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A wounded discourse

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A Wounded Discourse: The Poetics of Disease in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*

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After the blood and salt water spurts, quickly sew up torn flesh and apply the antiseptic tinctures, the gauze and surgical plaster; then the febrile wait through the forming of a scar: suppurating, always suppurating.
Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*

Where illness is born, blood is bad.
Santería divination proverb

The title of Cristina Garcia's widely acclaimed 1992 novel *Dreaming in Cuban* evokes the role of memory, dreams, and imagination as concepts that deterritorialize Cuban identity. By their very ethereal nature, these concepts have the potential to transcend the space between Cuba and the United States that separates members of the del Pino family and allow them to connect with each other despite the geographical and ideological distances between them. In addition to these metaphysical modes of connection, the material world also plays a prominent, if somewhat paradoxical, role in relaying familial and cultural ties beyond the boundaries of the nation-state in the novel. Specifically, *Dreaming in Cuban* reveals diseased and disabled bodies that are inextricably intertwined with the project of remembering domestic and national histories. These diseased entities enable ancestral connections to stretch beyond strained emotional and political borders by assuming the characteristics of a rhizome, which Caribbean scholar Édouard Glissant (following Deleuze and Guattari) defines as "an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently" (*Poetics of Relation* 11). For Glissant, the rhizome is useful for imagining the "submarine" connections linking Caribbean peoples, histories and experiences: "Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (11). While Glissant's theory rests on the organic relational systems of plant life, my analysis extends his exploration of life forms to examine the relational aspects of human bodies. In this paper, I examine how *Dreaming in Cuban* renders disease and disability in such relational, rhizomatic terms and, as such, subverts the dichotomized discourse

surrounding the U.S. and Cuba that draws concrete ideological boundaries around the two nations: “this thinking of errantry, this errant thought, silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, at the same time, form difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us” (*Poetics of Relation* 18).

In the novel, the relational aspects of disease can unleash bodies from the certainties of physical forms that have typically rendered them as either “Cuban” or “American,” male or female. Symptoms, character traits, and diseases periodically appear, disappear, and reappear on the bodies of characters in various spaces in the novel and suggest an alternative discourse that operates through a variety of corporeal registers and codes. As such, the novel outlines a “poetics of disease” that acts as a kind of virus both disrupting and enabling the poetics of relation. At times, non-hereditary symptoms recede only to surface a generation later. The overdetermination of disease figures in the novel as each character confronts an assault on the boundaries of her/his physical body from outside elements: cancer, syphilis, tuberculosis, spiritual possession, dysplasia, malnourishment, pneumonia, rape, physical assault, insanity and even passion. The result is that corporeal boundaries undergo various metamorphoses, such as when the symptoms of disease appear on the body, the precincts of one individual’s body merge with other bodies, or bodies vanish altogether. In the novel, these physical states require both Western biomedical and ritualized, spiritual modes of diagnosing and deciphering illness.

In addition to building upon Glissant’s poetics of relation, by configuring this “poetics of disease,” I am recasting Glissant’s notion of “forced poetics” which he defines as “any collective desire for expression that, when it manifests itself, is negated at the same time because of the *deficiency* that stifles it, not at the level of desire, which never ceases, but at the level of expression, which is never realized” (*Caribbean Discourse* 120).¹ In the context of Garcia’s novel, this deficiency originates in the capacity or failure of language to facilitate optimum expression. Many of the characters in the novel, especially female characters, struggle to find forms of articulation that enable attachments with their families and communities.² The first sections of my analysis, “Bodies in Relation” and “Ashé,” explore the connection between disordered bodies and the disordered social spaces in which they exist. I examine how female characters’ ambivalent relationships with the pre- and post-revolutionary

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¹ Raphael Dalleo draws on Glissant’s notion of relation to interrogate the genealogy of Latino literature as well as to examine the transnational intertextuality of Garcia’s novel. In her essay, Andrea O’Reilly Herrera utilizes Glissant’s theory of “H/history” in order to address the novel’s engagement with historical narrative.

² See also Isabel Alvarez-Borland, “Displacements and Autobiography in Cuban American Fiction” *World Literature Today*, 68:1 (Winter 1994) 43-49.

Cuban nation-state become articulated through female sexuality and mutable mother-child physical connections. In this section, I also address physical relationships with the domestic environment and the struggle between biomedical and traditional forms of healing for Celia del Pino, her daughter, Felicia, and her son, Javier.

My analysis also draws on recent scholarship in the area of disability studies in order to theorize the implications of rendering postcolonial and immigrant subjectivities through disability and disease. In *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions*, Lennard Davis defines disability as “a social process that turns an impairment into a negative by creating barriers to access” (12). Davis contends that a disability only becomes an impairment “when the ambient society creates environments with barriers— affective, sensory, cognitive, or architectural” (41). Davis also proposes an ethics of the body that begins with disability (23). In doing so, he argues that disability and impairment are universal, but unstable, categories. He asserts, “In the social model, disability is presented as a social and political problem that turns an impairment into an oppression either by erecting barriers or by refusing to create barrier-free environments.” It is important to note here that thus far the field of disability studies has primarily focused on the so-called “First World.” It is necessary to ask, therefore, what disability means for postcolonial and immigrant subjects. One issue that Garcia’s novel raises is the need to consider traditional, non-Western forms of knowledge about the body, health and disease. For example, there is a significant parallel between the language of “social disorder” that Davis uses to define disability and the Afro-Cuban belief system Santería (La Regla de Ocha) in which physical illness is considered to be a reflection of social distress. In the novel, a santera refers to illness as “dystopia” and the afflicted must be “cleansed” of their “infelicities” (14). In her study of Santería, Migene González-Wippler describes the processes by which practitioners can influence others as “contagious magic” which “assumes that things that have been in contact with each other are always in contact. It is thus possible to exert influence on a person if one can only procure something that has been in contact with that person. It may be a piece of clothing, some hair, or nail parings” (19). Notably, bodily trace remains serve as vectors in this magic allowing it to transcend as well as fuse physical boundaries. Anthropomorphism also plays a prominent role in Santería as the orishas, Yoruban deities, make their presence known by “mounting” their initiates (santera/os) to take on human form. Thus, in both disability studies and Santería, disability and impairment serve as categories which, while fluid and unstable, complicate existing subjectivities, and are defined vis-à-vis the surrounding environment. Disability is what all of the characters in *Dreaming in Cuban*, whatever their location, age, gender or ideology, have in common and, thus, reflects a collective trauma. These physical states mirror the socio-political circumstances in which they exist and exemplify Rosemarie Garland

Thompson's notion of "a universalized disability discourse that... requires understanding the body as a cultural text that is interpreted, inscribed with meaning—indeed *made*—within social relations" (22). Disease becomes a powerful metaphor as it crosses borders surreptitiously. Operating on a rhizomatic plane, it trespasses across generations, cultures, nations and geographies, while also demonstrating that filial attachments are not reliant upon an essential rootedness, but shift, morph, evolve and mutate.

