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The Cultural Dual Identity in Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* and Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*

In *Dreaming in Cuban* and *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, Garcia and Alvarez, respectively, take their reader on a journey through the immigrant identity. Cristina Garcia is a Cuban immigrant who came to America as a young child, and grew up in New York. She would later go on to write *Dreaming in Cuban*, which became her first bestseller, and other novels such as *The Aguero Sisters* and *Monkey Hunting*. Garcia's works are known to provoke the question of how one's relationship with one's country, heritage, and family impacts the sense of identity and placement in the world.

Julia Alvarez is originally from the Dominican Republic and came to the United States with her family in the 1960s. Her first novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, received much literary praise. With this success as well as wide recognition of her subsequent novels, *In the Time of Butterflies* and *Yo!* she became one of the most prominent American writers of the Caribbean diaspora. She continued to win various awards including the National Medal of Arts in 2013. Alvarez's works are known for exploring the effects of political unrest and immigration on the family and the intergenerational relationships.

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, the Puente family leaves Cuba in 1961, settling in New York. At the age of 2, Pilar finds herself in a completely new and largely incomprehensible environment. We observe her growth as a young adolescent in the context of her large

extended family, dispersed in the world. Through the mid 1970s to the beginning of 1980s, Pilar tries to find her own answers to the many questions regarding her immigration to the US and the subsequent sense of displacement. Thus, Cristina Garcia takes us on an exploratory journey with the divided self. On the one hand, Pilar confronts her desire to return to Cuba, which she still considers her homeland. On the other hand, she needs to resolve her doubts whether a return to Cuba is necessary in order for her to have a sense of belonging. In *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, Yolanda Garcia is the main character who, along with her three sisters and parents, flees the political turmoil of their native country of the Dominican Republic. The novel covers three decades, from 1960 to 1989, when the Garcia family tries to create a new home in the US. Alvarez presents the story in a stylistically interesting way, telling Yolanda's story from her point of view, through her recollections moving back towards her childhood. In the first scene we meet Yolanda as an adult, in her 30s, during her visit in the Dominican Republic. That is, everybody thinks that she is just visiting the relatives and friends who live in the DR. But secretly, she reveals to us, Yolanda thinks about not returning to the US, the country where she has lived since she was a teenager but which she still has difficulty identifying as her home. This sets up the plot for the rest of the story that examines, in backward motion, why Yolanda wants to return to her place of origin.

Both novels have epic sweeps presenting the sagas of families divided by geography and conflicting political allegiances. Cristina Garcia and Julia Alvarez cover the wide spectrum of the immigrant experience, telling a larger story with multiple characters and diverse points of view. In the center of attention, however, there remain two young girls

displaced suddenly from all that was familiar and beloved, trying to understand themselves in a new way. In my thesis, I focus primarily on how Garcia represents Pilar's experiences and her process of growth. Alvarez's novel helps me to clarify and elaborate main points of Garcia's original work. Characters like Pilar and Yolanda show what it means to be caught between the homeland of origin and the new "immigrated home." Their stories confirm that you have to confront your past in order to live presently.

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, we meet Pilar Puente for the first time, when she is thirteen years old, at the crossroads of childhood and young adulthood. Her family left Cuba when she was two years old, and since then she has lived in the United States (26, 58). Filled with powerful memories of her childhood in Cuba, unhappy with what seems to her a stagnant existence in New York, Pilar begins to wonder who she is, and whether being of two places is the reason for her feelings of displaced identity. When Pilar finally says, "Even though I've been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out" (58), a journey of figuring out the self begins. Paradoxically, the journey of self-discovery proves that in order for her to truly live in a new place as an immigrant and transform it into her new home, she must not give up her past identity or old home. Instead, Pilar must expand her identity to incorporate and learn from the experiences she has had in both places, thus accepting being of a culturally dual identity.

When a shocking discovery initiates this process of changes, Pilar, the daughter of Cuban immigrants, begins to feel the increasing weight of being of two places, and not fully understanding why. Until one day, she sees her father flirting with another woman: "I'm trying on French-style garters and push-up brassieres in the dressing room of Abraham and

Straus when I think I hear his voice. I stick my head out and see them. My father looks like a kid, laughing and animated and whispering in this woman's ear" (25). In this moment, as Pilar witnesses her father cheating on her mother, this one event sets in motion the thought process of whether she can stand being in the United States any longer. She comes to the conclusion that she cannot. Pilar says, "That's it. My mind's made up. I'm going back to Cuba. I'm fed up with everything around here. I take all my money out of the bank, \$120, money I earned slaving away at my mother's bakery, and buy a one-way bus ticket to Miami" (25). Due to this negative experience Pilar decides that she is "fed up" with the United States and wants to live in Cuba with her grandmother, Celia (26). The grandmother is for her the most important person that she associates with positive emotions and stability, in contrast to her parents, and especially in contrast to her mother, Lourdes (26-30).

We can see Pilar was not so much upset with her dad, but more so with the situation. Pilar begins to connect her father's infidelity (25) with the United States questioning whether if her father had committed such an act of betrayal, was he actually happy with his life in the US. And if he were not happy, whether there was any sense in moving to the United States. Was it, in fact, such a great opportunity in the first place? Pilar has just witnessed something any child would have a hard time processing in regard to their married parents' relationship, and this leads Pilar down a path of questioning till she arrives at the thought of whether she herself is happy in the United States. This incident occurred when Pilar was already living a strained existence in the US. At that moment, Pilar was already feeling like she did not belong, her relationship with her parents was not stable (26-30), and she was growing up in a culture that seemed far from her own yet appealed to her. So, the experience in the

department store of Abraham and Straus prompted her to re-evaluate her relationship with the United States, and why her relationship with the United States made her feel displaced.

