Summary. In my article, I focus on the different trajectories of cultural memory in the novels of Native American Louise Erdrich’s *The Painted Drum* (2005) and Cuban-American Cristina García’s *The Agüero Sisters*. Their protagonists not only have to face the individual trauma of the past, but also the collective trauma of their people. Both Faye Travers and Old Shaawano in Erdrich’s novel live on in the memories of their beloved deceased, although they sometimes may not realize this, and this is what they have in common with the protagonists of García’s novel, Constancia and Reina Agüero and their father Ignacio. All these characters try to cope with their grief in different ways, but in order to face the ghosts of their past, they need to excavate the buried histories of America, which are connected to some extent with the European conquest and colonization. Thus they travel in time and space to find out that the texture of their memories is grafted onto religious syncretism (the animistic tradition of Ojibwe in the case of Erdrich and the rites of *santería* in the case of García). The narratives include both feminine and masculine memories which are contrasted, but not according to the division lines typical for radical feminism.

Keywords: native American literature, ethnic novel, memory, native American, Cuban American, history, transculturation

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Both Louise Erdrich and Cristina García focus on memory in their novels, but they explore different cultural crossroads. Erdrich investigates the Native American past and García Cuban-American experience. They tell the stories of individual grief that is connected to collective trauma of the past in both cases. What they also share is the historical context of the conquest and colonization of the Americas. Additionally, both authors also rely on similar formal strategies such as introducing polyphonic narratives, exploring dialogic identities and employing magical realism in order to question the nature of reality filtered through the consciousness of their characters.

The topic of individual grief presented as a part of collective trauma has appeared in numerous novels of ethnic writers in the U.S., which was connected with the popular theme of looking for one’s lost identity or asking for one’s place in the post-ethnic American society. This shift is particularly visible in the fiction of Louise Erdrich, who started to explore her characters’ search for identity in the Pillager cycle (Tracks, Love Medicine, The Beet Queen, The Bingo Palace, The Tales of Burning Love, The Last Report on the Miracle at Little No Horse, Four Souls) and then concentrated on the presentation of post-ethnic dilemmas in the cycle devoted to the Coutts’ family (The Plague of Doves, The Round House). In the case of Cristina García there is no shift because both themes are explored simultaneously in her novels; some characters are aware of the complexity of their ethnic background and others still have to discover it.

The strategy of shoving individual loss into the background of collective trauma is universal not only for the ethnic writers in the U.S.; indeed, it is a reoccurring practice in contemporary literature – particularly postcolonial, though not exclusively. However, Native American and Latino/a authors have one more common point of reference, namely the history of the conquest and colonisation of the Americas and their present consequences.¹ What these writers emphasize is the clash and dialogue between Euro-American or Western culture and non-European cultures, such as indigenous and Afro-Carribean. Catherine Rainwater² noticed that writers such as Louise Erdrich or Linda Hogan use two parallel codes to signal a cultural clash or dialogue. This double-coding of narrative can also be observed in Cristina García’s fiction, but instead of the Ojibwe culture (ethno-history, language, spiritu-

¹ I discussed these problems more thoroughly in the book Pomiędzy rekonstrukcją a mitem. Role historii we współczesnej prozie rdzennych Amerykanów i Latino/a (Between Reconstruction and Myth. Roles of History in Contemporary Native American and Latino/a Fiction), Kraków 2016.
ality) that Erdrich concentrates on, García makes space in her literary world for the Afro-Caribbean elements.

Another important common denominator between Erdrich and García is their preoccupation with the theme of loss and restoration. They are authors who not only lament the past and concentrate on the roles of fickle memory, but they also suggest solutions that help to preserve a delicate balance between the unavoidable transformation of certain non-Western cultural elements and the necessary continuation of indigenous/Afro-Caribbean traditions. This balance is vital for their characters. Additionally, even though they describe communities torn by conflicts (Native Americans have been arguing repeatedly about the question of representation, e.g. whether mix-blood writers such as Erdrich represent indigenous tradition adequately\(^3\) and Cuban-Americans have been participating for a long time in the political conflict with the Cubans supporting Castro’s regime), Erdrich and García do not sacrifice literature to ideology, but try to expose the complex conflicting motivation of their characters who struggle with the consequences of the histories that have long been silenced.