The novel's polyvalent discourse of disease is characterized by a simultaneity of experience, suggesting that Cubans and Americans are mutually implicated in each other's histories. In the sections, "The Politics of Disease" and "Anti-bodies," I explore the relations between the U.S. and Cuba as they are represented corporeally by various family members. Specifically, I analyze the role of consumption, nutrition and medical discourses for Lourdes and her father, Jorge. When considering Cuban subjects who encounter the barriers existing between the United States and Cuba, the tropes of infirm, wounded, disordered bodies highlight the difficulties of expressing the fraught political relations between family members as well as the contentious relationship between capitalism and communism, demonstrating the incapacitating discourse surrounding the two nations. Both U.S. and Cuban political discourse has been tinged with metaphors of illness and disorder. For example, Louis A. Pérez Jr. notes that one U.S. official described Castro as a "complete hysteric with a messianic complex, if not a manic-depressive" (230).³ And in July 2002, Fidel Castro stated, "Perhaps, of the evils brought about by developed capitalism none is so nefarious as the way of life and consumerist habits" (qtd. in de Salas-del Valle). Pérez Jr. discusses how the ongoing political discourse reflects the rhetoric of transnational estrangement:

The important questions, hence, are driven not by 'if' but by 'when'—and under what circumstances and with what enduring legacies—will relations resume, for when relations do become 'normal' again, the people of each country will carry memories of the last four decades for years to come... it requires no gift of prophecy to understand *that the deeper the wounds the more difficult the healing*. Cubans and the US population will long be affected by these years of 'non-relations.' ("Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro" 253, emphasis added)

Pérez's language is especially appropriate when one considers that Cuban immigrants have typically been constructed as refugees fleeing a brutal communist dictatorship and U.S. official discourse has constructed communism as a disease to be contained the world over.⁴ Given such

³ Robert L. Ivie describes how the use of the metaphor of disease to describe communism in U.S. discourse originated with the Truman presidency: "The disease metaphor had been on the minds of Truman's advisers and speechwriters... As early as February 22, 1946, George Kennan's influential 'long telegram' from Moscow had warned that world communism was like a 'malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue.'"

⁴ One need only recall the events surrounding the Elian Gonzalez case to know that any discussion surrounding the U.S. and Cuba remains deeply embedded with ideological and emotional history.

politically-charged rhetoric, “normal” discourse between the two nations has been nearly impossible as national, geographic and political borders have become highly contentious and solidified since the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Yet, in the early part of the twentieth-century, the line of demarcation between the United States and Cuba was not as clearly drawn as it has been since 1959.⁵ Cuba then constituted an integrated component of the U.S. body politic via economic and political ties. But while the U.S. had a prominent presence on the island in the early part of the twentieth-century, with the revolution, that presence was virtually eliminated. Ruth Behar vividly explains the shift in the U.S. cartographic imagining of Cuba after the revolution: “Once upon a time, Cuba was such a commonplace of the United States’ imagination that it was included in maps of Florida. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and Fidel Castro’s declaration that Cuba would be resculpted a communist nation, the United States sent the island into exile” (399). In essence, the communist “infection” of Cuba was “amputated” from the U.S. body politic after 1959. Cuba only reappears in U.S. national consciousness with the influx of refugees seeking political asylum.⁶ As Felix Masud-Piloto remarks, these Cubans were welcomed with “open arms” into the United States as they were seen to be escaping communism.⁷ Cuban refugees become a kind of prosthesis, replacing the island, which has been severed from U.S. consciousness, but always recalling its absence. Since then, Cuban-U.S. migration has been disabled through the governing bodies of both nations—exhibited most recently in the Bush Administration’s tightening

⁵ In *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture* Louis A. Pérez Jr. explains the pre-revolutionary cultural and economic links between the two nations: “Cubans and North Americans occupied a place in each other’s imagination and in their respective fantasies about each other” (6). Indeed, the United States had a military presence on the island on two separate occasions (1899-1902 and 1906-1909), whose role enabled U.S. expansionism. Prior to the Cuban Revolution, Cuban migration to the U.S. was common for the upper-class elite, who often sent their children to U.S. boarding schools and universities (Louis A. Pérez Jr. 32-36). During this time, U.S. interests increasingly controlled Cuban land and companies. In 1959, the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro overthrew the Batista dictatorship and ushered in a revolutionary socialist government that nationalized Cuban lands and companies, thereby severing significant economic relationships with U.S. interests.

⁶ Initially, those Cubans who emigrated to the United States after 1959 were part of the white elite, whose lands had been confiscated and nationalized by the revolutionary government and who previously had strong ties to the U.S. interests on the island. See Louis A. Pérez Jr.’s *On Becoming Cuban*.

⁷ This sentiment was made policy with the 1966 *Cuban Refugee Adjustment Act* which encouraged Cubans to immigrate to the U.S. by “convert[ing] the status of Cubans from refugees to permanent residents; the Act continues in effect and has been the legal basis for admitting Cubans into the United States” (Lisandro Pérez, 198). While the initial period of migration was performed mostly by airlifts (1965-73), a shift occurred in this migration pattern with the 1980 Mariel boat exodus in which 125,000 Cubans left the island. From that point on, many Cubans who have emigrated have done so by the precarious means of small boats or makeshift rafts known as *balsas*.

of travel restrictions to Cuba.⁸ The impaired mobility on the part of Americans seeking to travel to Cuba and Cubans seeking to travel to the U.S. constitutes a kind of transnational disability, the most extreme example of which is the case of the *balseero* (boat person) who risks life and limb on open seas in the hopes of making it to U.S. shores. The U.S. continues to evoke Cuban bodies in/as political discourse by decreeing that only those Cubans who physically touch U.S. soil can stay in the country—a policy known colloquially as “wetfoot/dryfoot.”⁹

Finally, despite the history of ideological pressures on Cuban physicality, *Dreaming in Cuban* also suggests that bodies are not always solely regulated by outside forces, but can become a means towards relational agency when certain characters remake their bodies as they attempt to recreate their relationships with the surrounding environment. Thus, I conclude my analysis by exploring the possibilities and limitations of a rehabilitative poetics as seen through the representation of the younger generation in *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Bodies in Relation

For several of the women in the novel, the disruption of the poetics of relation begins well before the appearance of the geo-political fractures that emerged with the Cuban Revolution. For these women, female sexuality and the in-utero and post-natal connections between mother and child serve as embodiments of a poetics of disease and relation. Rocio G. Davis asserts that “separation and death may be overcome by reconstructing both the cultural past and the image of the mother, achieving a reconciliation with the maternal through and within language.” However, when viewed through the language of physical connection, mother-child relationships are some of the most contentious sites of expression in the novel, complicating facile notions of relation by suggesting that there is not an inherent mother-child bond. Furthermore, while many of the representations of disease throughout *Dreaming in Cuban* ground the characters in flesh and blood, female characters are also linked by a desire for transparency—the absence of materiality, which would allow them to escape the stranglehold of biological and

⁸ According to this latest policy, family members in the United States are limited to one visit to Cuba every three years. For a full account of the policy see Abby Goodnough and Terry Aguayo, “Limits on Trips to Cuba Cause Split in Florida,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2004.

