

Essay 2

Portrayal of History: Looking at Political Influences in *Dreaming in Cuba*, *Paula*, and *La Historia Oficial*

Writing about history often leaves the audience questioning the work's legitimacy. Personal beliefs, pictures, eyewitness accounts, and many other types of documentation contribute to the way that we interpret and depict an event. For non-fiction writers, it is important to use clear facts and reliable resources. On the other hand, fiction writers are free to twist and change history according to what fits their storyline best. Still, a lot of fiction composition aims towards making statements about history and therefore there may be more partiality than events reinvented. But how accurate are these embedded opinions and how well do they complement the plot or setting of a novel? How do similar references to history compare in nonfiction writing and in film? In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Cristina Garcia describes one family's attitude towards the dictatorship of communist Fidel Castro. In her memoir *Paula*, Isabel Allende portrays numerous historical facts about her native country, Chile, during the infamous military coup of 1973 and some debatable details about politics in her family. Finally, in the movie "La Historia Oficial," director Luis Puenzo presents a more specific and personal view of a political conflict in Argentina that was influenced by Chile's military coup. After looking at these three pieces, we can judge how politics influence different types of writing and film and we can see the benefits of including historical data in these works.

Political unrest in Cuba marks the lives of three generations of women - Celia, Lourdes, and Pilar - in *Dreaming in Cuban*. The novel's plot unfolds under the rule of Fidel Castro, known most frequently as "El Lider," who rules Cuba after leading a

socialist revolution and overthrowing the government in 1959. After gaining the support of the peasants, Castro quickly earned the love of nationalist supporters who helped him maintain his power and even impeded the United States during the CIA's attempt to occupy Cuba during the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs Invasion. Throughout the novel, Cristina Garcia extensively criticizes the Cubans' blind love for Castro, yet she also recounts the struggle of those who battled against the revolution, thus providing the audience with a multilateral look at how people were affected by it.

Considering the fact that *Dreaming in Cuban* is a work of fiction, the reader may wonder if Cristina Garcia distorts the historical data to better fit her opinion of Castro's presidency. Amazingly, this is not entirely the case. The main character, Celia, is a Fidel Castro lover; she works as a night watcher, sugarcane cutter, and does many other jobs for her beloved Lider. She is continuously pointing out the revolution's merits: "No one is starving or denied medical care, no one sleeps in the streets, everyone works who wants to work" (Garcia, 117). Moreover, Garcia describes to us the one job that allows us to reconsider the work of the revolution: as a civilian judge Celia encourages reform rather than punishment and persuades adolescents to follow their delights rather than giving them a cold-hearted punishment. This is shown when she sends the young boy who was accused of being anti-revolutionary to work in the theater (Garcia, 158). On the other hand we also get Celia's sexual obsession with her leader, episodes which were quite distracting, but represented well her dedicated passion for him. This obsession also makes her believe that she has a higher purpose in life, especially since her people are part of what she believes to be "the greatest social experiment in modern history" (Garcia, 117).

Although Celia is a strong supporter of the revolution, her daughter Lourdes chooses to be the exact opposite; she pursues the American dream in New York and refuses to believe that the revolution does well to her native country. Lourdes denounces the Cuban government numerous times, and with much reason to do so. After two visits from a couple of revolutionary soldiers, she loses her second baby, she is disgustingly raped, and she is also marked for life with an illegible scar on her abdomen (Garcia, 70). Nevertheless, in the United States Lourdes did not have a perfect life either: the American food was tasteless to her and her daughter Pilar was a rebellious young lady who even had the nerve to runaway from home and interrupt the commencement of Lourdes' new Yankee Doodle bakery with a horrific image of the Statue of Liberty. To counteract this, Lourdes' obsessive tendencies in her bakery over thieves, over her daughter, and her erratic diet, give light to her quest for success; although unhealthy it is obvious that she wants her bakery to succeed and her daughter to be under her eye, so that she can show her mother Celia that living in the United States is better than living in Cuba.

As the more sane character, Pilar finds herself with a strong desire to go to her homeland, but is kept back with her New York culture that is accurately described: with increasing crime rates and decreasing skirt lengths. This is Garcia's best character who is indirectly affected by the revolution in two ways: she cannot return to Cuba because her mother does not want her to visit her Fidel-loving grandmother, and she is stuck with her fastidious mother who is such a lame believer of the boring American dream. We can also understand her conflicting emotions with her distorted painting of the Statue of Liberty. With this character that is stuck between her grandmother and her mother,

Garcia once again presents both sides of revolution sentiments and how they affect this family of arrogant women.

