Intellectual Insurgency

“The Revolution introduced me to art, and in turn, art introduced me to the Revolution!” (Einstein). The cyclical relationship between expression and change is due to each of their definitive meanings. The knowledge acquired from exposure to opinion through all mediums of art is invaluable to the human experience. Art shapes social and cultural structures, the means by which we communicate and understand innovative ideas, and it also plays a big role in writing the history that teaches us about our past. All art comes from a desire to critique, to record or to emote. Christina Garcia’s socio-historical novel *Dreaming in Cuban* features characters struggling to disseminate and understand the world around them. A frequent solace and outlet for Pilar Puente as she deals with familial and cultural strife is visual art. *Dreaming in Cuban* itself acts as an artistic measure for change, a channel for understanding the social and familial constructs of Cuban-American culture. The audience to the arts, including a multitude of revolutionaries throughout history, Pilar Puente, and the readers of *Dreaming in Cuban*, are all mediums of change; writing history and understanding the world with improved predispositions gained through continuous perspective.

Pablo Picasso’s famous abstract response to the bombing of Guernica (entitled *Guernica*), black and white photos of overturned cars and militant police officers taken by French revolutionary students in 1968, Esther Forbes’ 1945 historical novel on the Sons of Liberty, “Johnny Tremain”, all examples and tokens of past revolutions the world of art and
expression has experienced. By questioning the modes in which society functions, art ventures to create an ideological revolution through internal controversy. This procession of opinion stays immortalized in time, acting as a forever-useful sentiment toward a better understanding of the world. Without art, time, thus history, would be forever lost before our eyes. During the Qin Dynasty of Ancient China, there was period of internal societal destruction called the “Burning of Books and Burying of Scholars” which resulted in the immolation of most opinionated thought and scripture that did not parallel the ideals of the aristocracy in power. The result was a loss in Chinese culture that vanished from the face of the earth, as well as from human knowledge all together (Barbieri-Low). Artistic expression can also act as an alternative to war, an outlet that allows emotions to be conveyed and ideas to be spread without the use of force. Effectively, art is an attack on the mind, an autogenous altercation that arises to challenge opinions and create dialogue. Without art, knowledge of past generations would be obscured, points in time would be absent and soon forgotten all together and one of the most effective sources of nonviolent, ongoing discussion would cease to exist. As humans, we are equipped to learn from past mistakes, as well as given the privilege of challenging our own opinions with the philosophies presented in the art of others.

Throughout Christina Garcia’s novel, art is a means of perhaps the most peaceful communication between characters such as Pilar Puente and the rest of her family. In many cases throughout the novel, the prevalent theme of violence and its place within a culture is often juxtaposed with the power of opinion and ideological revelations. Pilar muses on a past conversation with a psychiatrist after displaying grotesque themes of body mutilation in her artwork, “A paintbrush is better than a gun… painting is its own language” (Garcia 59). She reflects upon art as “the ultimate revolution” (235), claiming a voice of passion and emotion,
which is evident on canvases streaked with clotted swirls of red (29). Her art is often reflective of the punk sub-genre with which she identifies, and in turn, a criticism of the institution. Pilar’s painting of the Statue of Liberty, which is likened to the Sex Pistols’ God Save the Queen album cover, demonstrates her artistic demeanor as well as a cause for reaction. I want to go all the way with this…and do what I feel, so at the base of the statue I put my favorite punk rallying cry: ‘I’m a mess.’ And then carefully…paint a safety pin through Liberty’s nose” (141). The painting is a direct reflection of Pilar’s distaste for her mother’s conservative, unwavering nationalism, as well as a nod to the subculture of punk rock, which frequently critiques capitalism as well as the notions represented in authoritative, idealistic figures such as the Statue of Liberty. Once displayed, Pilar’s art evokes feelings of violence and disgust, suggesting the power of art and opinion and likening the meaning of the painting toward a revolutionary idea. This reaction is the principal purpose of art, and is present in all works throughout history, as well in Dreaming in Cuban itself.

Similar to Pilar’s attempt to stir a reaction with her work, Garcia places themes such as the defective systems of government in Cuba and America throughout her novel, exposing faults on both extreme sides of the political and economic spectrum. She paints a picture of Cuba deteriorating, its citizens divided by a historical power struggle which continues on today. She goes on to contrast the flaws of capitalism with Lourdes Puente’s American dream, which never seems to be realized. “[Lourdes] envisioned a chain of Yankee Doodle bakeries stretching across America…Each store would bear her name, her legacy: LOURDES PUENTE, PROPRIETOR” (171). Garcia juxtaposes a macroscopic view of economic and governmental strife with familial friction in order to evoke commonplace emotion from her audience. She primarily writes about strong-willed female characters, misplaced by the Cuban revolution in order to bring the idea of
disarray to the foreground. Overall, each generation of mothers and daughters are characterized by the same burning, ardent passion. In turn, the relationships between Celia, Lourdes and Pilar are burdened by both differences in political opinion, as well as the fervor that drives each character to continue preaching and pushing for what they believe in. Garcia works to communicate a message that recounts history and prompts a response, perhaps to spark a new idea or action, which works to alter the perspective that her audience may currently hold.

The personas and passions of each main character within this text exemplify the mechanisms society uses to cope in times of change and upheaval. The generational passing-down of oppression, and the zeal used to cope with their distinct situations at hand unites Celia, Lourdes and Pilar, just as their clashing opinions work to contrast and disassemble them. Humanizing the idea of unification in a society allows for Garcia’s message to be applicable to her audience, thus enabling her to spark new perspectives. Art in all mediums works to record time for future retrospection and start a revolution. In order to understand a society, look at the art that burgeons from it internally.
Works Cited