And so, her father's infidelity became yet another fact that she could add to the long list of grievances she was composing: "What Am I Doing Here, Still?" But the list itself, "What Am I Doing Here, Still?" was indicative of the fact that Pilar knew she was of two places and had the potential opportunity of choosing to live in Cuba or in New York. Pilar has always had doubts whether she would ever be able to be herself in New York, because the only times that she felt fully realized, engaged or able to express positive interest in something, were moments shared with her grandmother Celia in Cuba. In "Satisfaction in Belonging," Katie Helderbrand discusses the idea of the importance of being content with the place where one lives, or is to live. This is especially important in cases of immigrants. Helderbrand says, "...it is necessary for everyone to have a sense of satisfaction and belonging..." and "it is important for immigrants to find a place to belong in the new world they immigrate to" (51). So, it is important for someone to be comfortable where they reside or are to, but also have a sense of this is where they need to be, or at least, can be.

Another example of Helderbrand's concept is found in Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, a story about a Dominican immigrant woman who takes a look at her life's present, past, and potential future before ultimately deciding whether she is to remain in the US or stay in her native country that she is currently visiting (7, 11). Similarly to Pilar, Yolanda is troubled by a sense of alienation (51). Alvarez writes of Yolanda's current feelings towards the US saying, "Yes, when she returns to the States, she'll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English or like her mother,

mixing up some common phrase. This time, however, Yolanda is not sure she'll be going back. But this is a secret" (7). As in the case of Pilar, we observe this complicated relationship with the US that influences the idea of whether or not to stay there. Yolanda, unlike Pilar, is a lot older and can reflect more on the moments that lead to this question of whether or not to return to the Dominican Republic. But Yolanda does go back because she wants this feeling of belonging where she resides, she wants to be able to have this profound familiarity that comes with having a sense of comfort, pride, and safety where one resides, and that can only be felt in her native home. This example also relates to Pilar, because she does not feel this sense of "satisfaction or belonging" (Helterbrand 51). Instead, she feels the exact opposite due to the many experiences she has in New York that are mostly negative, and having to do with her parents who contribute to these negative events.

Like Yolanda, Pilar sets out to analyze the different aspects of her life up to the present, and thus weighs the repercussions and benefits of her culturally dual identity. And we know these feelings are not of a invalid place or angsty upbringing due to the fact it was one of the reasons the author herself wrote this book. In "Multi-Hyphenated Identities on the Road": An Interview with Cristina Garcia," Jose Santos conducts an interview addressing the issue of identity and place, and how Garcia chose to portray this in her works (203). Garcia responds to Santos, "I think what interests me is how multi-hyphenated identities differ from people who might see themselves as having a single identity. For example, I always think of myself as Cuban American even though my father is technically Guatemalan with just one hyphen. This is very different from my daughter managing three or four hyphens" (204). So, we see that this idea of "identity-hyphening" is a feeling that takes place

with someone of culturally dual identity. But it is up to the person to arrive at that idea they are “multi-hyphenated.” These autobiographical experiences are used by Garcia to create the character of Pilar. Like Garcia, Pilar sets on this arrival by examining her parents.

Looking at Pilar’s life, we observe that her relationship with her mother is completely strained, characterized by disconnection. She says of her mother, “My mother reads my diary, tracks it down under the mattress, or to the lining of my winter coat. She says it’s her responsibility to know my private thoughts, that I’ll understand when I have my own kids,” “When Mom found out about me in the tub, she beat me in the face and pulled my hair out in big clumps. She called me a *desgraciada*...” and “Mom’s views are strictly black-and-white. It’s how she survives” (26-27). Pilar’s conflicts with her mother do not make her existence in America any better than it can or should be. Regarding Pilar’s relationship with her father, Rufino, although he seems to be more lenient and accepting than Pilar’s mother, it is clear from the beginning that he is not incredibly involved in her life aside from their mutual interest in art (29-30). The shared bond of respect for the arts was crucial in the case of Pilar’s desire to pursue art education. When her mother objected to it, Rufino interfered on behalf of Pilar. As Pilar remembers, “She [Mother] said that artists are a bad element, a profligate bunch who shoot heroin. ‘I won’t allow it, Rufino!’ she cried with her usual drama. ‘She’ll have to kill me first!’ Not that the thought hadn’t crossed my mind. But Dad, in his unobtrusive way, finally persuaded her to let me go” (29).

Further observation of the Puente family shows that Rufino sometimes acted as a mediator between Pilar and her mother, but in general was not very involved when it came to Pilar. Pilar recalls how her father actually likes to thrift for strange finds, invents in his

workshop next to Pilar's studio, and he is also the one who fixed up her art studio for use (29-30). Despite these moments, we never see an in-depth relationship between Pilar and her dad, aside from the fact he seems to alleviate the strain between his wife and daughter.

Although there is importance in his mediation, he does not provide comfort or reason as to why Pilar should stay in New York. To the contrary, he adds to the list of why she wants to leave based on his infidelity (25). Thus, Pilar's parents do not give her reason to stay, instead, through their actions, they are unknowingly pushing her to leave.

In Alvarez's novel, we also are given a brief flash of Yolanda's life in the US and the moments that could have pushed her to leave when she reminisces while looking at her "Welcome Back" cake in the shape of the Dominican Republic displayed on a table "...with a lacy white tablecloth and starched party napkins." (6, 11). Alvarez highlights this moment of Yolanda's self-reflection, "She leans forward and shuts her eyes. There is so much she wants, it is hard to single out one wish. There have been so many stops on the road of the last twenty-nine years since her family left this island behind. She and her sisters have led turbulent lives--so many husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns among them" (11). Yolanda thinks of her life in the US and in the Dominican Republic, and hopes her leaving the US is the right choice in figuring out where she needs to be. Similar to Pilar's search of "home" and identity, Yolanda says, "Let this turn out to be my home, Yolanda wishes" (11). This is a process very similar to the search for "home" and analysis of one's origins that characterizes the start of Pilar's journey of pinpointing her identity, and her deciding to leave the United States with the burning question of whether she is meant to be in Cuba, not in

New York. Pilar sets on her journey of “multi-hyphenating” (204), and we know she has a lot of hyphens to add aside from “ Young-Cuban- Immigrant.”