⁹ Typically, as part of what is commonly referred to as the “Wetfoot/Dryfoot Policy,” Cubans who make it to U.S. shores are granted political asylum, but if they are picked up at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard they can be sent back to Cuba. It is important to note, however, that other Caribbean boat migrants from Haiti and the Dominican Republic do not receive the same treatment. Furthermore, Louis Pérez Jr. explains that the United States’ history of politicizing Cuban bodies goes back to the early stages of the revolution, when the U.S. “assault against the Cuban economy involved arson of canefields, sabotage of machinery, and *acts of chemical warfare, including spreading chemicals in sugar cane fields to sicken Cuban cane cutters*” (emphasis added, “Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro” 244).

geographical barriers. Corporeal connections to water figure prominently throughout the novel symbolizing both in-utero mother-child connections and the yearning for transparency.

The initial onset of a poetics of disease occurs in the novel when, as a young woman, Celia becomes ill when her lover, Gustavo, leaves for Spain in 1936. She is so tormented by his absence that she takes to her bed for eight months and her body atrophies: “Soon she was a fragile pile of opaque bones... The doctors could find nothing wrong with [her]” (36). Conventional biomedical modes of diagnosis fail so that a santera is brought in as a last attempt to try to heal her. The santera provides a ritualized diagnosis, translating the sickness as, “a wet landscape in [Celia’s] palm” (7). Thus, while there is nothing that can be medically deciphered about her illness, the “wet landscape” of the santera’s reading suggests that Celia’s illness is inextricably linked to her environment. It symbolizes the paradox of her ambivalent desire to both maintain and disrupt boundaries throughout her life. In a letter she writes to Gustavo shortly after he has left for Spain in March 1936, she says, “I wish I could live underwater. Maybe then my skin would absorb the sea’s consoling silence. I’m a prisoner on this island, Gustavo, and I cannot sleep” (49). Celia imagines her escape as a kind of corporeal osmosis in which she absorbs the therapeutic elements of the sea. Water becomes a symbol of departure and transparency as well as of healing and exile. The santera’s interpretation is underscored by the parallels drawn between Celia’s “wet landscape” and the Afro-Cuban deity Yemayà, “the queen of the sea and salt water” (Barnet 92). This is signified throughout the novel as Celia becomes associated with the color blue and Yemayà’s color “is navy blue with some white, symbolizing the foam of the waves” (92). When configured as Yemayà, one can read Celia’s self-submersion as an attempt to reclaim her marine environment linking her to what Benítez-Rojo refers to as the Caribbean’s “aquatic... sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar. The Caribbean is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity” (11). Given the prominence of “aquatic” and “nomadic” elements in Caribbean life, it is telling that Celia’s impairment becomes attached to her immobility. While she lives next to the sea for most of her life, it is the men in her life who have the freedom to traverse it. Discussing the restrictions placed on women in the early part of the twentieth-century, Louis A. Pérez Jr. notes that Cuban educator Carlos Saladrigas argued explicitly against sending young women abroad for fear that experience outside of their native country would distract them from their “primary and principle mission... within the bosom of the family” (Saladrigas qtd. in *On Becoming Cuban* 88). Similarly, Garcia suggests that travel and mobility, at least for a woman in early twentieth-century Cuba, remain specifically tied to the

male domain.¹⁰ Celia imagines that by submerging herself in the sea she can transform her physical environment and improvise a new relationship between it and her body—one that does not have to be defined by her gender.

When she becomes pregnant with her first child, Celia continues to equate maleness with freedom and escape,

Celia wished for a boy, a son who could make his way in the world. If she had a son, she would leave Jorge and sail to Spain, to Granada. [...] If she had a girl, Celia decided, she would stay. She would not abandon 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. (42)

A male would be able to survive without her; females would be obligated to maintain the cultural and national boundaries imagined as “columns of blood.” Pregnancy represents a permeability that threatens the boundaries that Celia has been trained to uphold. It is a condition that demands the health of mutually dependent bodies, but also raises questions about health and sickness because when mother and child are physically linked, there is the potential for passing on illness. When her first child turns out to be a daughter (Lourdes), Celia cannot face training her how to survive in a society filled with gender restrictions. She imagines her pregnant body as a vector of disease, casting herself as a contaminated mother who passes “venom” on to Lourdes in the womb. It is particularly because “the baby is porous” that makes her vulnerable to contagion (50). Realizing that she cannot escape her life on the island, she experiences a mental breakdown and upon giving birth, “she held their child by one leg, handed her to Jorge, and said, ‘I will not remember her name’” (43). Jorge reacts by sending her to one of the ultimate spaces of confinement, a mental asylum.¹¹ It is at this point, when confronted by the bio-medical system, that Celia is most out-of-sync with her environment: “nature is at right angles here. No bougainvillea. No heliconia” (51). Not surprisingly, her eventual release from the asylum signals a turning point in her relationship to the world as, “nature... seemed more flexible” (53).

Years later, the revolution becomes a defining moment in Celia's relationship to her surroundings as she begins to more willingly uphold national and ideological boundaries. In the opening scene of the novel, she scans the shoreline with binoculars to “spot another Bay of Pigs invasion before it happened” (3). One reason for this shift is that Celia now sees herself as an active citizen shaping her society. And yet, she continues to associate the sea with male mobility, which suggests that the revolution has not completely equalized gender relations. While she watches the

¹⁰ Although he initially does not leave the island as Gustavo did, her husband Jorge travels around the island selling vacuum cleaners, leaving Celia to contend with his fractious mother and sister.

