tool for cultural resistance and preservation in the midst of exile and fragmentation, this work adds to the body of postcolonial and diaspora studies.*

**Keywords:** magical realism, gynocentrism, cultural memory, diaspora, female agency, intergenerational trauma, spiritual haunting, postcolonial feminism, narrative resistance.

## Introduction

In *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), Cristina García weaves the private lives of three generations of women in the del Pino-Puente family via the shattered geographies of Havana and Brooklyn, making it a foundational work of Cuban-American and Latin writing. The narrative polyphony and lyrical writing of the book bring to life the many ways in which the Cuban identity of the late 20th century was shaped by revolution, exile, and diaspora. At the core of García's style is the use of

magical realism, which she does not use as a narrative flourish but rather as a “cultural epistemology” that “accommodates the paradoxes of postcolonial and diasporic existence” (Faris and Zamora 5). Within this perspective, the otherworldly (ghosts, telepathy, etc.) is not at odds with but rather interwoven with historical fact, particularly as it pertains to historically oppressed and gendered experiences. A gynocentric epistemology that emphasises female subjectivity, bodily knowledge, and matrilineal transmission has received less critical



attention than the novel's treatment of memory, exile, and cultural dislocation, which scholars like Marta Caminero-Santangelo and Julie Barak have fruitfully examined. Intergenerational haunting is shown as a means of resistance and continuity in García's use of magical realism, which the author employs as a feminist tactic to recover cultural memory that has been erased by patriarchal and nationalist forces. The research shows how spirits, dreams, and emotional attachments become places of action in diaspora via readings of Celia, Lourdes, and Pilar. This article begins by laying out the theoretical groundwork for magical realism and gynocentrism; it then goes on to analyse the ways in which the book's female protagonists deal with memory and the supernatural; and lastly, it argues that the novel has wider feminist and postcolonial narrative practice implications.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study examines *Dreaming in Cuban* via the theoretical lenses of diaspora theory, cultural memory studies, and feminist viewpoint theory, shedding light on the gynocentric structure of magical realism in the novel. "The lives and experiences of women... provide a standpoint from which to understand the world" (Hartsock 285), according to Nancy Hartsock's feminist standpoint theory. This perspective contradicts prevailing, masculinist epistemologies. Knowledge in García's story does not arise from abstract reasoning but from embodied, emotional, and intergenerational female experience, making this viewpoint vital for comprehending the narrative. Additionally, Marianne Hirsch's theory of "postmemory" (the passing on of painful memories to subsequent generations without first experiencing them) provides context for how Pilar inherited the emotional, rather than intellectual, legacies of Celia's yearning and Lourdes' silences (Hirsch 22). Objects such as Pilar's tattoos or Celia's pearl earrings serve as mnemonic anchors throughout diaspora, as further illuminated by Pierre Nora's "sites of memory" (Nora 7). Paul Gilroy thinks that diasporic identities are formed via "routes" rather than "roots," perpetuated by movable, sometimes

ghostly, attachments (Gilroy 190), and that memory is neither stable nor territorial in the Cuban-American context. In a similar vein, Stefano Vecchiola says that when people are "exiled, memory becomes a lived haunting," meaning that they continue to feel emotional connections to their country and ancestors via intuition and dreams (Vecchiola 112). The narrative form that may accommodate these tensions is magical realism. It mediates between historical trauma (e.g., sexual assault, political repression, and the Cuban Revolution) and the mystical (e.g., telepathy, ancestral voices, and prophetic visions). "The female body often functions as both site and sight of narrative disruption," writes Lucille Kerr of Latin American women writers, "where magical elements emerge from the margins of patriarchal space" (Kerr 176). Magical realism as a gynocentric epistemology of memory is what this disruption is not escape but reclamation in García's book.

### **Discussion**

#### **Celia del Pino: Memory, Longing, and Spiritual Presence**

As the spiritual and matriarchal centre of *Dreaming in Cuban*, Celia del Pino personifies a kind of cultural memory that is sensual, unwavering, and intricately bound up with the Cuban environment. From her vantage point on the Malecon, she composes unsent letters to her Spanish boyfriend Gustavo, who has passed away, and holds devotional vigils that combine grieving with writing. Active memory, rather than passivity, is shown by these actions; they constitute what Pierre Nora may call a "site of memory" materialised (Nora 8). According to García, her body acts as a repository for memories. The pearl earrings she wears "like armour" and the white gloves she wears even in tropical heat are more than just fashion choices; they are representations of her dignity, her loss, and her unwavering self-possession (García 11). Importantly, Celia's bond with Cuba goes beyond its physical location; she has a spiritual connection to the island, "hearing the sea even when it is calm" and having conversations with the deceased as if they were



