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## The Gothic in Cristina García's *The Agüero Sisters*

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The American Gothic tradition includes literature in the United States that exhibits fantastic or otherworldly qualities. More often than not, however, when these traits appear in US Latina/o fiction, the literary market categorizes it as magical realism.<sup>1</sup> Latin American fiction of the 1960s including that written by Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa popularized magical realism. Authors associated with “The Boom,” as it was called due to the explosion of Latin American literature of this era, incorporated supernatural elements and postmodern time in their work and made magical realism synonymous with Latin American fiction. Publishers and critics attempted to associate US Latina/o fiction with Boom literature in order to secure entrance and acceptance for US Latina/o literature in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, as Karen Christian notes, “in an attempt to identify the ‘essence of US Latina/o fiction, critics may fail to note the differences in the ways Boom aesthetics are deployed, or even the fact that by no means all Latina/o writing has a magical realist bent” (128). Magical realism implies an exoticism within the text as readers and other characters within the tale accept moments that evoke the marvelous or supernatural as part of the characters’ cultural belief systems. For example, Cristina García’s first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), presents ghosts as a natural part of the characters’ worlds. On the other hand, García’s second novel, *The Agüero Sisters* (1997), contains characters who experience magical events that produce disbelief, fear, and distress. In addition to the magical realism in García’s texts, we must also pay attention to the Gothic, the genre dedicated to fear.

Gothic literature often relies on an element of fear or terror associated with uncanny repetition or a return of the repressed. In *The Agüero Sisters*, Constanica Agüero wakes one morning to see her murdered mother's face in the mirror instead of her own. Given that she has spent her life repressing the truth about her mother's death, Constanica is horrified. Convinced she is not dreaming or hallucinating, she spends the rest of the novel worried that she will disappear completely. García's novel also alludes to classic British and American gothic tales. For instance, Reina Agüero, who accepts strange events more easily than does her sister Constanica, exhibits many parallels to the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818): her body must be repaired using skin grafts from a variety of people alive and dead, and throughout the novel she longs for a maternal relationship. The characterization of the murdered mother, Blanca, resembles that of the protagonist in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). Examples include Blanca's thwarted desire for a career and a postpartum depression that her husband, Ignacio, treats with electric-shock therapy. Finally, *The Agüero Sisters'* femicidal plot links it to the central concerns of contemporary female Gothic tales.<sup>2</sup> García incorporates the Gothic into her story by evoking fear, the uncanny, and these gothic tales. Magical realist moments exist in this text, but identifying the gothic modes alongside them attends to the fluid and transcultural nature of *The Agüero Sisters*. Reading this text as an amalgam of magical realism and the Gothic also expands the identification and discussion of American gothic texts, especially when engaging multi-ethnic literature in the US.

To introduce *The Agüero Sisters* as part of an American gothic literary tradition, it is necessary to clarify the nuanced definitions of the Gothic and magical realism. The term magical realism originated in Germany to classify an art form that lay somewhere between expressionism and realism. Writers in Latin America and the Caribbean applied the term to evoke the

essentially magical within American culture.<sup>3</sup> Since then, the generic classification produces the expectation that strange things will occur, but that these are somehow natural to the characters and/or community to which the novel pertains. Contemporary theorists of magical realism situate it within a legacy of Romanticism and the Gothic. More specifically, Lois Parkinson Zamora sees a lineage from nineteenth-century Romanticism and American gothic fiction to contemporary iterations of magical realism. Citing Borges's fascination with US Romanticism, Zamora "would extend (as Borges suggests) the discussion of US counterrealism from Hawthorne to Faulkner, add Flannery O'Connor, and compare the grotesque and Gothic conventions in their work to analogous conventions in contemporary Latin American magical realism" (518). Despite these links, Zamora identifies significant differences between these genres:

In tone, for example, the comic ebullience and sheer inventive energy of Latin American magical realism differs markedly from the darker, even lugubrious tone . . . of US romance. Further differences would be found in the narrative conventions of romance drawn directly from eighteenth-century Gothic fiction; the more explicit political critique of magical realism against the metaphysical categories of romance; the greater emphasis in romance on natural beauty that may seduce and betray; and so on. (518-19)

The distinctions Zamora lists illustrate the differences between magical realism and the Gothic in García's work. While moments of "comic ebullience" appear in *The Agüero Sisters*, García establishes a darker tone in the central murder and the sister's transformations. Such bodily violence draws our attention to a gothic legacy.

Zamora's nuanced descriptions of magical realism and its relationship to American Romanticism and the Gothic blur national and generic demarcations. In fact, she emphasizes the processes of transculturation that influence not only US Latina/o works but also much of world literature. Based on Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's theory, transculturation has to do with the coming together of two distinct culturally symbolic elements, such as sugar (representing Europe) and tobacco (representing Cuba), to produce another culture. Unlike instances of hybridity, the resulting product is not a stable entity but a fluid and changing relationship functioning much like a musical counterpoint. Silvia Spitta explains: "Transculturation can thus be understood as the complex processes of adjustment and re-creation—cultural, literary, linguistic, and personal—that allow for new, vital, and viable configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures and the violence of colonial and neo-colonial appropriations" (2). Zamora's description of magical realism as a whole reflects this transculturation, as she sees current iterations of American magical realism coming from clashes between Latin American and US literatures and reading. Texts such as *The Agüero Sisters* demonstrate the act of creating "new, vital, and viable configurations" from the "clash" of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic, American Gothic, the female Gothic and Latin American magical realism within depictions of a Cuban and Cuban American experience. Discussing *The Agüero Sisters* as a form of transculturation captures García's creative force and offers more literary lenses through which to read this text.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the influences of the marketplace often limit the discussion of US Latina/o fiction to one category: magical realism. This essay fills in some of the gaps to understand more completely the novel's transcultural gothic nature.