¹¹ This scene echoes Celia's own abandonment as a child when her parents divorced and she was sent away to live with a great-aunt in Havana: “on the long train ride from the countryside, *Celia lost her mother's face*” (emphasis added 92).

shoreline, she spots the image of Jorge on the horizon, crossing over geographic, national and metaphysical boundaries as he “walk[ed] on water in his white summer suit and Panama hat” (5). Jorge’s apparition is precluded by his death in New York where he had gone to seek medical treatment for stomach cancer. Upon seeing him, Celia goes into the sea, “The water laps at her throat. She arches her spine until she floats on her back, [...] A cool wind stirs Celia from her dream. She stretches her legs but she cannot touch the sandy bottom. She has lost her shoes. A sudden wave engulfs her, and for a moment Celia is tempted to relax and drop” (8). This act signals Celia’s continued attempt to reinvent her physical relationship to her environment; where she “sees” Jorge walking *on* the water, she submerges her own body *within* the water. Her allegiance to the Revolution eventually motivates her to come out of the sea when she remembers that she is the only person guarding the shoreline. Yet, her metamorphoses have already begun as “seaweed clings to her skull like a lethal plant. She is barefoot and her skin, encrusted with sand, is tinged a faint blue” (10). Although Celia maintains the national border, she persists in yearning for a relational mode of being with marine and plant life that exists beyond the boundaries of the nation-state.

For Celia’s daughter, Felicia, intimate physical connections also hold the potential to become diseased and lead to detachment. As a fifteen-year old, she embodies an eroticized physical and economic link between pre-revolutionary Cuba and the United States when she becomes a paid escort to a man from Oklahoma for an evening.¹² Felicia continues to have troubled intimate relationships throughout her life and experiences one of the novel’s most debilitating manifestations of a poetics of disease. She inherits the traits of her namesake, Celia’s roommate in the asylum, who killed her husband by lighting him on fire and herself dies “burned in her bed” (51) leaving Celia with only an indecipherable “trail of white liquid” (51). Although her body dissolves in the fire, her spiritual legacy seems to transfer to Felicia who also tries to kill her husband, Hugo, by setting his head aflame. Like Gustavo and Jorge, Hugo has a freedom of movement as a merchant marine who “sails around the world” (84), but returns with syphilis and simultaneously impregnates and infects Felicia. Thus, the immolation serves as an attempted purification of Hugo’s diseased body—the body that contaminates her.¹³ Hugo’s mobility facilitates Felicia’s disability as she becomes imprisoned in her own delusional mind and she spends her life searching for a means of articulating herself: “Something is wrong with her tongue. It forms broken trails of words, words sealed and resistant as stones” (83).

¹² Louis Pérez Jr. notes that “By the late 1950s about 270 brothels operated in Havana, with more than 11,500 women working as prostitutes” with a significant portion of the clientele coming from the United States (*On Becoming Cuban* 193).

¹³ Ellen McCracken connects Felicia’s act with the orisha, Changó, the god of fire and lightning (114-115). One could also see her as the orisha, Oyá, the mistress of lightning who is also known as “Our Lady of Candelaria.” According to González-Wippler, the Spanish word “Candelaria” is translated as “conflagration”(61-62).

Sublimation, ritual and language become imbricated in Felicia's search to heal herself and restore her sense of identity. One santero prescribes a "rubbing ritual to cleanse herself of negative influences" that is intended to "absorb the evil that clings to [her]" (148). However, Felicia is distracted from completing her treatment by her own erratic passions as she marries twice more. Her second husband, a food inspector, dies in a restaurant fire. And Felicia seemingly stumbles into her third marriage when she wakes up "in a bed that's not her own, in a room she doesn't recognize" with no idea who she is or where she is from (151-152). Without any recollection of her identity, Felicia looks to her body for clues and is satisfied when it appears healthy: "She looks tanned and rested in the mirror, almost pretty. This reassures her" (152). But despite her robust physical appearance, she has difficulty articulating her place in society. She "begins to assemble bits and pieces of her past. They stack up in her mind, soggily, arbitrarily... . She charts sequences and events with colored pencils, shuffling her diagrams until they start to make sense, a possible narrative" (154). Just when she begins to remember traces of her former life, she severs ties to her new husband by pushing him off a roller coaster and she "watched him die on a bed of high-voltage wires" and "his body turned to gray ash, and then the wind blew him north" (185-86). That Felicia obliterates the physical evidence of her present marriage signals an inability to reconcile it with the reconstructed narrative of her former life.

The legacy of Felicia's diseased maternal body continues long after her initial infection. She spends one summer making and eating coconut ice cream, believing "the coconuts will purify them, that the sweet white milk will heal them" (85). Significantly, among her three children, the only child to share in this decontamination is her young son Ivanito for it was while Felicia was pregnant with him that she became infected with syphilis. In fact, it was the disruption of morning sickness that "gave her a clarity she could not ignore" (82) and she set Hugo's head on fire. Ivanito remembers that, "His mother claims that he almost died because of Papa, from a venereal disease that infected him when he was born" (84). The infection serves as a symbolic connection that powerfully binds Ivanito to his mother so that when Felicia believes that her mother is trying to poison her with the food she brings, Ivanito also refuses to eat it for fear of "betray[ing] his mother" (87). The illness that links Felicia and Ivanito harks back to Celia's own fear that her maternal body would poison the fetus growing inside her. The purifying "sweet white milk" of the coconuts symbolizes a kind of mother's milk that Felicia's contaminated maternal body could not produce.¹⁴ The amalgamation of the tropes of food, nourishment and maternity comes to a terrifying climax when Felicia prepares an elaborate meal for Ivanito and herself--lacing their dessert of coconut ice-cream with poison (89), so that it too becomes another potentially fatal contaminating link between mother and son. The two survive, but it serves as cataclysmic rupture in their relationship as

¹⁴ Coconuts are also central to Santería rituals. See McCracken, 115.

Felicia is sent away to be reformed into a “New Socialist Woman” and five-year old Ivanito is sent to boarding school to be “integrated” (107). Whereas Celia finds a sense of purpose in upholding Cuban revolutionary ideology, Felicia finds the language of the revolution lacking: “all she sees is a country living on slogans and agitation.”

Although Felicia has an extraordinary connection with her son, she is utterly estranged from her twin daughters, Luz and Milagro, who see their mother’s nonsensical language as disabling—a kind of inadequate “forced poetics.” They complain that she only provides them with “pretty words. Meaningless words *that didn’t nourish us*, that didn’t comfort us, that kept us prisoners in her alphabet world” (emphasis added, 121). The twins speak of their mother and brother in terms of a discourse of disease, watching Ivanito for “symptoms” of their mother’s illness. Whereas the twins find their mother’s condition contemptible, they initially see their father’s disfigurement as a site of communicative agency. While his “face was hung with slack ugly folds that dragged down his eyes until the rims showed red, that dragged down the stump of his nose and misshapen ears, dragged them down until his skull was taut and bare,” they believe that they find “the language [they had] been searching for, a language more eloquent than the cheap bead necklaces of words [their] mother offered” (123-24). And yet, the potential for relation with their father is disrupted when they, along with Ivanito, witness him having sex with a prostitute, “his face swollen and purple as his sex” (125). Their horror at discovering their father’s phallic countenance momentarily bonds the siblings as “the three of [them] pricked [their] fingers and mingled [their] blood” and vow to keep the incident a secret (126). Garcia suggests, however, that blood does not guarantee an impenetrable relational bond. Ultimately, the secret that it symbolizes serves as another hindrance to the poetics of relation, especially for Ivanito. As if to counter the permeability that they see threatening Ivanito’s health, the twins manage to remain hermetically sealed from others: “Their world is a tightly sealed box. [They] are afraid of letting anyone inside” (229).

