Between Island and Mainland: Shifting Perspectives in Cristina Garcia’s *The Agüero Sisters*

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How can one go on living with two languages, two houses, two nostalgias, two temptations, two kinds of melancholy?

Heberto Padilla (translated by Alastair Reid)

*as pain sends seabirds south from the cold/I come north to gather my feathers for quills.*

Lorna Dee Cervantes

The last two decades have confirmed the vitality and originality of Hispanic/Latino writing in the United States.¹ The recent “boom” of Mexican American, Porto Rican and Cuban American literary works has been interpreted as a sign that “American literature has its own hybrid offspring of the Latin American school” (Thulani Davis, quoted in Lopez 102). Nourished by divergent cultural and linguistic traditions, the growing body of Latino/a literary works can be viewed as a cultural bridge over the Americas insofar as it translates the historical continuities, ruptures and remappings of the Western hemisphere.²
Cuban American writer Cristina Garcia is one of the most interesting literary voices to emerge in this dialogue. Her fiction is marked by a two-fold estrangement—from her native Cuba and from the Cuban American community in Miami. Dreaming in Cuban (1992) and The Agüero Sisters (1997), the two novels she has published so far, mirror the vagaries of a divided Cuba, its spatial and symbolic dissemination. The author views exile from an extraterritorial narrative perspective, one that allows her to place, displace and replace the characters on the beleaguered map of the Caribbean. Their loss of territorial and cultural points of reference appears as the expression of divided subjectivities and of the demise of encompassing ideologies. Through an examination of the shifting perspectives, contrapuntal narrative structure and deterritorialized language, this article probes the thematic and textual representations of “diaspora consciousness” (Clifford 1997, 256) in The Agüero Sisters. It will further be argued that the authorial narrative voice (speaking from a geographically and politically undetermined space) ultimately calls into question the viability of an “at-homeness” conceived in strictly territorial and cultural terms.

“Diaspora’s Borders”

As U.S. Hispanic writers are engaged in an ongoing process of redefining and repositioning their national legacy in the context of the Americas, issues of transnational identity, borderlands and diaspora feature as recurrent tropes in their works. History and geography, in particular the nature of the border with the United States—land versus water—, have by and large conditioned the literary representation of the contact between South and North, between the (is)land of origin and the new place of dwelling. Indeed, while the border(lands) experience informs much of Mexican American literature, a peculiar form of “diaspora consciousness” lies at the very core of Cuban American writings.

For Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa, the Mexican-American border—that “1,950 mile-long open wound” where the Third World “grates against the first and bleeds” (Borderlands 2-3)—separates but also unites the inhabitants on both sides of the Rio Grande. If the memory of the lost land is still vivid, the contiguity of the borderlands makes for a common transnational experience. In Anzaldúa’s conception “[…] the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Preface, Borderlands). Conversely, the Cuban American experience is one of extraterritoriality. Roman de la Campa considers the divided Cuban nation as “an impasse over history” […]
nations claiming a territory that begins with Cuba, but in many ways includes Miami” (*Cuba on my Mind*, 14). In between, the vastness of the ocean dissolves ties and amplifies distances while it also marks a drastic rupture between island and mainland Cubans, two communities that have long pretended to ignore each other.6 Uncovering the intricate layers of Cuban history and culture—on the island and in the United States—Garcia’s fiction translates the existential predicament of the Cubans: the islanders’ internal exile under the alienating effect of the regime and the Cuban Americans’ external exile, i.e. their physical, ideological and cultural distance from their home(is)land.

**“Cuba on my mind”**

*The Agüero Sisters* pursues Garcia’s investigation into “the chemical and irreversible” connections (*Dreaming in Cuban* 235) between island and mainland. The omniscient narrator delves into the intricate and erratic links between the workings of nature and the drives of human actions, between the human body and the body politics, between home and exile.

