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E'vaan Duncan
Hollins University

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E'vaan Duncan

ENG 350: Latinx Literature

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Research Essay

Cultural Effects on Mental Health in *Dreaming in Cuban*

Christina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* examines the lives of a dysfunctional Cuban family separated by generations and geographic locations. The tensions that hamper the relationships between relatives, as well as their own interpersonal reflections, vary across location and culture. These tensions—politics, region, immigrant status, and generation—impact the mental health of each character, and ultimately their futures and their fates. Of the many family members, Pilar Puente is the only character who is raised in the United States. Her narrative demonstrates how her Americanized background directly shapes her mental health literacy, which forms a key element of her identity. Her immediate family's Cuban upbringing affects their mental health due to cultural issues that Pilar does not have to face simply because of her U.S. citizenship and upbringing. García structures the novel into personalized fragments of the characters' states of mind that explore just how much these cultural and geographic differences change the lives of each character. By doing this, readers only encounter narratives of mental health within the context of each character's world'; they lack omniscience and instead learn how each character has perceptions that are normalized to them. These different contexts enable readers to see why various family members deal with their traumas and emotions in different, often harmful, ways. Pilar's immigration to the United States gives an elevated

awareness of mental health, sense of freedom, and access to creative outlets; this is her true “American dream.” Yet this awareness also informs and distorts her sense of her own Cuban identity, which contributes to her rebellious personality. Pilar’s version of reality reflects the advantages of being raised in the United States, where socioeconomic, political, emotional, and even artistic virtues are generally made accessible to its citizens.

Readers first get a sense of Pilar’s distinctness from her introduction in Celia’s narrative. Immediately, the bond that is formed by identifying Pilar as “her first grandchild” is cut short when she is established as a separate entity than Celia, who “writes to her from Brooklyn in a Spanish that is no longer hers” (García 6). Celia introduces Pilar’s American background, as well as the effect that migrating to Brooklyn has had on her Spanish. The barrier that language places between Pilar and her family reshapes her character in ways that often go unnoticed by monolinguals. According to Brittain (2008), native languages impact the nature of thought and social adjustment, especially in young people. Brittain also explores the linguistic relativity hypothesis of Whorf (1956), which states that native languages “reflect and reshape the transmission of cultures.” This can be seen in the novel through Pilar’s insecurities about her distance from her family and their fluency in Spanish when she states that she is jealous of her “Spanish curses,” causing her “English [to] collapse in a heap” (García 59). Pilar is a textbook example of a young person whose mostly-forgotten native language affects how she views her culture and identity, causing self-doubt and angst. It is a common insecurity of first generation Americans to feel cut off from their families because of language barriers. This form of oppression ultimately contributes to and even guides Pilar’s feisty and straightforward attitude about life. Her attitude especially contrasts against the parts of life consume her relatives, such as politics and spirituality. Though not something she chose, Pilar’s detachment from Cuba and

from her family led her on an entirely different path of social awareness and self-consciousness that molded her mindset into a product of the oppressed and the exposed. Pilar's linguistic separation is thus only one of several contributing factors she faces in the novel that causes her mental state to be represented differently in the novel than those of her family.

In addition to the language barrier between Pilar and her family, Pilar's experience in the United States exposes her to privileges that her relatives did not have as adolescents. Whether Pilar considers these circumstances privileges is debatable, but her upbringing led her in specific directions that exposed her to ideals about self-awareness and choices. These are two essential components to healthy mental health literacy and self-actualization (Maslow 1962). In grade school, due to Pilar's outspoken nature, she was kicked out of Catholic church and recommended a psychiatrist by her school nurse (García 58). Having school nurses, school counselors, and psychiatrists who are aware of their students' potentially harmful behavior and who take the necessary steps to approach them is an advantage that not all students are granted, especially outside of the United States (and especially during the 1950s and 1960s). An experience like this opens an array of exploratory questions for Pilar, questions posed by herself and by others who are seemingly concerned by (or afraid of) her behavior. Although Pilar's rebellion resulted in varying consequences like therapy, this American educational environment also forced her to question her own decisions, feelings, and morals from a young age. She does so blatantly and expressively in response to her temporary therapists' interrogation here:

But what could I say? That my mother is driving me crazy? That I miss my grandmother and wish I'd never left Cuba? That I want to be a famous artist someday? That a paintbrush is better than a gun so why doesn't everybody just leave me alone? (59)

This probing of her identity and her relationships with the outside world is a form of existentialist thinking to which her relatives cannot relate. Having authority figures who consider the off-putting behaviors of students through a mental health lens provides subtle dynamic shifts that influence the children's ideas of their place in the world. Even when retaliating or responding in a consequential manner, they are still being exposed to a deeper consideration of the whys and whats of who they are. Pilar's otherness and identity-crisis was the source of her inquisitiveness, while her relatives' identities have always been rooted in outer concepts like politics, spirituality, and love. Still, her family's experiences growing up in Cuba are heavily instrumental in their lack of mental health literacy—for reasons they could not control.

One way that García elegantly designs the novel to show the characters' lack of mental health literacy is by employing a clear lack of clinical terms. No such terms are used to describe the detrimental states of mind of the characters, which keeps the audience in a present-focused and personalized point-of-view. This changes the way readers perceive the mental states of the characters. By doing this, García reshapes the modern Americanized version of what we believe healthy mental health literacy is, since we experience their minds in the same diegesis as them.

The lack of mental health research in Latin American and Caribbean countries contributes highly to the domino-effect that leads Latinx people to certain mindsets about mental health and mental illness. Although Pilar was raised in the U.S., her mother immigrated as an adult, therefore carrying her low mental health literacy to the United States. Her inability to acknowledge her obsessions, vices, and delusions paves the way for Pilar to make open judgments about her mother. Pilar does acknowledge that Lourdes has some problems, referring to her as her “fucking crazy mother” and other informal terms at times (García 63). Referencing to her mother in this way not only represents how dismissive she is, but also shows how

judgmental she can be about unsettling behaviors. Most young children and adults receive mental health education informally through friends, family, and the media—although this method sparks much debate on the false narratives the media portrays about mental disorders (Mendenhall, Fraunholtz, and Conrad-Hieber 2015). Lourdes's lack of mental health literacy configures Pilar's view of her because of the fact that she is her mother and used to her behavior. If Lourdes cannot recognize her own symptoms of mental illness, this only channels Pilar's oblivion to the issues that her mother faces, which leaves both of them in a constant muddle of misunderstandings and bickering. If Pilar did have a more accurate handle on her mother's mental state, she may have been able to avoid most of the strain on their relationship that she unknowingly caused. The stigma that people cannot live high-functioning lives while suffering from mental illness is challenged by Lourdes, because, despite her annoying behavior, she still serves as a devoted business owner, citizen, wife, and mother. This makes it much harder to recognize the symptoms of mental illness in people close to you, especially children with their parents.

Lourdes's and her female relatives' personalities are easily brushed off by neighbors and witnesses because women have a tendency to be socially constructed as weak-minded, overemotional, bossy, and panicky. In many Latin American and Caribbean countries, behaviors of this nature displayed by women are unsurprising and even acceptable. These behaviors include stereotypes of the Latina "madwoman" that contemporary artists have written into their literature and film for decades. Halperin (2015), for example, examines how the Latina "madwoman" is portrayed as "deviant by their surrounding societies, communities, families, and selves." Women are already more susceptible to be questioned and judged for their choices much more aggressively and quicker than men are, and for the same choices. She criticizes several Latinx artists, including García, for incorporating these classifications into their texts by "tossing

them aside,” making their Latina characters even more incomprehensible and invisible than they are already viewed as in mass media. Contributing to the trend that these are the only roles that Latina women can take until driven to madness only further eliminates the possibility of these women to be recognized in reality for who they really are.

There is a lack of representation in the media for successful Latina women unless they are in gender or race competition with their male or white female counterparts (Halperin 2015). This method of storytelling narrows down Latina identity to one type of woman: “overly hyper sexualized as well as religious, conservative and family oriented” (Correa 2017). These features are present in the women in *Dreaming in Cuban*, who, although presented in the form of magical realism, are still realistically recognized by readers, amplifying internal prejudices towards the roles of Latina women in society. This consistent mode of writing about Latinas suggests that their capabilities only lie in roles within the family, and once their madness comes to light, they become useless and dismissible as characters. Readers are invited to feel sorry for them, and are able to easily connect their emotional struggles to their abrasiveness.