neighbours (García 23). The narrative climax of this mystical attunement occurs when Celia forms a telepathic connection with her granddaughter Pilar, who resides in Brooklyn but can dream about Celia and feel her emotions from across the ocean. Postmemory in the hands of García transforms into a supernatural, bodily conduit—"a matrilineal current of knowing" that transcends geographical and logical limitations, as pointed out by Marianne Hirsch, who adds that postmemory typically functions "through imaginative investment and projection" (Hirsch 24). Even while critics like Julie Barak have pointed out that Celia's "devotion borders on obsession," it is this same fixation that allows culture to endure despite revolutionary upheaval and exile (Barak 160). Politically, Celia's personal sorrow and love don't matter since official Cuban historical narratives are patriarchal, nationalist, and often repressive. However, García views her thought-provoking "madness" as clairvoyant resistance rather than disease. Nightly communions with spirits and the sea become acts of epistemic disobedience for Celia in a culture that requires women's silence especially on desire, loss, and dissent. According to Lucille Kerr, "female characters who speak to ghosts or hear voices are not mad; they occupy alternative epistemological spaces" (Kerr 178), who is analysing Latin American women's literature. So, history does not leave Celia behind; rather, she carries history in her physical form, her ceremonial practices, and her steadfast spiritual presence.

### **Lourdes Puente: Exile, Trauma, and the Rejection of Magic**

A life in Brooklyn characterised by a strict rationality and business ambition, Lourdes Puente represents the catastrophic rupture of exile. These traits serve as defence mechanisms against unresolved personal and national traumas. Lourdes, who was exiled and raped during the Bay of Pigs invasion, recreates herself via her bakery, "Yankee Doodle Bake Shop," where she "bakes American pies with a vengeance" (García 42), exemplifying a capitalist self-reliance that is ferociously controlled. She represses rather than liberates herself by embracing American materialism

and pragmatism; she destroys her ancestral spirituality and feminine rituals by burning her Santería beads, the most significant act of her disconnection from her Cuban heritage (García 89). But "the past in Cuban-American narrative is never fully exorcised; it returns in the body, in dreams, in silence" (Caminero-Santangelo 74), according to Marta Caminero-Santangelo. No matter how much she denies it, Lourdes is still troubled by dreams about her attack, hypervigilance, and unexplained phantom pains. Her extraordinary capacity to "feel Pilar's thoughts" and even exercise remote physical control over her daughter's body are manifestations of the magical realism that distorts rather than enhances her world (García 115). Instead of confirming a spiritual connection, these instances show the repressed returning violently. The idea that exile does not remove memories but rather transfers them to the unconscious is emphasised by her dream of a "ghostly Cuba" that "whispers her name through crumbling walls" (García 102). The path that Lourdes takes is an attack on the assimilationist branch of feminism that views cultural oblivion as synonymous with freedom. Lourdes "mistakes autonomy for forgetfulness," says Julie Barak, since she thinks that in order to be free, she has to "kill the Cuban within her" (Barak 165). But this layoff has left her spiritually empty and emotionally isolated. Celia and Pilar hold on to their feminine identities in ways that her individualist and market-logic feminism can't. The very epistemology that would help Lourdes recover is magical realism, which she rejects. In this way, García portrays her not as an antagonist but as a warning figure: a woman whose pain, intensified by diasporic displacement, causes her to confuse self-preservation with her own identity, and as a result, she breaks the matrilineal memory link that magical realism normally maintains.

### **Pilar Puente: The Diasporic Daughter and the Return of the Magical**

A second-generation Cuban-American woman torn between her grandmother's mystical roots and her mother's assimilationist fervour is embodied by Pilar



Puente, who serves as the narrative and spiritual pivot of *Dreaming in Cuban*. Pilar, an artist and self-proclaimed punk rebel, defies her mother Lourdes' idealised identity by displaying her hybridity via tattoos, dyed hair, and fiercely autonomous thinking. Her opposition, however, is profoundly epistemic and not just performative. Interacting as what Marianne Hirsch may call a "intersubjective postmemory" transformed into something supernatural, her telepathic connection with Celia—"I dream her dreams, and sometimes I think she dreams mine"—goes beyond the geographical separation between Brooklyn and Havana (García 3; Hirsch 32). Once official history and geography fail, magical realism facilitates this link, which works as an "affective technology of diaspora," preserving emotional and cultural continuity (Vecchiola 114). In reality, Pilar's tattoos are acts of remembrance, marking her flesh with Cuban emblems and personal suffering as a kind of counter-memory.