The novel’s apparent binary structure (there are two parts, “Tropical Disturbances” and “A Common Affliction”) is counteracted by the multiple narrative foci and by the constantly shifting perspective between island and mainland (there is even an occasional side-glance to Madrid). The author ostensibly plays on and with the long-standing cultural cliché of dichotomizing Hispanic and Anglo-America; she gives it, however, an unexpected twist. The time-space frame extends both horizontally (Havana—Miami—Madrid) and vertically (from 1904, i.e. two years after Cuba’s independence, to the late 1990s). The opening and closing chapters are set in Cuba’s Zapata swamp, the place where Ignacio Agüero, a famous ornithologist, killed his wife Blanca with a double-barrelled gun, an act he confessed to his diary only. Fragments from this diary, printed in italics, are embedded as separate chapters within the story. The Agüeros have two daughters: the elder, Constancia, left Cuba in the wake of the Castro revolution and lives in Florida among well-to-do Cuban expatriates. Reina, the offspring of Blanca’s affair with a mulatto whose identity remains undisclosed, is a skilled electrician (nicknamed “Companera Amazona” [10]), still eking out a living on the island. In the wake of the accident that leaves her body scarred forever (she has been struck by lightning while repairing a high-voltage cable), Reina joins her half-sister in Florida. The sisters’ reunion acts as a catalyst in their revision of the family’s ambiguous legacy, of their divided loyalties and split identities.

The highly poetic voice of the omniscient narrator emerges from three alternate perspectives, as the focalization passes from one character to
another: through Ignacio Agüero’s eyes, he who “traverse(d) Cuba with a breadth and depth few others achieved over considerably smaller territories” (4), the narrator probes into the secrets of the once pristine landscape, seeking clues to the personal and political events it conceals. Through Reina and Constancia’s contrasted perceptions, (s)he further compares Cuba and Florida’s cultural maps, in an attempt to identify the barely visible points and lines that form the epicenter of the “tropical disturbances” at work on both sides of the Florida Straits.

But the tormented past and uncertain present of the “two Cubas” manifestly call for a more encompassing vision. As Salman Rushdie aptly points out, the eye/I of the exiled or immigrant writer necessarily works from a perspective that is both plural and partial.7 The Agüero Sisters is a case in point. The author’s eye has to go beyond the “ground” perspective in order to achieve the necessary distance from the (is)land. Garcia’s narrator then alternately observes and contemplates the “two Cubas” from the ocean and from the sky. The blue expanse of water conceals and discloses, distorts and reshapes fragments of life on the island and on the mainland: “Reina has been on a boat only twice in her life, but she likes the perspective it gives her, the ocean’s open contempt for destinations. Why hadn’t she ever realized before the futility of living on land?” (165). At times, the omniscient narrator seems to hover, bird-like, over the Caribbean, distilling and articulating the changes brought about by migrations. The transmigrating birds over Cuba and Florida’s skies punctuate the narrative, acting as harbingers of the unpredictability of human actions, omens of the disturbances befalling island and mainland8:

Reina remembers how, after her mother’s death, everyone’s vision splintered. There was a bird that hovered over Mami’s burial plot at the Colon Cemetery. Her father pronounced it a common crow. Constancia […] insisted it was electric blue. Reina wanted to believe her sister, but she saw a bird on fire, tiny and bathed in violent light. It broke the air around them, invited an early dusk. Reina recalls how the emptiness seemed to surround them, a sad bewilderment that has never lifted. (67)

Birds also figure the migrations and metamorphoses of human beings, the painful dismembering and re-membering of their bodies. Blanca Agüero’s purplish burns (“exotic tattoos”) on her forearms are reminders of her days in a chemistry laboratory. Human maps as it were, the scarred bodies of most characters bear the mark of the island’s embattled history: Ignacio looks “as thoroughly disheveled as [his] surroundings” (154-155); Reina’s mismatched patchwork of borrowed skin is a metonymical translation of Cuba’s distorted landscape but also of the island’s indomitable vitality and vibrant sensuality. A miraculous survivor, the young woman has become used to “the discordant new landscape of her skin” (66) that she owes to “experimental skin grafts from loved ones” (35)—her lover, Pepin,
has donated a patch of his backside, her daughter a long stretch of thigh. It’s the stench of her skin she can’t tolerate:

She tries to mask the odor by rinsing smoked grapefruit through her hair. But the relief is only temporary. The stink ruins all her familiar pleasures. Gone is her rapture. Gone her hot, black scent. When Reina makes love, nothing, not even Pepin, whose hands erase all borders, whose mouth clashes against her in love, can make the bliss return. (66)

Reina, a larger-than-life character endowed with mythical dimensions (“a glorious titanic beast” [159]), is a feminine Prometheus of sorts, a trespasser who defies both rulers and rules. She is also the one who will eventually force her sister to face the family’s unacknowledged, obliterated past. A past that creeps in unwittingly one morning as Constancia wakes up from an unsettling dream: severing roots and useless nerves, a surgeon with crimson scissors has seemingly “reinvent[ed] the architecture of her face” (104). In the mirror, she discovers her mother’s face. Puzzled by this eerie transformation, Constancia’s “moods pendulate unpredictably, from [a] sense of contentment to an uncontrollable desire to scratch off her face” (130). The metamorphosis is disconcerting, to herself and to the others. Her senses awaken to things she has never noticed before: the strangely enlarged seagulls, the incongruent details of her condominium. But soon Constancia turns her mother’s spectral apparition into a flourishing business: commodifying memory, providing an outlet for nostalgia. She designs a line of beauty products, each featuring a cameo of her mother’s face (now her own) beneath the ornate logo Cuerpo de Cuba. The instant success of the venture prompts her to launch a full complement of face and body products “for every glorious inch of Cuban womanhood: Cuello de Cuba, Senos de Cuba, Codos de Cuba, and so on” (131). Her products (or is it her mother’s questioning eyes?) unfailingly revive her clients’ memories: “Politics may have betrayed [her] customers, geography overlooked them, but Cuerpo de Cuba products still manage to touch the pink roots of their sadness” (132). In cold blood, with the flair and efficiency of a successful businesswoman, Constancia caters to the exalted image Cuban-American women have of themselves: passionate, demanding and deserving of every luxury. The myth of Cuban femininity encapsulated in a cream! The Cuban dream!

But the fragrant lotions she administers to others unfailingly bring to the surface shreds of her own past, conjuring up the memory of long-ago summers in Cuba and casting ominous doubts over her present life. Her sister’s arrival in Miami precipitates the process of “re-memory.” Reina’s mere presence sends an electric shock wave through the Cuban American community: her unbridled spontaneity and unsophisticated beauty act as a catalyst of the discrepancy between the island’s vitality and the simulacrum of Cubanness the exiles indulge in.
**SHifting Perspectives in Cristina Garcia’s The Agüero Sisters**

“This shabby empire of exile”

Through the reunion of the Agüero sisters, the author brings together the “two Cubas” and extends the cultural critique to both shores. On the island, chaos and disorder are counterbalanced by the unkempt vitality of the people; conversely, in Florida there reigns an opulent but sterile order. García’s fictionalized comparison between island and mainland echoes Richard Rodriguez’s reflections on the Mexican-American border in his essay, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1992). In Rodriguez’s view, static, memory-ridden Mexico strikes one as a new, upbeat society while the United States, dominated by an amnesic febrile mobility, is showing unmistakable signs of a tragic culture. Past and future are intermingled in the confusing, fast-changing reality of San Diego and Tijuana. The post-industrial secular, soulless American city appears like an anachronistic vestige of history, while provincial Tijuana looks more resolutely than ever to the north, to the future. “Taken together as one, Tijuana and San Diego form the most fascinating new city in the world, a city of world-class irony” (106).

*Mutatis mutandis*, the Cuban-American “encounter” also results in the construction of a hybrid transcultural space. Miami’s *Little Havana* has become “the epicenter of the Cuban diaspora” (De La Campa 79), an enclave whose inhabitants seem to live in dual denial, of Cuba and of the U.S. This transitional, intermediary space is an edited replica of Cuba, mixed with American ingredients. The exiled community with its “constitutive taboo on return, its postponement to a remote future” (Clifford, *Routes* 246) appears as a diasporic group of a new kind: the possibility of renewing communication with the island makes for an overlapping of the border and the diaspora experiences. According to James Clifford, no exclusivist paradigms can be applied to this type of emerging transnational, contrapuntal identity (*Routes* 244-250).

