Old and New Paths of Trauma: An Analysis of Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*

Simone Aparecida Aguiar Mestre em Literaturas de Expressão Inglesa / UFMG

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes trauma in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*. The characters Celia and Felicia go through different sorts of trauma that do not fit in the PTSD concept. These traumas are related to patriarchal codes of behavior, family history, the socio-political context, and sexual oppression.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Trauma, gênero, patriarcado, repressão sexual, história familiar

In the novel *Dreaming in Cuban* trauma is a pervading theme. Since the 1990s this topic has been increasingly approached in literary studies, and most importantly, studies on trauma now have began to focus on gender issues, tracing a path different from the ones that deal with the Holocaust, collective violence, terrorism, and wars. In this essay I claim that some women characters in the cited novel go through different sorts of trauma. These traumas are connected with the characters' life stories and the codes of behavior that patriarchy expects them to fulfill. Laura S. Brown contends that a feminist analysis of trauma and its causes should ask: "how many layers of trauma are being peeled off by what appears initially to be only one traumatic event or process?... Social context, and the individual's personal history within that social context, can lend traumatic meaning to events that might be only sad or troubling in another time and space." Brown claims that personality is constructed in interaction with the internal individual experiences and with the social context in which she lives. Along this line of thought, in this essay I analyze the experiences and predicaments that

¹ BROWN. Not Outside the range: one feminist perspective on psychic trauma, p. 110.

² BROWN. Not Outside the range: one feminist perspective on psychic trauma, p. 103.

lead to traumas for Celia and her daughter Felicia, and the role of the socio-cultural contexts in these traumas.

Roger Luckhurst affirms that trauma has become emblematic of modern history as a result of the many vicissitudes humankind has gone through, such as wars, slavery, colonization, diasporas, and terrorism³. The term "trauma" was "first used in English in the seventeenth century in medicine, (and) it referred to a bodily injury caused by an external agent". In the twentieth century the concept is extended to mental disorders as a result of Freud's studies. The two Great Wars, the Holocaust, the Vietnam, Korea, and Gulf Wars brought about new theories on trauma, and as a consequence, it was acknowledged by the American Psychiatric Association as the cause of harmful symptoms in individuals, being then classified as PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). According to Luckhurst, the concept of PTSD "helped consolidate a trauma paradigm that has come to pervade the understanding of subjectivity and experience in the advanced industrial world". At the same time, this discovery triggered studies in various fields of knowledge that deal with traumatic experiences.

Regarding trauma theory in literature, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens argue that it is significant "for understanding colonial traumas such as dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide". *Dreaming in Cuban* especially foregrounds the discussion of traumatic experiences for women characters under different aspects and unveils problems that are not frequently tackled in trauma studies.

According to the PTSD definition, trauma is characterized by symptoms that follow an extremely "distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience". Among these events are included wars, the Holocaust, terrorism, natural and accidental disasters, and more recently, rape. However, recent studies on trauma have dealt with another sort of event that does not fit the PTSD definition. E. Ann Kaplan claims that there are traumatic experiences which are usually neglected because traumas perpetrated or suffered by men have been the main focus. Along the same lines, Greg Forter calls attention to the difficulty in explaining forms of trauma that have become naturalized in social contexts, such as rape,

³ LUCKHURST. *The trauma question*, p. 2.

⁴ LUCKHURST. The trauma question, p. 2.

⁵ LUCKHURST. *The trauma question*, p. 1.

⁶ CRAPS; BUELENS. Introduction: postcolonial trauma novels, p. 3.

⁷ PTSD. The circumcision reference library.

⁸ KAPLAN. *Trauma culture*: the politics of terror and loss in media and literature, p. 19.

racism, the subjugation of women and those categorized as "others". He sees the traumas resulting from these events as "chronic" and "social", thus they cannot be included in the categories under the PTSD concept. This concept is fundamental for the argumentation in this essay because the characters Celia and Felicia go through some kind of social trauma, which seems to be related to their family history, their sexual experiences and the sociopolitical contexts they are inserted into.

