

**PEOPLE ON THE EDGE SEE MORE.
A CONVERSATION
WITH THE CUBAN-AMERICAN WRITER
CRISTINA GARCIA***

Àngels Carabí

ANGELS CARABI: Cristina, you were born in Havana. Can you talk about your life in Cuba?

CRISTINA GARCIA: I was born in Cuba but, actually, I was raised in the United States. I came to the States when I was two and a half, in 1961, so I have no memories of Cuba at all except for the two weeks that I spent in the country in 1984. All the impressions I have are a mix of those two weeks plus the information, the legends and the emotionally charged descriptions that I have been hearing over the years. So the picture that I have of Cuba is very impressionistic and not at all crystal clear.

A.C.: How do you experience your Cuban-American identity?

C.G.: I don't really know. I think there is a public perception of what it means to be Cuban-American, but I think that this public perception is dominated by just a handful of people in Miami. To be Cuban-American publicly is very different from what it means privately, which has to do with a broad array of political responses to Cuba and to living in the United States. For me, being Cuban-American means very much my family identity, my private identity.

My trip to Cuba amplified my sense of 'Cuban-ness' somehow. It did feel, in a very strange way, like going home. There was some kind of

* This interview was held in Los Angeles in 1993.

reverberation or familiarity there for me. I think it was my Cuban family and the acceptance and the enthusiasm with which they embraced me that had a very powerful effect on me. I found my roots in Cuba. However, when I was sent to Miami for *Time* magazine in 1987, I encountered a whole other way of being Cuban-American that I felt completely alienated from. I was a kind of a pariah and I was called a communist because I would voice my opinions. All these experiences worked to refine and alter my sense of being Cuban-American and I think it's still evolving. As my daughter grows, I wonder what it will mean for her. It's nothing fixed, it evolves and changes fairly regularly.

A.C.: How do you see the future of the Castro regime?

C.G.: I think the situation in Cuba is very dismal now. Castro has backed himself into a corner and people have very little choice. From what I understand from my cousins, from the letters that we receive, the situation becomes more and more desperate every day. I don't think things will change until Castro is not there anymore. He is the Revolution. Maybe, after he goes, the people might see what they want for themselves. When this happens, I think that the Cubans in Miami will be very surprised. They believe that as soon as Castro is out, they will be able to go back and fill a vacuum; they think that everybody is going to wear jeans and drink Coca-Cola. They are acting like the Vichy regime, as if they were a government without a country. I do not believe that this is going to be the case at all but that the Cuban people are going to have to make their own choices about their future.

A.C.: Let's talk about your first novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992).^{*} It seems to me that through your characters you try to show the complexity of Cuban life and of Cuban-American life, especially of Cuban women. What it has meant for them to stay in the country and what it has meant to go away.

C.G.: When I was writing I wasn't trying to make the characters emblematic of anything larger than themselves. I was just taken with the peculiarities and obsessions of each woman and wanted to do them justice. It is true that I was trying to move away from the monolithic impression of Cuban-Americans in the United States as well as to move away from the monolithic impression of the Cubans in Cuba which, ultimately, is very dehumanizing and degrading. But again, my intention was to get into the bloodstream of my four women characters, Celia,

^{*} García, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. Alfred Knopf, New York, 1992.

Felicia, Lourdes and Pilar. Whatever politics exists in my writing reveals their interest in politics as well as in other issues.

A.C.: Let's talk about one of your most fascinating characters, Celia, the grandmother. Before she becomes fully involved with the Revolution, Celia is always waiting for somebody. She is a victim, a waiting woman. But the Revolution turns her into an active and determined woman. How does Celia represent what happened to women, to wives, who became politically active in the Revolution?

C.G.: I think you captured her very well. I did want to convey how much revolution and political activism galvanized her. It sort of woke her from the dead. The only part that was really alive was her diary, her private thoughts. For her, the Revolution means something she can put her energies, her intellect and her heart into. It stimulates her blossoming, her flowering, her fulfillment; she is able to reach her potential. I think many women and not only women, but many disadvantaged people, have the same feeling about the Revolution. I also think I wanted it to be a very personal experience for Celia. For her, 'El Líder' is the Revolution, they are one and the same. The passion she feels for the Revolution is a passion for him, personally. It's a deep love. This allows her to direct the displaced love that Gustavo awakened in her and that she was not able to complete. Her husband, senses this and he feels displaced once more. He knew she always belonged to Gustavo, and now there is another lover that has taken his place. He can never own her and that is why ultimately, he is so despairing of her.

