

LA ALTERNANCIA DE CÓDIGOS LITERARIOS
Y LA CONQUISTA DE LECTORES *DREAMING*
IN CUBAN, DE CRISTINA GARCÍA

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RÉSUMÉ

Comme de nombreux auteurs d'origine hispanique qui écrivent aux États-Unis d'Amérique, la romancière d'origine cubaine Cristina García a coutume d'introduire, à l'occasion, des mots, des expressions et des poèmes en espagnol dans son roman à succès *Dreaming in Cuban*. En plus du fait que de telles insertions transmettent des modèles discursifs, elles rendent présent une forme de lien psychologique entre l'auteur et le lecteur empirique dans le cadre du monde fictif fourni par son oeuvre. Le but de notre propos est d'analyser l'usage littéraire de quelques-uns des sentiments exprimés en espagnol et de leur lecture de la part des anglophones et des bilingues. Tandis que les lecteurs anglophones accueillent une interprétation ouverte qui récupère les aspects multiculturels du texte, c'est par une interprétation unique et précise que semblent polarisés les lecteurs bilingues de l'ouvrage.

SAMENVATTING

De schrijfster Cristina García, die van Cubaanse afkomst is, gebruikt Spaanse woorden, uitdrukkingen en gedichten in haar bekende roman *Dreaming in Cuban*, zoals trouwens ook vele andere auteurs van Latijns-amerikaanse oorsprong die in de Verenigde Staten leven. Meer dan een discours kwestie drukt het uit een psychologische band van de auteur met de lezer in de fantasie-wereld van de roman. Dit artikel analyseert het literaire gebruik van zulke uitdrukkingen in het Spaans en hoe de Engels- of tweetalige lezer ermee omgaat. De Engelstalige lezers zien meer de multiculturele aspecten van de text, terwijl de twee-talige lezers meer nelgen naar een gesloten en eenduidige interpretatie.

CRÍTICA

LITERARY CODE SWITCHING AND THE CREATION OF READERS IN CRISTINA GARCÍA'S *DREAMING IN CUBAN*

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ABSTRACT

Like many Hispanic authors writing in the United States, the Cuban-born novelist Cristina García inserts occasional words, phrases and poems in Spanish into her best-selling novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*. Rather than reflecting natural speech patterns, these insertions are highly literary and determine in part the psychological attachment of the empirical reader to the fictitious world of the novel. This essay addresses the ways in which this literary use of Spanish affects both monolingual, English-speaking readers and bilingual readers of English and Spanish.

While English-only readers appreciate the open, multicultural aspects of the text, bilingual readers experience a unique understanding.

RESUMEN

Como muchos autores de origen hispánico que escriben en los Estados Unidos, la novelista de origen cubano Cristina García suele introducir palabras ocasionales, expresiones y poemas en castellano en su exitosa novela *Dreaming in Cuban*. Más allá de que tales inserciones transmitan patrones discursivos, está presente una suerte de vínculo psicológico del autor con el lector empírico en el marco del mundo ficticio proporcionado por la obra. El presente trabajo analiza el uso literario de algunos sentimientos expresados en castellano y su lectura por parte de angloparlantes y bilingües. Mientras los lectores angloparlantes tienen acceso a una interpretación abierta, que rescata aspectos multiculturales del texto, los lectores bilingües parecen coincidir en una interpretación única y precisa.

With the critical acclaim accorded *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), and *The Agüero Sisters* (1997), novelist Cristina García has assured her place within the literary powerhouse of Latina writers of prose fiction who began publishing in the U.S. in the late 1980's. Foremost among this

group are the Cuban-born García, the Chicanas Sandra Cisneros and Denise Chávez, and Julia Álvarez, born in New York but raised in the Dominican Republic. Their writings, though varied in style and genre, reveal some common narrative traits: heroines struggle in unexpected ways to come to terms with a bicultural world, literary techniques can be traced through both Anglo and Hispanic traditions, and works are written principally, though not exclusively, in English.