The ascent of Fidel Castro to the highest post of the nation and the establishment of the communist ideology through a dictatorship was a crucial event in Cuba that marked, divided, and traumatized the history of the nation. This divide is explored in the novel though the portrayal of Celia, who supports the revolution, and her daughters Lourdes and Felicia, who are anti-Castro, but in different degrees. The image of the father embodied by Castro plays a key role in the process of subjectivity construction and fragmentation for the characters analyzed here, adding to other traumas they go through. In the novel, the characters constantly refer to "El Líder," a name commonly used to address the Cuban leader.

In *Dreaming in Cuban* the past is also fundamental to help understand the intricacies that ground the process of subjectivity construction of the women characters. They are marked by isolation, loneliness and patriarchal oppression. The first character I analyze is Celia del Pino. The novel opens with an old Celia in her porch fantasizing about being seduced by 'El Líder': "She would be feted at the palace, serenaded by a brass orchestra, seduced by El Líder himself on a red velvet divan." This fantasy corroborates the myth of seducer created around Castro's image in his young age.

In an article entitled "Castro's Women" Andrew St. George traces back El Líder's involvement with women, his attitude towards them, and the many myths which make him famous among women. St. George claims that Castro's sexual appetite is only balanced by his obsession with the good results of the revolution. St. George adds that stories abound about Castro's raping of virgins, which he neither worried about commenting nor denying. A notorious one is the Lorenz's case – his alleged rape of an 18-year-old American girl at the Hilton in Havana – and her forceful abortion afterwards. Thus, between myth and reality, Castro's aura of seducer hovered over women's imaginary, especially in the first years of the revolution. More recently, reinforcing this image, Saikat Basu details Castro's apparently

⁹ FORTER. Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: trauma and the politics of literary form, p. 260.

¹⁰ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 3.

¹¹ ST. GEORGE. Castros's women, p. 8-12, 75.

extraordinary sexual performances: "He slept with at least two women a day for more than four decades, one for lunch and one for supper. Sometimes he even ordered one for breakfast." For the patriarch-sexual predator it seems that women are items to be consumed voraciously. Be it true or not, the fact is that his personal charisma was magnified because of the changes he made in Cuba's society, especially those that brought a better life for the lower classes and the dispossessed.

Hence, in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Celia embodies the image of those women who fantasized and desired the charismatic, highly sexualized figure of Castro. Celia replaces Jorge's picture for Castro's at her bedside, and at the start of the revolution she gives up her devotion to her first love, the Spaniard Gustavo, beginning a fierce worshipping of Castro. Although she is aware of the power the traditional norms have over her, she surrenders to Castro's revolution with the same passion she would dedicate to a lover and this attitude has effects on her relationship with her family. Myra Mendible, in "Absent Fathers and Lost Lovers," states that the "two mystified objects of desire" (the Spaniard and El Líder) translate "Celia's search for fulfillment and self-validation". This search for her subjectivity is rooted in her traumatic abandonment by her mother, and in the other predicaments she goes through, events that would haunt Celia and become traumas which would pervade her life.

Celia's parents get divorced in her early infancy and they distribute their children among relatives. She is sent to Tía Alicia, in Havana and this trauma will have painful consequences for her and her daughters. As an adult, Celia is influenced by her aunt's romanticism and is easily attracted to Gustavo, the married Spaniard who later abandons her. For Katherine Payant, Gustavo refers back to "the many outsiders, colonialists such as the Spanish and business people such as the North Americans, who have exploited the beauty and riches of Cuba and then left". Gustavo abandons Celia without even saying good-bye and she is devastated. As a result, she gets depressed and is taken "to her bed by early summer and stayed there for the next eight months. That she was shrinking there was no doubt." Gustavo's abandonment is traumatic and will add to the trauma of her mother's earlier desertion of her, which would influence the way Celia would later deal with her children. Still in love with Gustavo, Celia marries Jorge, who is a salesman for an American company. In

¹² BASU. New York Post: Fidel Castro Bedded 35,000 Women.