Several characters in the novel do show signs of accepting and even fetishizing this type of behavior from the main women in the novel. Pilar does this to Lourdes, for example, obviously not taking her own mother’s mental health seriously on several occasions. In one of her narratives, Pilar goes into detail about Lourdes’s ability to “systematically rewrite history to suit her views of the world” (García 175). There is condescension in Pilar’s tone as she describes this extreme issue of Lourdes. Halperin (2015) suggests that the “intersections of psychological, physical, and geopolitical harm . . . is simultaneously disempowering and potentially transformative.” Pilar’s disregard for the intersecting struggles of her mother disempowers her and makes her issues appear less harmful than they may have been to her mental state.

Felicia's third husband, Otto, is in love with Felicia's odd behavior. It is not directly stated that he is mentally ill, but he is excessively obsessed with Felicia and oblivious to her mental health problems. He "thinks his wife is crazy and beautiful and mysterious," which could indicate that he is also a victim of low mental health literacy (García 154). Most of their encounters revolve around his sexual desire for her. He consistently gets turned on at the thought of the moment they met in which she appeared out of nowhere, approached him, said "I'm here," and began stripping (García 154). This meeting is peculiar, even for this novel, and it is even more strange that Otto trusts this behavior enough to marry Felicia the next morning. He continues to show ignorance of her redundant, empty responses to his inquiries. Otto's role in the story changes the way Felicia is perceived, because he is the first character to admire and encourage Felicia's behavior. The fact that he does not consider her behavior strange adds to the normalization of a crazy, sexualized Latina who needs a man to absorb her craziness for her. This narrative is incorporated into white American culture as well, but usually if a man marries a woman within a day, they are also deemed as mentally unstable or weak. It is not as socially acceptable for women to be "crazy" and "mysterious," but rather proper and pious.

As you can see, this novel sheds light onto important issues regarding the lack of mental health attention in Cuba and other Latin American countries. This scarcity is present in the novel, an uncontrollable component to the dysfunction of the family. According to Razzouk, et al. (2008), medical professionals in these regions have and are failing at engaging citizens in mental health research in comparison to the United States. These countries' sparse information on mental disorders and their signs and symptoms allows the citizens to become more susceptible to harmful states of minds and thought processes. It also affects how they view themselves and their ability to reflect on the traumas that they experience thoroughly. The disparaging way that the

family responds to each other's delusions and erratic behavior shows how their standards for what is an admissible state-of-mind differs from U.S. standards. Both Celia and Felicia's best friend, Herminia, show early signs of enabling Felicia's erratic behavior, with Celia "ignoring her daughter's outburst" and Herminia calling Felicia's delusions "naughty daydreams" (García 9, 11). In the United States, Felicia's behavior would most likely be recognized as symptoms of psychosis by a medical professional. Recognition is a vital part of mental health literacy that immensely affects the treatment and coping path of those dealing with mental illness. If the symptoms are brushed under the rug, ignored, or taken lightly, they can potentially evolve into even more dangerous manifestations, just as they did with Felicia in this novel.

Celia, Lourdes, and Felicia all display obsessive behaviors toward male figures and cope in harmful ways as a result of their low mental health literacy. The loss of Celia's first lover, Gustavo, causes her to slip into a depression that leaves her in a fragile state of mourning for almost half of her life. She spends 25 years writing to him but never sending the letters, integrating her self-reflection into a tainted reality of obsessive love and anxiety that worsens over the years (Jorge also agitates her traumas during this time). Lourdes copes with her trauma by obsessing over food, physical strength, the "American dream," and her father's death. She also becomes obsessed with Pilar's behavior, as well her the son she miscarried before Pilar was born. Felicia's mental health is the most unstable of the family, her delusions and hysteria hampering her reality so much that she blackouts for months at a time (García 105). She copes with this by practicing *santería*, a religion that encompasses rituals, potions, animal sacrifices, and divination. Celia also uses herbal remedies in attempts to treat her poor health, which is a common component of Latinx culture (Kramer, Guarnaccia, Resendez, and Lu 2009).