García's *Dreaming in Cuban* illustrates well the multiple ways in which the insertion of Spanish into a novel written in English effects monolingual and bilingual readers. Certainly this juxtaposition of languages is only one of many oppositions that define the novel. In an early review, Janet Reif captures both the rhythm and the style of *Dreaming in Cuban* when she states: "García juggles opposing life forces like a skilled magician accustomed to tossing into the air fiery objects that would explode if they came into contact" (1992, 117). Among these opposing forces, readers find three generations of characters with all of the conflicts inherent in cross-generational relationships, the post-revolutionary political views and lifestyles of Cubans and U.S. Cuban-Americans, stark realism and fantasy, humor and violence, prose and poetry, and multiple narrators. Written in English and marketed in the U.S. to a monolingual, English-speaking public, the novel is peppered with words, short phrases, and occasional poems written in Spanish.

Relying in part on these oppositions, *Dreaming in Cuban* depicts a complicated, multilayered cultural world. In this regard the novel fits comfortably with postmodern art in general. As John McGowan explains:

Unlike the heroic modernist, who created works out of pure imagination, the postmodern artist works with cultural givens, trying to manipulate them in various ways (parody, pastiche, collage, juxtaposition) for various ends. The ultimate aim is to appropriate these materials in such a way as to avoid being utterly dominated by them [1994, 587].

García's characters confront three vastly different, yet inextricably linked cultures. The socialist ideology and economic struggle that characterize life in contemporary Cuba contrasts with the equally strident political viewpoints of the prosperous yet sometimes isolated Cuban-American communities of south Florida. The Cuban community in New York provides a third society, for it forms part of a larger pattern of world-wide emigration and displacement. The struggle to adapt to these

diverse cultural realities alternately dominates and liberates individual personalities.

The interplay of two languages is an ever-present cultural given in the immigrant world of *Dreaming in Cuban* and as such is a frequent concern for the two generations of the del Pino family residing in the U.S. Their ambivalent feelings are typical of the role that language plays in the novel as a whole. Lourdes, who immigrates as an adult with her husband and daughter, relishes her new language as a type of rebirth: "Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful [...] She welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention" (1992, 73). She nevertheless recognizes and accepts the emotional intensity associated with a first language:

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? [1992, 73].

This ambivalence also characterizes Pilar, Lourdes's daughter. Although Pilar grows up as an American, essentially bilingual but with English as her primary language, she seeks forms of communication that avoid the emotionally charged issue of oral speech. As a painter, she intends to communicate through images: "Painting is its own language [...] Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English. I envy my mother her Spanish curses sometimes. They make my English collapse in a heap" (1992, 59). Pilar's most important verbal communications, with her grandmother Celia in Cuba, take place only within her mind and lie outside the realm of everyday reality:

Most of what I've learned that's important I've learned on my own, or from my grandmother. Abuela Celia and I write to each other sometimes, but mostly I hear her speaking to me at night just before I fall asleep. She tells me stories about her life and what the sea was like that day. She seems to know everything that's happened to me [1992, 28-29].

Dreaming in Cuban depicts a world in which communication between generations and between cultures is a source of both stress and personal strength. What, then, is the role of the occasional appearance of Spanish in the text, and how do readers react to this usage? Does Spanish simply underscore the specific cultural world of the novel for the monolingual

reader, or does it expand that world for the bilingual reader? Is Spanish used in a conversational code-switching context by a bilingual author, and thus by characters or narrators portrayed as bilingual?

The easiest of these questions concerns code switching. Defined simply as "un proceso que se da en el habla de hablantes bilingües y consiste en alternar una lengua con la otra en el mismo discurso" (Guitart, 1991, 400), code switching is most prevalent when bilingual speakers converse with others of the same speech community. Gary Keller, analyzing bilingual poetry, notes that "code switching in literature need not, and usually does not reflect code switching in society" (1979, 263). He further states: "Art may reveal the nature of the social phenomenon but it does so only as a by-product of its own concerns, as an instrumentality in achieving a literary goal such as irony, characterization, cross-cultural comparisons" (1979, 269).