¹³ MENDIBLE. Absent fathers and lost lovers: the romance of conquest in Margarita Engle's *Skywriting* and Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*.

¹⁴ PAYANT. From alienation to reconciliation in the novels of Cristina Garcia.

¹⁵ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 36.

this period she starts writing letters to her lover, that are never sent, and which she bequeaths to her granddaughter Pilar much later in the narrative. In these letters she records the family history and the important events in Cuba's history. However, her life with Jorge adds to her sufferings and depression because Jorge's mother and sister – Berta and Ofelia – make a hell out of her life. Both women enforce the subjugating role of women by idolizing Jorge and torturing Celia.

As she gets pregnant, Jorge stays away longer, leaving her in the hands of his mother and sister. Celia records her suffering in one of her letters to Gustavo: "They poison my food and milk but still I swell. The baby lives on venom." ¹⁶ Celia still holds a very romantic view of her relationship with the Spaniard and hopes to leave for Spain to search for him if she has a son, although she decides to stay in case she has a daughter. This son embodies a possibility of escaping the patriarchal norms that suffocate her. Nadia I. Johnson states that "[u]nderstanding the hierarchy of gender in Cuba, Celia knows that a son can thrive and be successful, even without his mother". ¹⁷ As Lourdes is born, Celia suffers a mental breakdown – possibly a post-partum depression – and rejects the child. She is unable to keep the promise of "not abandon(ing) a daughter to this life, but train her to read the columns of blood and numbers in men's eyes, to understand the morphology of survival". ¹⁸ Although she remains in Cuba, she shows no affection towards her daughter.

In her theory about the development of women's personality, Nancy Chodorow claims that "certain features of the mother-daughter relationship are internalized universally as basic elements of feminine ego structure". 19 This theory might explain Celia's abandonment of Lourdes and later of Felicia in that they have a direct relation to her own abandonment by her mother. Chodorow contends that "[t]he nature and quality of the social relationships that the child experiences are appropriated, internalized, and organized by her/him and comes to constitute her/his personality". 20 Celia's coldness towards her daughters is a result of the experiences she goes through and her own abandonment. Consequently, her process of subjectivity fragmentation results from the traumatic separation from her mother, added to the sufferings she goes through in Berta's hands. Additionally, the realization that Lourdes's birth

¹⁶ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 50.

¹⁷ JOHNSON. *Children for ransom*: reading Ibeji as a catalyst for reconstructing motherhood in Caribbean women's writing, p. 67

¹⁸ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 42.

¹⁹ CHODOROW. Family structure and feminine personality, p. 44.

²⁰ CHODOROW. Family structure and feminine personality, p. 45.

would keep her imprisoned under the suffocating rules of a patriarchal system also brings forth Celia's mental breakdown. Her stay at the asylum to which Jorge sends her and the electric shock therapy she receives are the final blow to her broken self.

Celia suffers other kinds of abandonment and separation. First, Lourdes leaves Cuba, taking Pilar with her. For Celia, this separation is traumatic as well because she is closely connected to her granddaughter, and she hopes that Pilar will come back to Cuba one day. Their connection remains strong despite the distance and is kept through the telepathic conversations between the two women, but eventually they come to an end. Jorge leaves for the US to treat a stomach cancer, and dies there. Throughout the years Celia learns to love Jorge –not with the passion she feels for Gustavo – and his death makes her acknowledge her loneliness and sense of separation from the world: "Celia cannot decide which is worse, separation or death. Separation is familiar, too familiar, but Celia is uncertain she can reconcile it with permanence." Jorge's death increases Celia's feeling of isolation. Still, Celia is to face another devastating event when Javier, her youngest child, returns from Czechoslovakia with a broken heart, and eventually disappears. She is especially connected to him because he is the only member of the family who supports Castro as she does. Finally, Felicia's death seems to lead Celia to a near-madness state, as the narrative voice states:

Celia overturned the tureen with the sacred stones and crushed Felicia's seashells under the heels of her leather pumps. Suddenly, she removed her shoes and began stamping on the shells in her bare feet, slowly at first, then faster and faster in a mad flamenco, her arms thrown up in the air.²²

Only with Felicia's death can Celia realize the extension of her children's problems and her inability to deal with them. The understanding of this situation breaks her down again.

In the end, Celia is aware that her devotion to the revolution blinded her to her family's troubles, especially Felicia's, whom she leaves in the middle of a crisis to work in the sugar plantations. For Celia, the only escape she envisions from her suffering is suicide and she drowns herself in the sea. It could be argued that in a way Celia is a victim of abandonment, excessive romanticism and patriarchal rules which traumatize her. Theses traumas are aggravated by Jorge's punishment of her – through his mother –, her stay at the asylum, his taking Lourdes away from her, Felicia's death and Javier's disappearance. Thus, the many episodes of abandonment, the patriarchal oppression, and the suffering Celia goes

²¹ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 6.

²² GARCIA. Dreaming in Cuban, p. 190.

through all contribute to her traumas and her subsequent mental breakdown that results in her suicide.

From the beginning of her story, and through the etymology of her name, Felicia gives the reader a clue of her everlasting suffering and unfortunate fate. Celia meets a woman she admires named Felicia during her stay at the asylum: "She killed her husband. Doused him with gasoline. Lit a match. She is unrepentant. We're planning to escape."²³ Celia names her second daughter after her insane friend – who also dies in a fire – and that, she believes later, has consequences in the future. Since her childhood Felicia is an outcast inside her home, although Celia tries to make up for her rejection of Lourdes by giving her love to Felicia. Mary S. Vasquez claims that to Felicia, "Celia bequeaths her poetry, her love of language, her sensuality, her ever hovering madness". 24 Felicia's delusions are rooted in language, as the narrative voice shows in this passage: "She hears them (people) talking but cannot understand what they say.... Felicia's mind floods with thoughts, thoughts from the past, from the future, other people's thoughts. Things come back as symbols, bits of conversation."²⁵ Additionally, since childhood Felicia cannot speak the language that Jorge and Lourdes share, although she tries to fit in: "He was always away on business. This time, he had promised to bring his wife a Jamaican maid (...) Felicia's father didn't return with a maid but he brought back a signed baseball for her sister, Lourdes, that made her jump in place with excitement. Felicia didn't recognize the name."²⁶ Jorge and Lourdes develop a language none of the family members can understand, and the estranged language in the novel is a metaphor for distance and separation between the characters, and Felicia remains adrift among them. As to this difficulty in communication between the characters in the novel, April A. Shemak states that "the female characters struggle to find forms of articulation that enable attachments with their families and communities". 27 For Felicia all attempts to connect to her family result in failure, mainly because Jorge is only devoted to Lourdes, thus paying no attention to Felicia's problems. Whereas Celia seems to accept motherhood with Felicia's birth, she is too immersed in her passion for Gustavo, and later, in her devotion to the revolution to realize the physical and mental fragmentation Felicia starts going through.

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²³ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 51.

²⁴ VASQUEZ. Cuba as text and context in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*.

²⁵ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 75-76.

²⁶ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 11.

²⁷ SHEMAK. A wounded discourse: the poetics of disease in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, p.