Eventually, Felicia appears to have found a language that suits her as she immerses herself in the rituals of Santería. Her Afro-Cuban friend, Herminia, explains how the ceremonies “were a kind of poetry that connected her to larger worlds, [...] Our rituals healed her, made her believe again” (186). Herminia’s remarks reflect the relational aspects of Santería “as a transformation of the self in which the ill person begins to experience the world in new ways” (Wedel 5). In particular, Santería offers Felicia an embodiment of spirituality, along with further hope of ridding her body of illness as its practitioners translate her sickness through ritual knowledge. She becomes initiated undergoing a rebaptism as “sixteen santeras tore Felicia’s clothes to shreds until she stood naked, then they bathed her in river water” (187). She crosses over metaphysical boundaries as she loses consciousness during the ceremony and is “possessed by Obatalá” (187), who, according to Miguel Barnet, is “the

god of purity and justice” and “in the liturgy of Santería he is the head, birth, that which stands high, pure, and clean... a symbol of what is born pure in life” (93). Yet despite Obatalá’s presence, Felicia remains voiceless: “the *santeras* had made eight cuts on her tongue with a razor blade so that the god could speak...[yet] Felicia could not divulge his words” (187). While Herminia explains that it was after her initiation ceremony that Felicia had “finally found her peace” (188), this peace is not reflected in her body. She becomes increasingly ill, her body covered with lumps and carbuncles until she dies (189). It is not until after her death when the final rites of Santería are performed on her body that Felicia achieves the purification she has been seeking most of her life. Herminia describes how “they passed colorful handkerchiefs over Felicia’s body, all the while grieving in low voices to purify her corpse. By the time they finished, the terrible lumps on Felicia’s head had disappeared, and her skin was as smooth as the pink lining of a conch” (214).¹⁵ Felicia’s physical symptoms serve as signifiers of that which she cannot articulate. That her outward healing occurs only after her death suggests that she was not able to find a healthy social space in which to exist.¹⁶

Ashé

While some studies of *Dreaming in Cuban* note the peculiarity of Felicia’s illness, scholars have typically avoided extensive commentary on the equally enigmatic figure of her brother, Javier, who returns from Czechoslovakia after his wife leaves him and takes their daughter.¹⁷ A lump appears on his neck and a scar on his back--apparent physical manifestations of his emotional loss--and Celia “falls on [him] like a lover” (156) to nurse him back to health. Celia wonders whether the physical symptoms indicate the reappearance of her own illness since Javier’s symptoms parallel her own (157). When his condition continues to deteriorate as he becomes an alcoholic, Celia tracks down the santera who helped her when she was grieving Gustavo’s departure. But this time the santera does not have a chance to offer an interpretation:

her face is black and puckered and oily now and seems to breathe all at once like an undersea creature... . She prays every Catholic prayer she knows in quick, calm

¹⁵ McCracken posits that Felicia’s death represents a failure of her santo, Obatalá, to protect her and asserts that Garcia is thus “sympathetic but partially critical” of Santería (116).

¹⁶ María Teresa Marrero offers an insightful discussion of the racial implications of both Felicia’s marriage to Afro-Cuban Hugo and her embracing of Santería: “Felicia is a culturally and racially liminal character: a white woman living as a member of a traditional Afro-Cuban religious sect. Her death suggests that she does not fit into either world, and subsequently her problems can only be resolved by death” (154). While I agree with Marrero’s assertion, I would also argue that Felicia’s social distress includes other factors such as her society’s restrictive gender roles and her alienation from the tenets of the revolution.

¹⁷ For other discussions of Felicia, see O’Reilly-Herrera, Luis, McCracken, and Marrero.

succession... . Her body starts to sway, and her clasped hands rock beneath her chin until it seems she is all loose, swinging angles... . the little *santera's* moist eyes roll back in her dwarfish head until the whites gleam from two pinpricks, and she trembles once, twice, and *slides against Celia in a heap on the sidewalk, smoking like a wet fire...* until nothing is left of her but her fringed cotton shawl. (emphasis added, 160)

The notion of *ashé* becomes important for understanding this phantasmagoric scene of ritual possession. Through divination and prayer, the *santera* appears to have been “mounted” by a particular *orisha*, or deity, in an attempt to call upon the saints to heal Javier. According to George Brandon, in *Santería*, “a mystical bond links living and nonliving things in an intricate web of influence and interdependence” (17). The means through which connection can be made is through the transference of the pure energy, or “*ashé*,” of the *orishas* through possession. Brandon explains that *ashé* “permeates the entire universe. All of the powers (the *orisha*, the ancestors, the forces and actions of nature, perhaps even the supreme being itself) are manifestations of this absolute and indefinable power” (16). He continues, “it is the *ashé*... that heals the sick and forestalls death in rituals of affliction” (17). Thus, while traditionally this divination should facilitate healing for Javier, because the *santera's* body disintegrates in front of her, Celia (and readers) are left without a ritual “diagnosis” of Javier’s illness. Like her roommate in the asylum, Javier’s illness remains indecipherable to Celia and he too disappears.

However, the combustion of the *santera's* body allows for an apparent corporeal trespassing to occur between Javier’s and Celia’s bodies so that with Javier’s disappearance Celia “feels a lump in her chest, compact as a walnut. A week later, the doctors remove her left breast. In its place they leave a pink, pulpy scar like the one she’d discovered on her son’s back” (160).¹⁸ These corporeal border-crossings and exchanges are related to *ashé*. Joseph Wedel explains that “In *Santería*, the self is not strictly bound to the individual as in Western cosmology, but may, to some extent, encompass a person’s relatives” (Wedel 109). The *santera's* incineration suggests that the *ashé* of the *orisha*—one whose attributes would most likely include fire or lightning--was too powerful to be sustained by the *santera's* body. Instead of recuperating Javier’s ill body, his emotions literally consume him along with the *santera* perhaps because “the human body was too weak and imperfect to house an *orisha's* full energy. Only a small atom of that divine energy could enter in” (González-Wippler 201). All that remains is *ashé*, the pure energy of the *orisha*, that, without bodily evidence, is no longer humanly perceptible.