The literary marketplace perpetuates the general association between US Latina/o fiction and magical realism. Publishers, for instance, are interested in creating an association with internationally known Latin American writers such as García Márquez. While this may be a useful way to sell books, this persistent connection in the production and study of US Latina/o literature also has disadvantages. As Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez suggests:

The critical affiliation of Chicano/a and Latino/a books to magical realism and to García Márquez's wake has become such a major burden for Chicano/a and Latino/a literature that it would give to a reader only exposed to mass-marketed texts the false impression that all valuable literature produced by Latinos/as is nothing but a continuation or imitation of that particular writer's work. (126)

Martín-Rodríguez uses García's *Dreaming in Cuban* as an example of this marketing strategy and suggests that this packaging ignores other literary influences, particularly those originating in the US (125).<sup>5</sup> This more closely aligns US Latina/o literature with Latin American works than with a US literary framework. Christian articulates another problem with automatically associating US Latina/o cultural production with magical realism and Latin American Boom fiction: "Some Latina/o writing does clearly copy Boom styles, and some critics do haphazardly label works as magical realist. Regardless of the source, these repeated 'performances' of magical realism at the level of writing have begun to give the impression that U.S. Latina/o literature has an invariable style and that Latina/o culture has a mystical essence" (124). The connection between magical realism and US Latina/o writing and culture thus also essentializes US Latina/os, implying that they are naturally magical. As Marta Caminero-Santangelo suggests, "In this critical and readerly propensity we can see another manifestation of the underlying assumption that a metaphorical umbilical cord connects U.S. Latinos to our Latin American

countries of origin” (140). These critical and mass-market associations make it difficult to read US Latina/o fiction outside of the realm of magical realism.<sup>6</sup> The automatic link between US Latina/o fiction and magical realism influences the reading of bizarre, uncanny, and violent occurrences as natural, despite possible textual clues indicating otherwise.

Genre labels affect expectations of a text, but so do identity politics. In relation to the latter, Antonio Viego suggests that society creates “dead subjects” by holding onto assumptions about particular groups and expecting corresponding qualities to manifest. He explains: “Racism depends on a reading of ethnic-racialized subjects that insists on their transparency; racism also banks on the faith and conceit that these subjects can be exhaustively and fully elucidated through a certain masterful operation of language” (6). Instead of thinking about the fluidity and continual creativity of a transcultural subject, these ethnic-racialized subjects are not allowed complexity; they are pinned down by the stereotypes and labels associated with their group(s). The creation of dead subjects can also occur in the reading process. For instance, if readers believe Cuban men are inherently violent or misogynist, they may not be surprised when Ignacio Agüero murders his wife early in García’s novel. In this scenario, Ignacio is made a dead subject because he acts according to the reader’s perception of Cuban male behavior. Moreover, automatic associations of García’s text with magical realism essentializes the author and neutralizes any strange occurrences in her writing. These readings further create a dead subject out of García because her use of magic, violence, and fear is perceived as directly relating to her Cubanness or her *Latinidad* manifesting in the text. Noticing a gothic mode in García’s novel helps us recognize the Latin American, Western European, and US American literary traditions in this work. In short, attention to creative transculturation revives García’s text, creating an “undead” subject for the reader and expanding interpretive possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

A deeper look at the contemporary definitions of magical realism and the various forms of the Gothic as a genre or literary mode illustrates García's transcultural practice. Wendy B. Faris lists the five primary characteristics of magical realism. First, "The text contains an 'irreducible element' of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them" (167). Second, "Descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world—this is the realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory" (169). Third, "The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events—and hence experiences some unsettling doubts" (171). Fourth, "We experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds" (172). Finally, Faris explains, "These fictions question received ideas about time, space, and identity" (173). She also argues that "magical realism, wherever it may flourish and in whatever style, contributes significantly to postmodernism" (166). She links the larger characteristics of magical realism to their corresponding postmodern qualities, such as metafictional dimensions (175), repetition as a narrative principle (177), and a carnivalesque spirit (184). These characteristics resonate with conventions of the Gothic and of the fantastic as a literary genre, which Tzvetan Todorov defines as "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). To reiterate Zamora's point about tonal difference, magical realism lacks the emphasis on the violence and horror accomplished by fantastic characteristics in gothic fiction.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick traces the conventions of British gothic novels of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including "an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society . . . the trembling sensibility of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover . . . the tyrannical older man with the piercing glance who is going to imprison and try to rape or murder



them” (8). The British tradition begins with texts such as Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Alan Lloyd-Smith notes that the American gothic tradition follows, but “[r]ather than a simple matter of imitation and adaptation, substituting the wilderness and the city for the subterranean rooms and corridors of the monastery, or the remote house for the castle, . . . certain unique cultural pressures led Americans to the Gothic as an expression of their very different conditions.” Lloyd-Smith continues that some of these pressures included “the frontier experience, with its inherent solitude and potential violence; the Puritan inheritance; fear of European subversion and anxieties about popular democracy which was then a new experiment; the relative absence of developed ‘society’; and very significantly, racial issues concerning both slavery and the Native Americans” (4). These concerns have led scholars to classify a substantial portion of American literature as fundamentally gothic.

