

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG (PUNK) WOMAN IN CRISTINA GARCÍA'S NOVEL *DREAMING IN CUBAN*¹

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Abstract: This paper provides an analysis of the portrayal of the young woman artist in Cristina García's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) to examine the importance of creativity and art-making processes in the development of a girl's identity. In this modern female *künstlerroman*, García reformulates stereotypical images by putting forth the independence, autonomy, rebellion, and determination of the novel's protagonist, Pilar Puente, a Cuban-born, American-raised girl who employs different art-making processes throughout her coming of age as a second-generation immigrant in the 1970s. Issues dealing with the socio-cultural construction of her girlhood are thus at the centre of inquiry and will be considered from various methodological perspectives within the field of Girlhood Studies, which addresses precisely the experiences and representations of girls in a range of formats and manifestations (Mitchel, Reid-Walsh and Kirk 2008). Furthermore, this study highlights the fact that the role of creativity and arts integration in any field are powerful interdisciplinary tools for both girls and women to connect their current reality with their desired states of mind and accomplishments. Ultimately, this article will discuss the dichotomy between what has been socially and culturally expected from girls in opposition to how this young punk artist chooses to be.

Keywords: artist-heroine; *künstlerroman*; punk art; Girlhood Studies; *Dreaming in Cuban*.

UN RETRATO DE LA ARTISTA COMO JOVEN MUJER (PUNK) EN LA NOVELA *DREAMING IN CUBAN* DE CRISTINA GARCÍA

Este artículo explora la representación de la joven artista en la novela *Dreaming in Cuban* (*Sñar en cubano*) (1992) de Cristina García para examinar la importancia de la creatividad y los procesos de creación artística en el desarrollo de la identidad de niñas, chicas y adolescentes. En esta *künstlerroman* moderna, García reformula clichés al presentar la independencia, la autonomía, la rebeldía y la determinación de la protagonista, Pilar Puente, quien, nacida en Cuba y criada en Estados Unidos, explora diferentes procesos de creación artística a lo largo de su juventud como inmigrante de segunda generación en los 1970s. Se analizará así la formación sociocultural de su

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identidad desde diversas perspectivas metodológicas de los llamados *Girlhood Studies*, que abordan las experiencias y representaciones de las chicas, niñas o adolescentes en una variedad de formatos y manifestaciones (Mitchel, Reid-Walsh y Kirk 2008). Además, se incide en que la creatividad y la integración de las artes en cualquier campo son recursos interdisciplinarios para que las niñas y las mujeres conecten su realidad con sus aspiraciones y logros. Por ello, también se aborda la dicotomía entre lo que se espera social y culturalmente de las mujeres y cómo esta joven artista punk elige ser.

Palabras clave: artista-heroína; *künstlerroman*; arte punk; *Girlhood Studies*; *Dreaming in Cuban*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cristina García, who was born in Cuba in 1958 but emigrated to the United States of America with her parents during the first wave of Cuban emigration after Fidel Castro came to power in 1960, is the first Cuban American woman ever to publish a novel written in English, the groundbreaking *Dreaming in Cuban*. The publication of this novel in 1992 brought Cristina García acclaim and a nomination for the National Book Award, and, since then, she has been considered one of the most important and provocative Cuban American voices in literature. Drawing on the problematic of memory and identity for second-generation Cuban American populations, she describes three generations of a family's life who struggle both in Cuba and the United States, while critically exploring Cuba's political situation. In an interview with Scott Brown, García cites Wallace Stevens, Federico García Lorca, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez, and William Carlos Williams as particular literary inspirations for her when writing the novel, which contributed to its lyricism (254). Her greatest inspiration was, however, a trip back to Cuba in 1984, where she learned about her broken family and, as for so many bicultural writers, regained a sense of her own culture of origin and discovered her Latin American literary heritage. That trip pushed her to face new and unsettling questions because, as she claims, “[t]he sense of not fitting in either 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” (Brown 249).