In some ways, Garcia reiterates a familiar trope in which the black woman’s body becomes a vessel to facilitate a connection between (white)

¹⁸ O’Reilly Herrera describes Celia’s mastectomy as the removal of “the primal source of human nourishment” that “suggests both the physical deprivation of the Cuban people as a result of severe food shortages and the maiming of Cuba as a mother country” (86).

mother and son.¹⁹ But, this reading is tempered by the fact that the “link” between the two, instead of signifying a cherished attribute or sanguine mother-child bonding, materializes as a cancerous lump. Garcia thus refrains from over-romanticizing the relational possibilities of Santería’s rituals since they do not seem to have resolved Javier’s or Felicia’s illnesses. Whereas Javier’s lump and scar symbolize his broken marriage and alienation from his daughter, Celia’s cancerous lump and scar symbolize disconnection from another of her children. Furthermore, the disappearance of the bodies of Celia’s roommate, Javier, and Felicia’s third husband mark aporias in the poetics of disease; there are gaps in this discourse that no amount of ritual or diagnosis can recover.

The Politics of Disease

For Lourdes, the obsession with food and her body marks a poetics of disease as they become sites of expression that link her with her father, Jorge. She experiences alienation from her mother and her native land that is compounded when she is raped at the hands of revolutionary soldiers. Shortly before the rape, her body had begun to reject the fetus growing in her womb when she was thrown from a horse. But it is in protecting her husband’s land against the revolution that her miscarriage reaches its final stages (70). When the soldiers return to deliver the official paper that declares their farm the property of the government, Lourdes again resists and one of the soldiers rapes her: “When he finished, the soldier lifted the knife and began to scratch at Lourdes’s belly with great concentration. A primeval scraping. Crimson hieroglyphics. [...] Not until later, [...] did Lourdes try to read what he had carved. But it was illegible” (72). Just as Celia’s, Felicia’s and Javier’s physical illnesses confound conventional diagnosis, the soldier’s primitive carving of Lourdes’ flesh resists interpretation. Through the soldier’s exertion of phallic power, the confrontation between the revolutionary vision of Cuba’s land and that of the wealthy landowners becomes inscribed on Lourdes’ body, leaving her unable to decipher it and without a voice. She internally challenges the disfiguring of her own body by imagining the soldier’s body disabled by his future military service: “She smelled his rotting leg in Africa, where it would be blown off his body on a moonless savannah night” (72). Instead of a poetics of relation, “in which each and every identity is extended through relation with the Other” (Glissant 11), after the rape, Lourdes severs all ties to Cuba by emigrating to the United States with her husband Rufino and daughter Pilar, where she welcomes her new, colder environment and speaks in the new language of her “adopted country.”

Lourdes gravitates towards a kind of conspicuous capitalist consumption in New York where nourishment and food take on political significance. As the owner of two “Yankee Doodle” bakeries, she sees food as evidence of her success. She imagines it as kind of a capitalist

¹⁹ See the figure of Chucha in Julia Alvarez’s *¡Yo!* and the figure of Fela in Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

weapon for fighting communism: “*Lourdes sends her [mother] snapshots of pastries from her bakery in Brooklyn. Each glistening éclair is a grenade aimed at Celia’s political beliefs, each strawberry shortcake proof—in butter, cream, and eggs—of Lourdes’s success in America, and a reminder of the ongoing shortages in Cuba*” (117). *Lourdes’s obsession with food-as-ideology parallels certain aspects of the U.S. trade embargo. Louis A. Pérez, Jr. explains that the U.S. economic sanctions resulted in “politicizing hunger as a means of promoting popular disaffection, in the hope that driven by want and motivated by despair Cubans would rise up and oust Fidel Castro” (“Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro” 241). The U.S. made policy decisions based on the expectation of what could become the starving, malnourished bodies of Cubans as they related to a Cuban body politic that was seen to be politically and economically deficient in its espousal of communism. The irony, however, is that while Lourdes leaves behind the nation where food shortages would become standard, it is in the U.S. that she cannot find adequate sustenance. Explicating this perception, Pilar questions the meals her mother prepares for her family that consist of the processed foods of their new country: “Mom makes food only people in Ohio eat, like Jell-O molds with miniature marshmallows or recipes she clips from Family Circle... . Like this is it? We’re living the American dream?” (137).*

Excessive consumption, in the form of eating and sex, become compulsions for *Lourdes* when her father initially arrives in New York for medical treatments: “*The more she took her father to the hospital for cobalt treatments, the more she reached for the pecan sticky buns and for Rufino*” (20). Despite being near the parent she favors, it is as if his ailing presence reminds *Lourdes* that she lacks a kind of nourishment and she uses food and sex in an effort to nurture herself (21). Significantly, *Lourdes’s* consumption also carries ritual meanings. One could view both her love of capitalist consumerism and desire for sweets as traits of the orisha, *Ochún*.²⁰ As *Stephan Palmié* observes, *Ochún* is “associated primarily with the flow of the sweet (as opposed to marine) water, *Ochún’s* powers are also felt in movements of circulation, not just of earthly waters, but of blood and money” (Palmié 281). Furthermore, *Lourdes’s* compulsive eating is also an attempt to have agency in spaces that men typically dominate. Eating becomes a means to transform her body in a way that does not attract male attention: “*The flesh amassed rapidly on her hips and buttocks, muting the angles of her bones. It collected on her thighs, fusing them above the knees. It hung from her arms like hammocks*” (20). By remaking her own body *Lourdes* attempts to impose order through ingestion. And she is not necessarily immobilized by her obesity: “*The heavier she got, the more supple her body became*” while *Rufino’s* body “ached from the [sexual] exertions. His joints swelled

²⁰ While I am using the spelling “*Ochún*” to indicate this orisha, because *Santería’s* beliefs and practices have been orally transmitted there is not a standardized spelling for the name. Other spellings include “*Oshún*.”

like an arthritic's" (21). She attempts to fill the void left by her rape in Cuba, her miscarriage, the absence of a maternal connection, and the possibility of losing the parent with whom she has a bond. Moreover, Lourdes's compulsive eating also signals the "dis-ease" of capitalist hyper-consumption. While Elena Machado Sáez argues that "due to its isolation from the global market and the progress of capitalism, Cuba figures as a space of unproductiveness, sickness, and death" (141), I would argue that Garcia suggests that despite its participation, and dominance, in the global marketplace, the U.S. is no more sustaining than Cuba. That Lourdes never manages to get "filled up" no matter how much she consumes symbolizes a political system marked by perpetual deficiency, despite the continuous consumption on the part of its citizenry.

