[Gender and Memory in Cristina García's *The Agüero Sisters*]

Anna Mertová

University of Ostrava,
Ostrava, Czech Republic

[Abstract] *This paper discusses Cristina García's 1997 novel The Agüero Sisters. Its aim is to outline some of the topics present in the novel through the lens of gender, and to contribute to an awareness of Hispanic American literature. Following a brief introduction, the paper discusses masculinity and femininity as present in the novel. Here the paper focuses on two motifs – the position of the human body in the novel, and memory; a link between these two motifs is suggested. Memory is central to the novel, and it appears in different variations throughout the text – nostalgia, intergenerational memory, or memory as an inherently unreliable process. While this paper does not exhaust the topic of memory, it attempts to point out a possible direction for further discussion.*

[Keywords] *Cristina García; The Agüero Sisters; Cuban American literature; ethnic literature; gender; memory; nostalgia*

[1] Introduction

The Agüero Sisters (1997) is Cristina García's second published novel, and from the thematic point of view it could be considered a continuation of her first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992). Both novels focus on women and their lives, exploring how societal factors affect them, and both of them discuss memory, its subjectivity, and (in relation to this aspect) nostalgia. For this reason, this paper focuses primarily on *The Agüero Sisters*, it also makes some references to *Dreaming in Cuban*, and so at least a surface-level awareness of the novel is recommended.

The novel *The Agüero Sisters*, much like *Dreaming in Cuban*, follows several members of the same family as they navigate their own personal lives and slowly reveal the family's complex and often tragic history. Of the rather extensive cast, two characters are given the most attention within the narrative – the sisters Constancia and Reina Agüero. Constancia left her home country soon after the revolution of 1959 and settled in New York, whereas the younger Reina stayed in Cuba. The sisters have been estranged since childhood as a result of their parents' strained relationship, and they only grew further apart after their mother's mysterious death. After a workplace accident, Reina leaves Cuba to stay with her sister, and they are forced to confront their past in order to achieve healing and to reach a reconciliation not only with each other, but also with their family's history.

[2] The 1.5 Generation, Cristina García, and Cubans in Miami

García's generation holds a unique position with regard to the Cuban American experience. Firmat, inspired by research undertaken by the sociologist Rubén Rumbaut, refers to this generation as the 1.5 Generation – a generation of Cuban Americans who migrated from Cuba into the US as children and as a result do not feel fully at home in either culture. This is not necessarily viewed as a problem; Firmat himself suggests that their role is that of cultural translators, and as such they have their own important place in Cuban American culture (Firmat 3). This generation has produced no shortage of authors, and some of them have achieved mainstream commercial success (Kanellos 184), for example Pablo Medina, María del Carmen Boza, or Roberto Fernández, to name just three. It can be said that their works show a tendency to be highly subjective, and contain autobiographical features. Certain topics – including the attempt to navigate both cultures, nostalgia, the search for an identity of one's own (Alvarez-Borland 463) – frequently reappear in the texts created by the representatives of this generation, albeit with varying intensity.

This stems partly from the specifics of the Cuban American community as a whole. While Cuban Americans have been praised for the speed at which they became settled in the US, and for their economic success, there are still some tensions present within the group, and this is reflected in García's novels. It is important to keep in mind that