*The Agüero Sisters* portrays the Cuban American community as the discrepant Other of the island left behind, its micro-territory an odd translation of Cuba’s decaying habitat and culture mixed with a touch of *YUCA* (Young Urban Cuban American) cosmopolitanism. “This shabby empire of exile” (124) is grafted onto the shallow glamor of Miami, “America’s twentieth century playground,” a city of “jubilant escapists, tragedies, and striking discrepancies,” a place of “tropical overexposure” and “disturbing tropical realities” (Leon 281-283). One of the most striking examples of the exiles’ incongruous setting is the *Versailles* (a famous Miami restaurant which figures in the works of many Cuban American writers). For Gustavo Perez Firmat, “this quaint, kitschy, noisy restaurant that serves basic Cuban food is a paradise for the self-absorbed: the Nirvana...
of Little Havana” (Firmat, in Behar 324). The profusion of mirrors on the walls, the bright lights reflected in the windows make the place into a Cuban panoptikon. “One goes to the Versailles not only to be seen but to be multiplied” (Firmat, in Behar 325). Becoming part of the trompe l’œil setting makes it easier... to forget to remember. Yet it is in this “hall of mirrors [which] is also a house of spirits” (Firmat 325) that Constancia is confronted with her “palimpsest” face. There is a deliberately jarring allusion to T. S. Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in the narrator’s description of a dancing ball at the Cuban exiles’ exclusive club: “The evening gowns flaunt their hothouse colors, as if forced to bloom in artificial light. Jades and saffrons, vermilions, glamorous blacks. The women inside them turn and hesitate, rustling their skirts with deafening allure” (74). The conversation at the Miami club turns around preparations for the so-called “final takeover of Cuba”. Heberto, Constancia’s husband, and a group of diehard anti-Castrists are about to embark on a crusade to liberate the island. In Reina’s eyes, this pathetic attempt is nothing but the counterpart of the Comandante’s ludicrous idea of a possible Yanqui invasion; it is rather the gusanos12 who travel to Cuba with loads of gifts for their relatives that represent a threat to Castro’s revolution. Reina has grasped the paradoxical similarity between the extremist attitudes on both shores: “El exilio is the virulent flip side of Communist intolerance” (197).

It is mainly through her eyes that the narrator provides an ironical gaze on the expatriates’ peculiar way of “constructing homes away from home” (Clifford, Routes 251). Cuban Florida appears as a stagnant place—the backwater of the exiles’ pent-up feelings, of their resentful nostalgia. These neo-Miamians are wasting away their freedom, living in golden cages—the cheek-by-jowl condominiums with their tiny swimming pools. Scattered in between the country clubs and condominiums are outdoor shrines dedicated to La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, Cuba’s patron saint. It is as if the Cubans were trying to hold on to a romanticized memory of their past which forecloses circulation and movement (Bhabha in Clifford, TC 114). Indulging “the uneasy indolence of exile life” (157), they sail in circles through the swamps and the Key Biscayne canal in luxurious yachts and motorboats, mindless to the call of the ocean. Reina remembers that in Cuba it was strictly forbidden to venture out on the open seas. In Florida, this circular pursuit of freedom and happiness gets one nowhere.