A.C.: When Celia becomes a judge, she chooses reform instead of punishment.

C.G.: The kind of justice that Celia is striving for is a complicated one. I have very mixed feelings about her decision, for example, about the boy who was writing stories that were considered anti-revolutionary. Celia senses that people have to make sacrifices for the Revolution among them, personal freedom, artistic freedom. I think that she strives for balance, but it's the balance of a dictator. That which balances individual rights against the needs of the State. And Celia is trying to do this in a microcosm. Sometimes I applaud her as a character for her efforts, but I also think she can be very misguided in her zealotry. She has her blank spots, like all the women.

A.C.: Celia is an atheist.

C.G.: She is an active atheist and does not have religious faith. Her faith is the Revolution and a belief in personal love.

A.C.: The deeds of your characters are public. One feels that the community has responsibility over its members. Is that something you intended?

C.G.: I think so. My sense is that Cuba is one big small town where people know everybody's business. I can't tell you how many neighbors dropped by while I was there to see what was going on and to chat. There was a sense that your life was open to scrutiny, especially in the block associations that exist. People do know your business. If you are not on your night patrol people wonder why. If your kid does not go school, everybody knows about it. The degree of involvement expected of you in your neighborhood was amazing and extraordinary to me.

A.C.: In *Dreaming in Cuban*, there is the feeling of failure regarding the relationships between mothers and daughters. It seems though that Lourdes and her daughter Pilar get along better at the end.

C.G.: I am not sure that they get along better. Lourdes and Pilar are at each other's throats all the time but Lourdes defends her daughter when Pilar's painting is being criticized by the neighbors. As much as she hates the painting, as much as it drives her crazy, she is not going to let anybody tell her what to do. In the end she's the mother lion. In a sense it reveals my own experience with my mother, which is disappointing. I don't really know to comment on that except to say that it is disappointing but it is still a kind of love.

A.C.: The man-woman relationships that you explore in your book seldom turn out to be nurturing.

C.G.: I know, I know. I wasn't trying to make any kind of statement about human relationships but it does come out, obviously. I'm sure it reflects to some degree my own pessimistic sense about potential relationships. But I think I feel a little differently now that I have a daughter. I always thought that I would have a daughter but that I would be alone. That I have a great husband is an amazing surprise to me. It's not something that I expected.

A.C.: Lourdes is a striking character. The Revolution deprives her of her house, she is degraded and finally raped. The loss is so great that she moves to New York, cuts her links with Cuba and becomes an angry person who needs to control everybody and everything.

C.G.: I think that's fairly accurate. It was very hard for me to be fair with Lourdes. I think that there are a lot of 'Lourdeses' in the Cuban community. Women with that kind of rigidity, that almost blinding hatred for communist Cuba, that black-and-white mentality. There is no room for ambivalence in her; in fact, ambiguity makes her incredibly uncomfortable. There is a need to control. The last time she was not in control, she was raped. It drives her crazy that her daughter Pilar doesn't just fall in line. As much as she loves her, she can't control her.

Pilar maintains herself before her mother. She does not lose integrity, she does not allow herself to be humiliated by someone as controlling as Lourdes is. This is why they clash. Pilar is intolerant of intolerance. She's just as strong as Lourdes.

A.C.: When Pilar goes to Cuba, she finds part of her roots there.

C.G.: Yes. I think that her reaction is a way to resist the black and white mentality of her mother. She doesn't have to choose in a way; things can be relative and somewhat ambiguous and you can be torn by two places, by two countries at once and yet feel more drawn to one. This does not mean that you are rejecting the other. Pilar can encompass that kind of ambiguity and a certain amount of double longing. It's something her mother would be incapable of doing.

A.C.: Celia's daughter, Felicia, looks to the supernatural to find wisdom and information. Can you talk about your vision of the supernatural?

C.G.: This was not anything central to my life. I didn't grow up with it. In fact, Catholic upperclass Cubans dismiss it and look down on it as mumbo-jumbo. So, for me, this whole spiritualism that is so much part of Cuban life in all socioeconomic classes was a process of discovery. I personally don't have any faith, but I am intrigued by ritual and religion.

A.C.: Since Felicia's death is connected to one of the rituals, do you consider this spiritualism dangerous?

C.G.: It's true that Felicia dies but I do not think her death is due to malevolent forces within the religion. I felt that, in a way, death had nothing to do with religion. But religion couldn't save her either. I do think that religion is a dangerous force in the world.

A.C.: Felicia is not interested in the Revolution but her daughters want to become successful women.