That is not to say that American literature is formulaic. In fact, many contemporary literary critics identify gothic modes within many types of fiction. In an effort to explain the diffuse nature of the Gothic, Eric Savoy states: “This is precisely why an appreciation of the possibilities of ‘resonance’ is preferable to a totalizing or comprehensive critical enterprise. There are sites, there are moments. There is no All” (Introduction ix). Instead, Savoy and others point to thematic concerns that repeat, like tropes of haunting, violence, psychological disturbance, and the uncanny. Lloyd-Smith explains the psychoanalytic relevance of these gothic returns: “Gothic characters are often shown as struggling in a web of repetitions caused by their unawareness of their own unconscious drives and motives. And repetition figures in a Gothic understanding of trauma, and of Freud’s *nachträglichkeit*, when an experience is fully felt only in its echoing repetition at another time” (2).<sup>8</sup> Several characters in *The Agüero Sisters* embody gothic types.

For instance, the “web of repetition” found in Blanca’s return to her body symbolizes Constancia’s “unawareness of [her] own unconscious drives and motives.”

Constancia’s bodily metamorphosis has been read as an example of magical realism. Various theorists accept the magical or marvelous quality of Constancia’s transformation (Derrickson 496; Sandín 30; Socolovsky 163). However, from Constancia’s point of view, there is nothing natural or realistic about what happens. Constancia does not see this change as strange or miraculous, but rather as frightening: “As she passes her reflection in the hallway mirror, she barely stifles a scream. Her mother’s face hovers in the glass appearing as frightened as Constancia herself. She hurries to the closet and pulls out a stack of bed-sheets, then drapes every mirror in the house with expanses of pastel linens” (106). This response illustrates one of the key differences between haunting in magical realism and in the Gothic, as Lucie Armitt suggests: “In magical realism ghosts are simply ‘there’, usually giving testimony to the voices of those whom society has silenced or rendered ‘disappeared’, but rarely the primary focus of the mystery of a text. In the Gothic the phantom is the central source, manifesting a secret that disturbs, even chills” (315). Armitt’s explanation of the gothic ghost’s function applies to *The Agüero Sisters*. After her body changes, Constancia attempts to exorcise her mother and thus continue to repress the truth—that her father Ignacio murdered Blanca. Blanca’s death is the novel’s central unsettling secret and mystery.

At the point of her transformation, Constancia hesitates about whether or not her body has literally changed or is a hallucination or a supernatural occurrence. Lyn Di Iorio Sandín states, “But García’s postmodernist magical realism is so ambiguous that characters, narrator, and reader are left with doubts” (30). Todorov writes that the fantastic requires or produces an uncertainty between the real or imaginary that disappears once a decision is made by the

narrator/character or reader (25; 42). The doubt Sandín describes corresponds to a reading of both magical realism and the Gothic wherein “the effect of the fantastic is certainly produced, but during only a portion of our reading” (Todorov 42). As Faris’s list of characteristics suggests, magical realism fits squarely within the fantastic, at least for a portion of the story. However, Constancia’s bodily formation is described through fear and anxiety, emphasizing the darker realm of American gothic fiction.

Constancia’s change begins with a dream that she undergoes plastic surgery. She wakes up to discover her body has changed into that of her mother’s (104). When she turns on the bathroom light, she “finds her face in disarray, moving all at once like a primitive creature. Her neck and temples itch furiously erupting with bumps each time she attempts to scratch. . . . Then it hits her with the force of a slap. This is her mother’s face” (105). The description of the mobile and fluid face reiterates the “undead” nature of identity. The magical moment signals Constancia’s transcultural nature as her mother’s face takes over her own in a clash of identities. The result, however, is not simply something new and celebratory. It is a monstrous amalgam of Constancia and Blanca, the mother she has always hated. This transformative moment clearly agitates her:

Constancia turns off the lights and nervously climbs back into bed. She senses a sudden coldness at her center, as if she were freezing from the inside out. Her blood is congealing, her nerves are a fine net of ice. For a moment, Constancia fears she may no longer exist. ‘A! E! I! O! U!’ she shouts, as loud as she can. If she can still recite her vowels, Constancia reasons, she couldn’t possibly be dead. (105)

This “coldness” and “freezing from the inside out” suggest a death of sorts, and Constancia worries that she may no longer exist. The idea of being completely overtaken by her mother

terrifies her. Blanca's haunting presence thus produces the "chill" that Armitt attributes to gothic phantoms (315). The element of the unknown, her understanding that Blanca's appearance is neither a miracle nor a scientific fact, presents Constancia with an "untimely transition" (García 27). Though she tries to control herself, Constancia falls into a state of panic as she attempts to confirm that she is not experiencing a hallucination. At one point, she "takes thirty-one photographs of herself. Then she sends the undeveloped film to her daughter in Hawaii" to confirm that in fact she has changed (107). Later, she drives to her yacht club and encounters "the regular clique of Cuban ladies . . . But the five ladies simply stare at her, blank with surprise" (108-09). Constancia also tries a Santero named Oscar Piñango, with whom she consults throughout the rest of the novel (110). Constancia's hesitation ends once she admits that she inhabits her mother's body. At this time, the fantastic moment changes to an uncanny haunting, another gothic trope that shows Constancia's fear.

Constancia fears death and dying. Before she goes to bed, she "assesses her progression toward death. Death troubles her deeply, but not nearly as much as the prospect of an untimely transition. If only she could choose the hour and manner of her passing, plan for it properly with the caterers, she could avoid any unseemly panic. She is the first to admit she has a low threshold for disorder" (27). Constancia's need for order and her desire to control the way she dies generate her horror when Blanca returns. Constancia has repressed the truth about her father's murder of her mother but when she wakes that fateful morning to have her body completely transformed, the repression fails. She also has refused to understand Ignacio's sexism and racism as reasons for the familial violence that haunts her. This repression illustrates her fears of impurity, change, and death.