Although Pilar had mixed feelings of whether she belongs in Cuba or New York (Garcia 58), she does notice that her life in New York is not all negative. The biggest source of positive experiences for her is music and the arts in general. The eclectic art that Pilar starts to create was a discovery she made in New York, not Cuba. Pilar says, “My grandmother is the one who encouraged me to go to painting classes at Mitzi Kellner’s. She’s a lady down the block who used to hang out in Greenwich Village with the beatniks” (29). Pilar tells the audience of how she began to make her art which is a huge part of her identity...in New York. She again associates this positive finding with her Cuban-bound grandmother. Again, coming back to her art, it has proven to be an “out” for her, a space where she can express feelings she cannot define.

Pilar uses her art to express her most private thoughts and views, but it also is used to mediate the strained relationship with her mother (59). Pilar says, when the psychiatrist asks her “Tell me about your urge to mutilate the human form” (59), “Mom must have told him about my paintings. But what could I say? That my mother is driving me crazy? That I miss my grandmother and wish I’d never left Cuba? That I want to be a famous artist someday? That a paintbrush is better than a gun so why doesn’t everybody just leave me alone?” (59). These thoughts are expressed through Pilar’s art, through her images, but these are what the images or paintings translate to. Feelings of displaced identity, her unstable mother, and wanting to be with her grandmother.

Pilar's paintings can also be interpreted as what Cristina Garcia calls "borrowed nostalgia" (206). In Santo's interview there is a moment he asks about the impact of how "place and placeness shape the human stories in your writing?" to which Garcia replies of being a Cuban exile, "It just became part of what I inhale and what I exhale. But I also feel that this is a borrowed nostalgia, fed not by actual memory. It's a nostalgia distorted by longing, distorted by loss, distorted by beyond any semblance of reality" (206). This is exactly what Pilar feels. This longing, this loss, and it is expressed through distorted reality, hence her paintings (206). Because painting never fully captures reality, it imitates it. It imitates the feelings, the emotions, the ideas of a topic the painter wants to or cannot express in reality, and that is what Pilar is doing.

In Alvarez's novel, we also see how Yolanda and her family lived in New York, and how it was not a complete disaster despite Yolanda's feelings toward the US (7,11). Yolanda says of the moment her parents' citizenship status granted them a chance to live in New York as youths, "You can believe we sisters wailed and paled, whining to go home. We didn't feel we had the best the United States had to offer. We had only second-hand stuff, rental houses in one redneck Catholic neighborhood after another, clothes at Round Robin, a black and white TV afflicted with wavy lines" (107). So these examples can be added to the list as to why Yolanda might have wanted to leave later. But similar to having to understand the motives of Pilar's want to potentially leave (58), we must still analyze Yolanda's past in New York. This moment does give grounds to why someone would want to leave their new home, but later on, we see how Yolanda begins to settle in her new American life. She says, "We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, and soon, Island was old hat,

man. Island was the hair-and-nails crowd, chaperones, and icky boys with all their macho strutting and unbuttoned shirts..." and "...we had *more* than adjusted" (108-09).

This "*more* than adjusted" (209) can also be seen with Pilar and is exactly why an analysis of why these characters debated whether to leave their homes is needed. Pilar and Yolanda have these feelings of not belonging, but they still can give credit to the good moments they had in their respective new places that fell under the category of "adjusting." This is also an important point in Helterbrand's article when she says, "However, despite all the good reasons to immigrate, arriving and adjusting to life in a new country is often a process that leaves much to be desired. Even when people leave behind negative aspects of their homeland, upon their arrival in the new country, they often find themselves remembering the positive aspects of their homeland" (51). So even though a person might immigrate due to duress, they still reminisce about the good that was once their homeland. Now what does that have to do with Pilar? Pilar left Cuba because her parents wanted to escape political corruption and live in what they assumed was a free, safe country, the United States (26-32). But Pilar was young when this happened; she did not fully understand the political situation or what it meant to live in El Lider's Cuba, as her parents did.

Throughout the novel, we see Pilar's parents' views on their relationship with Cuba, and their life presently in New York. It is interesting to note the differences in their reactions to the change. Rufino, a man whose family owned a wealthy ranch in Cuba (130), struggled with life in New York (129). Garcia gives insight to this struggle when she explains how Lourdes came to the conclusion that her husband would never be the same after leaving Cuba (129). She says, "It became clear to Lourdes shortly after she and Rufino moved to New

York that he would never adapt. Something came unhinged in his brain that would make him incapable of working in a conventional way. There was a part of him that could never leave the *finca* or the comfort of its cycles, and this diminished him for any other life. He could not be transplanted” (129). So, Rufino has to adjust from a comfortable life on his family-owned Cuban ranch, to arriving in New York, and eventually permanently living there. The move proves to be too great for him. Too much change. Lourdes, on the other hand, thrives. When it comes to Pilar’s mother, Lourdes leaving Cuba and arriving in America, picking up from the last quote, Garcia says, “So Lourdes got a job. Cuban women of a certain age and a certain class consider working outside the home to be beneath them. But Lourdes never believed that. While it was true that she had grown accustomed to the privileges that came with marrying into the Puente family, Lourdes never accepted the life designated for its women” (130). What we do see, though, is Lourdes accepting change has arrived in her life, and that she must adapt to that change. She begins to work by buying a bakery from a French-Austrian Jewish migrant (18), and adjusts to life in America. For example, we get to see a glimpse of Lourdes working when Garcia paints the reader a picture of an average day in her shop. Garcia says, “Lourdes works extraconscientiously, determined to prove to herself that her business acumen, at least, is intact. She sails back and forth behind the bakery counter, explaining the ingredients in her cakes and pies to clients” (66). This driven work ethic becomes her new identity. It can also be interpreted that Pilar may not have the best understanding of her parents and their lives, hence why an analysis of them is important in understanding how it ultimately affected Pilar’s identity.