Nonetheless, *Dreaming in Cuban* is much more than a commentary on the political situation of Cuba in the late twentieth century, as it also tackles themes of family, politics, and memory, to offer a sound reflection upon other aspects of the human condition that are of a more universal nature. For instance, the novel portrays the

idea that art is one of the most important factors that help us shape one's identity and express ourselves through creativity. *Dreaming in Cuban* is indeed the portrait of rebellious aspiring artist Pilar Puente, who tries to find her place in New York, where she immigrates from Cuba with her mom, as well as within the city's the alternative art scene. It is her aspirations to become an artist, precisely, which transforms the story into a modern female *künstlerroman* in which the reader follows the protagonist's physical, mental, emotional, and artistic journey as an aspiring artist. However, as Cuban sociologist Ruben Rumbaut explains, Pilar's generation, that of young migrants, has the double task of transiting to adulthood and becoming acculturated in a new society, a challenge which they undertake at a different place from that of their parents (61).

Since girlhood extends from childhood to the beginning of adulthood, it represents a complex category encompassing various life stages and kinds of femininity, as well as differences based on class and race (Moruzi and Smith 1). In this article, issues of the cultural construction of Pilar's girlhood are thus at the centre of inquiry and will be considered from various methodological perspectives within Girlhood Studies, especially those in postcolonial girlhood studies. On the one hand, as Mitchell, Reid-Walsh and Kirk posit, Girlhood Studies focus on girlhood in ways that go beyond disciplinary boundaries and aims to provide instead a diverse approach to girlhood rather than a monolithic one, including the voices of girls themselves (ix). On the other hand, postcolonial girlhood studies/scholars explore the unique experiences of young females shaped by colonialism's lasting impacts, focusing on how race, culture, class, and nation intersect with gender to create specific oppressions and resistances. It does so by analyzing migrant identities and cultural hybridity and challenging imperial narratives through individual stories and cultural productions, like literature and media. More particularly, it examines the tension between idealized "girlhood" and the complex realities of girls in postcolonial contexts, revealing themes of displacement, identity formation, and resilience, and highlighting the young protagonist's agency and unique forms of speaking back, like it is the case with Pilar in *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Furthermore, by emphasizing identity, creativity and inspiration, this paper discusses Pilar's personal and artistic transformation throughout the novel and examines how the author uses various artmaking methods to demonstrate how the arts can aid young female aspiring artists in forming their own identity while also reinterpreting conventional images in their work. In fact, Pilar weaves her creativity into everything

she does, from exploring her relationship with family and society to asking fundamental questions about art and gender. By drawing upon cultural and literary theories (especially, identity-formation and postcolonial), as well as art and music studies, this paper examines the crisis between what is expected from girls and young women in different cultures and patriarchal societies in light of factors such as gender and race, in opposition to how García's main character chooses to be. By doing so, this research contributes to the broader discourse on identity politics and gender equity, aiming to discuss and further develop appropriate methodologies for exploring girl-related topics in literature through Girlhood Studies. In the following sections, we will first explore some of the theoretical context regarding art and the female *künstlerroman* before moving on to a more detailed analysis of the fictional text.

2. ON LIFE AND ART

It is widely believed that art transcends mere words, sounds, or paintings, helping channel and process complex emotions and experiences. Thus, Cristina García's novel delves into this topic by depicting its main character Pilar as an emerging artist, examining how creativity and the process of creating art are essential for her growth and how that can significantly influence a girl's sense of self. As American artist Edward Hopper stated: "[g]reat art is the outward expression of an inner life," which means that creative outlets like artmaking offer catharsis and a way to explore one's inner world.² Likewise, art aims to show the inner significance and essence of things, not just their outward appearance, thus capturing deeper truths. For all these reasons, the creative process can actually be crucial to a girl or a woman's right to express herself in oppressive situations.