The memory of Blanca's abandonment, Constancia's own acts of violence against her sister Reina, and her banishment to the family farm with her uncles agitate Constancia. Any mention of Blanca makes her nervous: "Each time Reina tried to talk about Mami, Constancia covered her ears and hummed the national anthem. Although they spent years together at boarding school . . . she and Constancia never discussed their mother again" (159). Constancia's horror can also be read through Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection as "something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (4). Kristeva suggests that fear holds its sway over us because of what we have rejected in the formation of identity. Blanca's re-emergence on Constancia's body resonates with Kristeva's description of the workings of symbolic dissolution:

I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and instead of what will be "me." Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. A possession previous to my advent: a being-there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody. Significance is indeed inherent in the human body.  
(10)

Looking at Blanca's apparition, Constancia is faced with "an Other who precedes and possesses" her. She finds herself in chaos, replaced by the mother she hates and bombarded by a past she previously refused to acknowledge. Constancia looks at herself in the mirror, but she sees the physical "ghost" of her mother, a familiar phantasm that resurrects her repressed resentment, compels her to think about the past, and eventually forces her to confront the truth about her

parents. Her terror at the prospect that the dead do not lie still marks her experience as particularly gothic.

Constancia's terror and Blanca's monstrous return are not the only gothic elements in this text. Ignacio's murder of Blanca follows the patters of Latin American melodrama and the female Gothic. Rebecca E. Biron writes of the femicidal or otherwise murderous tendencies within twentieth-century Latin American fiction. She suggests these texts are "narratives of besieged or threatened masculinity" where the "protagonists blatantly exercise male authority by killing women" (8). This certainly applies to García's depiction of Ignacio's insecurities. Adriana Méndez Rodenas proposes that Ignacio enacts vengeance on Blanca because she does not fulfill her conjugal duties and because of her double-infidelity (414). Ignacio's anxiety about Blanca's actions and his tenuous hold on patriarchal authority align with Helene Meyers's explanation of the female Gothic's treatment of femicidal plots. Meyers suggests that women writers now manipulate the Gothic in order to lay bare the operations of patriarchy: "Violence is not eroticized in these texts, nor is the mutilated female body fetishized. Yet, although these works carefully avoid blaming female victims or heroizing male victimizers, they also collectively demonstrate the multiple dangers of subscribing to myths of pure, powerless women and essentially sadistic men" (21). García complicates these gender myths in order to lay bare the violent effects of patriarchal anxieties. These details also parallel traditional female Gothic texts, particularly Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

The absence of Blanca's narrative voice reinforces the female Gothic and melodramatic elements in *The Agüero Sisters*. Ignacio's diary and Constancia's and Reina's conflicting memories provide the only descriptions of Blanca. Ignacio, a gifted naturalist specializing in categorizing Cuba's flora and fauna, writes his diary in a dispassionate, analytical, and scientific

style.<sup>9</sup> This fits Biron's description of the femicidal crime and detective fiction in Latin America: "These psychological tales, focalized through the murderer, his motivations, and the psychosocial effects of his actions, afford readers the position of scientist/analyst, observing the criminal from a safe and innocent objectivity. At the same time, they rely on reader identification with the murderer as he undergoes a variety of transformations in the course of the narrative" (18). Ignacio describes Blanca, herself a scientist, as a fascinating, though queer and uncanny character. He writes, "Her gifts had nothing to do with intelligence, which she displayed in impressive abundance, but were born out of qualities much less tangible. Instinct. Intuition. An uncanny sense for the aberrational. Blanca had no patience for hypotheses or dry pontification" (182). Ignacio's claims mitigate Blanca's scientific skills by relegating them to her supernatural, "uncanny" abilities. He continues to describe Blanca's scientific skills in mystical terms: "Blanca was most inclined toward chemistry then. The subject came naturally to her, and she seemed to have an odd, mimetic gift for inanimate substances. . . . It was as if matter spoke to Blanca directly, revealed to her its secrets. As a practical man, a man of science, I could not make sense of any of this" (182-83). Here Ignacio juxtaposes his position as "a man of science" to Blanca's "odd, mimetic gift for inanimate substances." Ignacio is rational, whereas Blanca is bewitching and strangely, "naturally" adept at teasing out matter's "secrets." Moreover, the force of his attraction implies an otherworldly nature that Ignacio cannot scientifically explain. Blanca is a gothic monster for Ignacio, an amalgamation of anxieties about race, women, and sexuality more generally.<sup>10</sup> His fear pertains to the destruction of patriarchal authority within the home and workplace, a central premise in contemporary female Gothic tales.

The language used in Ignacio's description of his marriage proposal foreshadows Blanca's monstrosity. He writes, "I smoothed my hair as best I could and, like a holy-day penitent, lurched

over to her on my knees. Her hands were soaked with blood. A queer apparition. I realize now I should have taken a closer look, that she had spelled out her grief to me to see. . . . I asked Blanca Mestre to marry me. And to my complete astonishment, she handed me her bloody knife and said ‘Yes.’” (188-89). This strange and obsessive courtship thus ends in a bizarre proposal, marked by groveling and blood. Ignacio regrets not having “taken a closer look,” indicating his eventual recognition of Blanca’s attempt to show him her misery. Ignacio’s use of “queer apparition” maintains his belief in Blanca as a fantastic ghost-like figure. Ignacio is even more disturbed by the fact that he must repeatedly surrender to the intelligent but enigmatic Blanca, an act that exceeds his rational comprehension of the world. He loves Blanca’s ghost-like otherness but does not understand her, and that unknown is his greatest fear.