There is another moment of Santo's interview when he asks Garcia about how she introduces magical realism into her books to bring what could be understood as "personality" (210). Garcia responds, "The work I'm doing now is underpinned by so much history that it felt quite remnant. I wanted more light, more sense of the absurd, more hallucinations. Things that cannot be accounted for or pinned down" (210). This idea of not being "accounted for or pinned down" is what we see with Pilar's parents. And before we go into why magical realism is relevant in understanding Pilar's parents, the idea of what magical realism is in the first place should be discussed. In Rebecca D. Elswick's "Magical Realism With An Authentic Voice," she explains the concept; "Magical realism is a serious branch of fiction that focuses on ordinary people going about the everyday activities of life in a real-world setting. Everything is normal except for one or two fantastical elements that go beyond the realm of possibility" (105). To be specific, magical realism is used to enhance aspects of fictional reality in order to make it more appealing. In relation to Pilar, magical realism is used in her understanding of why her parents left Cuba for America. While there might not be "fantastical" or "whimsical" elements (105) what is fantastical or whimsical is Pilar's black and white view of her parents being in America. Yes, Pilar speaks of her relationship with her parents and Garcia lets the reader know of their lives. But does Pilar know? Does Pilar know, in depth, the emotions and feelings her parents felt when it came to having to leave the country they knew and having to "accept" the United States? Not likely.

For example, when it comes to the early lives of Pilar's parents, Garcia shows us that while they were in Cuba they did not always live under duress. Garcia explains how Rufino's family "...owned casinos in Cuba, and had one of the largest ranches on the island. There

were beef cattle and dairy cows, horses, pigs, goats, and lambs” (28). And when it came to Lourdes, “Back in Cuba, everybody used to treat Mom with respect. Their backs would straighten and they’d put on attentive faces like their lives depended on the bolt of fabric she chose” (63). So, we see that Pilar’s parents were not living in poverty in Cuba and had the country not fallen to communism, they probably would have remained there. But one day, Pilar’s parents experience something they knew they would not be able to further live with, and it is the mistreatment by communist soldiers (70-71). At some point, while Rufino was away, Lourdes was raped by soldiers on their property (71). And due to her fragmented story-telling, Garcia switches from this scene to another part of her story, but we see in a previous section what happened when Pilar’s parents arrived in America.

Garcia says of Pilar’s parents trying to find a place to reside, “‘I want to go where it’s cold,’ Lourdes told her husband. They began to drive” and “‘This is cold enough,’ she said finally when they reached New York” (69-70). With that, we are given in fragmented sections the actual parts of what drove Pilar’s parents to move to America. But to Pilar, she still thinks she understands why her parents moved, and like every immigrant, it was to seek a better life. And while that is true, Pilar fails to understand that every immigrant story, including one’s parents, can be rich with deeper truths, history, and/or trauma. Pilar does not seem to grasp when it comes to parents, children can have the tendency to believe they have an idea of who their parents are as concrete fact versus who their parents actually are or were. Children, whether young or adult, never account for the years they did not know their parents. The years their parents might have lived elsewhere, before they had children, and what they have been through to get to where they are or reside currently. It is only until the

child has a moment of self-reflection, a “aha!” moment, do they decide to ask the question “Who was this mother, father, parent-figure to me?”

Pilar creates her understanding of her parents’ lives outside of her direct experience through a mixture of real facts and fantasy, filling in any other part she does not understand with whatever interpretation she has of them. For example, her father being aloof or her mother being controlling, in reality, is due to their past lives in Cuba and their transition to the United States. Hence an analysis of her parents’ lives and their “yes” to the US having to be explored. Looking more closely, we can begin to understand why did Rufino have such a hard time with his “acceptance” and why did Lourdes adjust so well. We also understand better how the differences in her parents’ adjustment – Lourdes’ ability and inability in Rufino’s case - so greatly affect Pilar’s identity.

What does this all have to do with Pilar? Why talk about her parents' adjustment? In order to truly analyze her displaced identity and why she has these feelings of loss, we must look at her parents, the very people who brought her to the US, and why they themselves left, what was their relationship with Cuba. Also, in order to know loss, one must understand loss. Pilar, in reality, has not lost much. She left Cuba at a young age, and grew up in a country that, yes, has its fair share of issues, but is not ruled by a dictator. What exactly has she gone through? Not much. But her parents understand loss, and if we can explore true loss, we can begin to understand the different effects of it.

The idea of loss and its effects on immigrants is addressed in Cynthia Johnson’s article “Post-Emigration: Mental and Emotional Unrest” which explores the psychology and structure of how emigration impacts a person as they make the journey from one home to a

new one (24). Johnson quotes Salman Akhtar's article, "A Third Individuation: Immigration, Identity, and the Psychoanalytic Process," where he states, "Leaving one's country involves profound losses. Often one has to give up familiar food, native music, unquestioned social customs, and even one's language" and "The dynamic shifts resulting from an admixture of 'culture shock' and mourning over the losses inherent in migration, gradually, give way to psycho structural change and the emergence of a hybrid identity" (24, 30). The amount an immigrant must leave behind, even of themselves, makes room for the new parts that will take over those empty spaces in their identity, thus creating a mixture of their old and new notions, experiences, and feelings about how/where they live now. And we observe this process of change in the case of both Pilar's mother and Yolanda's parents in America.

Garcia further explains just how comfortable Lourdes has adjusted, "Lourdes considers herself lucky. Immigration has redefined her, and she is grateful. Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention" and "She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her" (73). Strongly in her acceptance of the United States, Lourdes does not suffer from a displaced identity or "mourning" (Johnson 30) because she never had a close connection to Cuba. She saw a chance to leave a place she despised and took her family with her, never truly weighing or considering how it would affect them. But in this new place, she thrives, and thus creates her "hybrid identity" (Johnson 30). Rufino, on the other hand, does not. Unfortunately, it seems his identity does not shift, improve, or adjust, but remains suspended over a country he never seemed to connect with.