Pilar had the advantages of using music as her main method of coping, a paramount aspect of Pilar's upbringing that her relatives did not experience. Music is evident in her life when it comes to mental health and emotional benefits. It is also proven to specifically aid adolescents in support of identity, relationships, coping methods, and their moods (Gold, Saarikallio, and McFerran 2011). McFerran and Rickard (2015) attest to rock 'n' roll during the fifties "paving the way for creation of a new economic and social demographic." This kind of music encompasses many themes that are considered obscene, such as sexuality, identity, drugs, religions, individual, and social change (McFerran and Rickard, 2015). These themes reflect Pilar's rock/punk personality and shapes how she defies worldly matters.

Pilar's artistic abilities are also apparent throughout the text; her hobbies include painting and playing the bass. She is also "*perfecto*" at dancing as indicated by a dance instructor during a one-time lesson (García 59). Through these hobbies, her creativity became her method of dealing with a sense of detachment from her Cuban roots, since she saw her own rebellion in popular music at the time. She notes that Lou Reed, a rock/punk musician, is a huge influence on her "because he sings about people no one else sings about" and makes her "feel like a new [her] sprouts and dies every day" (García 135). The liberation she experiences while listening to these artists are shown in the way she dresses and carries herself—many punk rockers identify with being an outcast or a rebel against society. Pilar also displays her version of punk rock rebellion when Lourdes asks her to paint a mural on their family's bakery to display to the neighborhood. Pilar does so, painting the Statue of Liberty in a grungy state that leaves the observers in a state of shock and anger (García 144-145). Despite a brief moment of hesitation, she pulls off this stunt with confidence and a bit of humor, showing that she does not take the concept of American values seriously and is not afraid to let the majority know.

For Pilar, the bold and radical rock music was an emotional experience and an influential art movement that is widely accepted in American culture. She describes her love for its “energy, their violence, their incredible grinding guitars” which indicates empathy and aesthetic appreciation (García 135). These ideas in rock music were especially accepted by the youth who was undergoing massive social resistance during Pilar’s adolescence. Pilar also connects her and her grandmother’s love for music with other shared characteristics as described by her: “sympathy for the underdog, and a disregard for boundaries,” ideas that which the development of rock music heavily depends on (García 175). In this story, music plays multiple roles—a way to define oneself, a mode of rebellion, an emotional outlet, and an emotional escape.

Although music does have its benefits, there has been evidence that it could also enable negative thought patterns and vulnerability. Violent lyrics have been shown to increase hostility in some young people (Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks). Rock music and hip hop have been subjects of scrutiny since the lyrics and stylistic elements tend to be louder with upbeat bass and percussion, which can result in increased aggression (Currie and Startup 2012). This could be another reason for Pilar’s sharp mouth and her irritability. Her tone often comes across as disrespectful when she addresses her mother; at one point in the story she mocks her mother as she wears her work police force uniform, asking “Who do you think you are, Kojak?” and ignoring her mother’s lecture (García 131). The angst that Pilar tends to display could be an indicator of her love for rock, since angst is a “popular characteristic” of enjoying such music.

A musical outlet is something Pilar’s relatives were not fortunate enough to experience, specifically American music. Growing up, they were unable to channel their stress into idols or iconic songs that challenged their minds and emotions the way that Pilar is able to. Had they

been exposed to legends that stirred up controversy, fed off of rule-breaking and society's idea of obscenity, they might use that sense of artistic humanity to break free from constricting views.

The political differences between the family causes the most obvious tension between the family, specifically Celia and Lourdes. Exile is something citizens of the United States have not necessarily experienced, so the political and social climate differ extremely from the Cuba. Both Celia and Lourdes are die-hard believers in their political stances, which is hard not to do when the world around them is chaotic and evolving. Celia's support of El Líder and Lourdes's distaste of the revolution caused both of them to stray into obsession. Celia's support is strongly rooted in sexual fantasy towards El Líder, and the results of the support of the revolution make her feel "honored" (García 3). She is personally affected by the revolution, especially after the death of her husband Jorge, whom she is visited by after his death. Her hallucinations are rooted in the revolution as she "grieves for her husband, not for this death, not yet, but for his mixed-up allegiances" (García 5). Jorge's support of the American government created yet another division between family that reflected back on their characters and how they felt about one another. Lourdes strong bond with her father is an influencing factor for why she feels so negatively about the revolution, enough to a point that she hates her mother because of her advocacy.