The occasional use of Spanish in *Dreaming in Cuban* is a literary device rather than a reflection of the conversational code switching of characters or narrators. In opposition to traditional code-switching norms, for example, Spanish words and phrases occur in the novel with approximately the same regularity, and with generally the same patterns of usage, in the speech of characters who are theoretically speaking Spanish (monolingual Spanish speakers in Cuba, as well as in the U.S.) as in the speech of bilingual characters. Also, the location of events (Cuba or the United States) and the speech status of the addressee (monolingual or bilingual) have little effect on the frequency of Spanish used in dialogue or in first-person narration of events. In a symbolic reversal of language roles, the substitution of English for Spanish in a García Lorca poem appears, ironically, in a small section dedicated to the Cuban grand-mother Celia. In this section, as in all others of the novel, the English/Spanish dichotomy serves to engage readers and to draw attention to textual nuances rather than to recreate actual speech patterns.

Studying the ways in which literary code switching impacts readers of a particular text offers an effective way of analyzing that text. One can argue, of course, that any text actually creates or defines its readers through the ongoing reading process. Umberto Eco refers to this hypothetical reader as the "model reader". From his highly text-based perspective, he proposes the following:

To organize a text, the author has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contexts to the expressions used. To make the text communicative, the author has

to assume that the ensemble of codes relied upon is the same as that shared by the possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of a possible reader, supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them [Eco, 1984, 7].

Although Eco's analysis of the means by which a text defines the reader is a complicated one, the language or languages in which a text is written constitutes a most basic level of communication. Through juggling this level, *Dreaming in Cuban* models both monolingual and bilingual readers.

On a surface level, the novel addresses a monolingual, English-speaking audience. Yet the occasional use of Spanish words or phrases is more than the adding of local color or cultural flavor. Eva Mendieta-Lombardo, in an insightful study of code-switching in poetry, notes that

from a socio-psychological perspective, the poet is trying to engage the reader/audience through the evocation of cultural images that are intimately linked with the Hispanic identity, and thus serve as a solidarity marker which can reach non-Hispanic members of the larger community [Mendieta-Lombardo, 1995, 568].

The establishment of this "solidarity" is dependent, to a certain extent, upon the exigency that the second-language phrases do not undermine the monolingual's understanding of the work. In García's novel, those expressions used by characters for addressing each other and for referring to each other in first-person narrative belong in this non-threatening, solidarity category. These include, among others, "hija," "mi hija," "mi hijito," "mi hijo," "compañero," "mi corazón," "chiquito," "hombre," "mi cielo," "mi reina," and "chico." These expressions, like virtually all of the Spanish used in the novel, are italicized within the text. Short conversational phrases in Spanish frequently introduce dialogue and, like terms of address, do not generally effect the meaning of what is being said: "*Por Dios*, we've been waiting for you for over an hour! What took you so long?" (1992, 13), or, as Lourdes comments during her two-week stay in Cuba, "Look at those old 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 bystanders. "You could have Cadillacs with leather interiors!" (1993, 221).¹ Other

¹ Translated into Spanish by Marisol Palés, *Soñar en cubano* was published in 1993. Despite the accuracy of the translation, most of the nuances created by the insertion of

phrases of this type include "Perfecto," "Así, así," "Vámonos," "Sí," and "Mira."