To prove more specific textual connections, I will start by summarizing the plots. *The Painted Drum* is a story of an American, Ojibwe Faye Travers, who gradually discovers her lost connections with the North Dakota Ojibwes and their tragic history. When we meet Faye at the beginning of the novel she is an independent woman whose work is appraising family estates. Her Native American background is not particularly important to her. On one occasion Faye finds a valuable Indian drum which comes from her mother’s reservation and she decides to keep it for herself, although it is illegal. The drum landed in New Hampshire town as a result of an Indian agent’s activity – an agent who had been stealing from Native Americans all his life. Faye has the impression that the drum communicates with her and later guides her until she reaches Bernard Shaawano, who is the descendant of the drum maker Old Shaawano. From Bernard, Faye learns the tragic story of his family; Old Shaawano made the drum to mourn his beloved daughter who was killed by wolves while following her mother and Old Shaawano’s wife Anaquot. Shaawano’s wife had betrayed her husband and left him to live with her lover. Anaquot had also left her five year old son behind, but took two daughters, one was just a baby whose father was the new lover and the other got sacrificed to the wolves (either by Anaquot who pushed the girl to save herself and the baby or by her own will). Old Shaawano loved the daughter so much that he did not want to let her ghost

\(^3\) One of the most controversial attacks has been presented by David Treuer in *Native American Fiction. A User’s Manual*, Minneapolis 2006, who is also Ojibwe writer and who claims that Native American literature does not exist.
go away, violating Ojibwe tradition. His depression led to drinking and complete neglect of his son. Old Shaawano’s spiritual recovery started when he heard the Ojibwe gods, who asked him to build the drum that would help him to say goodbye to his deceased daughter and at the same time would be her commemoration. When Old Shaawano created the drum, the instrument not only helped him to cope with the loss, but it lived on its own, sometimes restoring life, sometimes ruining it when someone acted against tradition. It was central for the Ojibwe community, who suffered greatly when it was deprived of it. In the background of the novel Erdrich subtly shows the gradual acculturation, identity loss, poverty, hunger and alcoholism of some Ojibwes. Hope comes back when Faye returns the drum to the community; thanks to the workings of the drum Bernard Shaawano manages to save his three grandchildren, left by their irresponsible mother in a freezing house. When the children tried to get some warmth they accidentally set the house on fire and had to wander in a wintry forest. It was the sound of the drum which guided them to Bernard’s house and let him save their lives.

The story of Faye is interconnected with the story of Bernard, not only through the instrument. Just as Faye brings back their memory, by bringing back the drum to her mother’s reservation, Bernard makes her aware that she has to finish her own mourning and face her own trauma by sharing the story of his family with Faye. Many years ago Faye lost her sister Netta, who died falling from a tree. Just like Old Shaawano’s daughter, Netta died partly because of her parents. If Anaquot had not decided to split the family, her daughter would have survived, similarly if Faye’s mother had not found herself a lover, Netta would not have died while fighting for her parents’ attention. Surprisingly, despite the fact that Faye is so different from Old Shaawano in terms of participation in Ojibwe tradition, she behaves in a very similar way to him when she decides to keep the memory of her sister alive by never finishing mourning. And she also gets saved by the drum which makes her keep it and guides her to Bernard who finally teaches Faye to find courage to face the past through his stories, to let Netta’s ghost rest and continue living. It is also important to notice that in both stories, Old Shaawano’s and Faye’s, traumatic events get remembered in a way that falsifies the past. Just as Old Shaawano had been blaming himself for letting his wife take their daughter and blaming his wife for sacrificing their daughter to the wolves, and while he had been blinded by grief it had never occurred to him that it might have been his daughter’s decision to save her mother and her half-sister, Faye had been blaming herself for years for not saving Netta, not catching her while she was falling. Only after having listened to Bernard’s story did Faye find courage to discover her mother’s affair. Both survivors, Faye and Shaawano refuse to let the ghosts of their relatives go. Faye “punishes” the orchard
in which her sister died by not taking care of it and gives up on serious relationships with people other than her mother, whom she to some extent idealizes. Shaawano keeps his daughter’s scarf and her bones because he knows that in this way she will not ever leave him. Additionally, he opens the door to his hut to the west which makes it accessible to ghosts, according to the Indian tradition.

As Jean Wyatt notices, the function of Shaawano's story-telling is to include Faye in collective therapy. It is worth noting that in her interpretation and analysis of The Painted Drum, Wyatt incorporates both Native American tradition and Western trauma theory, proving that they might complement each other. The critic refers to Cathy Caruth's study to support her reading of Erdrich’s novel: “According to contemporary Western trauma theory, putting a dissociated traumatic experience into the form of a chronological narrative effects a cure by enabling the trauma survivor to transform trauma into narrative memory and thus integrate it into personal history.” Additionally, Wyatt includes the conclusions on the function of Native American story-telling of Paula Gunn Allen and Greg Sarris, according to whom the readers have to use 'accretive technique' (Allen in Wyatt 14) in order to make connections between the stories of Faye and Bernard and appreciate the latter's pedagogical aims (Sarris in Wyatt 20). At this point it is worth mentioning that Erdrich is particularly fond of this type of traditional story-teller and the construction of Bernard has been probably influenced by that of Nanapush from Erdrich’s Pillager cycle. The dialogue between Native American tradition and Western paradigms is far from simple and easy, but it is possible. As Wyatt concludes:

“When Faye calls for her mother’s differing story the word story points back to Bernard’s storytelling as the source of her new relational paradigm; and the word differing indicates the core dynamic of storytelling in this novel. In Faye's dialogue with her mother as in her experience of the Ojibwe ancestors' perspectives on death and loss, storytelling and storylistening create a dialectical relationship in which the other's story simultaneously reflects one's own experience and offers new perspectives on it, shaking up and turning around one's fixed ideas. Again, Erdrich draws on Ojibwe tradition but gives it her own twist. In the traditional wisdom voiced by Paula Gunn Allen and Leslie Marmon Silko, tribal storytelling comforts and heals through similarity, as a listener is assured that “no one's experience is idiosyncratic” (Allen, “Sacred” 17) and that “if others have done it before... [and] have endured, so can we” (Silko 52). In The Painted Drum, it is the difference of others' stories that heals.”