In fact, as Daniel Serig asserts:

Artists use reflexivity to engage in a dynamic cycle of creating art to make meaning, to make sense of the world and their place in it. Influential life experiences are often the focus of reflexive thought because they are seen as having an impact on current artistic practices. But the art practice, while perhaps separated into specific time and location distinctions, interrelates with the life of the artist. In this way, the content of

² Hopper's exact quote, which encapsulates his lifelong view that true art reveals the artist's unique subconscious vision and internal world, is not tied to one specific date; it rather reflects his lifelong view that he expressed throughout his career, more notably in a 1953 journal statement and his 1959 interview by John D. Morse, whose original recording is available at www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-edward-hopper-11844.

an artist's work involves these interrelationships as the artist dialogues with the self through the material. (236)

On a similar note, visual artist Teresita Fernández (qtd. in Popova) claims that art “is always the combinatorial product of the fragments of who we are, of our combinatorial character,” and thus:

Being an artist is not just about what happens when you are in the studio. The way you live, the people you choose to love and the way you love them, the way you vote, the words that come out of your mouth, the size of the world you make for yourselves, your ability to influence the things you believe in, your obsessions, your failures – *all* of these components will also become the raw material for the art you make.

In literature, art gives the heroine – as well as the author – the opportunity to consider herself in the world and describe and question each specific location. This highlights the fact that art, and literature in this case, connects universal human experiences (like loss, suffering, understanding) beyond mere plot, making complex emotions understandable through shared feelings between artist and audience, a core idea in Leo Tolstoy's aesthetic theory. For the great Russian author, art's purpose is this emotional communication and infection of feeling, not just entertainment, allowing an artist to share a genuine emotional experience with an audience.³ In his view, literature taps into fundamental human conditions, revealing shared truths that resonate deeply with artists and readers alike. In the novel, we might notice that Pilar wants to create and make art especially whenever she feels lonely, misunderstood, or rejected, which proves that art-making is closely related to our human need to feel understood. Likewise, she needs to go through a quiet period of introspection as she travels to her homeland, Cuba, to reconnect with her roots, which ultimately enables her to awaken creatively. This “need” referred to in the novel is the fundamental drive to understand life and connect with others, which is shared not only by artists but all human beings.

3. THE FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN AND KÜNSTLERROMAN

Regarding the character of Pilar, *Dreaming in Cuban* can arguably be interpreted as either a *bildungsroman* or a *künstlerroman*; however, this paper posits that it is primarily the latter, due to significant differences between the two novel types. On the one hand, the *bildungsroman* is often called “the novel of formation” or “novel of

³ In fact, “feeling” (in Russian, *chuvstvo*) is the central term of Tolstoy's aesthetic theory. See Leo Tolstoy, “What Is Art?” (Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1904), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/64908/64908-h/64908-h.htm>.

education” (in the broad sense of the word) because it shows the development of the protagonist’s mind and character through a number of stages and a variety of experiences, often from childhood to early adulthood. On the other hand, the *künstlerroman*, also called “the artist novel,” represents the growth of either a writer or any other kind of artist, into maturity, and characteristics of the genre follow the formation of the artist almost as much as the art they strive to create.⁴ While some critics believe the boundary separating these two genres is virtually non-existent, or that the *künstlerroman* is only a “more specialized version” of the *bildungsroman* (Saunders 13), there is, in fact, a dividing line which women have been prevented from crossing as artists in literature.

As Elise Thornton states in her thesis on the *Representations of the Woman Artist in Modernist Literature*, “the figure of the artist-hero has dominated literary narratives since the Romantic period” (2). In this regard, novels like Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le Noir* (*The Red and the Black*) (1830), Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1831), Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861), Gustave Flaubert’s *L’Éducation Sentimentale* (*Sentimental Education*) (1869), Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* (1913), or Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) are recognized as the leading examples of nineteenth and twentieth-century *bildungsroman*. Consequently, much of *bildungsroman* criticism throughout the twentieth century excludes female narratives from their studies, and the *bildungsroman* is often identified as a predominantly male genre. In a similar way, the patriarchal mantra proclaiming that “[w]omen can’t paint, women can’t write” (48) imposed upon Virginia Woolf’s artist-protagonist Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) certainly represents an enduring obstacle for the woman artist at that time. With the development of the first wave of feminism, the artist-heroine begins to emerge in the literature of the twentieth century, in which modernist women writers such as Virginia Woolf herself, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, Vita Sackville-West, Kate Chopin, or Willa Cather, to name some, engage with the figure of the female artist. Their works begin to cover issues surrounding gender and artistry/creativity, which marked the shift from the traditional female *bildungsroman*

⁴ Literally, *künstlerroman* translates to English as “artist” (from the German *künstler*) and “novel” (from the French *roman*).

narrative, which typically ends in marriage,⁵ to the *künstlerroman*, where female protagonists are depicted as determined vocational artists.