In Alvarez's novel, we also see how "profound losses" and "hybrid identity" (24, 30) begins to take place with Yolanda's parents accepting their new citizenship for the family (107, 141). Yolanda says of her parents' process of US citizenship for the family, "For three-going-on-four years Mami and Papi were on green cards, and four of us shifted from foot to foot, waiting to go home. Then Papi went down for a trial visit, and a revolution broke out, a minor one, but still. He came back to New York reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and saying, 'I am given up Mami! It is no hope for the Island. I will become *un dominican-york*'" (107). Like Pilar's parents, Yolanda's parents decide for them they will live in the US, but having more insight into how their own countries actually work, or will remain to be, they accept the US, and its eventual adjustments.

Pilar's loss through immigration is not as substantial in comparison to her parents' losses, but it is a loss nonetheless. One difference between Pilar and her parents' loss through immigration is at least her parents had each other to go through it with. They do not have a growing list of reasons why they should leave, and Lourdes does not even want to. Pilar's loss felt from the moment when she had to leave Cuba was most importantly associated with her grandmother (26). Helterbrand's article states, "Even when people immigrate to leave behind negative aspects of their homeland, upon arrival in the new country, they often find themselves remembering the positive aspects of their homeland and wondering if the decision to immigrate was the right decision" (51). An immigrant begins to remember what they once had, after they arrive in the new country, so much that they begin to re-evaluate whether their decision to leave was the right choice to begin with, regardless of the reasoning as to why they originally left. With Pilar, there is this reversal of feelings when it comes to

her relationship with Cuba and New York. She left Cuba, currently lives in New York, and has not had the best experiences there. Therefore, she begins to think back to a potential life in Cuba. While that might sound the same as what Helterbrand was explaining, it is not. Helterbrand discusses the idea of leaving one's new home, because of the memories of their old home. But New York is home for Pilar; she was born in Cuba, but she did not **live** in Cuba. She does not have extensive memories of Cuba like her parents, she knows and has memories of New York, and she no longer wants to be in the United States because of it. In the novel, it takes a long time for Pilar to come to that realization, but to the reader, it is obvious from the beginning that Cuba is not her home.

What makes for New York to become Pilar's home is her constant, "double-edged sword" experiences. Pilar has had her fair share of negative experiences in New York, from her strained relationship with her mother, lack of privacy, and on a more serious note, sexual assault at the hands of young teens (Garcia 202). But there are other moments like, for example, her meeting with the record store clerk who speaks Spanish with her (197). Pilar says, "When I thank him in Spanish, he's surprised and wants to chat. We talk about Celia Cruz and how she hasn't changed her hair" (197-98). Pilar recalls that they talked about Lou Reed and the clerk put on a record for her to listen (198). While this scene is brief, it is significant because it highlights the fact how rarely we see Pilar interacting with anyone in New York. Pilar goes through the majority of the book disconnected from everyone in her life. In this case, she meets a person who shares her similar interests, and happens to speak Spanish. For a change, Pilar experiences something positive, and it happens in New York.

Pilar's interest in rock music is yet another positive experience in New York. She says, "I just love the way Lou Reed's concerts feel--expectant, uncertain. You never know what he's going to do next. Lou has about twenty-five different personalities. I like him because he sings about people no one else sings about--drug addicts, transvestites, the down-and-out" and "I play Lou and Iggy Pop and this new band the Ramones whenever I paint. I love their energy, their violence, their incredible grinding guitars. It's like an artistic form of assault" (135). So through bursts of self expression, we see Pilar enjoys this genre of music because it represents rebellion, difference, and exposure to groups that are not a part of mainstream society or counted as such. Pilar considers herself as belonging to these outcast groups due to being an immigrant and her overall general view on society. She proves this notion when she says, "I try to translate what I hear into colors and volumes and lines that confront people, that say, 'Hey, we're here too and what we think matters!'" or more often just "Fuck you!" and "If I don't like someone, I show it. It's the one thing I have in common with my mother" (135). Again through self expression, Pilar uses this music to enhance her art, and her thoughts. She even agrees this "confrontational" music is just as confrontational as she is, hence the connection Pilar feels to the music. Pilar even goes so far to admit that this connection also shares a common trait of aggression that is like her mother.

In the idea of loss and decision, Pilar's brand of loss is of the self between two countries. This prompts her to weigh her experiences in both to see where she belongs, thus creating a displaced identity. Helterbrand's article states, "Such indecision over which country they belong makes immigrants both unable to fully enjoy life in a new country and unable to comfortably return to their homeland. Such indecision about where he or she

belongs may hinder the immigrant from achieving a satisfying life” (51). Helterbrand explains that if an immigrant is questioning whether their decision to move was credible or right, they will have problems adjusting in their new country, but also unable to confidently return to their homeland knowing they originally had a reason to leave, good or bad. This relates to Pilar because, even though it was not her decision to leave Cuba, the choices she makes in New York, and how she chooses to interpret her experiences in New York as good or bad, prompt this uncomfortable, unstable feeling within herself and identity as an immigrant. She is not sure if New York is right, still, for her, and she does not know enough of Cuba to confidently return there with the idea of permanently staying. So Pilar sets off on this journey that she believes will answer these burning questions in her mind and put to rest these “unresolved discrepancies” within her identity. Once at this arrival of the self, Pilar will begin to understand an expansion of the identity is where her answers lie.

This idea of a “journey” to the self brings to mind Maria Cristina Rodriguez’s article, “Journey, Migration and the Construction of Imaginary Homelands in Novels by Hispanic Caribbean Women.” In her article, she discusses the idea of how different experiences had by immigrants, and specifically, female immigrant characters in novels such as Garcia’s, shape their lives, and gives “...a redefinition of ‘homeland’” (100). Rodriguez also notes, “These female characters all embark on a journey that takes them away from ‘home’ to reside in a place chosen by someone else, where the feeling of displacement leaves scars that neither passage of time nor change of place will erase” (100). On further explanation, these female characters immigrate and then must live with that decision to move, and go through the feeling of not fully belonging in the new place they are in. This, somewhat, relates to

Pilar because she does go on a journey, but it is her immigrated home that prompts her to want to move back to her homeland. It's an analysis of experiences in her new home that has made her realize her displacement, not exactly the immigration, despite it all stemming from her original immigration from Cuba.