although some features may be shared, Cuban immigrants do not represent a monolith. Alberts makes a distinction between four groups – the first wave being the so-called Golden Exiles, who laid the foundations for the future arrivals. Generally well-educated, often with previous connections in the US, the Golden Exiles were able to adapt quickly and successfully, earning themselves the reputation of a “model minority”. Constancia and her husband Heberto are both members of this group. Following the Golden Exiles were the immigrants who made their way to the US via the Camarioca Boatlift and the Freedom Flights. Priority was offered to those Cubans who already had connections in the US. The already established Cuban American community showed great solidarity to the new arrivals, and aided them in their integration. Alberts comments that the solidarity wavered somewhat with the arrival of the Marielitos, because Castro used the Mariel boatlift as a way to remove undesirable elements from Cuba; many Marielitos were recruited from Cuban jails and mental institutions (Alberts 237). Their socioeconomic level and their education did not generally meet the expectations set by the Golden Exiles. The last group, the Balseros, was fairly small, and the attitude towards them was generally positive. All of this, of course, is mostly applicable only to adults. García herself, as stated previously, was one of the one-and-a-halfers, and one-and-a-halfers feature heavily in her novels, as do the Golden Exiles from the generation of her parents. García's generation in particular felt a certain degree of pressure from other Cuban immigrants to be uncritically supportive of the US and capitalism, a pressure that is particularly palpable in *Dreaming in Cuban*. The novel *The Agüero Sisters* focuses rather on another recurrent problem in the Cuban American community, and that is the attitude of the Cuban community in Miami to exile. García witnessed that for many people, Cuba became a partly mythical country, a kind of a lost paradise. Arguably, these sentiments are not entirely unusual in ethnic literatures as a whole; however, it appears that they are true of Cubans in Miami to an unusual degree, and some doubt exists as to how factually true some immigrant accounts of pre-revolution Cuba were (Rieff 55). It has been suggested that many Cuban immigrants in Miami consider their residence away from Cuba a temporary inconvenience, rather than a permanent change (Esplin 85). Among Cuban Americans living in other parts of the US, this attitude seems to be present to a lesser degree. There is always, naturally, room for exceptions, and it is more than likely that these differences might disappear over time; however, at the time of writing the division was significant enough to warrant commentary in *The Agüero Sisters*.

The elder sister, Constancia, spends most of her life in the US in New York with her husband Heberto, until he retires and insists that they move to Miami. Constancia is somewhat reluctant to move; she would rather avoid Heberto's brother Gonzalo, her first husband, but she also feels alienated from other Cubans living there:

She knows she isn't one of them, that her life outside Miami will always mark her as a foreigner. The problem, Constancia decided, is that the *cubanas* here can't make comfortable assumptions about her. [...] Another time, Constancia mentioned she'd voted Democratic (just once, for Jimmy Carter), and the room fell starkly silent. How could she possibly define herself by such unambiguous terms? Constancia doesn't consider

herself an exile in the same way as many of the Cubans here. In fact, she shuns their habit of fierce nostalgia, their trafficking in the past like exaggerating peddlers. [...] Of course, she wouldn't dare say this aloud in Miami and expect to survive. (45–6)

When her sister Reina leaves Cuba to stay with her sister, she is quietly expected by other people in Miami to denounce Cuba, the revolution and Castro, something Reina has no intention of doing. When she accidentally refers to a shop assistant as a comrade, a fight nearly breaks out. In a way, Constanica and Reina's experiences in Miami are similar, even though they came to them from different starting points. García revisits and elaborates some of the criticism already present in *Dreaming in Cuban*, commenting on the pressure from within the community to conform to expectations of how an exile should act.

Constancia finds in Miami the Cuba that no longer exists (if indeed it ever did exist). Everything down to the produce in the markets reminds her of her native country, and it seems that the "habit of fierce nostalgia" (45–6) begins to affect both her and her husband, albeit in distinct ways.

[3] Masculine amnesia

While Constanica becomes haunted by her mother's face, Constanica's first and second husband both become obsessed with the idea of invading Cuba – Gonzalo himself participated in the Bay of Pigs Invasion, during which he was injured, and he still bears the scars left by the injuries as a badge of honour. Now that he is too old to participate in any significant operations of this kind personally, and in spite of (or maybe because of) his terminal illness, Gonzalo dedicates his time to planning another invasion of Cuba, and his zeal proves to be infectious. Constanica is left to watch as her otherwise seemingly practical and business-minded husband (under the influence of his charismatic brother) becomes obsessed with the idea of an invasion. What is interesting is that the brothers' brand of nostalgia is closely bound up with masculinity and the *machismo* that is prevalent in Latin American communities. Although *machismo* is mostly understood to be a concept related to gender, De La Torre points out that *machismo* is a construction that takes into account not only gender, but also race, class, and sexuality (213). In the light of this, the divide in Cuban society is not as much between men and women as it is between the *macho* and the *non-macho*, which allows the *macho* man to assume superiority over those they perceive as the Other, which may include men of other ethnicities or sexual orientations.