Once again, Thornton further defends that:

The question of whether the female protagonists in these novels are read as developing artists is not a mere issue of taxonomy: it is about women's autonomy, education, professionalization, and their right to individual self-expression as artists. . . . These definitions have historically excluded women and by extension limited the kind of artistry they are seen to engage in. . . . Furthermore, [female *künstlerromans*] examine and reinterpret the necessary conditions needed to achieve artistic fulfillment. (2)

Another key element of women artists' resistance to the masculine ideology surrounding art has been, indeed, the literary representation, often autobiographical, of the female artist-heroine. These narratives have been repeatedly misclassified as *bildungsromane* and yet they explore the creative and artistic development of the protagonist, not simply the coming-of-age process usually depicted in this type of literary genre.

In this sense, according to Thornton:

While the figure of the woman artist had been previously ignored by critics as a significant literary figure, had been identified as an amateur to her male counterpart, or was simply given just the role of the male artist's muse, [...] the modernist examination of this figure instigated new trends in how we explore gender, women's creativity and national identity within literary studies today. (69)

Similarly, in the second wave of the feminist movement during the 1970s, critics who were concerned with the "excavation of and recovery of lost women writers and artists" (Elliot and Wallace 14) finally began to recognize a previously neglected female presence in the genre. One such publication that reasserts the genre's influence and continued strength in literature is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's groundbreaking publication *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), which happens to be the first critical study to offer a more comprehensive examination of the female *bildungsroman*.

Therefore, the question of whether the protagonist in *Dreaming in Cuban* is read as a developing artist in the *künstlerroman* tradition cuts to the heart of questions of

⁵ For example, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1869), or Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre* (1847).

feminism and female creativity. As “the figure of the female artist encodes the conflict between any empowered woman and the barriers to her achievement” (DuPlessis 84), García attempts to reach the same goal: she wants her heroine to be free to create her own identity, a step towards “a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures” (Anzaldúa 104). Ultimately, reading *Dreaming in Cuban* as a *künstlerroman* rather than a *bildungsroman* will allow us to explore the ways in which this novel examines female creativity and challenges any oppressive attitudes surrounding the role of the young woman artist.

4. GARCÍA’S ARTIST-HEROINE: PILAR PUENTE

Cristina García creates Pilar’s character loosely based on some of her own personal experiences growing up as a Cuban American adolescent in New York. In fact, she has stated that Pilar is the character she identifies with the most, acting as a kind of “alter ego” for her, she explains: “I grew up with a very bifurcated sense of myself. At home, things were intensely Cuban. In the rest of my life, it had very little meaning. I probably thought of myself, first and foremost, as a New Yorker – an urban kid with an affinity for many cultures yet beholden to none” (García qtd. in Brown 251).

Curiously enough, Pilar’s last name “Puente” means “bridge” in English, which suggests that the author might have consciously chosen Pilar’s last name because, to fully develop her identity, she must first bridge her Cuban heritage with her American life. Yet as Pilar forges her identity from various distinct linguistic and cultural contexts, her process of becoming is marked by her hybrid identity. Thus, as Jon Schneiderman points out in his analysis of the novel, García’s portrayal of Pilar “not only attempts to describe the difficulties of a hybrid existence, but also to bridge two different cultures” (7). It seems necessary to first analyze what a “typical hybrid identity” is broadly considered by researchers and theorists on this topic. For instance, Wolfgang Welsch states that “every culture is supposed to mould the whole life of the people concerned and of its individuals” (195). However, there are two main conflicts to this. On the one hand, while most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting and one home, a person who migrates adopts characteristics of that new language and new culture, which combined with the old ones create a new hybrid identity. On the other hand, if “our identities are indeed hybrid,” it becomes “increasingly difficult to describe something as entirely foreign or entirely our own”

(Welsch 200). As a result, the young second-generation immigrant is an extremely alienated subject due to the severance of ties with familial and national groups and the discordance of the two contexts in which they are caught *in-between* (Rumbaut 749).