On the other hand, towards the end of Alvarez's novel, there is a key point when Yolanda, as a child, asks a visiting man on her father's Dominican property whether she can play, and keep a newborn kitten (284). The visiting man goes on to tell Yolanda, "To take it away would be..." The man considered his words. "To take it away would be a violation of its natural right to live" (285). Yolanda goes on to explain to the audience she did not as a child understand what the man meant (285), but nonetheless it is apparent to the reader. The visiting man's explanation relates to the idea of the immigrant being "taken away" similar to the newborn kitten (285), and similarly to Rodriguez's aforementioned concept (100). This "violation" (285) the visiting man speaks of, can be understood as an idea that something young and growing is being taken away at a period when familiarity is needed. This idea can also be applied to the many aspects of the immigration experience when a young immigrant is taken from their home country, for whatever reason and against their will (or without mature knowledge), and dropped into a new place to live, adjust, and survive. It is not right because the person taken has no say on whether they want to immigrate or not. Coming back to the story of the visiting man, the kitten and the mother metaphorically represent the immigrant and their homeland. Yolanda represents the potential and unexpected disruption that can push or force an immigrant to leave. Relating this concept back to Pilar's case, would she have died if she were taken from her mother like the newborn kitten? (285) Highly

unlikely. But still, it is the idea she was removed in the first place, not in regards to her mother but her original country.

This is exactly why an analysis of Pilar's experiences is needed. We need to sift through how she got to these feelings, when immigrants and scholarship have presented that these feelings only come after someone has moved to the new place, analyzed that decision, and then must live with whatever experiences that will reshape their identity to live in that new place. But New York is all Pilar has ever known. She has had enough experiences, time enough to analyze them, and is now coming to the decision that the bad outweighs the good. Pilar wants to go back to a country she might find solace in, and claim the proper identity that has always been unclear to her. So, a journey is to be made, but the explored aspects of that journey is what will expand instead of replace her current identity, not being in Cuba or New York.

In her article about female, Caribbean characters taking on these types of "journeys," Rodriguez says, "Their various journeys, embark these female characters on a continuous search for a place they can claim as their own; a place defined as home because it is where they can identify themselves as women in their own terms and not as wife or daughter or sister" (102). So in understanding the definition of "home," Rodriguez is saying that it is where the immigrant female can be herself, and once she has found that place only then can she truly live, and exude her actual identity. This is exactly what Pilar seeks when she decides to leave for Cuba. She says, "If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged" (58). Thus, Pilar firmly believes that she will find her "true self" once she goes

to Cuba, sees her grandmother, and decides once and for all, where she is to reside and truly live as herself based on which country presents the right identity to her.

Pilar set on a journey of the self, leaves the United States and visits Cuba to explore a potential life of living there. In Rodriguez's article, she explains the importance of the immigrant journey; "The external journey for Caribbean authors and their fictionalized characters, is divided by Daryl Cumber Dance into three movements: first to the white western world represented by England, Canada, the United States; second to the long distanced world of Africa, India, China to discover the roots of a hidden or denied culture; and third the return home, which may or may not take place" (102). Dance breaks down the immigrant journey as it normally takes place in Caribbean literature, and at times, reality. Dance explains the process behind the journey, and what the immigrant must mentally and physically travel through in order to properly find, maintain, return, and/or re-shape, their identity as they travel between their homeland and new home. These "three movements" (102) are exactly what Pilar goes through as presented in Garcia's novel.

This concept is also seen in Alvarez's novel when Yolanda begins to answer the question of whether she is to remain in her home country while visiting (7,11). We see Yolanda's life, like Pilar, happen throughout the novel, jumping between scenes of New York and the Dominican Republic. But with applying Dance's "three movements" (102) to Yolanda's immigrant journey, instead of finally claiming her homeland in the end of the novel the answer is given through seeing her life in the past, present, and what she hopes for herself in the future. Unlike Pilar we do not have to tediously analyze her life to confirm what we already knew to be true. Instead, we are given her answer when she says from the

beginning “Let this turn out to be my home, Yolanda wishes” (11). Then we are shown throughout the novel why this is her wish, nonetheless, she gives us room to interpret her experiences, leading us to her final expansion of her identity built off of being of two places.

In Garcia’s novel, Pilar’s first movement is her actual immigration to the US. Her second journey is not her actual travel back to Cuba, but an important experience that takes place in a brief moment in a spiritual shop (203). Garcia presents the scene through Pilar saying, “I enter a *botanica* on the upper Park Avenue. I’ve passed the place before but I’ve never gone inside. Today, it seems, there’s nowhere else for me to go” (199). It seems Pilar has never had a need or inclination to go into this shop, but that day, she does. It also seems that Pilar realizes that due to her recent feelings of displacement, this place, now, seems appealing to her. And the decision to walk in, proves not to be wasteful. In the spiritual store, Pilar meets an elderly man who tells her to boil and bathe in herbs for a number of days, calls her a daughter of Chango, and says “On the last day, you will know what to do” (200). Pilar takes the elderly man’s advice, and on the last day of her herb baths, she tells her mother they are to go to Cuba (203). This second movement to the homeland is prompted by Pilar returning to her roots through stepping into her culture’s spiritual roots, this then prompts her to literally return to Cuba.

Once in Cuba, Pilar begins to analyze if her Cuba is where she is meant to be, and if this is the identity that she is to truly have. When Pilar finally meets her distressed grandmother she remembers, “I notice Abuela Celia’s drop pearl earrings, the intricate settings, the fine gold strands looping through her lobes” and “When I was baby, I bounced those pearls with my fingertips and heard the rhythm of my grandmother’s thoughts” (218).

To which her grandmother responds, “I’m glad you remember, Pilar. I always knew you would” (218). In this scene, this is a moment of remembrance for both of them. Pilar now sees greater potential there because of the connection she feels with her grandmother. When it comes to her grandmother, Celia is happy Pilar remembers this “ancient” place in spite of her immigration. For Celia it means that if Pilar remembers Cuba, then she remembers her. We even see this concept when Garcia explains Celia’s belief of how Cuba’s fits in the world saying, “Celia wonders whether Cuba will be left behind alone in the Caribbean sea with its faulted and folded mountains, its consequences, its memories” (48). For Celia, her greatest fear is being forgotten similarly to her country of Cuba, a place she believes is drifting from the rest of the world due it not being seen as important.