Even though she has adopted the paraphernalia of luxury exhibited by her peers, Constancia remains a stranger to their urbane Cubanity, to her surroundings, and... to herself. Underneath the veneer of her pleasurable life in Florida, lurks barely dormant the memory of unresolved questions—to begin with, that of her mother’s mysterious death. Reina, the keeper of the family’s lies and secrets, will open her sister’s eyes and force her to solve the
“puzzle” inscribed on her face. The confrontation between the two sisters takes place on a boat called *Flor del Destierro/Flower of Exile*. Reina’s voice covers the sound of the ocean as she finally discloses the family’s long-buried secret: “[Ignacio] shot her like one of his birds, and then watched her die” (275). Time has come now for Constancia to revisit the island and to reassess her past. She makes her uneasy way through the roads of Cuba—“a world preserved […] a landscape where every origin shows” (296)—back to her strange inheritance, to the Agüeros’ “original sin”. But “the closer she gets to [her parents’ home], the more it feels unreal. It’s as if every moment in Cuba is absorbing many times its weight” (292). Constancia discovers her father’s diary which was buried in a copper box, and she now begins to understand. The meticulous scientist had tampered with the harmony of the universe: he knew how to catch and dissect birds; what he didn’t know was that close to him a human being was pining away. After murdering his wife (apparently aiming at a close-by hummingbird), he made this cryptic confession to his daughter: “Human beings are distressingly unpredictable. They have a natural propensity for chaos. It is part of their biology, like a capacity for despair or profound joy […] There is a comfort in knowing what to expect” (134). Unable to deal with Blanca’s unpredictability, he immobilized her forever and spent the rest of his life surrounded by his collection of stuffed birds. While still in Havana, Reina wanders through the University’s biology building and wonders whether “her mother would be there, stuffed and inert like everything Papa killed?” (99).

The secret of Blanca Agüero’s violent death lies buried forever in the Zapata swamp. The novel moreover implies that the Cubans’ relation to death has been profoundly affected by the vagaries of their transnational condition. Split between island and mainland, the rituals of burial and mourning have lost their referential meaning. Even those who die on the island cannot always find their peace. Constancia will bring her husband’s “maddeningly inert” ashes (292) back to Miami (Heberto died during the failed attack on the island). Off the shores of Miami, yachts and motorboats occasionally hit the corpses of drowned refugees. The *no-man’s ocean* between Cuba and Florida has become the resting place of many an anonymous life. Then there are those who die in Miami. Two blocks away from the *Versailles*—that “glistening mausoleum” (Firmat, in Behar 325)—is Woodlawn Cemetery, the resting place of Cuban American notables. Remote from the exiles’ birthplace, these extraterritorial, “unhoused” burial places are stripped of their signifying value.

Transnational displacement does call into question one’s affective and cultural points of reference. Not surprisingly, one of the characters in *Dreaming in Cuban* is pondering “the transmigrations from the southern
latitudes, the millions moving north. What happens to their languages? The warm burial grounds they leave behind? What of their passions lying stiff and untranslated in their breasts?” (DC 73)

A no-man’s language?

_The Agüero Sisters_ pursues the reflection on the gradual loss of the mother tongue, on its multiple transformations and, ultimately, on the impossibility of expressing one’s innermost feelings in any given language. As a writer, Garcia (like Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Richard Rodriguez, among others) transforms this liability into an asset.

Transplanted into the New World, English and Spanish have struck new roots and come to translate distinct experiences. Transplanting a transplanted language—Cuban, Mexican, or Portorican Spanish—into an English-speaking environment obviously poses new sets of problems. Like other Hispanic writers, Cristina Garcia suggests that for Spanish-speaking individuals, English is (and remains) a “cold”, rather inhospitable language, inappropriate to convey one’s innermost feelings. While she manifestly enjoys “a sense of limitlessness with language and imagination” (Interview Lopez 109), her characters wrestle with their own linguistic predicament, with the untranslatability of their emotions and of their memories. To begin with, there seems to be a physiological incompatibility: as Reina is learning the language, she “isn’t sure she likes the way English feels in her mouth, the press of her tongue against her palate, the lackluster r’s” (235). But heteroglossia is at work even within the terra cognita of Spanish: spoken by Miami Cubans, the language has an “archaic” flavor (circa Havana 1959), it is an “unhoused” idiom that cannot grow on foreign ground. Reina is sensitive to the temporal and ideological gulf that separates her island Spanish from the Miamian one:

_In Miami, the Cuban Spanish is so different, florid with self-pity and longing and obstinate revenge. Reina speaks another language entirely, an explosive lexicon of hardship and bitter jokes at the government’s expense. And her sister sounds like the past. A flash-frozen language, replete with outmoded words and fifties expressions. For Constancia, time has stood linguistically still. It’s a wonder people can speak to each other!_ (236)