Furthermore, Maurizio Ascari notes that “contemporary literature is a primary tool in the effort to foster intercultural understanding, a representation of human experience” (17). It is clear, then, that García is using the character of Pilar to represent a generation of immigrants who have struggled to create an identity because they were born in Cuba but raised and educated in the United States. As Gustavo Pérez Firmat describes in *Life on the Hyphen*, the experience of being a Cuban living in the United States since very young feels as “having two cultures [but] you belong wholly to neither one. You are both, you are neither: cuba-no/america-no” (7). In addition, *Dreaming in Cuban* is another example of literature’s “critical globalization,” wherein the narrative “uses knowledge of other regions or countries to disrupt habitual perceptions and practices, and to prompt a self-reflexive repositioning of the self in the global sphere” (Cuddy-Keane 546). García shows that out of the dislocations and the constant commuting between cultures, often emerge tensions, contradictions, and reconfigurations that shape and influence the artistic production of the young female artist. She also might struggle sometimes with feelings of isolation and dislocation, yet she can be sure that the journey to become an artist will take her somewhere and that she will certainly be changed.

4.1. PILAR FEELS THROUGH PAINTING

The reader is first introduced to young Pilar Puente early in the novel, when her grandmother Celia del Pino remembers Pilar’s letters sent from New York. Having grown-up in America, Pilar writes to her from Brooklyn “in a Spanish that is no longer hers,” nor that of a native speaker anymore, but awkward and “hard-edged” (García 7). However, Pilar and her grandmother share writing as a common bond because they both record their experiences, history and feelings in letters and diaries which, in the author’s words, “provide a window into [their] inner life and yearnings” (Brown 252). Thus, as a writer, García demonstrates that the inter-weaving of language can serve as a useful tool for artistic expression too. Nevertheless, when spoken and written languages seem to fail Pilar, this situation causes even more confusion in the creation of her own identity.

She then wishes to have a new language to express herself – one that she eventually finds in art.

From the beginning, readers may perceive how Pilar is always attentive to the colors and shapes that surround her and for which she displays a special sensibility that already announces her interest in painting and her artistic inclinations. She is also constantly trying to communicate her own ideas, to express herself, and when both English and Spanish languages seem to fail her, she uses painting instead. When Pilar paints, the barriers of language and words are removed, and she can describe what she feels through her art. She even concludes that, “painting is its own language. Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English” (García 59). Therefore, she wonders, “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” (García 139). The one thing that is certain in Pilar’s life is her driving desire to establish herself as an artist because art is important and liberating to her, and it helps her understand herself. For example, she shares with the reader that she feels “more comfortable” with abstract painting because “it’s more directly connected to [her] emotions” (García 233), and at the same time she acknowledges “people here [in New York] react negatively to any overt displays of soulfulness” (García 180). However, she also mentions at one point that her paintings “have been getting more and more abstract lately, violent-looking with clotted swirls of red” (García 9) which, according to Schneiderman (25), is reminiscent of Ana Mendieta, an artist that, as Cuban American interdisciplinary artist and feminist theorist Coco Fusco highlights, “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.”⁶ If art is representative of the artist’s sense of self, Pilar’s art is certainly representative of her fragmented identity and demonstrates the internal struggles she faces.

It is particularly important to note that her formative years occur during the 1970s, when social movements in U.S. such as the Women’s Rights movement sought

⁶ Ana Mendieta (Havana 1948–New York 1985) was an artist who explored her identity as a female emigrant in a work that mixed performance, photography, film, and sculpture. Born in Cuba, in 1961 she was exiled to the United States and sent to an orphanage at the age of twelve. The trauma of separation from her family, culture, and homeland became the bedrock of her artistic work. Mendieta is often connected with the Feminist art movement for her work on the fluidity of gender to blur the line between male/female identification. Available at www.artsy.net/artist/ana-mendieta/.