Blanca’s unnaturalness also appears through Ignacio’s anxiety about her relationship to maternity. Ignacio expects her to behave like a natural mother and wife, despite his awareness that much in nature would challenge these expectations. He clings to false hopes about Blanca and her role as mother, explaining Blanca’s actions after giving birth in ways that continue to portray her as “mysterious” and unsettled: “After the baby was born, Blanca rocked Constancia for hours in the nursery, a deceptively cheerful room with a border of leaping frogs. Round the clock, Blanca rocked, unaware of the hour, the day, of my physical presence. . . . Except for the baby, everything around her was dead, a sad contagion” (228). Ignacio responds to what we would now classify as Blanca’s postpartum depression through “science” in ways reminiscent of the protagonist’s husband in Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.”<sup>11</sup> Several physicians “prescribed vitamin shots . . . metallic medicines to stir her blood . . . fastened electrodes to Blanca’s temples and gave her intermittent shocks.” When these methods do not work to shake Blanca from her silent obsession with Constancia, she flees; Ignacio writes, “Five months after



Constancia was born, Blanca disappeared. She left no note, no clue to where she would go, only our daughter shrieking blue in her crib” (229). Unlike the protagonist of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Blanca escapes her home and the treatments used to “cure” her disease.

Nevertheless, the cold way Ignacio describes Blanca’s actions and his description of his “daughter shrieking blue in her crib” also rhetorically constructs Blanca as cold and heartless—the mother who leaves her five-month-old daughter to die.

Ignacio also focuses on Blanca’s racial and sexual otherness to maintain his position as a rational scientist caught up in Blanca’s irrational and mystical power. While her name means “white” in Spanish, Ignacio focuses on Blanca’s mixed-race identity. For instance, Blanca’s brother informs Ignacio “that their mother was a mulatta descended, in part, from French colonists who’d fled Haiti after the slave revolt of 1791” (187). His interest in this racial detail connects Blanca to an African heritage that Ignacio uses to explain some of her strangeness. Amparo Marmolejo-McWatt reads many of Ignacio’s descriptions of Blanca’s actions in terms of their relationship to Santería, the syncretic belief in the worship of African gods/goddesses. In fact, Marmolejo-McWatt argues that Blanca’s entire characterization is connected to the ever-changing nature of the goddess Ochún, who exhibits power, control, and also the figure of “the bad mother” (93). This is particularly the case when Blanca exerts her sexuality or independence (Marmolejo-McWatt 93-94). Ignacio’s descriptions of Blanca’s spiritual and supernatural qualities tap into his sense of her essentially African nature.

According to Ignacio, Blanca’s African connections are linked to her marital infidelities. After Constancia’s birth, Blanca escapes the psychological and physical examinations at home, returning some time later pregnant with Reina. When Reina is born, Ignacio describes her body as “nutmeg brown, with huge hands, and eyes that devoured the world” (263), and tells of the

mysterious appearance of a “giant mulatto, tall as a lamppost and with incalculable heft” (265). Ignacio later recalls another incident of infidelity when Blanca chooses another “dark” man over him. Blanca throws a party for Carnival that apparently leads to intercourse with a dark, “huge, near-naked man . . . dressed in a sequined loincloth, a red velvet cape, and a towering headdress with a red stone fastened to the crown” (267). The emphasis on size in Ignacio’s descriptions indicates his obvious insecurity. The repetition of the term huge and the use of terms such as giant, tall, incalculable heft, and towering in reference to Blanca’s lovers offer Ignacio’s perspective on his own position in relation to these figures. They loom large in his eyes, implying his normal status. Despite the calm, almost scientific tone with which he describes these events, Ignacio reacts violently to Blanca’s sexual exploits by asserting himself sexually and then shooting her. Ignacio apparently rapes Blanca during what he calls his “dreadful assertion the night of the masquerade ball.” He claims that afterward, Blanca “addressed me kindly again, questioned me about my work, reassessed me, it seemed, with her stark green eyes” (268). After this, Blanca agrees to accompany him on their final expedition, and Ignacio murders her.

This narrative of Blanca’s experience as a scientist, wife, mother, and sexual woman allows us to see her oppressed state. But Ignacio clearly de-emphasizes his anger and his power, instead constructing Blanca as a sexually promiscuous and monstrous mother. Ignacio’s repression of his displeasure and pain and his subsequent murder of Blanca indicate a more violent reaction underneath the calm veneer of his memoir. In the end, he cannot make Blanca a dead subject, one who will comply with his expectations of a good wife and mother. This elicits his fear and anger. He must kill Blanca in order to save himself and his worldview. The fact that Ignacio eventually kills himself and that Blanca returns from the dead years later makes this a female

Gothic narrative, which functions as a feminist response to the psychological and physical violence against her. Blanca's return instigates a repetition of the murder scene, this time to clarify the truth for Constanca and Blanca.