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5 Ibidem, pp. 29-30.
In my opinion, Erdrich’s best strategy is refraining from showing Faye as readily “converted” into Ojibwe shamanism. At the end of the novel Faye remarks “For to suddenly say, I believe, I am convinced, even saved, and to throw myself into Native American traditions as Kit Tatro wishes so sincerely to do is not in my character.”

She is still open to change, but what she sees remains a partial mystery, especially in the last scene with the ravens. Although Wyatt interprets this scene as Faye’s comeback to the Ojibwe animist tradition, it does not have to be this stage of conversion because Faye might just be imagining Netta instead of believing that her sister has turned into the raven:

As I think this, one raven veers toward me, zipping straight at my face, but I do not flinch as its wings brush through my hair. I called my sister’s name in the wildness of the moment.

At the same time, the most famous excerpt from the novel that illustrates Faye’s epiphany is universal and might form a bridge over the gap between the cultures:

Life will break you. Nobody can protect you from that, and living alone won’t either, for solitude will also break you with its yearning. You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason you are here on earth. Your are here to risk your heart. Your are here to be swallowed up. And when it happens that you are broken, or betrayed, or left, or hurt, or death brushes near, let yourself sit by an apple tree and listen to the apples falling all around you in heaps, wasting their sweetness. Tell yourself that you tasted as many as you could.

Another critic who emphasizes the role of Ojibwe heritage in The Painted Drum is Pamela J. Rader. She calls Bernard “an oral historian” who pays homage to the indigenous tradition of story-telling and preserves cultural memory. Additionally, in the notes the raven is interpreted as a bridge between Ojibwe and American culture. Rader explains that Faye gets interested in the ravens because she sees in them the continuance of life, as she quotes from Erdrich’s novel:

Say they have eaten and are made of the insects and creatures that have lived off the dead in the raven’s graveyard – then aren’t they the spirits of the people, the children, the girls who sacrificed themselves, buried there? (276).

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7 Ibidem, p. 276.
8 Ibidem, p. 247.
In my opinion this quote is particularly valuable because it not only illustrates double cultural coding, but is an example of magical or tribal realism. On the one hand no sacred knowledge gets revealed here because Faye just notices the circle of life, but on the other hand one can see some space left for the Ojibwe belief in the open boundaries between the dead and the living and the special status of animals in indigenous cultures which makes them equal to human beings.

Both Old Shaawano and Faye had to reconstruct the past in order to get control over their memory, and in both cases it would not have been possible without the drum. In this way Erdrich not only shows the importance of this artifact for individuals but addresses the bigger issue of returning stolen artifacts to Native Americans in the 20th and 21st centuries because what for non-Indians might be just a source of intellectual excitement and aesthetic pleasure in a museum, for Indians is loaded with memories without which reconstruction of the past is impossible, and without ethno-history they cannot speak about identity. James Clifford is the scholar who has investigated this problem most exhaustively.10

This conclusion helps me to create a comparative context between Erdrich and García, whose novel The Agüero Sisters also tells stories about memories that block access to the past and create identity problems. Again the problems are partially solved and the wounds partially dressed through storytelling full of syncretic motives, this time inspired, of course, not by the Ojibwe, but by the Santería tradition.

In García’s novel the stories are also interconnected and despite the fact that it is the memories of the two sisters Constantia and Reina Agüero that are the main focus of the author, the recollections of their father have the biggest impact on the way the sisters try to reconstruct their past and shape their identity. Just like Faye is the Ojibwe who knows little about her Indian past because she somehow inherits the tradition of silence imposed by her mother, Constantia from García’s novel distances herself from Cuban culture because her mother never shared this culture with her. To make matters worse, Constantia’s mother rejected her and sent her away to live with her relatives after giving birth to Reina, who was born as a result of Blanca’s betrayal. So again in the background we have a split family and the tragic consequences of the conflict between parents.

The marriage of Ignatio and Blanca had been doomed right from the beginning because they hardly knew each other and they came from completely different backgrounds. Ignatio represented white urban Creole culture and Blanca mixed-blood rural tradition. Significantly, Blanca’s mother died in a mysterious way,

which might have been connected with the fact that as mixed race she had been never fully accepted by the family of her husband. Ignatio also perceives Blanca as strange, and their marriage ends when he shots her accidentally, so the story of the mother is repeated in the story of the daughter to some extent. Ignatio lies about his killing of Blanca all his life and obviously his version of the story influences the memories of his daughters. To complicate matters, García makes Ignatio a responsible father of two daughters and Blanca only bonds with Reina, because she leaves baby Constancia for one year and a half. After this time she comes back pregnant with Reina and further neglects her first child. That is why Constantia hates her mother and later emigrates to the U.S., while Reina loves hers and stays in Cuba.