Felicia dances Beny Moré songs tirelessly because it brings some relief from her delusions. As a child she becomes fascinated with Saint Sebastian – mainly because of his double death – and chooses him to be the saint of her confirmation, which never happens. As an adult, she believes she hears the saint speak about his disappointment with her. Although Felicia presents a dysfunctional behavior since an early age, she attempts to have some agency in her life by looking for a job. However, the one she finds is to work as an escort for rich businessmen, a job that worries Celia and about which she talks to Gustavo in a letter:

I'm very worried about Felicia (...) She takes the bus to Havana every afternoon and doesn't come back until late at night. She tells me she's looking for a job. But there's only one in the city for fifteen-year-old girls like her. (...) I've heard many stories of young girls destroyed by what passes as tourism on this country. Cuba has become the joke of the Caribbean, a place where everything and everyone is for sale.²⁸

In the pre-revolution period Cuba was famous as a place for sex tourism for the US businessmen. Thus, Felicia has no options regarding work, as in traditional societies women are expected to marry and have children. Her choices lie in being either a shop assistant or a prostitute. Although she is young, needy, and mentally unstable, Felicia refuses to prostitute herself. However, her lack of connection to the world, her loneliness and her abandonment by her father leads her to a ruinous relationship with her first husband.

Felicia strongly desires a connection with the world and to be loved – it seems that both are synonyms in the character's mind – and the first possibility of achieving this connection comes through Hugo Villaverde, a merchant sailor with whom she falls in love. Her docile submission to him unveils the inability to deal with her loneliness and separation from her family and social relations. Later, soon after their wedding, Felicia would be rejected and beaten by Hugo because she is pregnant. For Hugo, Felicia does not mean anything. She simply serves his sexual urges; therefore, as she gets pregnant, his interest disappears.

In her second pregnancy Hugo infects her with syphilis and that adds to Felicia's subjectivity fragmentation. Her mental condition worsens and she tries to kill Hugo by setting fire on him, as the narrator tells:

That afternoon, as she was frying plantains in a heavy skillet, the nausea suddenly stopped. It gave her a clarity she could not ignore. Felicia dropped a rag into the skillet and watched it go limp with oil (...) She lit a match and approached her husband, asleep on the couch (....) Felicia carefully brought the blue flame to the tip of the rag (...). Hugo awoke and saw his wife

²⁸ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 164.

In her attempt to be loved, Felicia encounters oppression, violence, denigration, and disease. As a result, she gets trapped into marriage and motherhood. She is also aware that motherhood would keep her more constrained and, consequently, more subordinate to Hugo's violence and abuse. Accordingly, Felicia rejects her twin daughters, Luz and Milagro. Her own abandonment by her father, her unstable mental condition, the sufferings she goes through with Hugo, and the syphilis, all lead to Felicia's abandonment of her daughters and her subsequent madness.

Felicia gets married a second time, to Ernesto, whom she meets and marries in four days, and who dies in a fire at his workplace. The facts that she tries to kill Hugo with fire, and that later she accomplishes it with her third husband Otto Cruz, who is electrocuted in the wires of a roller coaster, symbolize her attempt to free herself from oppressive husbands that, nevertheless, she herself chooses. To achieve her freedom she uses fire, in search for purification and to escape her present situation. Additionally, the oppression she goes through in her marriage to Hugo adds to the estrangement with Jorge because he is against their union, possibly because Hugo is black. Jorge's indifference towards Felicia continues after his death because he comes back to see Celia and keeps his connection with Lourdes, but ignores his second daughter. Concerning this indifference, Felicia complains: "'He didn't even say goodbye.' The last time Felicia saw her father, he had smashed a chair over her ex-husband Hugo's back. 'If you leave with that sonofabitch, don't ever come back!' her father had shouted as they fled." For Jorge it seems as if Felicia had ceased to exist.

Although Celia affirms to love Felicia, her attitude as a mother is rather cold, and later their relationship would be affected by Felicia's refusal to fully become a communist. It seems that Felicia, despite her madness, can view patriarchal and political oppression clearer than Celia can. As El Líder is the embodiment of sexual power, his image obviously appeals to women's imaginary in a way that obliterates their view of political oppression. As an illustration, Felicia suspects that her mother's devotion to El Líder is more than just political, for she "can't help feeling that there is something unnatural in her mother's attraction to him, something sexual. She has heard of women offering themselves to El Líder, drawn by his

²⁹ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 82.