Blanca's experiences reflect how the female Gothic draws our attention to the violent nature of patriarchy and to a feminist response to masculine anxiety. Constanca's transformations show the gothic operations of fear and the uncanny. Reina, the other Agüero sister, also carries gothic significance via metaphors of darkness and monstrosity. Leslie A. Fiedler argues that American literature is gothic at its core: "It is the Gothic form that has been most fruitful in the hands of our best writers: the Gothic symbolically understood, its machinery and décor translated into metaphors for a terror psychological, social, and metaphysical" (28-29). Fiedler continues that these fears are founded on questions of identity, particularly race and sexuality. Like Fiedler's, Toni Morrison's analysis of American literature also evokes a gothic mode: "For a people who made much of their 'newness'—their potential, freedom, and innocence—it is striking how dour, how troubled, how frightened and haunted our early and founding literature truly is" (35). These anxieties are elaborately represented in gothic literature through what Morrison describes as the "construction of blackness and enslavement":

Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. . . . What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American. (38)

“American Africanism” functions as the “not-me” for an American literary (and cultural) identity. The other is key to the racial formation of a white American subject. But this process is not only found in early American literature. García makes use of the “fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire” as the basis for Ignacio’s murder of his wife Blanca. But the text also represents Reina, the Agüero sister embodying Ignacio’s racialized anxieties, in monstrous terms.

Reina’s monstrosity begins in her ability to fluidly accept the strange happenings around her. Her character therefore enables the reader to temporarily approach the events in the novel outside the realm of fear and the Gothic, and approach a magical realist reading. For instance, Reina remembers another transformative moment that Constanica repressed or left unspoken:

Constancia grew to look remarkably like their mother after her death. She seemed to absorb Mami’s erratic vigor, the spidery movements of her wrists. Even her inflection changed, from a nasal steadiness to the halting, feathery music of Mami’s voice. Reina remembers how at the funeral, Constanica frightened all the mourners with this spectral impression. Reina wasn’t scared, though. After never knowing her sister, she longed only to love her. Of course, Constanica wouldn’t allow it. A week later, her sister went back to looking like herself. (73)

This temporary transformation demonstrates two different ways to read the strange happenings in this novel: horror and acceptance. While Reina accepts Constanica’s change with equanimity, García refuses to provide a stable way to understand this moment as solely magical realism because of the mourners’ fear and Constanica’s refusal to allow Blanca to take over. The matter-of-fact manner with which Reina describes Constanica’s change is described as a longing for affection, both sisterly and maternal. Despite the magical realism provided by Reina’s

perception, the circumstances leading up to the sisters' reunion and the way Reina expresses this maternal longing later in the novel reveal her connection to the gothic mode via an association with Victor Frankenstein's creature.

In contrast to Ignacio's obsessive desire to control Blanca and Constancia's aversion, Reina idealizes and fixates on Blanca, producing a melancholic relationship to her mother. However, as with Constancia, strange circumstances change Reina's body. In Cuba, Reina is a famous and skilled electrician. Lightning strikes Reina as she works in a storm. Her burns are severe, requiring extensive skin grafts donated from both living and dead Cubans. This electrical and epidermal rebirth complicates stereotypical assumptions about the sexualized Caribbean mulatta. Reina's skin, her racial significance, is now a quilt, an amalgamation that is impossible to classify. However, she remains highly sexual and shirks social norms in her relationships and body image after her accident, maintaining her role as a "natural" and exoticized subject.<sup>12</sup>

The details about Reina's bodily transformation evoke Victor Frankenstein's mode of piecing together his creation in Shelley's gothic tale, *Frankenstein*. The adult Reina longs for Blanca, and the rejection she experiences from Constancia echoes Frankenstein's creature's thwarted desire to commune with his maker. After her life-changing electrocution, she travels to Miami and forces Constancia to discuss their mother's death. When she arrives in Miami, Reina finds Constancia transformed and spends the rest of the novel hoping for some sort of interaction with Blanca: "If only Constancia would stop talking, stay mute sufficiently long enough for Mami to emerge. Reina finds intolerable the false expectations their mother's visage sets up. Reina wants to address Mami directly, to risk everything—even if it means eradicating her sister—in the hope of retrieving her past" (138). Reina violently desires to "address Mami directly." She would let

Constancia die in order to fulfill this maternal communion, which resonates with Frankenstein's creature's violent longing.

Many theorists have suggested Shelley's work is a commentary on reproduction and maternity via Victor Frankenstein's desire for the power of creation, and the subsequent rejection of the creature he makes.<sup>13</sup> This abandonment on Victor Frankenstein's part leads his creation to search for his maker, resulting in violence and despair. Upon first meeting Victor, for instance, he states, "I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me" (Shelley 66). Victor's refusal to perform his parental obligation results in his creature's obsession with Victor and leads to the subsequent murders. Just as Victor Frankenstein refuses his monster's request for companionship, Constancia refuses to perform maternity for Reina.

In gothic tales, withholding the maternal bond leads to violence. In Shelley's novel, Victor kills his creature's mate, which leads to the death of Victor's bride on their wedding night. Likewise, Constancia and Reina physically battle as they approach the truth about Blanca's murder: "with one hand, [Reina] lifts her sister by the throat. To choke out the final lies. Papá's lies. Constancia's willful stone-blind lies. Reina is sweating profusely, rivers of salt leaving her face and back. A wild blood storms up from her heart. She smells the wet earth, Mami's freshly dug grave. The sight of her sister's pale breast stops Reina cold" (276). At this moment, only the smell of Blanca's freshly dug grave and the sight of Constancia's breast end Reina's violence. The maternal longing within Reina marks her sensibility toward her sister.

Reina's feelings evoke the creature's emotional response to Frankenstein's death and his own lack of friendship: "still I desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned. . . . I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on.

Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice” (Shelley 154-55). The “wild” and “boil[ing]” blood in Reina and Frankenstein’s creature demonstrate, in different ways, their desire for impossible familial bonds. Frankenstein’s creature reaches Victor too late for reconciliation; Reina is refused a maternal communion because of Blanca’s death and Constancia’s denials. When at the end of the novel Reina becomes pregnant, her desire for another maternal connection will be transposed into her own mothering.<sup>14</sup>

Once Reina releases Constancia’s neck, Constancia bludgeons her with an oar. This act represents Constancia’s desire to eradicate the memories she repressed: “I needed to believe him! . . . Me oyes?” (276). Constancia may exist within her mother’s body, but she clings to Ignacio’s lies. It is therefore no surprise that when the familial violence repeats, it is perpetuated against Reina, the product of Blanca’s transgression. The gothic repetition of the initial family violence forecloses any resolution in this battle except the knowledge that there is no whole and essential truth; the only “truth” is that which is narratively pieced together.

Unlike the initial familial violence, Reina lives and Constancia eventually returns to Cuba to retrieve the truth from Ignacio’s diary. Constancia finally sees that Blanca’s malevolent return produced a kind of justice. The sisters will presumably reconcile. Moreover, the novel ends with Ignacio’s final confession: “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). This confession leads us not to magical realism in the text, but to the act of femicide that reminds us of the dangerous ways anxious patriarchs can quiet their fears. Even in death, Ignacio gets the last word, though perhaps this time in service to a healthier, fearless existence for the Agüero sisters, who might now live more peacefully with Blanca’s visage.

García's melding of gothic and magical realist elements in this work about Cuban and Cuban American subjects points to the impossibility of strict ideological views about identity, particularly when these views concern gendered behavior and racialized subjects. In an interview with Ylce Irizarry, García articulates her desire to challenge the rigid constructions of "ethnic-racialized" identity operating in the Cuban and Cuban exile community:

I am interested in how Cubans are constantly defining each other and what it means to be Cuban. This is something I played with a lot in *The Agüero Sisters*. Neither of the sisters fits into strict notions of cubanidad. Reina, for example, is not feminine in the ways she is supposed to be feminine, and Constanca is über-feminine. Neither one fits into the Miami exile sense of cubanidad; they do not fit the political or cultural mores of the exile community. This whole natural/unnatural thing works with the process of defining one's identity because that process is unnatural, too. . . . For me, what is considered natural is usually really, really unnatural. ("Interview" 180-81)

Here García highlights how "dead subjects" can be created within a US Latina/o community. Cubanidad as a concept implies a false sense of authenticity that obscures identity's fluid and socially constructed nature. García uses the characters in *The Agüero Sisters* to demonstrate the painful and violent results of reinforcing essential identity. Blanca dies because of Ignacio's failure to see her as a subject outside of his views of what a wife and mother should be, and the two sisters are haunted by this unnatural expectation. García imagines "undead subjects," women who defy social norms and whose existence defies the constraints of patriarchy, even beyond the grave.

On a meta-level, García constructs undead subjects through her transculturation of the fantastic, uncanny, and monstrous bodies found in the gothic aspects of this novel. *The Agüero*



*Sisters* offers a reminder of the fluidity of identity and the presence of death in life. As Reina asks, “You think the dead just lie still, Constancia? Coño, just look at yourself” (275). Reading the Gothic in García’s work shows that the dead do not lie still, but neither are the living “dead subjects.” Instead, García presents gothic moments that highlight the violence and fear created by stereotypical understandings of race, gender, and ethnic or national identifications. As García declares, “what is considered natural is usually really, really unnatural” (“Interview” 181). Applying this to García’s fiction, the naturalness used to describe her work as magical realism is not enough to grapple with this novel. García plays with the genre not aligned with the supernatural, but with the unnatural: the Gothic.

Ignacio’s violence, Blanca’s apparition, Constancia’s fear, and Reina’s monstrous longing each evoke a gothic quality that magical realism cannot explain away. Even when critics acknowledge magical realism in the text, they do not offer another way to grapple with the weird, strange, or otherworldly.<sup>15</sup> Violence and spirituality are often dealt with ethnographically, resulting in a focus on cultural difference instead of literary production.<sup>16</sup> Readers, publishers, critics, and students will benefit from placing US Latina/o literature transculturally, within an international gothic and magical realist tradition. This placement offers myriad ways to critically engage García and also works by Chicana/o authors John Rechy, Ana Castillo and Cherríe Moraga;<sup>17</sup> Dominican American writers Angie Cruz and Junot Díaz; and Cuban American writer Achy Obejas.<sup>18</sup>

Fiedler’s argument that America’s “best writers” have used the Gothic to express all forms of terror would mean that the Gothic is central to the formation of an American literary canon. This has importance in light of Joyce Carol Oates’s claims in her introduction to *American Gothic Tales*: “I would have liked to include more stories by African-Americans and other American

ethnic writers, but the ‘Gothic’ has not been a popular mode among such writers, for the obvious reason that the ‘real’—the American of social, political, and moral immediacy—is irresistibly compelling at this stage of their history” (8-9). This omission makes sense given the propensity to market US Latina/o literature as exclusively magical realist in nature. Using a gothic lens to read García and other ethnic writers presents advantages. It shows how magical realism and the Gothic can coexist in a text, therefore providing another way to identify American gothic texts otherwise ignored because of their ethnic affiliations. It also reminds us of a transcultural option: that multi-ethnic literatures may produce fluid texts that contrapuntally incorporate a variety of influences. To paraphrase the title of Doris Sommer’s important work, attention to these details helps us “proceed with caution when engaged by minority writing in the Americas.”