Heberto, who is considered to be the less adventurous and courageous – the less macho – of the two brothers, joins Gonzalo's underground exile group, La Brigada Caimán, which is planning to invade Cuba and topple Castro. It appears, however, that Heberto's involvement does not stem from any particularly strong political feeling (politics play only a minor role in the novel, especially compared to *Dreaming in Cuban*) as much as it does from his own desire to prove himself as a man:

Heberto trudges on, taken with a sense of his own new significance. [...] He is here now, isn't he? Here with men of action, helmets afire. Here with hundreds of militant

ordained men. The stench for miles a privilege of endurance. He is here, no? Not any previous elsewhere. Not rocking in his boat, pathetic and pleading with the moon. [...] After all, Heberto thinks sourly, what has safety brought him but more fruitless safety? (123–4)

This shift in his character possibly stems from his feeling of having been emasculated by Constanca and their exile, and from his feelings of inadequacy when compared to his brother, who is by far the more traditionally *macho* man of the two. In his doomed attempt to invade Cuba with a group of men like him, he tries to act out some kind of heroic fantasy that seems more erotic than patriotic:

Invasion. The word makes Heberto hard as a young man. He can feel it. The tight ridge of expectation in his groin. His contracting *cojones* [testicles, vulgar, my note], the same ones his father accused him of not having. Heberto puts his hand over his heart and imagines it roaring with life. Tireless, inexhaustible. Vibrant with a fugitive rhythm. For him, there'll be no more waiting on the sidelines in this shabby empire of exile. Soon he'll confront himself in the ultimate exaltation – focused, vehement, without memory. Nothing less will satisfy him. (124)

In the end, he dies during the attempted invasion, or soon after.

That one of Heberto's aims is to be without memory is somewhat symptomatic of the characters in this novel – the text is marked with their struggle to reach some kind of reconciliation with their past. Esplin notes that this rejection of the past is especially notable in the character of Silvestre, the son of Constanca and Gonzalo, who murders his biological father, thus symbolically erasing his past (Esplin 91). This is a plausible reading, given that Silvestre rejects things that tie him back to his past, such as his birth name – but there is also another layer to Silvestre's situation. For Silvestre, as a queer man, the *machismo* prevalent amongst Cubans may be a source of internal conflict. To be a queer man often entails the struggle of being perceived as less masculine, especially in a hyper-masculine society. In addition, he was made to leave Cuba during Operation Peter Pan when he was very young, and as a one-and-a-halfer he felt alienated from Cuban culture. This is combined with the fact that Silvestre's biological father rejected him, thus functioning as a symbol of his alienation from his own personal history. To negotiate one's identity against cultural expectations can be difficult, and so it is possible that his rejection of his Cuban heritage is a way of protecting himself. Interestingly, Silvestre, like Constanca, seems to struggle with the idea of his future, and with the notion of old age as well – Constanca creates her own concoctions to maintain a youthful appearance, and later on she is magically transformed into her mother, who died young; Silvestre murders his aging, physically frail father, whose body is a tangible reminder of Silvestre's own mortality:

He pulls down the sheet tucked under Gonzalo's armpits and stares at the bone heap of his father's body. The belly is hard and grotesquely swollen, the legs withered and rivered with veins. [...] Silvestre raises the hem of his father's gown until everything is

visible. So this is his origin, his inheritance. His first resurrection. These hairy orbs, so huge and sagging. This limp little snout, still pink as a boy's. So this, too, is his future. (245)

Silvestre leaves the country immediately after the murder. Aside from him, all major male characters in *The Agüero Sisters* end up dead. A similar pattern may be observed in *Dreaming in Cuban*. Whether this is because García views women as more resilient and adaptable, or whether there is an entirely different reason, remains somewhat unclear.