Mendieta-Lombardo also speaks of the use of "key words in Spanish that function as indices of specific Latino realities or cultural traditions." These terms may be used "to express emphatically Hispanic concepts and to evoke emotional and cultural associations that the English correlate would fail to convey" (1995, 567). In *Dreaming in Cuban*, the repeated use of the Spanish names of specific foods, dances, and plants aids in creating an association with Hispanic, and particularly Cuban, culture. Since the general meaning or category of meaning of these terms is easily discernible by English-only speakers, there is minimal loss of meaning. Readers learn, for example, that Ivanito, a Cuban cousin of Pilar, "is only five years old, but he can mambo and cha-cha, do the *danzón* and the *guaracha* with the facility of a gigolo" (García, 1992, 78). Some contexts are quite specific, as in "Jorge coaxed me to try a *guayabita del pinar*, a local drink, and I surprised myself by finishing four" (García, 1992, 54); other contexts are more relaxed: "The next morning, Lourdes scours the newspapers for calamities as she dunks sticky buns into her *café con leche*" (García, 1992, 174). Pilar notes that "Mom chews the cane until she tastes the *guarapo*, the sticky syrup inside" (García, 1992, 219), while Lourdes's sister Felicia, still in Cuba, prepares "*yerba buena* teas" (García, 1992, 189). Always presented within context are such items as "guayaba," "ropa vieja," "arroz con pollo," "natilla," and "carne asada."

Generally speaking, phrases appearing in a second language in any text are considered "marked;" terms conceived to evoke emotions are more marked than those used to highlight culture or seek solidarity. While many names in *Dreaming in Cuban* carry Spanish titles (Abuela Celia, Abuelo Jorge, Tío Arturo, or simply Tío or Abuela), the novel also displays an occasional yet powerful use of Spanish in referring to certain people, groups of people, things or ideas that bring about an affective, emotional response. By their mere presence, these highly-marked terms grab the attention of readers and help pass on those emotional responses accorded to characters to both a monolingual and a bilingual audience. In a simple example, Fidel Castro is never referred to by name in the novel, but is always called "El Líder," even by the Americanized Pilar.

Spanish into the English text are lost. In the case of these lines by Lourdes, a change in the Spanish was necessary in order to maintain grammatical accuracy: "Oiganme —grita para llamar la atención de los presentes" (1993, 292).

Emotional responses acknowledged in *Dreaming in Cuban* include fear and hatred, frequently softened by humor. The grandmother Celia, sitting on the porch of her beach home in Cuba, observes the seas: "In an hour or two, the fishermen will return, nets empty. The *yanquis*, rumors go, have ringed the island with nuclear poison, hoping to starve the people and incite a counterrevolution" (García, 1992, 3). For the monolingual English-speaking reader, the italicizing of "yanquis" underscores the depth of Celia's fears and humorously separates these "yanquis" from the "Yankee" who may, in fact, be the reader. Even though "yanquis" is presented in third-person narrative, bilingual readers can almost hear Celia uttering the word.² In another example involving fear, the narrator describes Pilar's grandfather, who has also moved to New York. He is obsessed with the very unscientific, and highly affective "microbios:"

Her father had been a fastidious man, impeccable, close-shaven, with razor-sharp creases pressed into his trousers. He took pride in never walking barefoot, even in his own home, and shuffled around in highly polished leather slippers to protect himself from *microbios*. The very word lit a fire in his eyes [García, 1992, 21].³

Although *Dreaming in Cuban* generally seeks solidarity with monolingual readers, the novel also models a bilingual, bicultural audience. Reed Way Dasenbrock, analyzing multicultural literature written in English, distinguishes between textual "intelligibility," which requires a literal understanding, and textual "meaningfulness" or "openness." He states that "multicultural literature offers us above all an experience of multiculturalism, in which not everything is likely to be wholly understood by every reader" (Dasenbrock, 1987, 12). Thus while *Dreaming in Cuban* intelligibly addresses a monolingual, English-speaking audience, bilingual readers are also brought into the fold through their ability to appreciate more intimately those linguistic aspects of the text that remain "open" (meaningful, but not necessarily intelligible) to English-speaking monolinguals. This particular use of Spanish is seen in a range of situations, including those in which knowing Spanish lends clarity or

² My students at Texas Christian University contributed greatly to this study by analyzing and sharing their reactions to the novel.