Daily life among exiles is an exercise in cultural and linguistic translation. For Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Miami is the place where “the interlingual utterance [...] remains up in the air as if it cannot make up its mind whether to land in the domain of Spanish or English. Sometimes the American dream is written in Spanglish” (323-324). This airy quality of the exiles’ language translates the existential hesitation inherent in their condition—the loss of a centered relationship between mother tongue and native ground.
Garcia conveys this painful condition through Reina’s daughter’s first-person narration: Dulce Fuerte is the only character in the book who voices her predicament without the narrator’s mediation. Wayward and unruly, she is looking for clues to the culture of her origins. In Madrid, she is forced to realize that Cuban Spanish does not prove very helpful: “Each word is a map I track toward the same blank wall, thickly covered with moss” (143). In Miami, the subtle alchemy of the medianoche—the ultimate Cuban snack—strikes at the very root of her being. The forgotten taste makes Dulce ponder “how close we are to forgetting everything, how close we are to not existing at all” (288). The loss of faith in memory spells the erosion of ethnic identity, for when we are “close […] to forgetting, we are close […] to not existing as a we” (Brogan 130). The fragmented, mediated memory of individual exiles points to a vanishing sense of collective identity. From her distant, doubly removed vantage point, Garcia’s omniscient narrator seems to question the very meaning of Cubanity—Cubanidad.

The sense of estrangement one experiences when reading Garcia’s novel—or other works written by exiled authors for that matter—springs from the explicit and/or implicit traces of cultural and linguistic displacement, from the perceptible substratum of an other tongue at work in the text. Here is an excerpt from Dulce Fuerte’s internal monologue during her stay in Madrid:

_There’s a soreness at my center I can’t rub away. It opens and withers like a night-blooming flower. Carajo, I’m starving. […] There’s a good Cuban restaurant on Avenida Infantas, filled with fat expatriates. I’m tempted to go there but I know the smell of fried plantains might make me do something desperate._ (205)

Kathleen Brogan is certainly right in claiming that “we live in languages as much as we do in countries” (99). Leaving one’s birthplace means disrupting one’s intimate connection with the mother tongue; transplanted into another culture, the fading, half-forgotten language becomes itself a site of ethnicity that undeniably puts its stamp on the acquired language. The exiled/immigrant writer’s language contains those elements of foreignness that, according to Adorno, are indispensable in the forging of a creative literary voice: “Only he who is not truly at home in his language uses it as an instrument” (quoted in Steiner, Extraterritorial 5).

Garcia’s persistent use of the present tense throughout The Agüero Sisters conveys to the narrative a poetic sense of timelessness and a marked collective purport that heighten the deterritorializing effect of language.13 As George Steiner has pointed out, discrepant temporalities and histories do not add up to a homogeneous language/time/culture but rather tend to intensify “the experience of the untranslatable, the untranslated, the ‘unreceived’” (Steiner, No Passion 153). It would seem, then, that Garcia’s literary achievement is to have forced the (English) language into complying with her “stereoscopic vision” of heterogeneous languages, times and cultures.
In the last analysis, *The Aguêro Sisters* can be read as a meditation on the tenuous relationship between home and language, particularly manifest throughout the 20th century, “the age of the refugees.” Just as transmigrations have profoundly changed our idea of home, they make dwelling in a common house of language increasingly problematic.

**Diaspora’s Borderlessness**

Through Reina’s belief in the futility of living on land, of anchoring oneself to a country or to a home, *The Aguêro Sisters* pushes the limits of the exile condition to the extreme. The novel ultimately calls into question the very concept of “at-homeness”, of a territorialized national identity. Reina, arguably the writer’s alter ego, finally understands that “everything comes to an end on land, rooted in accumulation”, that “[…] civilization […] kills every original thirst” (199-200). She would rather spend the rest of her life crisscrossing the world, free as a bird. The novel’s terse closing chapters, replete with fleeting fragmented visions of the past’s unreliable wilderness and flickering images of today’s dystopic civilization, express a profound skepticism regarding the possibility of a return to the home (is)land, as well as a growing disaffection with the viability of settling elsewhere. Maybe, as James Clifford put it, “we are all Caribbeans now in our urban archipelagos […] Perhaps there’s no return for anyone to a native land—only field notes for its reinvention” (*Predicament* 173).