As pointed out by Sáez in her essay about *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cuba in García's writing is no longer a space suitable for the living. "Only the dead, like Jorge, Celia's husband, return to Cuba to stay. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cuba is ultimately a dead space due to the island's relationship to history, time, and globalization via the Revolution." (Sáez 142). The same applies to *The Agüero Sisters*. Heberto and Gonzalo (whose intention was to reclaim Cuba) both die, Ignacio (who chose to stay) commits suicide, and Blanca (who was unable to leave although she wanted to) is murdered. At the other end of the spectrum, Reina left Cuba following a near-death experience, and not only rebuilt her life, but also became pregnant, whereas Constanica returned for a short visit following the death of her uncle (who in part raised her) to retrieve a message from the dead. Much like in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Constanica's brief return to Cuba is presented as a necessary step in her healing process, but with the knowledge that her stay will not be permanent. In the light of this, it may be concluded that the deaths of the men in *The Agüero Sisters* represent the decay of the patriarchal system, as well as the end of an era.

[4] Lives of women

García appears to be more concerned with the lives of women in general, possibly because their lives are still largely absent from official histories. It is also because García, growing up in a Cuban American community, always felt a certain dissonance between public *machismo* and generally female-dominated households (Santos 209). That is not to say that men do not have any impact on the narrative – rather, they are given less attention than the women of the story, with the exception of Ignacio Agüero, the sisters' father. As García admitted in an interview with Jorge Santos: "fathers have always felt more remote and mysterious to me" (209). It does not then come as a surprise that even though the novel includes several chapters told from Ignacio's point of view, his version of the events cannot be accepted at face value.

All in all, it is mostly the relationships between women that are a point of interest for García, both in *Dreaming in Cuban* and in *The Agüero Sisters*. It could almost be argued that the amount of space given to Ignacio's texts spread over the course of the novel is somewhat unusual in this regard. Ignacio is allowed to speak through fragments of his diary, a form of confession, in which he records his life and work in an attempt to provide a background to the murder of his wife and the events leading to his suicide. Even his confession, however, contains certain confusing details and attempts at misdirection, and behind the surface of an objective scientist there stands a deeply unreliable narrator.

In contrast, Blanca Agüero, Ignacio's wife, can be characterized by two attributes – her beauty and her mysteriousness. Although the impact of her death still affects her daughters and their relationships decades later, she herself is the one character who is never allowed to speak for herself, and all that is known about her comes from second-hand accounts that cannot be deemed completely accurate. Although not much can be said about her as a person with any certainty, the characters who knew her all seem to project some idea of her onto their memories. In this regard, Blanca Agüero becomes a semi-mythical character in their lives, yet her humanity is thereby denied. She is, in fact, the embodiment of the Other. She is beautiful, she is mysterious, she is not Ignacio's equal, and those around her, especially Ignacio, wish to possess her. That said, this image of her is carefully constructed in the narrative by Ignacio – who, as Blanca's killer, has his own reasons for emphasizing Blanca's more "inhuman" qualities, whether real or perceived.

Through the character of Blanca it is also shown that Cuban problems and oppression did not start with Castro's revolution, or even with Batista's oppressive regime that preceded it; for approximately half of the Cuban population, women, gender inequality impinged on their freedom and personal happiness regardless of the current political situation:

The day we returned from her medical examination, Blanca insisted that I pay her a salary. I had stopped remunerating her since our marriage because, frankly, I no longer saw the need. I admit I am not what one might call an emancipated man. Although it is true that my parents raised me with progressive ideas and Mamá taught music all her life, I had certain expectations for my wife. Not only did I refuse to pay Blanca; I prohibited her from seeking other employment. Blanca disregarded my edict outright. [...] No one would hire Blanca even with her stellar qualifications. Each time she appeared for an interview, her stomach tightly bound to conceal her condition, the story was the same: If only you were a man... Our wives would not stand for it... Cuba, my dear, is not America. (225-6)

Not even Ignacio, who proclaimed to love her, treated his wife as his equal, which shows how patriarchy affects not only political life, but also the personal lives of women. A brilliant scientist in her own right, Blanca Agüero was still seen, at best, as her husband's unpaid assistant, and her marriage to Ignacio forced her into the role of a wife and a mother, which started a chain of events that became the source of many anxieties for her adult children.