Similarly to Erdrich’s characters in *The Painted Drum*, three main protagonists of *The Agüero Sisters* live in a past overshadowed by grief and unfinished mourning. Likewise individual histories are also a pretext to tell collective histories. Constantia represents Cuban-Americans who cannot define their identity as long as they do not discover their past; that is why she devotes so much energy to finding Ignatio’s diary. Reina represents the Cubans who try to somehow combine Cuban and American elements and because she has a positive attitude towards her heritage she is more successful than Constantia or any other characters. The difference between the sisters is a repetition of the contrast between their parents: Blanca and Ignatio stand for completely different Cuban traditions; Blanca represents to some extent Afro-Caribbean spirituality and Ignatio Creole tradition, which does not mean that he can avoid magic in his life. Just the contrary, his diary is a proof that he is haunted by an omen.

Even though the history of Cuba is an important part of Ignatio’s diary, it worth noting that in Ignatio’s perspective, despite the fact that he is trying to follow a rational cause and effect storyline, there are events that open magical realist space, such as the apperance of certain birds at the most important moments of his life. For example when Ignatio is born, an owl gets into the room and takes away the placenta. Later Ignatio becomes a world famous expert on birds and hires Blanca as his assistant. When they get married, however, Ignatio no longer treats her as an academic but tries to subjugate her by limiting her role to that of a wife and a mother. Thus Blanca has a reason to betray Ignatio, some say she does it with Changó, Santería god of thunder, and later Ignatio has a reason to kill Blanca. Although he actually kills her while trying to shoot a rare hummingbird, we can never be sure if he id not do it out of revenge. The birds definitely are symbolic here, e.g. the owl symbolizes death in the majority of indigenous cultures, just as the humming bird is considered the messenger of gods in many Native American traditions. The owl brings doom for Ignatio in the person of Blanca who represents that part of Cuban culture that Ignatio definitely underestimates.
The role of Santería in the novel has been exhaustively discussed by Amparo Marmolejo-McWatt, who concentrates on the character of Blanca. The critic notices that Blanca is an ambivalent character just because her characterization is based on the Santería goddess Ochún; she has the power to attract and destroy and she is can be both predator and the prey. Not only does she wield her power on Ignacio (who is far from innocent) but on her children as well. As the scholar further explains:

Blanca, as the embodiment of Ochun is the repository of many behaviors, and the author enacts in her the oricha path of Ochun Yeye (Cabrera 83): this is the bad mother. Blanca abandons her five-month-old baby, Constancia. This behavior matches the legend of Ochun as the goddess of love, who loves men, has their children, and abandons them.11

García’s prose is more feminist in this aspect than Erdrich’s – in The Agüero Sisters the conflict between the matriarchal and patriarchal perspective is far more important. In García’s writing, Ignacio represents the tradition of the European scholars like Humboldt, who believed that nature could be completely explained and tamed through scientific means. Ignacio stretches these methods to humans when he tries “to classify and tame” Blanca. Blanca is not able to become a Creole housewife and the mystery of some of her rituals cannot be rationally described. By killing the humming bird and killing Blanca, Ignacio ruins his life and he is aware of it. He sacrifices her life for to hunt a rare species for his collection and violates all taboos – in the Indian tradition by killing the messenger of god, and in the Christian tradition by killing a human. His scientific knowledge did not help him to choose well and he did not even have enough courage to tell the truth to his daughters.

As Isabel Alvarez Borland notices, there are many other strange incidents in the lives of the characters of García’s novel. Magical realist features are usually present when Santería references are introduced, but as in classical magical realist fiction events always have two explanations – one magical and the other rational. For example Blanca is said to have had an affair with Changó, but Ignacio notices that a strange black man (not god) follows her. Some characters follow the advice of santeros, like Constantia, who after consultations decides to travel to Cuba, but García does not treat this motive very seriously but instead makes it a part of Constantia’s obsession with paranormal phenomena. When Constantia finally reaches Cuba on santero’s advice, no miracle takes place. She discovers Ignacio’s diary that only partially explains family mysteries.