Anti-bodies

Lourdes continues to symbolize Ochún as the stomach, the locus of ingestion, becomes the source of dis-ease for both her and her father. González-Wippler explains, "The entire abdominal area is sacred to Oshún... The orisha is... responsible for all abdominal illnesses and operations" (60). For Jorge and Lourdes, his stomach cancer would seem an apt manifestation of having lived under what they see as the corruption and inefficiency of the communist system. Pilar explains, "Mom says 'communist' the way some people say 'cancer,' low and fierce" (26). Jorge yearns for the pre-revolutionary days when he worked as a salesman for a U.S. company: "He'd wanted to be a model Cuban, to prove to his gringo boss that they were cut from the same cloth" (6). Jorge's emulation of American methods manifests through his war on germs, which he sees proliferate in the tropical Cuban climate. For him, even the word "*microbios*" "lit a fire in his eyes. 'They are the enemy!' he used to bellow. 'Culprits of tropical squalor'" (21-22). Lourdes remembers how "for her father, conquering *microbios* required unflagging vigilance" (22). Jorge's construction of Cuba as a diseased space reflects U.S. policy towards the island during the U.S. military occupation following the Spanish-American War (1898) when the *Platt Amendment* was drafted to provide guidelines for United States-Cuban relations. In addition to allowing that the "United States may exercise the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence," the Amendment configured national security through a biomedical discourse:

That the government of Cuba will execute, and as far as necessary extend, the plans already devised or other plans to be mutually agreed upon, *for the sanitation of the cities of the island, to the end that a recurrence of epidemic and infectious diseases may be prevented*, thereby assuring protection to the people and commerce of Cuba, as well as to the commerce of the southern ports of the United States and the people residing therein. (emphasis added)

Jorge's desire to maintain order in his environment parallels the U.S. government's attempt to "contain" those "Cuban" diseases that threatened

national, economic and political boundaries.²¹ His war on germs signals his efforts to control and order his family's physical interactions with the tropical environment and the Cuban system.

Ultimately, the excretions of his own ailing body dismantle Jorge's fantasy of an efficient and hygienic American medical system. During his treatment for cancer in a New York hospital, Lourdes remembers how "her father despaired at the incompetences and breakdowns in procedures Once a nurse inserted a suppository to loosen his bowels and did not return, although he cramped his finger ringing the buzzer, until after he had soiled his pajamas" (22). While he deplores "tropical squalor," it is the humiliation of being unable to maintain his body's hygienic borders in North America that eventually overwhelms him and ultimately symbolizes the difficulty of drawing distinct allegiances along national and ideological borders. Furthermore, Garcia's rendering of Lourdes and Jorge in association with Ochún also challenges their attempts to cut themselves off from the island since in Cuba the orisha "is syncretized with Our Lady of La Caridad del Cobre" to represent the patron saint of the nation (González-Wippler 59).

Significantly, while Lourdes has an insatiable appetite during her father's illness, she quits eating when he dies: "She envisions the muscled walls of her stomach shrinking, contracting, slickly clean from the absence of food and the gallons of springwater she drinks" (167). While earlier in her life, the ocean only served as a reminder of her unwelcome birth, Lourdes now parallels Celia's and Felicia's desire for "transparency" through infusing her obese body with water. Instead of symbolizing nourishment, food now signifies illness –the smell of food repulses her so that "[s]he can't even look at it without her mouth filling with the acrid saliva that precedes vomiting." She imagines her former sexual appetite in terms of revolting cannibalism: "a life-craving whore who fed on her husband's nauseating clots of yellowish milk" (169). Her dieting is imagined as a kind of cleansing and rebirth so that she has to be "weaned" back on food, like an infant, after which she feels "pure, absolutely clean" (173) as she attempts to rewrite her history by reconstructing her body. Although she loses a total of one hundred-eighteen pounds, Lourdes is unable to maintain her "purified" thin body. She regresses to her former physical self when her ideological and environmental boundaries are threatened at Pilar's mention of moving back to Cuba (174).

The bluish liquid that Lourdes ingests while dieting parallels her father's "cobalt" radiation treatments that symbolize their view of a world that must be eradicated of communist contamination. But the irony of radiation therapy is that it kills good cells in order to also kill cancerous

²¹ Historian Nancy Stepan analyzes the U.S. Yellow Fever Commission (1900) that investigated the transmission of yellow fever by mosquitoes in Cuba. She points out that "both the imperial rationale and the North American military presence were threatened [by the disease]. These economic and political factors transformed yellow fever from a low priority disease to one of the highest priority" (151-152).

ones. Thus, Lourdes' and Jorge's attempts to inoculate themselves from communism can only be accomplished by denying themselves connections to their family members still tied to Cuba. Indeed, one path to immunity can include undergoing a previous infection so that disease is not always debilitating but can prove to be an ontological necessity.

Towards a Poetics of Rehabilitation

In light of the infinite and elaborate ways in which bodies experience illness in the novel, the family's hope lies with the younger generation of the del Pino family, Pilar and Ivanito, for whom the poetics of disease eventually becomes transformed into a kind of poetics of rehabilitation through a reworking of the social relations in which their bodies exist. For example, Pilar challenges the U.S. social order in a mural of the Statue of Liberty that she creates for the grand opening of her mother's second bakery. She paints a punk version of the statue, where "Liberty's torch floats slightly beyond her grasp" and "black stick figures pul[s]e in the air around Liberty, thorny scars that look like barbed wire... at the base of the statue I put my favorite punk rallying cry: I'M A MESS" (141).²² Pilar's reconfiguration of the symbol of the U.S. body politic is that of a disordered and unhealthy body. Thus, her rendering of a "punked out" Statue of Liberty is particularly evocative as it deconstructs the icon of a welcoming "motherland."

Pilar's own corporeality offers a rewriting of Lourdes' and Felicia's physical histories. She symbolizes the possibility of reviving the relational aspects of their afflicted bodies. The impetus for Pilar's return to Cuba begins with a trip to a botánica where a santero recognizes her as a "daughter of Changó," the god of fire and lightning, and tells her that she "must finish what [she] began" and prescribes herbal baths for nine consecutive nights. Returning home from the botánica, Pilar is molested by a group of boys in Central Park. The violent violation of her assault echoes Lourdes' rape as well as Felicia's abuse by Hugo (81). Shortly afterwards, she experiences a spiritual awakening that manifests corporeally as she undergoes Santería bathing rituals. These simultaneously violent and restorative permutations of Pilar's body signal a pivotal moment in the novel since they propel her return to Cuba with her mother--an attempt by both to reconnect and reconcile with the past, family and the Revolution. In this sense, the novel "trespasses" across many boundaries considered taboo by many Cuban-Americans who refuse to return to the island until after Castro's death.