In addition, by showing and expressing both sides of the revolution opinions, we get the richness of Garcia's magical realism more genuinely. The political unrest that is discussed throughout the novel serves as a support for the plot by mirroring the familial break and attempt at recovery, allowing us to see the magical realism as not just a wonderful work of fiction and writing, but also to unwittingly excuse the psychological issues that were prevalent among these women. For example, Celia's obsessive behavior over her lover Gustavo and El Lider while making a hyperbole of a Cuban supporter also allows us to see the positive side of being one; her behavior while obsessive formulates her self-confidence and belief that she could do good for her country. Her unmailed correspondence to Gustavo could be considered as her way of coping with her emotions, and patriotism and good deeds cannot be considered negatively. Throughout the novel, Lourdes' conversations with her dead father become common, which while making her seem delirious, are probably the most rational parts of her life; it is he who tells her that her mother does indeed love her even though Lourdes had been hurt by her mother's rejection at her birth for many years. The aspect of magical realism made the familial issues more pronounced and comparable to the political issues.

A similar distrust in a country's government is seen in Isabel Allende's *Paula*, but with a different and much more partial representation. As Isabel Allende describes the story of her youth in *Paula*, we have a first-hand look at the works of her uncle and President during that time, Salvador Allende, and the effects of the military coup of 1973. In 1970, as the leader of the Chilean Socialist Party, Salvador Allende was appointed

President of Chile. He became the first “Marxist” in the world to gain power in a free democratic election (Spartacus). Of course, the United States CIA soon became involved in an effort to overthrow him, and did so incorrectly by arranging relations with Augusto Pinochet, a man with unethical plans who was soon appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean army in June of 1973. That same year on September 11 Pinochet, with the help of the United States and British governments, led a military coup against Allende’s government. This resulted in the death of not only Salvador Allende, but of thousands of supporters of his liberal party that primarily consisted of innocent people. Soon enough, Pinochet took over the government and found many ways to dodge and overcome the accusations of human rights abuses that were placed upon him. It’s amazing that even twenty years later he continued to influence the government and that he was immune to prosecution for leading the coup (Spartacus).

Isabel Allende movingly describes this time of her life during which she was the “Harriet Tubman” of Chile all the while witnessing the passing of her daughter, Paula. She risks her life and helps the persecuted escape Chile for asylum in the embassy of Mexico. Despite her memoir being nonfiction, she confidently writes it as if it were one of her other works of fiction literature: using captivating imagery and descriptions that make a reader feel the emotions and live the events that marked a horrible time in her and many other people’s lives. As she starts to talk about her grandfather’s fear and decision to stay within four walls, she describes human wickedness:

For me, it was a total surprise to discover that the world is violent and predatory and ruled by the implacable law of the survival of the fittest. Natural selection has not caused a flowering of intelligence or evolution of the spirit, at the first

opportunity, we destroy one another like rats trapped in a too-small box. (Allende, 217)

By giving us her personal experiences during this time in Chile, we are not only given a proper history lesson, but also a victim's standpoint of the terror that innocent people lived through. Most importantly, as she recalls her own experience, it successfully echoes her daughter's irrecoverable state, incessantly building our understanding of her agony.

One of the most important issues that were discussed in *Paula* concerned Salvador Allende and Isabel Allende's personal opinion and familiarity with him. To her, Salvador Allende "was just another uncle" (31) whom even represented her long-gone father during her first wedding and signed the civil register as her witness (Allende, 114). She defended her uncle at the time of his death, alleging to the fact that "He won't surrender, ever" to the coup. There is much debate over whether Salvador Allende committed suicide in defense of his beliefs or whether he was murdered by the military. To a reader, it is easy to believe that he in fact did commit suicide because of his passion for socialism that we read from her description of his family as full of "socialist fervor" (Allende, 95) along with the idea that Pinochet would invent something like that in support of his attack against Allende. Nevertheless, because he was her uncle wouldn't it be obvious that she would favor his side in making him look heroic? Either way, we get a clear understanding of Pinochet's unfair retaliation against this democratically elected socialist government. Isabel Allende's descriptive, wonderful way of writing and the inclusion of so many historical facts built not only her ethos but also readers' sympathy.