Regarding her feelings about her grandmother, Pilar thinks she has the idea of her grandmother as concrete fact. She positively remembers her grandmother, but does she truly remember her? Everything Pilar understands about Cuba comes through memories of her grandmother, but she must understand that just because she positively remembers her grandmother, it does not necessarily translate to positively meaning Cuba is the country where she is meant to live. Pilar needs to understand there is a separation between her grandmother and Cuba, and just because she “belongs” to her grandmother, it does not mean she belongs to Cuba. This is Pilar’s journey, and she comes to that self-awareness only after she fulfills her need to visit Cuba and her grandmother.

While in Cuba, we see how Pilar connects to the country and begins to confront the burning question of whether Cuba is supposed to be her true identity. She explores different aspects of her potential life in Cuba, for example she imagines how it would be to get old,

and preferring to self-immolate with her paintings (220). She listens to stories of her grandmother's younger days, explaining the feelings, "As I listen, I feel my grandmother's life passing to me through her hands. It's a steady electricity, humming and true" (222), and confirms that Cuba is "much tougher here than I expected, but at least everyone seems to have the bare necessities" (234-35). We observe how Pilar is experiencing Cuba, as she is now. She is not the baby that used to sit in her grandmother's arms, but a young woman seeing Cuba as it is, and figuring out whether this will be the remainder of her life. Or at least, see the connection as to why she might not be having the best experiences in New York because Cuba is her actual home/identity.

We not only witness how Pilar lives in Cuba while on this small vacation, but also observe her through Ivanito's eyes, one of Felicia's children, Pilar's deceased aunt (231). Ivanito reports how Pilar is trying to find more about his mother, "Afterward, Pilar pulls me aside and asks me to take her to Herminia Delgado's house. She says she wants to learn the truth about my mother, to learn the truth about herself (231). This intimate moment shows Pilar trying to find out more about her family, beyond the bond she shares with her grandmother. She believes in order to clarify her identity, she must understand every aspect of it, including a fuller history of her family. So, she takes it upon herself to learn more about her other family members as a way of finding out parts of herself. As her stay in Cuba continues, Pilar begins to analyze her life saying, "I wonder how different my life would have been if I'd stayed with my grandmother. I think about how I'm probably the only ex-punk on the island, how no one else has their ears pierced in three places. It's hard to imagine existing without Lou Reed. I ask Abuela if I can paint whatever I want in Cuba and

she says yes, as long as I don't attack the state (235). In these moments, Pilar begins to realize that her dynamic, rebellious personality might not be a fit for the current, static state of Cuba, despite her grandmother being there, or family.

As stated before, we slowly begin to see Pilar's realization there needs to be a separation between the memories of her grandmother and Cuba. She begins to see that the reality of Cuba is not what she used to associate so many positive feelings with. Instead, Pilar needs to begin to re-evaluate her idea of whether Cuba is a place she can go back to, live, and comfortably be herself. Slowly but surely, Pilar begins to see Cuba is not where she needs to completely invest herself in.

There is also a moment when Ivanito says of Pilar and her grandmother, "She and Pilar sit for hours on the wicker swing, passing the afternoons. Pilar is painting our grandmother's portrait" (230). This is how Pilar has been spending her time in Cuba with grandmother. Although it proves to be a fulfilling, long-awaited experience, is it enough for her? In Cuba, she cannot paint her grandmother's portraits forever, she cannot sit on the wicker chair forever, and Pilar begins to realize that. This brings us back to Rodriguez's article quoting Dance's final movement, a return home (102). Rodriguez expounds on the final movement, "The third journey, defined by Daryl Dance as the return home, whether it actually takes place or not, requires a redefinition of homeland" (105). Whether this return to the new place takes place or not, there still needs to be a re-examination of what these two places now mean to the immigrant, since undertaking this journey that was filled with experiences in both places.

This point also appears in the final moment of Alvarez's novel when Yolanda finally claims what being of New York and the Dominican Republic ended up meaning to her in terms of who she became and was. Yolanda explains, "I grew up, a curious woman, a woman of story ghosts and story devils, a woman prone to bad dreams and bad insomnia. There are still times I wake up at three o'clock in the morning and peer into the darkness" (290). In context, Yolanda is talking about that newborn kitten she once asked the visiting man about years ago in the Dominican Republic (285). She speaks of how she is haunted by the kitten's mother because even after the man had told Yolanda not to take the kitten, in her innocence, she does anyway and ends up hurting it (285-88). As a woman, Yolanda speaks of seeing this black mother cat haunt her still (290).

At the conclusion of the story, we see Yolanda hope her native country would be her home after all that time in the US, for the haunting black cat always symbolized a needed return to the Dominican Republic (7,11, 290). Like Pilar, Yolanda finally learns she was supposed to have gone through these experiences in order not to choose one place over the other, but to come to the awareness that both places provided elements of "home." Thus the identity of being of two places broadened her appreciation of these two culturally different places. Therefore not losing one's identity but making room based on whichever place was chosen as a final residence. No matter where Yolanda or Pilar ended up to reside, they were still meant to be there, at this point it is a matter of preference because they had already proven they can live in two different places.