to open the system up for women's participation at a public, political level. However, Frances Borzello states in *A World of Our Own: Women as Artists* that controlling who has access to proper education and training is one way of preventing women from attaining the same artistic status as men (142). Before the feminist movement arose, admission into art schools was a major step forward for the aspiring woman artist. Nonetheless, as Whitney Chadwick posits, sexism towards women's art still prevailed in the community, for "hierarchie[s] of genres" and culturally conditioned stereotypes about women's creativity and role in the public sphere hindered their recognition as artists (38). Thus, when Pilar contemplates history and the role women play in it, her observations expose her frustration at the patriarchal treatment of women in history and of female artists in particular:

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 of nature, or a direct result of her association with a male painter or mentor. Nobody's even heard of feminism in art school. The male teachers and students still call the shots and get the serious attention and fellowships that further their careers. As for the women, we're supposed to make extra money modelling nude. What kind of bullshit revolution is that? (García 139-40)⁷

Consequently, Pilar's development of her own identity as a member of 1970s American society might be further complicated considering her feminist views, which also conflict with her traditionally patriarchal Cuban heritage. However, it is precisely her Cuban grandmother who encourages her as an artist that strengthens their relationship. As a result, she claims that she feels "much more connected to Abuela Celia than to Mom. Even in silence she gives me the confidence to do what I believe is right, to trust my own perceptions" (García 176). Even more, her identification with her grandmother stems not only from a close personal tie to her, but it also reflects a strong personal bond with her native Cuban culture.

In contrast, Pilar and her mother, Lourdes Puente, are divided by a lack of understanding because their personalities are polar opposites: on the one side, Pilar, as

⁷ Women painters, for example, were denied membership to national art academies like the British Royal Academy 1861, and to the École des Beaux-Arts until 1897, and were forced to adapt and find alternative "routes to professionalism" with private lessons and 40 group workshops, or ateliers, in an established male artist's studio (Borzello 30).

an artist, open-minded and optimistic; on the other side, Lourdes, whose views “are strictly black-and-white” (García 26), admits that she “has no patience for dreamers, for people who live between black and white” (García 129). Moreover, she believes that everything is what it appears to be, tends to be pessimistic, and refuses the idea of change. Above all, one of the major differences between Pilar and Lourdes is, according to Rocio Davis (64), that “Pilar is a dreamer trying to construct her identity, while her mother is firmly accepting of her newfound identity as an immigrant in a new land.” It is no wonder then that mother and daughter strongly disagree on exile politics also, and this continuing struggle between them can be examined on a metaphorical level too. The author seems to establish a parallel between patriotism and motherhood, which is exemplified in Pilar’s art.

In fact, as Mónica Fernández Jiménez notes:

While Pilar’s mother rejects talking about Cuba and idealises American society, another nostalgic usage of the imagination is implemented by Pilar, who shapes through her art the domestic history and the collective memory of this family. . . . She tries to find a third space where she can escape the ideas of fragmentation and incompleteness which deprive her from constructing new memories in the new country. (96)

As an example, when Lourdes commissions Pilar to do a large painting for the opening of her own bakery – even though at first she did not approve of her daughter’s desire to become an artist – she paints a punk Statue of Liberty, which marks a turning point in her life and in the narrative: “Liberty, thorny scars that look like barbed wire. I want to go all the way with this, to stop mucking around and 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” (García 141). Pilar’s painting, entitled “SL—76,” seems to be not only a bold statement against the United States, but a rebellious one against her mother too. Since the knowledge of cultural symbols “instinctively transform during art making processes into personal expressions of identity” (Marshall 7), Pilar’s art thus demonstrates the internal struggles she is facing to blend her two worlds: her “hybridity” is part of who she is, of how she views the world and, consequently, of how she makes art.

4.2. PILAR THINKS THROUGH MUSIC

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar's taste in music also reflects her "hybridity" as well as her sense of marginalization from the dominant American society. As a self-described punk, she listens to Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, and the Ramones, who were the most relevant musicians and key figures in New York's punk scene in the mid-to-late 1970s, when the novel takes place. Pilar openly explains what attracts her to their music and she states:

I play Lou [Reed] and Iggy Pop and this new band the Ramones whenever I paint. I love their energy, their violence, their incredible grinding guitars. 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!' (García 135)

On his part, Göran Folkestad defends that the development of a musical identity "is not only a matter of age, gender, musical taste and other preferences, but is also a result of the cultural, ethnic, religious and national contexts in which people live" (151). Pilar's choice of music is revealing in that it sheds light on her political orientation, while her connection with these artists also shows that at this point in the novel, she is still struggling to establish her own identity.