Within her memoir, Isabel Allende took the time to also incorporate the situation that was culminating next door in Argentina. Her parents were then on government work and Allende described their situation:

They were... in a strange city where the horror of dictatorship and beginning phases of what would come to be called the 'Dirty War' were already in the air (Allende, 197).

From 1976 to 1983 the country of Argentina, in looking at how its neighbor Chile was going through political turmoil, became extremely aggressive against "suspected dissidents and subversives" (globalsecurity.org). About 10,000 to 30,000 people, including both government opponents and innocent people, were the casualties of this war. People who were kidnapped were described as "desaparecidos" or the disappeared. In an effort to show the side of an oblivious middle-class history teacher who comes to realize that her "adopted" daughter is a result of a kidnapping, *La Historia Oficial* awoke extreme commotion regarding human rights not just in Argentina, but worldwide.

After discovering the terror of kidnappings and torture that were occurring in her country through a conversation with an old friend, Alicia begins to wonder whether her own adopted daughter, Gaby, is but a victim's stolen daughter. As a history teacher and with a suspiciously successful husband, it is hard to believe that she is oblivious to the war that surrounds her; but as the story develops the message that it unfolds is clear. Like in Chile, innocent people became victims of a horrible regime that judged unjustly against communist thoughts. As Alicia goes deeper into her search for the truth, she meets with Gaby's potential grandmother and opens her eyes to her husband's involvement. Although the film ends with an unclear ending, it mirrors the unclear truth

and justification of this “Dirty War”, but successfully promotes activism and sentiments towards these types of regimes.

One successful aspect in the film was the depiction of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Gaby’s grandmother was a part of this group of women that marched silently in the central area of Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, holding up pictures of “desaparecidos” and signs with pleas for justice. It became extremely ironic that Alicia only came to notice these women when her suspicions arose, although the article on Human Rights Quarterly describing these women claims that “Nobody can pretend not to see them” (Agosin, 433) because they made such an impact with their silence. Their inclusion is particularly significant because even today these women continue to march in the Plaza and have traveled abroad to spread their message with their slogan: Justice and punishment for the guilty (Agosin, 433). Throughout the film they were repeatedly shown marching in the plaza, and the audience can interpret this as insistence, even after the “war” is over, so that “all the guilty be brought to punishment” (Agosin, 433). Repetition is definitely one of the best approaches for engraving a statement into someone’s mind.

This over exaggeration of Alicia’s ignorance sets out to make a statement about upper class and higher middle class people. These people who probably had the power to prevent or even those who were part of the conspiracy did nothing to stop it. It was as if they pretended that Argentina went on as usual without political or social conflicts. Moreover and coincidentally, Alicia’s husband’s involvement with the military also served to reveal a way that the wrongdoings were covered up. On a random visit to his office she couldn’t help but notice suspicious conversations and the madman that was obviously disturbed by his unlucky situation; it was probably involvement with the

regime. To add even more coincidence, it was Alicia's really close friend Ana who suffered even more directly through actual torture and rape to eventually tell Alicia of her encounter. The director and producers behind this film valiantly took the opportunity to make a strong statement of this work of fiction using their own methods of amplification.

It is obvious by the examination of these three pieces that references to historical events play an extremely important role in their success. Although all three of them had similar political conflicts against socialism, the ways that the facts were illustrated are quite dissimilar. In *Dreaming in Cuba*, the sentiments for and against Fidel Castro fueled the relationships between the three generations of women. The political conflicts were mirrored in the fiction by these women's attempt and failure at reconciliation. Isabel Allende's *Paula* used similar aspects of magical realism as those in *Dreaming in Cuba*, but this non-fiction work was completely one-sided and the experiences aided in building the distressing emotions in readers to feel the pain suffered by the writer during these times of unfairly resolved suspicions. "La Historia Oficial" used methods of exaggeration and repetition to make a clear political statement against the Dirty War in Argentina that had a huge impact world wide in regards to peace and justice. By allowing us a glimpse at these occurrences, they awaken historical interest in readers, pushing them to learn more and become aware of these political conflicts that are occurring all around us. Increasing awareness through films and literary work is definitely one of the most tactful ways of preserving history and condemning people's wrongful actions.

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