García is always careful not to reveal too much about the characters and the nature of the reality they live in. Erdrich seems to share this conviction; no matter how much we learn about the characters’ past, we never get to know them completely and they remain a mystery for each other. As Reina remarks in *The Agüero Sisters*: “We hold only partial knowledge of each other […]. We’re lucky to get even a shred of the dark, exploding whole.”¹² The majority of the characters become obsessed with history, the official one and the marginalized where collective stories merge with individual tales. Not only Ignatio thinks about history while writing his diary, but his granddaughter, Dulcita, also betrays her fascination even when she leaves Cuba. When she visits Spanish kings’ treasures in Madrid she comments:

It’s scary how long the Spaniards have been brewing trouble for the rest of the world. My mother told me once how the early explorers had come to Cuba with their pestilential pets and nearly killed off the island’s native species. She said that her father, my Abuelo Ignacio, held King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel personally responsible for the decimation. My great-grandfather originally came from Galicia, from the mountains somewhere. My mother says that he was one of the great lectores in Pinar del Río, that he read the classics to the cigar workers, organized unions, made a first-rate scallop pie. Why is it that everything interesting in my family happened long before I was born?¹³

Similarly to Erdrich, García manages to avoid sentimentality and naivety in portraying relationships between man and nature. Just as in the case of Native American writers, true immersion in the natural world is connected in García’s prose with a non-Western perspective, with the legacy of the colonized peoples of America. Ignatio’s fascination with the natural world, although sincere, is not equivalent with understanding it. In García’s fictional world it is women who understand nature intuitively and do not fall prey to the illusion that scientific description and cataloguing makes one the master of that realm. At the same time García does not equate women’s relationship with nature, and the extrasensory reality that it hides, with gaining a magical formula that may help them to solve all types of existential problems. Her favorite technique is ellipsis, which definitely helps her to portray the relationship between man and nature as multidimensional and complex. Thus García, like Erdrich, prefers to ask questions about the natural world and our place within it. We might see the raven at the end of *The Painted Drum* as the avatar of Netta and/or the product of Faye’s wishful thinking, and similarly we might perceive the owl that,

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 203-204.
according to Ignatío, “participated” in his birth, as an omen, but also as another of this character’s lies, who was looking for excuses for his actions (it would be better if his daughters perceived him as a doomed man who could not be blamed for all his actions and especially for the murder of their mother).

Marmolejo-McWatt also notices the importance of birds in *The Agüero Sisters*. She emphasizes Blanca’s likeliness to a bird in the description of her physical appearance or in the costume she chooses for a Cuban carnival. What is striking for me is that she gets shot while Ignatío is aiming at a bird, which might indicate that Blanca, similarly to Ignatío, has to pay a high price for playing with natural and supernatural forces. Similarly to Erdrich, García employs magical realism here because Blanca’s involvement in Santería, as well as her death, have both magical and rational explanations. The magical reason is her attachment to Santería’s animal transformation; Blanca wants to possess the power of nature so she becomes a part of it, a bird, and as a bird she falls prey to a hunter. But the same involvement in Santería is Blanca’s psychological refuge from an unhappy marriage and patriarchal Cuban culture, and her death is a coincidence or Ignacio’s final revenge for her betrayal. Magical realism does not aim to convince us that miracles happen, but it signals the presence of mysterious elements in the real world and expands the perception of reality, asking more questions than it provides answers to. Additionally, it makes us see Cuban folk culture not merely as a collection of primitive superstitions, but as a complex cultural space. Marmolejo-McWatt shares a similar conviction, even though she does not concentrate on the presence of magical realism, but Santería, as she writes:

Santería and the equation of Blanca with Ochun/Oshun is a way not only of demonstrating eloquently the silent power of women (through the power and the role of the goddess), but also of directing attention to indigenous folk beliefs and practices which underlie the surface orthodoxies of Cuban society and are themselves intrinsically subversive. Blanca, through Ochun/Oshun, “speaks” to the initiated and suggests that the true Cuban voice is to be heard in the submerged lore and spiritual practices of its people, which encode a life and a mode of being that is “revolutionary” in an entirely different way.

Therefore García cannot be accused of constructing her fictional world in a style marked by exotic ornaments typical for the commercial version of magical realism. For her female protagonists, nature is as important as history, which Ignatío was not

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15 Ibidem, p. 97.
16 Ibidem, p. 100.
able to understand. At the same time the female perspective does not guarantee learning and understanding everything, but it is more inclusive. García’s women understand that great history is not just the history of victories and defeats on a battlefield, but it must include the histories of families and private lives, part of which is the history of man’s relationships with nature that might nourish the development of holistic syncretic spirituality. In García’s fiction, men describe reality by dividing it into separate categories which leads to creating borders between ideas, whereas women try to connect and build networks, so basically it is the contrast between analysis and synthesis. The more extreme the characters become in their perception, the less they understand. The advantage of García is that she can convincingly expose the characters who fail to understand their histories, thus leaving the space for the reader’s interpretation of what brought about the failure, e.g. as in the excerpt in which Constantia realizes that sacrificing herself to the powers of nature cannot help her to find the meaning of life:

> It would be so easy to offer herself to this wind, to become one with the ocean, surrender herself to each harsh element. No mission but existence and cycle. Laws greater than any one sad thing.¹⁷