Although her daughters are not shown to suffer from the same level of gender inequality, they are still affected by the mere fact that their mother did suffer from it, simply because Blanca lived in a deeply patriarchal society and as such was at the mercy of the men in her life. Reina especially still feels the loss of her mother quite deeply, and when confronted with the fact that her sister is now the mirror image of Blanca, she is so enthralled by the vision that she would prefer it if her sister never spoke or did anything that might endanger the image of their mother in front of her. At another point in the

text, she even goes as far as to ask her niece, Constancia's daughter, to breastfeed her.

Ignacio's reason for the eventual murder is never fully revealed, but it is quite plausible that a part of Ignacio's motive was his need to understand Blanca fully and thus finally possess her. As a naturalist of that era, however, the only way he knew to study a fascinating specimen was to kill it first. This reading is supported by the many scenes in which Ignacio recounts his previous hunting expeditions, including the one during which he proposed to Blanca, and the one during which he murdered her, and the presence of his stuffed specimen, sometimes juxtaposed with the photograph of Blanca, in Constancia's home. This plot point, however, resists a definitive interpretation. García herself admits (García 307) that it is intentionally left open to various possible readings, and she suggests there was not one single reason behind the crime.

What can be said is that in this storyline, to be the Other is to be silenced. The process of becoming, or rather, the process of creating the Other takes place on two levels – there is the personal level, the entrapment in an unequal marriage with all that it entails, and the larger, systemic level, here represented by potential employers and their reasons for rejecting Blanca despite her qualifications and desire to earn her own money, which would then afford her a degree of independence. The absence of Blanca's voice in the narrative is then in some ways more eloquent than Ignacio's account of their life together.

[5] The *Cubana* body

If Blanca Agüero is the embodiment of the Other, it does not necessarily come as a surprise that she is presented in the text as a very traditionally feminine woman. Her daughters, too, can be considered to be highly feminine, but their femininity exhibits itself in different ways, which only emphasizes the differences between their personalities and ways of thinking. Reina Agüero, the younger daughter, is extremely sensuous, and her relationship with her body and with sex is fairly straightforward and uncomplicated. Her independence, confidence and sensuality contrast with Constancia, who seems uptight and self-conscious in comparison:

Reina is perplexed by the obsession women in Miami have for the insignificant details of their bodies, by their self-defeating crusades. She was appalled when Constancia took her to the Dade County shopping mall last Sunday. All those hipless, breastless mannequins, up to their scrawny necks in silk. Don't women understand that their peculiarities are what endear them to men? Rarely do the most conventionally beautiful women have the greatest hold over their mates. Pepín, who adored Reina but remained an inveterate woman watcher over the years, admitted that he favored no particular female features. *Cada mujer tiene algo*, he liked to say. Every woman has something. The best lovers, Reina knows from experience, approach women this way. [...] "Well, you're probably the only woman on earth who actually likes the way she looks!" Constancia snaps, stirring the thigh lotion with a steady rhythm of her wooden spoon. "Definitely bad for business!" (161-2)

This moment in the novel both showcases Reina's view of herself, and also touches on another aspect of *The Agüero Sisters* that warrants discussion. As mentioned previously, Constanica struggles with the idea of aging, possibly made worse by the fact that her mother, father, and grandmothers died relatively young. This is stated in the text quite explicitly: "It occurred to her that her parents had died long before they were old. How then, could she possibly know how to grow old herself?" (27)

She works in the cosmetic industry – initially, she is an extremely successful salesperson for an unnamed makeup company, and immediately upon her move to Miami she is offered the position of a district manager for Avon, another make-up and skincare company, which she declines. Instead, she launches her own company, *Cuerpo de Cuba* (Cuban Body, Body from Cuba). This coincides with one of the more overtly magical realist events in *The Agüero Sisters*, which was alluded to earlier – Constanica wakes up to discover that she has become the spitting image of her dead mother. This is the second time that such a transformation has happened, the first being shortly after her mother's funeral. The funeral triggered physical changes in all members of the Agüero family – Reina's hands suddenly grew to be seemingly too large for her body, the way they were when she was first born, while their father's thinning hair started growing back, and his appearance reverted to that of a much younger man. Generally, the body and changes in the body play a role in the novel, and a connection could be made between the body and intergenerational memory.