Pilar finds that certain boundaries remain impenetrable when she reaches her native land. She realizes that reconnecting with her grandmother is not as easy as she had imagined: "I have this image of Abuela Celia underwater, standing on a reef with tiny chrome fish darting by her face like flashes of light... . She calls to me but I can't hear her. Is

²² For another reading of Pilar's mural, see William Luis *Dance Between Two Cultures* p. 218-219.

she talking to me from her dreams?” (220) Pilar confronts her nostalgia for her homeland and in doing so, comes to realize that her visit will not completely reconcile her to it or her grandmother. She learns that she cannot simply return to her “roots,” but that her search for identity must encompass all of the rhizomatic “extensions” of her (and her family’s) existence, exemplifying that “identity is no longer completely within the root but also in the Relation” (*Poetics of Relation* 18). Significantly, Pilar experiences this revelation physically: “I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. There’s a magic here working its way through my veins” (235). For Lourdes, remediation begins through reorienting her physical relationship with the Cuban landscape, where she fears that her rape and miscarriage “were absorbed quietly by the earth” (227). Upon returning, she visits the site of her rape and finds that the place of abuse has been turned into a hospital. The transformation of the original site of trauma into a place of care under a socialist government could imply the possibility of rehabilitating her relationship with Cuban space.

Notwithstanding the obstacles that she encounters upon returning to Cuba, Pilar represents the chance to reestablish the rhizomatic links between Cuba and the United States, and family in both locations. However, the novel also demonstrates that Pilar will not achieve this alone, but in conjunction with her cousin, Ivanito. The prospect of an embodied relationality becomes apparent when Pilar and Lourdes put aside their differences to help Ivanito escape in a scene recalling the Mariel boatlift.²³ Pilar finds him in the crowd at the Peruvian embassy and together they experience a connection beyond words as she describes how, when she embraces him, “I can feel my cousin’s heart through his back. I can feel a rapid uncoiling inside us both” (242). This connection is striking because Ivanito has no real ties to family or anyone left on the island. His mother is dead, his grandmother is dying, he does not have a relationship with his father and his sisters have their own insular connection to each other. While O’Reilly Herrera argues that Ivanito’s “passive nature links him to a bygone age and ideology” (79), I assert that what is most remarkable about Ivanito is his vision for the future. When he grows up he wants to be a translator for world leaders (230). His desire for translation signals a kind of rehabilitation of his mother’s legacy of forced poetics as well as a reestablishment of communication between Cuba and the United States. Whereas Elena Machado Sáez posits that “within the novel, translation means death and by extension, if Cuba is translated, it will die” (143), I argue that the novel signals the need for domestic and international translation. Ivanito represents the potential for bridging not only linguistic, but also cultural and political boundaries—he signifies the ultimate trespasser. Together with Pilar, who carries her grandmother’s letters-as-history to the United States, the pair represent what David T.

²³ Garcia represents the relational possibility between mother and daughter, Cuba and the United States, through their surname, “Puentes.” “*Puente*” translates as “bridge.”

Mitchell refers to as a “ ‘hybrid’ third generation,” (53) the future generation of Cuban “native informants” who will regenerate and complicate the existing Cuban-American discourse. As Glissant asserts, “The thought of errantry is a poetics, which always infers that at some moment it is told. The tale of errantry is the tale of poetics” (*Poetics of Relation* 18). Ivanito and Pilar *together* will carry on the family history, which is significant since one of them was raised in Cuba and the other in the U.S.; their collaborative poetics symbolize the visionary possibility of a poetics of relation.

Dis/Abling the Caribbean

The prevalence of a poetics of disease in *Dreaming in Cuban* suggests that impairment is universal for those caught between Cuba and the United States. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that novel charts a linear progression from disease to cure, migration to destination, abnormality to normalcy. Glissant’s notion of relationality rejects such linear trajectories; a poetics of relation requires the acknowledgement and incorporation of the complex historical dimensions of “wounding” in the region. Benitez-Rojo’s remarks in the epigraph that preface this paper suggest that the notion of impairment has a much longer history in the Caribbean as he describes the creation of the Caribbean plantation system as a “wound” borne out of European colonialism in the region. His remarks could also speak to the contemporary experience of *balseros*, whose lives can literally be lost in-between Cuba and the United States. And Garcia does not let readers forget those very “real” material markers of this transnational disability:

Four fresh bodies are floating in the straits of Florida. It’s a family from Cardenas. They stole a boat from a fisherman. It collapsed in the current early this morning. A boatload of Haitians will leave Gonaïves next Thursday. They will carry the phone numbers of friends in Miami and the life savings of relatives. They will sail to the Tropic of Cancer and sink into the sea. (216-217)²⁴

This image is perhaps one of the most profound and tragic examples of the relational—the errantry of boat refugees from disparate parts of the Caribbean for whom the “unity is (sub)marine”²⁵ as they are led astray by the forces of nature. Garcia makes a significant intervention by suggesting that this kind of transnational disability is not solely a Cuban phenomenon, but a pan-Caribbean condition.

²⁴ There is a growing number of Caribbean literary works that explore the experiences of migrants who make clandestine attempts to reach U.S. shores by small (and usually precarious) water vessels. See Kamau Brathwaite’s story-poem “Dream Haiti,” Edwidge Danticat’s short-story “Children of the Sea,” Ana Lydia-Vega’s short-story “Cloud Cover Caribbean,” J. Joaquin Fraxedas’ *The Lonely Crossing of Juan Cabrera*, Yvonne Lamazares’ *The Sugar Island*, and Nikol Payen’s short-story “Something in the Water... Reflections of a People’s Journey.”

²⁵ This is Kamau Brathwaite’s famous assertion for describing the linked histories of the islands of the Caribbean.

Dreaming in Cuban ends with Celia's final journey into the sea that has sustained her throughout her life: "Celia steps into the ocean and imagines she's a soldier on a mission--for the moon, or the palms, or El Líder. The water rises quickly around her. It submerges her throat and her nose, her open eyes that do not perceive salt... . *She breathes through her skin, she breathes through her wounds*" (emphasis added, 243).²⁶ There are multiple implications of this scene. On the one hand, it appears to be an act of suicide. However, there is also the paradoxical image of "breathing" underwater, which suggests that Celia experiences submarine life. It is as if she has finally achieved the "wet landscape" of the santera's prophecy. By giving herself over to the sea, Celia is, at last, able to leave the shoreline and the boundaries of ideology and nation as her body becomes completely porous. Ultimately, what is most significant about this passage is that Celia claims, and even embraces, her *wounds*. Thus, while there is the possibility for healing familial, political and regional fractures, Garcia's text also demonstrates that the scar left after the attempted severing of filial, geographic and ideological ties between Cuban exiles and their families "at home," and the United States and Cuba, is "suppurating, always suppurating."

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²⁶ William Luis reads Celia's suicide as her giving up after having been betrayed by Pilar and Ivanito, but I would argue that this is too pat a reading for the sea is too complex a metaphor to be reduced to a singular representation (233). Andrea O'Reilly Herrera writes convincingly that "Celia's immersion in the sea, combined with her attempt to preserve and record her story and history through her letters, signifies her 'immersion,' as a woman, in creating and revising H/history, for the sea also functions as a symbol of Caribbean history... in that it connotes infinite cyclic renewal, diversity and protean change" (90).

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