In Pilar's case, she's experienced New York and Cuba, she left and arrived in both places. For her final "arrival," she must evaluate which place was enough for her to

completely identify with. And she realizes it is neither. This key realization is the very moment we see Pilar understand that she is not choosing one cultural identity over the other, she is not replacing her current New York identity with a Cuban one, or vice versa. Pilar begins to understand that she belongs where there is possibility to live different aspects of herself, and that cultural identity has never been “linear.” This “nonlinear” concept is presented in Florence Ramond Journey’s article, “Between Nostalgia and Exile: Picturing the Island in Cristina Garcia’s Fiction.” Journey discusses the idea of how nostalgia and exile can have an affect on the definition of identity of being an immigrant caught between two places (91). She says, “This daily push and pull between the country of exile and the country of origin is influenced by the new culture and condition of the exile, thus developing along new parameters” (91). For the immigrant, being of two places, can affect their perception of the homeland of origin and of the new place they move to, due to them having to “travel” (and sometimes literally) between the two places. The immigrant/exile takes influences from each place, and exchanges them between the two. For example, Pilar continued to paint in Cuba, an activity she started in New York, and when in New York, the moments she spoke Spanish, this obviously stemming from being of her Cuban heritage.

Pilar finally begins to see those “new parameters” (91) not as limitations or rigorous expectations, but new options that permit her to expand her identity. She does not have to worry about where she fits or where she belongs, because she finally accepts her cultural duality. She understands that she does not have to make a choice of one over the other, but can construct an identity where these two places have contributed equally to who she is. In one of the most expressive passages of the novel, Pilar sums up her new self-acceptance:

I've started dreaming in Spanish, which has never happened before. I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. There's a magic here working its way through my veins. There's something about the vegetation, too, that I respond to instinctively---the stunning bougainvillea, the flamboyants and jacarandas, the orchids growing from the trunks of the mysterious ceiba trees. And I love Havana, its noise and decay and painted ladyness. I could happily sit on one of those wrought-iron balconies for days or keep my grandmother company on her porch, with its ringside view of the sea. I'm afraid to lose all of this, to lose Abuela Celia again. But sooner or later I'd have to return to New York. I know now it's where I belong--not *instead* of here, but *more* than here. How can I tell my grandmother this? (Garcia 235)

This is the moment, the arrival, that Pilar realizes Cuba is not the right place for her, but that she simply needs more than what it can offer her. She now knows that her "American identity" encompasses her "Cuban self," and that although her physical location is New York, it's not because New York proved to be better than Cuba. But she loves her grandmother and she fears their connection will be lost when she leaves Cuba. Pilar wonders how to break this news to her grandmother, but I believe her grandmother already understands her decision and accepts it. Celia says, "For me, the sea was a great comfort, Pilar. But it made my children restless. It exists now so we can call and wave from opposite shores.' Then she sighs waiting for her next words to form. 'Ay, *mi cielo*, what do all the years and the separation mean except a more significant betrayal?'" (240). Celia understands that Cuba did not prove to be enough for her children. She understands and sees the

separation between her and them, but still, she must live and they must live through this communication of “call and wave from opposite shores” (240).

Although Celia mentions a betrayal, it should not be thought of as her thinking her children betrayed her, but as her understanding that Cuba was not enough in the end. For Celia, despite her burning patriotism for the El Lider (3-5), it did not keep her family together. She sees that the sea, though comforting to her and even a type of barrier against Cuba’s potential enemies from the outside (3-5), presented possibilities not limitations for her children, and now, for her grandchildren. However, although Cuba did not prove to be a final residence for Pilar, she and her grandmother understood within themselves, Cuba was not meant to be a final destination in both of their regards. Pilar asks a question her grandmother cannot answer now, because through Pilar’s experiences, she answers them herself. Celia can only sit and watch Pilar’s process of growth in coming to her new arrival that she is of a culturally dual identity. Unbeknownst to Pilar, Celia understands more than her granddaughter can ever think; Celia only wants what is best for Pilar, whether it is on Cuban or US land.

Florence Raymond Journey says, “The members of the Caribbean diaspora are themselves, as well as the characters portrayed in their literature, living with a moving identity, shifting with the various experiences they undergo---but nevertheless, as Dara Goldman reminds us, always linked to the island” (92). Immigrants/exiles, despite travelling and/or living between two places, whenever they can or are allowed to, are and will always be a part of their Caribbean islands. And we see Pilar come to that realization. She does not give up her past or choose her present over it, she appreciates Cuba and expands her Cuban

identity to include her present life in New York. Monica Perales adds an important dimension to this discussion of cultural identity. In her article “On Borderlands/ La Frontera: Gloria Anzaldua and Twenty-Five Years of Research on Gender on the Borderlands,” Perales shows how Anzaldua’s reflection on the “Borderlands” presented new avenues on how the idea of gender and identity can be defined by those constantly changing boundaries between cultures (163). And while the article presents several key points, one ties all these notions and concepts together. Perales says of Anzaldua’s work, “For her, the borderlands are only in part geographic; instead, the borderlands must be understood metaphorically, as a state of being and consciousness, continually being redefined” (163). Perales correctly interprets Anzaldua’s work, saying that the borderlands are not to be seen as limitations but a constant, dynamic state of change and possibility for the person who occupies these spaces. In a final conclusion, or resolution, this is what Pilar finally sees, and accepts about herself. An expansion, a redefinition (163) of her identity.

The two novels, Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* and Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* help the reader to understand the immigrant experience. We observe two young women on their journey from exploring their origins and confronting the dramatic cut immigration had caused in their life, through considering a return to the country of origins, to a new self-awareness. We saw the journey that must be experienced in order for the immigrant to fully comprehend his/her life. Pilar and Yolanda were finally able to comfortably choose and live in the country they preferred, without the pressure of believing that the chosen place fully determined their identity. Appreciating their cultural duality, they acknowledged that both the “homeland of origin” and the new “homeland of immigration”

contributed equally to their sense of self, thus shaping the immigrant identity as a kind of unification of both places.

As a coda to this thesis I would like to add a personal note. Like Pilar and Yolanda, I have struggled for a long time with a sense of displacement. The questions about my identity became especially difficult to confront after the death of my grandmother. I was caught between my present life in the United States and my longing for my grandmother's Trinidad. Analyzing the two novels by the Caribbean writers helped me on my own journey to find out how a person at a crossroads makes a hard decision of choosing where they are to belong and remain. In the end, I came to the conclusion that my identity can encompass my dual heritage, the experiences of both places, where I was born and where I live, becoming united. I do not belong in one place over the other, instead, I appreciate the privilege of being able to call two places home.

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