Although his narrative is not as extensive as the other characters' sections, Celia's late husband Jorge is undoubtedly affected by the political climate of Cuba that he opposes so. During his marriage with Celia, he would leave for weeks and months at a time, trying "to prove to his gringo boss that they were cut from the same cloth" (García 6). This shows Jorge's own obsession with trying to prove himself as a useful, working Cuban man in competition with his version of the working American man during tense political times. His insecurities also affected how he abused Celia by leaving her to crumble in the hands of his family and an asylum. The

spirit of Jorge reveals to Lourdes that he purposely tried to “break” his wife after they were married due to her obsession with her past lover Gustavo (García 195). This is an example of “the disintegration of family ties due to political ideology” and his insecurities influenced by government climates and cultural stigmas (Hernandez 1992).

Lourdes also held similar resentment towards her own mother about her political stance, and her father served as refuge for that disapproval. Lourdes’s obsession with American politics could have very well stemmed from the hatred of her mother since a young age, since she grew up very close to her father, always on his side. Still, Lourdes differs from Pilar because although Lourdes judges her mother for her political beliefs, she chose the extreme opposite form of government to support wholeheartedly, a decision that Pilar would not make on either side.

Had Pilar been raised in Cuba, she might have taken a side. Taking a side would have either caused another weld between her and her relatives or aided in them. However, Pilar’s upbringing was in a climate where she was able to get a different perspective on not just the Cuban revolution, but politics in general. Because of her mother’s political passions, she was more willing to question the importance and role of government systems and its effects on people. She often mocked her mother’s view of the “American dream,” exaggerating that Lourdes “makes food only people in Ohio eat” and “barbeques anything she can get her hands on” (García 136). Pilar also complains about Lourdes’s interest in American holidays and traditions, like forcing them to watch holiday parades (García 137). Pilar states her distaste for American politics in general, believing that her immigration has robbed her of her culture:

I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we'll have when we're old. Every day Cuba

fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be (García 138).

Pilar's distance from a Cuban identity offered her an alternative to radical politics: indifference. Her desire to return to Cuba and reconnect with her grandmother gave her insight on whether having a political stance should be damaging to family bonds or not. She did not let her grandmother's support for the revolution cloud her judgement of family and identity, unlike Lourdes. Her experience growing up in the U.S. gave her the opportunity to be freer with her beliefs and morals, unlike her relatives who were directly affected by the climate of Cuba. Martinez (2001) studied elderly Cuban exiles living in southern Florida in order to understand their current mental states as immigrants. His studies suggest "that poor mental health [in elderly Cuban exiles] may be conflated with several socio-cultural factors including marital disruption, strained family ties, an adhere to the ideology of exile)" (García 137). All of these elements contributed to the mental impairment of Pilar's relatives living in Cuba.

These elements affecting the personalities of the characters are often based on where they grew up, and are therefore out of the characters' hands. Pilar's privilege of being raised in the U.S. is something many people take for granted and only understand when they are exposed to the operations of outside countries. Despite Pilar's desire to return to her native country, she ultimately recognizes how fortunate she is to reside in a country that is home in her heart.

Pilar's immigration to the United States highlights key elements that contribute to her well-being, personality, identity, and mental health. The stark contrast of her narrative to her relatives' shows how much regional differences affect the minds and adjustment of people and how little of a choice they can have in the unraveling of their mental health. García delicately

intertwines themes of language, stigmas, culture, and politics together to show how often they can go unnoticed during conversations about mental health, and how often they must be naturally incorporated into the daily lives of those who do not get certain advantages of being located in the right place at the right time. Without Pilar’s perspective, readers would not be able to compare how damaging or beneficial the place of one’s upbringing might be to their mental health. Her immigrant/citizenship status shapes her into the person she is—defiant, resistant, curious, level-headed, and therefore the most resilient and reliable of the characters.

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