³⁰ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 12.

power, by his unfathomable eyes, and it is said he has fathered many children on the island."³¹ Similarly, Felicia is influenced by El Líder's sex appeal. After she tries to kill herself and her son Ivanito, she is sent to a military training in the jungle as a kind of treatment and as way to become a "real socialist". Although she despises the regime's oppression and hypocrisy, she fantasizes about having sex with the dictator.

Concerning the links between mother and daughter, Chodorow argues that "identification with (the) mother is not positional – the narrow learning of particular role behaviors – but rather a personal identification with (the) mother's general traits of character and values". Felicia and Celia share many similarities, despite the opposite opinions regarding the regime. Chodorow's arguments about the shaping of woman's personality are relevant for a better understanding of Felicia's problems. She inherits the insanity of her namesake and in her relationship with Luz and Milagro she replicates Celia's coldness towards her. She also worships Ivanito in the same way as Celia does with Javier. Moreover, she attempts to fulfill the void of her abandonment through sex and she tries to purify herself from oppression, violence and disease by burning two of her husbands, repeating the acts of the insane Felicia after whom she is named.

Felicia's ordeals are the result of a legacy that disempowers and makes her deadly sick, namely, the abandonment that traumatizes her, the need to define herself through love, the subsequent mental disorder, the syphilis she gets from her husband, and most importantly, the patriarchal and political oppression she tries to disengage herself from. Felicia is a misfit, both inside her family and in the sociopolitical context. Her affiliation to Santeria is the most consistent attempt to define her subjectivity, however, her health – mental and physical – and beauty are destroyed in such a way that even her embracing of the religion cannot make her recover, although it brings her some relief. After she becomes a santera, all her diseases – mental, social, physical – take control of her:

Her eyes dried out like an old woman's and her fingers curled like claws until she could hardly pick up her spoon. Even her hair, which had been as black as a crow's, grew colorless in scruffy patches on her skull. Whenever she spoke, her lips blurred to a dull line in her face.³³

That she only recovers her beauty after her death symbolizes her misplacement and inadequacy inside such an oppressive, sickening and traumatic context. As she cannot fully

³² CHODOROW. Family structure and feminine personality, p. 51.

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³¹ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 110.

³³ GARCIA. *Dreaming in Cuban*, p. 189.

exercise her freedom, her sexual desire, and her nonracist view of the world in life, and because she cannot fit in, death becomes the only solution for her as well.

Celia and Felicia are closely connected to each other in what concerns their traumas. The abandonments are painful and the difficulties they encounter in face of patriarchy are very similar and have serious consequences for both women. The relationship with the primary caretaker is relevant in that the daughters' subjectivities suffer severe fragmentation which is a result of poor interaction or total lack of it, as are the cases of Celia with her mother, and Felicia with Jorge, and to a lesser degree, with Celia, who is immersed in her passions. Felicia is unable to construct her subjectivity independently of other's responses, and disappointments, sexual oppression, and the violence she suffers also traumatize her. The socio-political context in Cuba is crucial in shaping these women's subjectivities and adding to their traumas. For Celia and Felicia, the patriarchal codes of pre and post-revolutionary Cuba are fundamental in entrapping both women. Trauma in *Dreaming in Cuban* is presented as a multilayered and complex phenomenon and that demands a new path of study, diverse from the established concept of trauma.

RESUMO

Este ensaio analisa traumas em *Dreaming in Cuban*, de Cristina Garcia. As personagens Celia e Felicia sofrem diferentes tipos de trauma que não se enquadram no conceito de PTSD. Estes traumas estão relacionados aos códigos patriarcais, às historias familiares, ao contexto sociopolítico e à opressão sexual.

KEYWORDS

Trauma, gender, patriarchy, sexual oppression, family history

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