To be clear, a move from a classification of this text as magical realism to the Gothic is not an attempt to suggest that this novel must be read exclusively one way or the other.<sup>19</sup> Neither is it a suggestion that one genre is more valuable or prestigious; as those who work in the Gothic understand, it is an often “ghettoized” or under-appreciated genre. But the prevalence of gothic connections to the reading of US literature and an American psyche makes this connection an important one in relation to US Latina/o literature. Writers like García are producing fiction that can and should be discussed beyond particular assumptions about race, national boundaries, and generic markers. Reading the Gothic in *The Agüero Sisters* and in other US Latina/o texts that address uncanny, violent, disturbing, and traumatic events offers a rich terrain through which to move American literary studies.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, the terms *Latina/o* and *US Latina/o* refer to individuals of Latin American and Caribbean descent who were born and/or raised in the US. When appropriate, I refer to individual cultural backgrounds such as US Puerto Rican, Chicana/o, or Cuban American.

<sup>2</sup> In their introduction to the special “female Gothic” edition of *Gothic Studies*, Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace quote Ellen Moers’s definition of the subgenre as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called ‘the Gothic.’” They continue: “Moers’ analysis of female Gothic texts as a coded expression of women’s fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body, most terrifyingly experienced in childbirth, was extremely influential. It not only engendered a body of critical work which focused on the ways in which the female Gothic articulated women’s dissatisfactions with patriarchal society and addressed the problematic position of the maternal within that society, but placed the Gothic at the centre of the female tradition” (1).

While Smith and Wallace suggest that more recent gothic criticism has challenged this umbrella term, the emphasis on the “dissatisfactions with patriarchal society” and the “problematic position of the maternal” resonates with the analysis here.

<sup>3</sup> For a historical overview see Kenneth Reeds. Amaryll Beatrice Chanady offers a comparison between magical realism and the fantastic. For a series of more contemporary uses of the term, see Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang’s edited collection.

<sup>4</sup> For a reading of transcultural strategies in African American and Chicana female Gothic texts, see Ana María Carbonell.

<sup>5</sup> For more examples, see the jackets of Angie Cruz’s and Ana Menéndez’s books.

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<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon is not limited to US Latina/os in the US. Ethnic others in the US and in the UK have been discussed (or recuperated) as magical realist when gothic elements are present. Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie are two examples.

<sup>7</sup> The use of the term *undead* suggests a potential reading of the zombie figure within gothic horror and Caribbean spiritual practice. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert argues that zombies are an important component of Caribbean Gothic, which utilizes this practice in order to evoke horror in postcolonial fiction. However, because García's use of the Gothic does not specifically utilize zombies and because of her ambiguous use of Santería as a belief system (Sandín 26), I use the term *undead* in the metaphoric sense, suggesting the mobile and unfixed subject unbound by culturally imposed stereotypical limits.

<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth theory of uncanny repetition in the Gothic, see Eric Savoy ("Face").

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of the naturalist's discourse in this novel, see Adriana Méndez Rodenas.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Halberstam offers a clear explanation of how the connection between gothic monsters and social anxieties works in classic and postmodern gothic texts (27).

<sup>11</sup> In Gilman's gothic tale, the protagonist's husband sees to it that she not be allowed to write or occupy herself with anything other than "bed rest" (42).

<sup>12</sup> Pascha A. Stevenson critiques García, suggesting that "the black female body slips uncritiqued into the role of spectacle" (145). When read via the Gothic, the spectacular association between Reina's sexuality and her racialization reach monstrous proportions that produce a more critical understanding of racial representation. The excess and spectacle become a commentary on society's racialization and sexism rather than a complicit or conservative reproduction of this view. The facts that she is conceived during Blanca's escape from Ignacio's medicalization and that she is a woman professionally unlimited by gender constraints (she works as the best

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electrician in Cuba) position Reina as the fulfillment of Blanca's dreams of liberation, not simply as a racialized spectacle.

<sup>13</sup> For discussions of Victor's obsession with creation as a social commentary on maternity, see David Collings, Dianne Hunter, and Alexandra Reuber.

<sup>14</sup> Reina's first daughter, Dulce, also denies her a traditional maternal role, eventually immigrating to Spain from Cuba and reuniting with Reina toward the end of the novel. At this point, Reina's obsession with the maternal reaches a climax as she even feeds from her niece Isabel's breasts in a scene that illustrates the depths of Reina's melancholic connection to her mother Blanca (241).

<sup>15</sup> The exception is Kathleen Brogan's treatment of both *Dreaming in Cuban* and *The Agüero Sisters*. She discusses the haunting as an allegory for the way Cubans are affected by exile and politics. I suggest that in *The Agüero Sisters* the haunting speaks to a more feminist concern of violence against women throughout the Americas.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Amparo Marmolejo-McWatt.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the Gothic in Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* (2001), see Tanya González.

<sup>18</sup> This is only a partial list of some popular US Latina/o authors that may be revisited via the Gothic. I am thinking particularly of John Rechy's *The Vampires* (1978), Ana Castillo's *Sapogonia* (1994), Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* (2001), Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and Angie Cruz's *Soledad* (2002). Of course, there are others. For instance, Terri De La Peña's "Refugio," a Chicana lesbian vampire story, more obviously engages with the Gothic.

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<sup>19</sup> Alan R. Velie's readings of Native American literature through gothic, magical realism, and the fantastic demonstrate the value in recognizing these literary modes in multi-ethnic literature in the US. See "Gerald Vizenor's Indian Gothic" and "Magical Realism and Ethnicity."

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