In contrast, Lourdes perceives them as a form of defiance (García 98). Dreams that she has, such as seeing Celia on the Malecón or hearing voices from the ocean that she cannot identify, are not mere imagination but rather mnemonic transmissions that her mother has tried and failed to erase. Her return to Cuba, a homecoming on a spiritual and physical level, is the pinnacle of her arc. Pilar experiences more than simply seeing her grandmother when she meets Celia; she "feels the island breathe through her," seeing ancestor spirits and the energy of shared memory (García 231). García 245, describing her last picture as "a woman with three faces: one young and angry, one old and serene, one in between, weeping and laughing at once," describes how this reunion comes to a head. Julie Barak observes that this three-part picture "synthesises rupture and continuity," graphically representing a Cuban identity that is centred on women and that accepts and even celebrates contradiction (Barak 168). Instead of seeing hybridity as division, Pilar sees it as creative multiplicity, in contrast to Lourdes's perspective. Diasporic diversity enhances, rather than diminishes, her identity. According to García, magical realism is not a feminist strategy for avoiding history but rather

a way to reimagine it from the perspective of women. The female artist in Latin American storytelling often serves as the meeting place of memory and magic, according to Lucille Kerr, who asserts that this leads to the development of new ways of knowing (Kerr 180). That Pilar does not choose one over the other—be it Cuba or America, intuition or logic, the past or the present is a central theme in her arc. Rather, she incorporates them into a fresh system of knowledge, where magical realism serves as the vocabulary for empowerment, healing, and gynocentric self-creation.

### **Magical Realism as Gynocentric Methodology**

Cristina García's use of magical realism in *Dreaming in Cuban* is skewed towards women, since it is mostly influenced by their thoughts and experiences. Intimacy, embodiment, and matrilineal transmission are at the heart of the narrative method that spirits communicate with Celia, dreams unite Pilar with her grandmother, and Lourdes' buried pain manifests in hallucinations. "Magic arises not from cosmic spectacle but from the domestic sphere—kitchens, bedrooms, letters, and bodies" (Kerr 177), according to Lucille Kerr, who notes that Latin American women writers tap into this realm. In Gabriel García Márquez's male-centred magical realism, the miraculous is frequently used for nationalist allegory or masculine mythmaking. In contrast, in García's novel, magic is not grand or public but rather whispered, passed down through generations, and experienced in the midst of women's everyday lives. She is therefore associated with a canon of feminist literature that includes works such as *In the Name of Salome* by Julia Alvarez and *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, both of which retrieve lost female histories via the employment of supernatural aspects (Allende 45; Alvarez 112). However, García breaks new ground by placing this sexist sorcery in a diasporic context. Her characters live in both Havana and Brooklyn, allowing memory to travel and spirit to transcend borders. Celia perceives the island's "sighs" and Pilar feels its "pulse" as it assumes a feminine, almost sentient quality, creating connections between land, body, and genealogy that



are in line with eco-feminist ideology. This criticism is enacted by García's merger of Cuban soil with female corporeality, as pointed out by Greta Gaard, who says that ecofeminism "connects the exploitation of nature with the subjugation of women" (Gaard 2). In addition, the book challenges official narratives that downplay diasporic belonging and gendered experience by putting women's spiritual knowledge at the centre as valid historical evidence, thereby advancing postcolonial feminist discourse. Magical realism becomes a gynocentric approach in García's hands, reclaiming memory, redefining home, and restoring agency via the silent, enduring force of women's voices throughout generations, rather than a literary cliché.

### Conclusion

*Dreaming in Cuban* is Cristina García's reinterpretation of magical realism as a sexist approach of preserving, disputing, and rebuilding Cuban women's cultural memory from one generation to the next. García shows that memory is not something that is passively passed down but rather an active, physical activity that is maintained via ancestral ties, telepathy, and dreams by focusing on Celia's spiritual unwaveringness, Lourdes' painful rupture, and Pilar's diasporic synthesis. In the end, the book presents a postcolonial feminist view of hybridity as resilience rather than fragmentation. It shows how the female body, the island, and the spirit world all come together as places of resistance, continuity, and self-making.

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