However, as Folkestad sustains:

Throughout time, people have used music as a means of expression and identification. . . . Music has always played an important part in forming the identities of individuals and of groups of people. . . . It provides a means of defining oneself as an individual belonging to and allied with a certain group, and of defining others as belonging to other groups which are separate from one's own. (Folkestad 151)

Thus, through music at least, Pilar can identify with a group within the States: the punk youth, that is, the frustrated segments of American society. Frank Fitzpatrick further suggests that "it might be simply the need to be understood and to find others like you [that] someone who feels different, or outcast, could empathize with an artist." In *Dreaming in Cuban*, young Pilar feels a strong connection to Lou Reed in particular. As the lead singer and songwriter of The Velvet Underground in the 1960s, Lou Reed helped invent punk rock while writing "about people no one else sings about – drug addicts, transvestites, the down-and-out" (García 135). Pilar also suggests that she likes Lou Reed because "you never know what he's going to do next. Lou has about twenty-five personalities. . . . I also feel like a new me sprouts and dies every day" (García 135). This passage reveals her identification with Reed's main subjects, which are disembodied people and marginal identities mainstream American culture. In a similar

thread of thought, José Esteban Muñoz explains this kind of behavior when he maintains that: “Minority, diasporic, and exiled subjects recalibrate the protocols of selfhood by insisting on the radical hybridity of the self, . . . a hybrid that contains contradicting associations, identifications, and disidentifications” (291). In contrast with Muñoz’s theories on “disidentification,” when Pilar attends a Lou Reed’s gig at a club in the Village, however, she feels even more alienated because when Reed shouts to the audience that he is from Brooklyn, which she refers to as her “adopted neighborhood,” she fails to respond: “‘I’m from Brooklyn, man!’ Lou shouts and the crowd goes wild. I don’t cheer, though. I wouldn’t cheer it either if Lou said, ‘Let’s hear it for Cuba.’ Cuba. Planet Cuba. Where the hell is that?” (García 134).

In a later attempt to find a different form of self-expression from painting, Pilar buys a bass guitar and experiments with it. She then describes her process of starting to play the instrument: “I flip straight to the album I want [...] and put on the good, thumping, straight-ahead rock and roll. 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” (García 181). It is the purchase and playing of this bass guitar that begins to give Pilar “insight about selfhood [...] and signifies progress in her struggle for a bicultural identity” (Schneiderman 44). Moreover, now she knows subconsciously that for her to grow and move forward, she needs to become independent. As Pilar herself puts it: “Everything up until this very minute [...] feels like a preparation for something. For what, I don’t know. I’m still waiting for my life to begin” (García 179).

4.3. PILAR’S DREAMING AND AWAKENING

What is clear, then, is that Pilar Puente’s formation as a woman and as an artist implies her necessary reconciliation with family, religion, love, and art. In fact, she firmly believes that if she returned to Cuba, she would be able to build an identity of her own. By the end of the novel, her strong desire to return to Cuba has not diminished yet, as she still holds vivid memories and longs to return to her native island:

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. [...] The skies looked newly washed. 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. (García 26-32)⁸

Throughout the book, Pilar repeatedly expresses her desire for roots and wonders about what life would have been like, which demonstrates the sense of displacement and the idealization of the homeland felt by people in the diaspora (McLeod 44). Similarly, in the literature of exile and migration, the role of memory becomes a key topic in the character's creation and reformulation of identity as a means of coping with the estrangement, because "memory is where self is made and remade and where politics can be imagined" (Muñoz 92).⁹ Therefore, as in most novels of formation about exiles or children of exiles, her search for her identity culminates when she finally decides to visit her homeland: "I'm going back to Cuba. I'm fed up with everything around here" (García 25). She uses her time in Cuba to become "more reflective," until she realizes that she is no longer part of Cuba's culture and that she actually misses America. In her own words: "I think about how I'm probably the only ex-punk on the island, how no one else has their ears pierced in three places. 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" (García 235). Likewise, when she sees that artists in Cuba are confronted with a depressed cultural space, she openly states: "Art is the ultimate revolution" (García 235). Consequently, the return to Cuba is "a teaching experience for her," because "she realises that there was nothing essential for creating an *inbetween* identity in the island" (Fernández Jiménez 97). Eventually, Pilar becomes fully aware that, while she loves the language, the sights, and the Cuban culture in general, she does not really belong there, and recognizes that the Cuba of her dreams is not the Cuba of the current reality:

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. . . . 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. (García 235-36)

⁸ In an interview with Chris Albani (2017), Cristina García claims that she uses the tree "as a symbol of a refuge, as essential connection to a lost or confused mythical past," because for her, "trees do represent crossroads, an opportunity for redemption and change." This interview is available at www.bombmagazine.org/articles/2007/04/01/cristina-garcia/.

⁹ In this regard, Maurice Halbwach's definition of collective memory remains central. This French sociologist's notion that "[o]ur memories remain collective, however, and are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events" (23) takes into account familial ties and national affiliation in the creation of an identity. See Maurice Halbwachs *The Collective Memory* (1980).

It is at that point of the story that she has finally found both her independence and her cultural identity. She now knows that the solution lies in accepting her hybridity, acknowledging that her place is in the United States while also recognizing her Cuban cultural heritage.

5. CONCLUSION

As the evidence above suggests, Pilar Puente's experiences, her growth, identity crises, and feelings of frustration at being misunderstood and like she does not belong are all themes that transcend any borders, whether geographical, cultural, or even time spatial. However, while an essentialist perspective on *inbetweenness* is not explicitly expressed in *Dreaming in Cuban*, exploring the island of her ancestors grounds Pilar's final understanding of her hybrid identity. Thus, the readers are left with the impression that she might be able to achieve a kind of wholeness at some point in her life as a Cuban American woman artist. Added to this, her transformation at the end of the novel unveils how art, whether it be music, painting, or literature, can be used for identity negotiation as it provides motivation and a sense of belonging to girls throughout their coming-of-age. In this regard, it becomes clear that Cristina García has reformulated stereotypical images of girlhood in this novel, because Pilar is able to choose and make her own way, despite the many obstacles, in order to find her own voice – both personal and artistic – and, in the process, create her own identity. That way, the author has boldly suggested that female artists have never been free from personal and/or social restrictions, yet they have made the most of the resources available to them and performed their own rebellious acts of self-expression in their chosen creative field.

Furthermore, by making her protagonist an aspiring artist, García has portrayed those girls and women who are brave enough to reject a patriarchal system that would not only define them as wives and mothers but would also limit and restrain their artistic autonomy. As we previously discussed, in complete opposition to traditional bildungsroman and adhering to the female künstlerroman narrative instead, the young woman artist is characterized in *Dreaming in Cuban* by an undeniable hunger to create or re-invent whatever it is in her life to break down any heavily constructed walls around her. It is indeed this type of mentality that the author accurately depicts that drives both girls and women to strive for individuality and self-expression, rather than simply conforming to societal expectations. Ultimately, this paper has shown that

insights into girls' lives derived from fictional narratives about girlhood, such as Pilar Puente's, can and do influence present-day actions concerning their lived experiences, motivating further exploration among girls and young women from various social and cultural contexts, educating and inspiring them to create the life they want for themselves despite the many challenges.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

ELENA CANIDO MUIÑO PhD, is an award-winning scholar, professor, and multidisciplinary artist whose research bridges issues of identity, creativity, culture, and the arts. She has successfully published articles and presented papers at both national and international conferences on such topics, her primary goal being to defend the essential value of the arts and humanities for both individuals and society alike. Canido Muiño discusses these issues not only from an academic point of view but also inspired by her own artistic journey, in which her professional practice from a very young age in different creative fields, from music and literature to drama, film, and photography, has informed her understanding of the artistic creation and its human, historical, and socio-cultural connections. She was awarded, indeed, for her thesis *Creative Muse: The Young Female Artist and the Role of Arts in Women's Künstlerromans*, in which she precisely delves on the present article's themes.

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