Constancia's company starts producing skincare products named after different body parts, and the product seems to be popular especially amongst Cuban expat women. This, again, is reminiscent of *Dreaming in Cuban*. Sáez in her essay "The Global Baggage of Nostalgia in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*" discusses the effect of market forces on the reconnection with one's cultural and ethnic heritage. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, one of the major characters, Pilar, cannot access Cuba and instead has to make do with products related to her country of origin that are available for sale in the United States – music records, items used in *santería* and so on. Constanica's *Cuerpo de Cuba* may then be interpreted in a similar way – that is, as an attempt by Constanica and her customers to assuage their nostalgia by purchasing commodities:

Constancia intends to launch a full complement of face and body products for every glorious inch of Cuban womanhood: Cuello [neck] de Cuba, Senos [bosom] de Cuba, Codos [elbows] de Cuba, Muslos [thighs] de Cuba, and so on. Each item in her *Cuerpo de Cuba* line will embody the exalted image Cuban women have of themselves: as passionate, self-sacrificing, and deserving of every luxury. [...] Already, Constanica has received dozens of letters from women who confess that they feel more *cubana* after using her products, that they recall long-forgotten details of their childhoods in Sagua la Grande, Remedios, Media Luna, or Santa Cruz de la Sur. [...] Politics may have betrayed Constanica's customers, geography overlooked them, but *Cuerpo de Cuba* products still manage to touch the pink roots of their sadness. (131-2)

Again, this goes back to the relationship between body and memory.

As seen previously, Constancia considers women like her sister bad for business because her livelihood depends on the internal dissatisfaction of her customers. Her sister, in turn, finds Constancia's business purposeless, and does not completely approve of her style of marketing, which uses the image of their dead mother, Constancia's suddenly supernaturally youthful appearance, and their position as exiles. It is true that Constancia, whose own memories of Cuba are ambivalent at best, can be perceived as someone who exploits the trauma and nostalgia shared by many immigrant women for her own financial gain. At the same time, the establishment and subsequent growth of her company coincides with her own slow descent into nostalgia, which was likely triggered by her move to Miami. She starts wearing exclusively vintage clothing, and she is haunted both by her mother's face and the objects left for the sisters by their parents – a single photo of their mother, some stuffed specimen hunted by her father decades ago. With the return of her half-sister, she is forced to confront some of the discrepancies in her childhood memories, namely those related to Blanca's death.

[6] Repetition

Certain motifs appear and resurface at different points in the narrative, suggesting continuity through distinct generations of the Agüero family. As mentioned previously, the body is often the place where such repetitions occur. For instance, there is an injury at a specific place on Blanca's foot, which she sustained during her honeymoon. The same injury reappears – as an injury or a mark – on the bodies of her granddaughter and great-grandson.

To give another example, Reina sends her daughter Dulcita away as a child, even though being sent to a boarding school deeply hurt her when she was a child grieving for her mother. Dulcita feels similar resentment towards her mother because of this. Similarly, Constancia sent away the then extremely young Silvestre to the US, which damaged the bond between them, adding to the pattern of fractured parent-child relationships within the family.

The final scene between Constancia and Reina represents the culmination of this repetition, as they replay the scene of their mother's murder. Constancia, still unwilling to accept the idea that their mother was murdered by their father, and still wearing her mother's face, takes Blanca's place, and begins to argue with her sister while they are alone on *The Flowers of Exile*, their boat, far away from any possible witnesses. Reina, playing the part of their father, demonstrates, using one of the oars, that their mother could not have committed suicide, as it would be physically impossible for her to shoot herself in the neck with a fairly long shotgun. Although Constancia knows, and likely has known for a long time, she struggles to accept that her father could be a murderer; a fight breaks out, and she nearly drowns Reina. At the last possible moment, however, she saves her sister, and the cycle is disrupted.