This kind of submission to nature characterizes the animal world and Constantia would have to discard her human consciousness and the ability of auto-reflection, so it is a utopia. In my opinion, Erdrich’s characters also realize this, despite the fact that many of them perceive the world from the perspective of Ojibwe animism, still even those who have the potential of animal transformation are deeply aware of their human limitations. It is probably connected with their mixed-blood legacy. Perhaps pre-Columbian Indians were able to become one with nature, but the mixed-blood Indians who inhabit contemporary ethnic literature have definitely lost this ability. García also describes the experience of “hyphenated” characters so it is not surprising that she uses history and nature in a similar way to Erdrich. Their characters repeatedly try to bridge the gaps between different perspectives, but they do not cherish any illusions that the gaps can be bridged completely because reconstructed tracks are ruined by the passage of time and failing memory. Still they will keep trying, because only in this way can they question the authoritarian control imposed by the discourse of the Western culture and fight for the shape of their cultural memory which ensures cultural integrity or even survival. As Dulcita concludes when she invokes her memories of Cuba abroad:

It made me realize how close we are to forgetting everything, how close we are to never existing at all.¹⁸

Adriana Méndez Rodenes is another critic who focused on the conflict between Ignatio and Blanca using historical context, i.e. the encroaching imperial policy of the U.S. on Cuba, which led to Castro’s revolution. This context is presented symbolically by the disappearance of the natural world the species of which Ignatio tries to collect. For Méndez Rodenes, natural history in the novel also addresses the issue of diasporic imagination; García nostalgically reconstructs the richness of the lost fauna and flora from the perspective of a Cuban immigrant in the U.S. making her readers aware of a less well-known history of the island. The tension between the patriarchal and matriarchal perspectives is no longer important; the critic notices that just as Blanca loses her fight with her patriarchal husband, her daughters represent matriarchal potential that their mother was not able to develop and they are both empowered by nature. Reina, by her affiliation with the thunders, and Constantia, by her secrets for creating natural cosmetics, start to ‘rule’ the nature that to some extent ruined their parents. Julee Tate elaborates more on the relationships between children and parents in her essay.¹⁹ According to her, in García’s novel the relationships with mothers affect those with the motherland and “maternal narratives are important to the daughter’s process of identity negotiation” (Roccio Davis quoted in Tate 160).

The relationship between García’s fictional world and Cuban history is also analyzed by Isabel Alvarez Borland. The critic agrees that history appears in the novel quite frequently and García often introduces it by means of the narrative device of Chinese boxes, similar to that of Gabriel García Márquez (Melquiades’ manuscript in One Hundred Years of Solitude). Ignatio’s diary is one of these inner texts which helps Constantia to understand the sadness that has always accompanied her. Alvarez is right when she notices that the diary registers two parallel histories. One is the history of the Agüero family and the other is the history of Cuba. Repeated dictatorship weakened the structure of Cuba, just as repeated violence impaired the structure of the family. Agüero belongs to the generation of Creoles who created the state of Cuba. Ignatio, born in 1904, shows the violence of tyrannical dictators like Eduardo Machado whose rule led to bloodshed and repression silenced just as the story of Blanca.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 286.
¹⁹ J. Tate, Matrilineal and Political Divisions In Cristina García’s “Dreaming in Cuban” and “The Agüero Sisters,” “Letras Femeninas” vol. 32, no. 2, 2006.
Alvarez also shows that García moves from the level of historical reflection to the level of universal philosophical investigation, trying to answer the question of what it means to be a human being. Ignatius tries to expose the exceptional condition of man, emphasizing the elements that differentiate him from animals, such as the freedom of choice between good and evil, but it does not prevent him from sacrificing the life of his wife for capturing the rare species of the bird. As Alvarez concludes, on the level of composition the history of Ignatius is connected with the history of Cuba as a natural wonder and she supports her argument with one of the most striking excerpts of the novel, in which the splendor of the Cuban nature contrasts with the moral downfall of Ignatius watching Blanca dying:

The day stole past in an hour. Clouds scrolled by, dragging their shadows across the watery land. I heard Blanca’s voice in the stirring of grasses and reeds, in the crisscrossing cranes overhead, in the swaying clumps of cow-lily leaves. All afternoon the Zapata clicked and rustled, clicked and rustled its fatal chorus, until a lone red-tailed hawk soared above us... Then, in the broken violet light of dusk, I carried her seventeen miles to the nearest village and reluctantly began to tell my lies.20

It is worth noting that in Erdrich the reader also witnesses this progression of reflection inspired by the particular context of the Ojibwe and American culture towards a universal philosophical message. The Painted Drum is not the story of conversion from American into Native American, but the story of individual and collective healing after the trauma resulting from the death of a beloved person. Erdrich wisely exposes the situation in which no culture can produce a quick and effective remedy; the process of healing depends on time and personal involvement. It is not the drum which undertakes decisions, but people. The drum is just an incentive, but the impulse to reshape one’s memories must come from a human being.

