Dreaming in Colors

Let’s talk in blue. What does it remind you of? Who does it remind you of? Are there any experiences that you associate with the color blue? What does it symbolize? What emotions are attached to it? The answers to each of those questions will be different from person to person. We have all had different life experiences that cause us to think about and interpret this color differently. For any given individual, blue could be the ever-expansive ocean; it could be a symbol of sorrow or loneliness; it could even be a clear sky, symbolizing possibility and eternity. That is the trouble with writing in colors; a writer may be trying to convey a point based on her feelings toward a certain color, but as soon as that work gets into the reader’s hands, it is all up in the air, and he can interpret it to mean the complete opposite. To the writer, blue is freedom - the blue on the American flag, the blue of the sky that is the limit - but to the reader, blue is confinement. Like the dark walls of a prison cell - colors are tricky and ambiguous.

However, Cristina Garcia has found a way to eliminate ambiguity in colors by attaching them to a separate entity that is, for all intents and purposes, immovable. In her novel “Dreaming in Cuban,” she employs the religion of Santeria and its gods, or orishas, to give colors a clear meaning. Garcia gives her characters colors to represent them, which link them to orishas, based on the colors that each orisha is associated with. Each character has his or her own orisha (or set of orishas) that he or she is associated with. This association between characters and orishas can be used to interpret the identities of each of the characters, giving us, the readers, insight into the Del Pino family, as well as into identity itself. Namely, we see that identity is not set in stone and that “our identities have changed over time,” as Stuart Hall argues in his essay “Radical
America” (Hall 10). This is true for a few characters - particularly Celia, a wife, mother, and grandmother, who identifies with multiple colors and orishas, showing her struggle in finding her own identity. Many characters in the novel have changing identities, and as a result, they lose track of who they are. While it is natural for identity to be varying and for individuals to feel a loss of identity, Hall explains that for many, identity is something of a stabiling force that “keeps the world from falling apart” (Hall 10). When one does not know her own identity, she begins to feel lost, just as Celia does in her relationships with three men – her ex-lover Gustavo, El Lider, the face of the revolution, and her late husband Jorge Del Pino.

There are five orishas needed to gain insight into Celia and her romantic interests. The first is Chango, the orisha of thunder and fire, ruled by the color red, who encompasses power, passion, and male sexuality (Clark 49). He has had many wives, the first of which was a passionate and beautiful young woman named Oya, who used her good looks and charm to win Chango over (Cros 246). She, like Chango, is associated with the color red (Clark 47). On the opposite side of the spectrum, in blue, there is Yemaya, whose symbols are the ocean, maternity, and mature womanhood (Clark 49). The orisha of hunting and justice, Ochosi, is also blue, and he is one of the most talented and respected of the orishas (Clark 48). Lastly, there is Oba, orisha of navigation, matrimony, and stability, characterized by a dusty pink (Clark 48).

Celia identifies herself with the color red, full of passion and love. She has “always envisioned [herself] in a flared red skirt like flamenco dancers wear”… “with a few [red] carnations” (Garcia 232), during the time she was with Gustavo, and imagines being “feted at the palace, serenaded by a brass orchestra, seduced by El Lider himself on a red velvet divan” (Garcia 3). The two men hold a similar place in her heart, and cause her to surround herself with the color red, from her lipstick to her clothing, and in this Garcia illustrates Celia’s desire for the
passion encompassed by Oya. She wants to be young and desirable, loved by El Lider, the strong powerful leader of the rebellion, or Gustavo, the young man who gifted her a pair of drop pearl earrings that she would not let go of, even in her old age.

It is no surprise that Gustavo and El Lider are also red. They are red like Chango, who possess characteristics that would give any woman the promise of excitement and pleasure. However, it comes at a price; Chango is destructive, leaving a path of discontent in his wake (Clark 223). Celia is hit by this plague when she meets Gustavo, being swept away by him, engulfed in his flames, and she loses sense of herself. She continues this unhealthy infatuation, even after she stops sending him letter, by placing every ounce of her being into fulfilling the will of El Lider. Similarly, El Lider, through the revolution, creates unrest within Celia and divides her family. By being red, like Oya, Celia opens herself up to the manipulations of these men, drifting closer to them. As Oya, Celia is in danger.