³ The marking of "microbios" is lost in the Spanish version of the novel. The translator compensates by changing the last sentence slightly: "La sola mención de la palabra prendía llamas de fuego en sus ojos" (García [trad. M. Pales], 1993, 39).

depth of understanding to an event or character to situations in which full meaning, literal or symbolic, is simply unavailable to English-only readers. The bilingual reader response may be one of pleasure, such as being let in on a secret, a heightened appreciation of humor or culturally-bound situations, or a psychological connection with the text.

Dreaming in Cuban is replete with examples demonstrating the less demanding end of the bilingual reader spectrum. Celia, for example, notes that there is "no sign of *gusano* traitors" (García, 1992, 3) as she guards the coast.⁴ Unlike "yanquis" and "microbios," terms whose similarity to English makes them easily identifiable, the word "gusano" is unintelligible to English-only readers who must rely on "traitors" for understanding of meaning. Certainly an understanding of the Spanish "gusano" provides bilingual readers with additional textual nuances; readers familiar with the particularly Cuban use of "gusano" to refer to people from the United States are afforded yet another subtlety.

The use of Spanish to portray pejorative or crude concepts provides a subtle layer of humor available only to Spanish-speaking readers. In the following passage describing a court session in Cuba, for example, monolingual readers can only infer that a "puta" is something undesirable. Loli and Ester, accuser and accused, shout allegations:

Loli then recounts how Ester rushed at her with an ironing board and chased her into the stairwell of their building, knocking her against the wall and holding her there like a prisoner.

"She called me a *puta*," Loli complains angrily.

"I never called her a *puta*! Though God knows she deserved it!" [113].

Describing her mother's annoying behavior, Pilar asserts: "Can you believe this *mierda*? My mother snatches the picture of El Líder off Abuela's night table" (García, 1992, 219). In another passage, a Cuban worker exclaims: "They'll round us up and shoot us like pigs! They'll send us to the work camps with the *maricones*!" (García, 1992, 241).

Dreaming in Cuban also creates a small number of situations in which the bilingual reader approaches the text with an obvious advantage over a monolingual one; in these passages, an understanding of the essence of a situation is simply unavailable to the English-only reader. In a simple

⁴ Once again, the marking of the Spanish *gusano* is lost in translation. The Spanish version automatically provides the full meaning: "Ni rastro de gusanos traidores" (García, 1993, 15).

example, one of Felicia's daughters speaks of receiving a postcard from her long-lost father. Monolingual readers find no context for the Spanish provided here; more importantly, they also miss the irony. As Luz Villaverde tells us: "The postcard was of a tobacco factory, row after row of women bunching bronze leaves into cigars. The caption on the back said 'Cuba [...] alegre como su sol'" (García, 1992, 122). In a more involved passage, Lourdes's deep-seated hate of the Cuban political system is expressed in a context understandable only to Spanish speakers:

Every way Lourdes turns there is more destruction, more decay. *Socialismo o muerte*. The words pain her as if they were knitted into her skin with thick needles and yarn. She wants to change the "o" to "e" 's on every billboard with a bucket of red paint. *Socialismo es muerte*, she's write over and over again until the people believed it [García, 1992, 222-223].

The appearance of six short songs or poems, five of which remain untranslated from the original Spanish, also constitute an appeal to a bilingual audience. Readers with a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish assume that the significance of these selections is expressed in the surrounding English text and make little attempt to find cognates or decipher meaning; readers totally unfamiliar with Spanish simply skip these sections. The basic meaning of the poems, as well as those nuances expressed through rhythm, rhyme, and metaphor, are available only to bilingual, bicultural readers. In one passage, for example, the narration preceding the well-known song "Cielito Lindo" describes encounters between a young Celia and a Spaniard named Gustavo. For Spanish speakers familiar with the melody, the presence of the song changes the narration from a description, available to all readers, to a presentation to be both seen and heard.

Gustavo returned to Celia's counter again and again. He brought her butterfly jasmine, the symbol of patriotism and purity, and told her that Cuba, too, would one day be free of bloodsuckers. Gustavo sang to her beauty mark, the *lunar* by her mouth. He brought her drop pearl earrings.