Cristina García also explains a lot as far as the interpretation of her novel is concerned in an interview from 2007. When asked by the interviewer how her exploration of memory affects character development, García responds:

Memory is a reflection of our own fiction about our lives. Writing characters really means writing the fiction they would write about their own lives.21

The novelist further defines memory as overrated, “eternally elusive, subjective, and open to interpretation” and adds that “I have come to understand memory as a personal necessity for creating one’s own history. For me, it is not about reclaiming

20 C. García, The Agüero Sisters, p. 298.
anything but about embroidering and discovering more about what I don’t know about what I think I know." 22 This process of embroidering is particularly visible in the perspective of Ignatio, whose story belongs to a broader tradition of naturalists’ writing on Cuba. García notices that this perspective is anthropological and outsider, and it is meant to affect the memories of Ignatio’s daughters for whom he wrote the diary. Luckily they refuse to believe in one version of history. At this point it is again worth comparing the perspective of García’s characters with that of Erdrich’s protagonists who usually remember the past as well as Bernard Shaawano. The main problem of the Ojibwe narrators in Erdrich is very often making others hear and understand, whereas in the case of García’s the biggest challenge of her characters is to find out what happened and whose version is true. What unites all the protagonists is the conviction that memory is crucial, as Reina in García’s novel says “To be forgotten … is the final death.” 23

García also claims that she tries to write against the rigidity of perception of Cuban identity. She says:

What strikes me more is the notion of Cuban identity—the rigidity involved in that. 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 Constancia 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. 24

The novelist adds that for this reason her Blanca is a blank narrative Ignatio must fill with his “scientific” description:

For at least two reasons, he needed to kill Blanca: she was an utter mystery to him, and he needed to put her under the glass; and she was something to collect and understand in his own fiction of Cuba. 25

In my opinion, Louise Erdrich also writes against such rigid perception of Native Americans, but she has to deal with the stereotypes created about Indians, starting from the Noble Savage and Vanishing Indians and ending with Western movies’ and New Age disfigurations. Similarly to García, she often resorts to a sense of

22 Ibidem.
23 C. García, The Agüero Sisters.
24 I. Irizarry, An Interview…
humour; in *The Painted Drum* she introduces the character of Kit Tatro, a white man who wants to be more Indian than true Indians. In contrast, her Native American characters are convincing as authentic representatives of the Ojibwe culture because Erdrich does not idealize them but grants them the right to be human.

In conclusion, the memories of the characters of both Erdrich and García depend on their courage to reconstruct family histories. These histories are in both cases connected with ethno-histories, i.e. the history of Ojibwes in *The Painted Drum* and the history of Cubans in *The Agüero Sisters*. In both novels, memories are shaped by lies or silence and the process of defalsification is long and demands lots of sacrifice. Both Erdrich and García use embedded narratives consisting of many perspectives. Thus their history reconstruction is dialogic. They also rely on magical realist strategies that enable them to broaden the perspective of intercultural storytelling by making space for non-Euro-American components such as animistic religions. In this way, they construct the narratives of transculturation that address the postcolonial dilemmas of characters who represent more than one tradition, history and religion. Erdrich explains in the author’s note how important these different story-telling traditions are:

> As in all of my books, no sacred knowledge is revealed. I check carefully to make certain everything I use is written down already.²⁷

To some extent, they are also interested in pan-Indian (Erdrich) and transnational (García) perspectives because they try to manifest the problems that are important not only for Ojibwes (other Native American tribes are also interested in regaining stolen Indian artifacts) and Cuban-Americans (Cubans also have to face complexities of the bloody history of the island which still has to deal with its colonial legacy).

Both Erdrich and García are far from claiming that reconstructing ethnic past and re-shaping cultural memory is easy; their characters have to, first of all, face the legacy of racism of American culture and the second class citizen status [some of their characters hardly belong to any culture]. Neither novelist is naïve, nor do they present ethnic legacies as a blessing. Just as when Faye approaches Bernard she approaches the past trauma of her ethnic group, when Constantia opens Ignatio’s diary she has to face the troubled history of Cubans. The theme of alcoholism is especially important in Erdrich and alcoholism is a colonial legacy, just like forceful conversion. Old Shaawano is a victim of colonization because he has forgotten his


old gods and he has lost his tribal or clan connections and he chose alcohol as a solution to his grief. Erdrich does not accuse American colonizers directly when she presents the story of Old Shaawano, but the alienation of Old Shaawano is contrasted with the communal life of Simon Jack and his wives, to whom Old Shaawano’s wife escapes. The fact that Old Shaawano is alone in his mourning should not be ignored. Alcohol also ruins Native American families many years after Old Saawano’s death; Bernard’s grandchildren almost died because their mother spent too much time comforting herself with alcohol. Of course Erdrich puts lots of blame on her characters, all of them have suffered the consequences of colonization and only some are so weak or desperate to choose alcohol.