However, because Celia sees identity as an unwavering force, she is afraid to open herself up to any other identity. Although she cannot see it for herself, Celia has another identifying color – blue. She has been unable to access this side of her identity, because it is part of her unconscious. Hall explains this flaw in identity in the context of Freudian psychology by stating that “identity is itself grounded on the huge unknowns of our psychic lives, and we are unable, in any simple way, to reach through the barrier of the unconscious into the psychic life” (Hall 11). In the context of Celia’s identity, Hall’s words can be interpreted to mean that since Celia is not aware of her own unconscious, she has no way of grasping the entirety of her identity. Without someone else guiding her, she only sees a small part of herself – the part that is red. The unveiler of this secret is her granddaughter, Pilar, who is an artist. Although Celia wants to be painted in reds, Pilar sees her in blue. Similar to how Garcia paints a picture of each character with her use
of colors, Pilar paints her grandmother in blue, despite her instructions to use red (Garcia 233). This blue is quite contradictory to the other part of Celia’s identity. It connects her with Yemaya, who suits a more mature version of her, from her love and closeness to the ocean to her obvious old age. She is no longer the young, strong woman she once was, but her importance in the world has not changed. She is still needed as a mother to her children and as the protector of the Cuban coast, and when she accepts her new identity, having been enlightened by Pilar, she is able to let go of her past, removing the political barriers between herself and the rest of her family by removing the drop-pearl earrings she received from Gustavo. For years she clung to these as a link to her young passion and to the revolution, keeping her from her family. When she “reaches up to her left earlobe and releases her drop pearl earring to the sea,” she “closes her eyes and imagines it drifting as a firefly through the darkened seas, imagines its slow extinguishing” (Garcia 244). Her red earrings are engulfed by the blue ocean, and they lose their flame. Garcia uses this as an analogy for Celia letting in a new identity and “extinguishing” the old one that has only caused trouble for her and her family. She allows her new identity to take over and is finally at peace – she is finally the serene blue of the ocean.

The color blue also arises many times in the case of Celia’s husband, Jorge Del Pino, but this is a different kind of blue. Not the blue that rules the ocean, but a supernatural blue that is connected to Ochosi. Jorge appears to Celia after his death, and she sees him with “blue eyes” … “like lasers in the night,” … “[with] the beams [bouncing] off his fingernails, five hard blue shields” (Garcia 5). Throughout their marriage, Celia saw Jorge as Ochosi, and although he has many positive aspects to him, there is one important detail about Ochosi that explains her unhappiness in marriage. Ochosi “owns the jails” (Cros 286), just as Jorge keeps Celia prisoner in a life that brings her sorrow and ultimately causes her derangement. This depiction of his
character sheds light on Celia’s disdain for this man who only ever tried to gain her affection and was torn apart by her lack of passion toward him.

She made the mistake of seeing her husband in only one identity, but Hall explains that an individual is not confined to just one identity (Hall 17). While Jorge is blue, like Ochosi, he is also pink, like Obba. He tried to make her see his other side throughout their marriage, which she reveals by “half [expecting] him to pull pink tea roses from behind his back as he used to when he returned from his trips to distant provinces” (Garcia 5). As Obba, Jorge keeps his family stable and united, because each member has his or her own connection towards him. Being the orisha of navigation, he brings them all together with his death, because they all begin to think as a family again after he dies, instead of remaining separated due to political unrest.

By interpreting Hall’s view of identity with Garcia’s depiction of each character’s identity, we see that it is the misinterpretation of the nature of identity that causes tragedy in the Del Pino Family. Because Celia does not believe in the fluid identity that allows someone to have more than one identity – to be complex – she approaches herself and her husband with a closed mind. This is her life struggle until her eyes are opened by Pilar. Until that time, she had been clouded by her belief that she and Jorge could not be happy with one another since they had different identities. This is what Hall calls “disruption of identity,” how identity is generally looked at in this day and age, as opposed to what is right (Hall 10). The disruption of identity comes as a challenge to everyone, but it is especially dangerous when one’s homeland is also being disrupted, which is ultimately the point that Garcia is making with her use of color as identity. During the revolution, many Cuban families, including her own, were ripped apart due to the misinterpretation of identities. Garcia wrote the varying identities of Celia, Gustavo, El Lider, and Jorge into “Dreaming in Cuban” to shed light on the fact that it is acceptable for one
to have multiple identities, which is a struggle that faces many Cuban-Americans, as they feel torn between their connection to home and their patriotism for America. She is making it clear that one does not need to choose between the two – it is possible to have both.
Bibliography


Hall, Stuart. *Radical America*. (cannot site further than this)