The frequently recurring motifs evoke the Gothic tradition; when González argues for a reading of *The Agüero Sisters* through the Gothic lens, the repetition is one of her

arguments for reading the text as a Gothic novel rather than seeing it primarily as a magical realist text (González 118). This reading is also supported by the central mystery that manifests itself through Constancia's transformation into her mother, a manifestation that haunts her, and produces shock and fear that has more to do with the Gothic tradition than the magical realist mode.

In light of the cyclical nature of the novel, it is telling that the text begins and ends with the same event, albeit told from two slightly different perspectives. The event is, of course, Blanca's murder, first told from the omniscient third person point of view that is present throughout most of the novel (save for selected chapters), and then from the point of view of Ignacio. While both texts are nearly identical in content, there are certain details that call into question the reliability of the parts of the narrative as presented by Ignacio. See: "Ignacio Agüero waited until nightfall, watched and waited until a lone red-tailed hawk soared above them in the sky. Then he carried his wife seventeen miles to the nearest village and began to tell his lies" (5). Then, the same event as presented by Ignacio: "The day stole past in an hour. [...] All afternoon the Zapata clicked and rustled, clicked and rustled its fatal chorus, until a lone red-tailed hawk soared above us. I held my Blanquita. I held her. A mournful, bitter pleasure. Then, in the broken violet light of dusk, I carried her seventeen miles to the nearest village and *reluctantly* began to tell my lies" (300; emphasis added). It can be assumed that Ignacio's confession was written by him some time after the fact and before he committed suicide, and there is some possibility that he intended his confession to be read at some point in the future by his daughter. That a naturalist who devoted his life to the study of Cuban species would take notice of the birds flying overhead does not come as a surprise, but his writing, the final text in particular, reads like the words of a man trying to justify his actions – both to the reader and to himself. In this way, Ignacio can still attempt to manipulate the reader even after his death. The confession remained buried in Cuba to be retrieved by Constancia at the end of the novel.

[7] Conclusion

In *The Agüero Sisters*, García further develops some of the topics previously addressed in *Dreaming in Cuban*, and there is no shortage of parallels that could be drawn between the two novels. One noticeable difference is a shift away from politics in favour of a closer focus on gender-related topics, whereas the interest in the lives of women, complex family structures, and the exile experience remains the same.

The Agüero Sisters explores the effects of gender-based expectations on men and women, and the unique challenges associated with them. On one hand there is the *machismo* that leads to the untimely deaths of both of Constancia's husbands, and on the other there is the systemic silencing and Othering of women throughout history, which is exemplified in the character of Blanca Agüero.

A second major point for discussion is the position of the human body within the narrative. The body in *The Agüero Sisters* is both haunted and haunting. While far from

exhaustive in its scope, this paper has suggested a relationship between the body and memory; the main characters of the novel undergo physical changes in response to the trauma brought about by Blanca's violent death, and the appearance of certain physical traits, such as scars or birthmarks, is nearly always related to the previous generations of the Agüero family. The physical transformation of Constancia is then related to the secret of her mother's alleged suicide, forcing her to re-evaluate her father's version of the events.

In the end, although the novel *The Agüero Sisters* presents various ways of dealing with past trauma, it seems that the only viable and sustainable options for García involve confrontation with the past, and restoration of family ties where possible. Living in the past, and excessive nostalgia, are presented as unproductive and possibly lethal. This is consistent with the ideas presented in *Dreaming in Cuban* – despite the shift away from politics, and despite the heightened interest in the generations of Cuban Americans preceding the one-and-a-halfers.

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[Address]

Department of English and American Studies
Faculty of Arts
University of Ostrava
Reální 5
701 03 OSTRAVA
Czech Republic
anna.mertova@osu.cz

Anna Mertová is a second-year PhD student at the University of Ostrava. Her Master's thesis dealt with Angela Carter's short story collection The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories from a feminist perspective. Her current research investigates the question of identity in the novels of Cristina García and Isabel Allende with emphasis on gender, class and ethnicity.