Similarly, García shows a bigger historical context for the story of Ignatio who is a victim of colonization in a different way. His family was Creole and their burden is connected with their underestimation of Afro-Caribbean culture. We are sorry for Ignatio that he has been shaped by racism and machismo, but we also see his responsibility for his downfall. And it is extremely important than in Erdrich and García we have both the memories of the colonizers and the colonized reflected on the level of formal solutions, i.e. hybrid forms of narration. Both authors chose the Euro-American genre of the novel and include in their narratives cause and effect historical contexts, but simultaneously, apart from referring to Euro-American tradition, they use indigenous myths that are grafted onto historical perspectives and they expand them. What happens both in The Painted Drum and The Agüero Sisters is similar to what was introduced by Alejo Carpentier’s The Kingdom of This World, where the Euro-American historical perspective clashed with the Afro-Caribbean mythical order. Erdrich and García are similarly interested in the tension between the reconstruction of the buried Native-American and Carribean history and the myths that have shaped contemporary ethnic cultures. Just like the drum in Erdrich’s novel might signify the spiritual presence of Native American culture within American culture, which has done so much to silence it forever, the birds in García’s novel might refer to the spiritual presence of Afro-Carribans in Cuban culture, which is not appreciated by many descendants of Creoles like Ignatio. Gustavo Perez Firmat (Perez Firmat 1994) wrote a lot about this paradox of Cuban culture, which he compared to ajiaco, the dish cooked from very different ingredients, but he noticed that although the Cubans are not attached to the concept of ethnic purity, their culture is racist. Luckily for Erdrich’s characters, almost all her Native American characters are still able to “hear the drum”, to recognize the originality of their ethnic tradition, but unfortunately for Ignatio Agüero, he remains deaf and blind. There is some hope for Constantia, though, who at least makes an effort to understand Cuba in all its complexity.
Catherine Rainwater repeatedly examines the strategies of ethnic writers using a double cultural code, and I see this code in the clash of the historical and the mythical in the cultural memory of Erdrich’s and García’s characters, and I agree with the purpose that, according to Rainwater, this double coding has. As she writes:

Unfolding within the strictures of Eurocentric written narrative, these texts nevertheless demand non-Eurocentric interpretations based on nonwestern worldviews. Thus the dominant discourse is readily “counter-colonized” by “subversive” semiotic practices that, in turn, become a part of the dominant discourse. Such counter-colonizing texts expand the Euro-American epistemological frame and facilitate the entry of other such texts – and their concomitant worldviews and “realities” – into the dominant domain.28

The issue of cultural memory is crucial here because the characters of Erdrich and García cannot build their identity on history exclusively, not only because the Euro-American understanding of history excludes myth that is so important for them, but because Native Americans distrust history based on written documents for two reasons: one is their reliance on oral tradition and the other is deception they experienced many times when their land was stolen on the basis of written treaties. The case of Cubans is different, but if we treat García’s narrative as counter-colonizing, we understand that it might have been written as a reaction to the often silenced history of Afro-Carribbeans on Cuba who in the official narrative were treated as “the obstacles to progress,” too superstitious both in the eyes of the Creole landowners and later from the perspective of atheist communists. Memory seems to be more capacious than history because it examines the sources which are not only historical documents and includes oral history. Maurice Halbwachs was one of the first scholars who noticed that we cannot speak about individual memory when we exclude the collective context29 which might be illustrated by the way in which Erdrich’s and García’s characters retain their memories. Aleida Assmann defines cultural memory as the memory based on artefacts such as texts, pictures, sculptures as well as holidays, habits and rituals.30 They together compose the code that needs constant interpretation through historical changes so it can fit the present. These processes are crucial for transculturation, which similarly requires the constant conscious modification of one’s tradition. Erdrich and García do not write

28 C. Rainwater, Dreams of Fiery Stars. The Transformations of Native American Fiction, Philadelphia 1999, p. 34.
30 A. Assman, Przestrzenie pamięci. Formy i przemiany pamięci kulturowej, in Pamięć zbiorowa...
about syncretic religions as past habits but show their significance for contemporary Native-Americans and Cuban-Americans. They show the participants of ethnic cultures that try to answer the question what is means today to be Native-American or Latino/a, to what extent we can rely on our memories and how they are they produced.

We as readers are also challenged while approaching this kind of literature. Apart from decoding its different cultural contexts, we might also wonder about the attitude of ethnic writers to their mixed-blood heritage at the turn of the 20th century: are the works by Erdrich and García a farewell to their Ojibwe and Cuban past? In my opinion, definitely not. They present Native-American and Cuban-American culture as alive and vibrant, always negotiating between the continuation and transformation of ethnic tradition and history. For both, memory is crucial for self-definition. The last – but not least – question is how the memories of Erdrich’s and García’s characters contribute to the picture of contemporary America: multi-ethnic on the outside, but increasingly racist inside. They write against the Euro-American utopia. Contrary to the narratives of Spanish conquistadors and discoverers, contrary to the visions of Puritan pilgrims, America has always been far from Paradise, the Promised Land, a Pastoral Dream, Virgin Wilderness. The history of contact is the history of racism with very few exceptions. Even though *The Painted Drum* and *The Agüero Sisters* do not deal with racism in the context of the contemporary U.S. they expose the colonial and neo-colonial practices from the past that have tragically affected the lives of their characters.

**Literature**