*The Aguêro Sisters* suggests that politically and ideologically the nation and the family—in other words, territoriality and rootedness—have taken too heavy a toll in human lives and suffering. Adorno’s reflections on the broken relationship between one’s territory, one’s home and one’s self understandably come to mind. Written during his exile in North America, in the aftermath of World War II, his meditations foreshadow the condition of present-day immigrants, refugees and exiles. For Adorno, “the predicament of private life” lies in a tortured relationship to mass culture. If change or revolt against the past is inevitable, something of substance has been irretrievably lost. “Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible,” he wrote. A return to the traditional notion of home does not even seem fully desirable: “The traditional residences we grew up in have grown intolerable: each trait of comfort in them is paid for with a betrayal of knowledge, each vestige of shelter with the musty pact of family interests.” And, with a touch of nostalgia, Adorno concludes: “The house is past” (*Minima Moralia*, “Refuge for the homeless” 38-39).

In Garcia’s fictionalized version of the “two Cubas”, the traditional house has become a thing of the past, the “homes constructed away from home” (Clifford, *Routes* 251) but hybrid attempts at reconciling nostalgia
with hollow show-off. Ultimately, the space occupied by the narrator in *The Agüero Sisters* is neither exile nor homeland, but an ever-fleeting horizon which makes for an understanding of both. Salman Rushdie reminds us that the word “translation” comes from the Latin “bearing across”. Having been borne across the world, exiled and immigrant writers are themselves translated men and women (Rushdie 17). By the same token, they become translators of their extraterritorial experience into a deterritorialized language.

*The Agüero Sisters*’s plural and partial time-space-language perspective enables the reader to achieve freedom from dangerous certainties, “from a finality of vision, [from] a definitive version of life’s meaning” (12), to envisage exile as an ongoing process of incorporating the past while remaining immune to dogmas and ready-made truths. *In fine*, Garcia would most probably subscribe to Adorno’s paradoxical statement: “The enforced condition of emigration [is] a wisely-chosen norm” (*Minima Moralia* 39).

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NOTES

1. The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino/a” literature are used indiscriminately throughout the article.
3. The Agüero Sisters and Dreaming in Cuban have been translated into French and published by Calmann-Levy and Denoël, respectively.
4. Garcia’s first novel Dreaming in Cuban (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992) fictionalizes the geographical dispersion, the ideological disintegration and cultural split brought about by the Cuban revolution in the life of a family divided by a deep language rift. They no longer speak the same language, even when that language is Spanish.
5. James Clifford has envisioned the potential ideological impact of literary works centering on conflictual borderlands: “The border experience is made to produce powerful
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political visions: the subversion of all binarisms, the projection of a multicultural public sphere versus hegemonic pluralism” (Clifford, TC 102).

6. Eliana Rivero—a Cuban writer who lives in Colorado, close to the Mexican American border—points to the shifting connection between location and culture in her particular case: “I am a hybrid, a puente, a being of two places at once, but also of one place which is dual and fluid and rich [...] I can also see that I am what I am (soy) where I am (estoy)—soy lo que soy donde estoy” (“Fronterisleña, Border Islander”, 343). By combining the Cuban exile/diaspora and the Mexican American border experience Rivero has become a “borderislander”—a graphic coinage for her hybrid cultural location.

7. As he puts it, “stereoscopic vision” replaces “whole sight” (“Imaginary Homelands”, 19).


10. Rodriguez is struck by the chronological gap between the two towns: they “are not in the same historical time zone. Tijuana is poised at the beginning of an industrial age, a Dickensian city with palm trees. San Diego is a post-industrial city of high-impact plastic and despair diets [...] San Diego faces west, looks resolutely out to sea. Tijuana stares north, as toward the future.” (84)

11. One of the epigraphs to the novel is “I can remember much forgetfulness” (Hart Crane).

12. Literally gusanos means “worms”; the term commonly refers to the defectors from Castro’s Cuba.