*Ese lunar que tienes, cielito lindo,
junto a la boca...
No se lo des a nadie, cielito lindo,
que a mí me toca* [García, 1992, 36].

Years later, as Celia continues to write never-mailed letters to her lost love, she remembers their earlier meetings in the Hotel Inglaterra. The depth of her despair, her melancholy, is available only to readers who grasp the full meaning of another song:

Mi querido Gustavo, There was a three-person band in the Parque Central today that played their ballads with such heart that many people lingered to hear them [...] One song made me cry, and I saw others crying, too, as they tossed their coins in the musicians' hat.

Mírame, míenteme, pégame, mátame si quieres pero no me dejes. No, no me dejes, nunca jamás... [García, 1992, 165].

An important symbolic use of Spanish in *Dreaming in Cuban* involves the appearance of a brief section of the "Poema de la Sigüiriya" by Federico García Lorca. This poem is quoted twice, first in the original Spanish version and then later in an English translation, and is linked both times to Celia. When first hearing Lorca read his poetry in Havana, Celia reacts with a strong longing for an ecstasy associated with death: "During his presentation, a torrential rainstorm fell and the black sounds of the *duende* shivered in the air with mystery and anguish and death. Death was alluring, seductive, and Celia longed to die in the thrill of it over and over again" (García, 1992, 95). The poem is first quoted as Celia watches nighttime lights from the front porch of her home in Santa Teresa del Mar, thus carefully establishing connections between the verse, death, and the ocean.

Celia settles in her wicker swing to watch the ocean, jumping with silver light. Is it flying fish or dolphins or some undiscovered pulse? The sky is alive with lightning, feeding on the earth's heat...

*El campo
de olivos
se abre y se cierra
como un abanico.
Sobre el olivar
hay un cielo hundido
y una lluvia oscura
de luceros fríos* [García, 1992, 94].

The English translation of the poem appears in the final section of the novel and leads readers into a scene in which Celia allows herself to sink into the ocean. The previous linking of Celia to the ocean and to death is now complete. The paragraphs introducing the poem also include a dramatic reversal of Spanish and English print styles; the Spanish word "duende" now appears in standard print, and the poem in English is italicized.

The duende, her head thrown back in throaty seduction, called to me through the poet. Her black sounds charmed me, and she wove her black ribbons as the rain hammered assent.

*The field
of olives
opens and shuts
like a fan.
Over the olive grove
in a sunken sky
and a dark rain
of cold evening stars [García, 1992, 243].*

Celia's world, conceived in Spanish, thus becomes a reality in which the English of future generations will dominate. In the final sentence of the novel, Celia states that her American granddaughter Pilar, with whom she has always communicated, "will remember everything" (García, 1992, 245). This final section of the novel is appropriately entitled "The Languages Lost."

Through a skillful manipulation of language, *Dreaming in Cuban* successfully models both monolingual and bilingual readers, thus allowing the novel to be simultaneously categorized as "ethnic" and "mainstream" within the canon of U.S. literature. In one of Cristina García's two published interviews, she explains her view of these concepts and of herself as a Latino writer.⁵ She notes:

We're part of American literature, and what's keeping it vibrant and dynamic these days [...] What I mean is not that we'll become part of the melting pot nor that our identity and culture will become diluted, but that the mainstream itself will be redefined to include us [López, 1994, 613].

⁵ See "'... And there is only my imagination where our history should be': An Interview With Cristina García" by Irida H. López, and "A fish swims in my lung: an interview with Cristina García" by Allen Vorda (1993).

Certainly *Dreaming in Cuban*, with its highly selective, literary use of Spanish within an English text, contributes to this process of redefinition. By appealing to both monolingual and bilingual readers, and by respecting the needs of each group, the novel ultimately brings all readers into the same "stream" through the shared pleasure of a vibrant fictional world.

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