

ISOLATION ON AND OFF THE ISLAND:
THE POLITICS OF DISPLACEMENT IN
CONTEMPORARY SPANISH CARIBBEAN FICTION

By

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To my husband Phil for his unwavering love and support

and

To my daughter Belén Amanda

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: ISOLATION ON AND OFF THE ISLAND

The Spanish Caribbean of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is defined by both its proximity to and separation from the United States. In terms of geography, water is a dominant metaphor that isolates and connects Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico in a constant state of movement to and from the mainland. While this trope of movement predates Spanish colonization, its recent permutations in contemporary Spanish Caribbean fiction have shifted the meaning of historical migratory patterns. Movement to and from the United States complicates the superficial binary opposition of island and mainland, creating a third space defined by displacement and alienation. The result of this absence is disjuncture, both in terms of history, geography, and culture. Contemporary Spanish Caribbean writers reveal the aftermath of this fragmentation by reading their own culture from a place of ambiguity. Cuban authors Zoé Valdés and Oscar Hijuelos, Dominican authors Junot Díaz and Loida Maritza Pérez, and Puerto Rican authors Rosario Ferré and Luis Rafael Sánchez are all displaced writers in their own right, and read their countries from the outside, both linguistically, culturally, and geographically. Their writing exposes the historical misalignments that shape the contemporary Spanish Caribbean and the pervasive displacement of its people.

The relationship between fragmentation and isolation, as well as the sense of alienation that results from this association, grounds the works that I study. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines fragmentation as “A breaking or separation into fragments.” Additionally, when used in a biological context, fragmentation is defined as the “separation into parts which form new individuals.” Both definitions are useful when considering migration and isolation because they

refer both to the breaking apart of families and themes of identity. Turning again to the *OED*, isolation is defined as “The action of isolating; the fact or condition of being isolated or standing alone; separation from other things or persons; solitariness.” However, especially in psychological and sociological contexts, isolation is “The separation of a person or thing from its normal environment or context, either for purposes of experiment and study or as a result of its being, for some reason, set apart.” This second definition, and its notion of being “set apart” helps to explain the sense of “not belonging” experienced by the characters in the novels that I study.

While the term displacement is well-established as a means to understand the repercussions of Spanish colonization, I argue that the specific relationship of the United States with the Spanish Caribbean and the alienation it produces better accounts for social realities within its codified borders and its diaspora. Again relying on the *OED*, “alienation” is defined as “estrangement; the state of being estranged or alienated.” Historically, “alienation” also meant “The taking of something from a person, esp. without authorization; appropriation.” For my purposes, a sense of belonging and place is this “something” taken, and its effects on families are both alienating and isolating. The term I use for this is fragmentation. In these works, fragmentation is first a political reality due United States’ policies that are in fact those of neo-colonization. I read this colonization through its cultural, linguistic, and structural aftermath in Latino works that define Spanish Caribbean diasporic literature.

Specifically, I am interested in how children of those who survived historical trauma inherit both the scars of their parents’ memories and the pain of realizing that the place they imagine as home no longer exists. I use the term historical trauma to describe particular, defining

moments of the twentieth century in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico and their repercussions on the U.S. mainland. The *OED* defines trauma in terms of the somatic and the psychoanalytical. In a pathological sense, trauma is a “wound;” in psychiatry, it refers to “a psychic injury, esp. one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed; an internal injury.” I argue that both definitions help explain the isolating aftermath, or sense of “not belonging,” due to historical misalignments in the Spanish Caribbean.

Internal familial struggles can be mapped onto internal political dynamisms in the Spanish Caribbean that are exacerbated by migration. While an earlier sense of “not belonging” is present in Boom and post-Boom literature, and arguably before, it excludes the linguistic, racial, and gender concerns explored in the works that I study. I read these works through Tato Laviera’s “nideaquíndeallá” to explain how Latino literature re-imagines “not belonging” as a “third space” that is “neither here nor there.”¹ This “no place” is particularly painful because it creates another source of pain for people from the Spanish Caribbean living in the United States. In these novels, cultural fragmentation leads to this sense of being “no place” that is embedded in historical and familial trauma.

The cultural consequences of “not belonging,” a result of migration patterns to and from the United States, predominate works by Valdés, Hijuelos, Díaz, Pérez, Ferré and Rafael Sánchez. Each in turn addresses an immigrant or exiled family and how each generation experiences displacement and alienation. In the case of Cuba, the aftermath of the Cuban

¹ Laviera’s “nideaquíndeallá” is an invented, compound word from the Spanish “ni de aquí ni de allá.” While “aquí” in Spanish has an accent, in Laviera’s term, it does not. I have remained faithful to his poem and have left the accent off of his compound word.

Revolution and the U.S. embargo lasting more than fifty years informs decisions of exile.² Zoé Valdés's *La nada cotidiana* (1995) and Oscar Hijuelos's *Dark Dude* (2008) and *Beautiful María of My Soul: Or the True Story of María Cifuentes y García, the Lady Behind a Famous Song* (2010), the repercussions of exile, especially for those who left the island at a young age, combine with themes of isolation and betrayal. In these three novels, the contentious relationship between the United States and Cuba exposes familial divides that were present even before the Cuban Revolution.³ These novels demonstrate that Cuban families are divided by a political situation that informs the exile experience and forces contentious choices. Dominican American works *Drown* (1996) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao: A Novel* (2007) by Junot Díaz and *Geographies of Home* (1999) by Loida Maritza Pérez address the legacies of corruption manifested in immigrant families, suggesting that culture and place are not mutually inclusive. Once again, the United States plays a neo-colonizing role in the Dominican Republic. The United States invaded and occupied the island from 1916 to 1924, and intervened to depose the popularly elected leftist Juan Bosch in 1965. Moreover, without the United States' support, Trujillo's brutal dictatorship would not have been possible. In Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (1976) and Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), Puerto Rico's linguistic and political marginality combine in both novels to expose the island's political status as a root cause of its stagnation. Puerto Rico, as a Commonwealth or *Estado Libre Asociado* of the United States, has remained, in some form, a liminal political entity since U.S.

² The United States imposed an economic, commercial, and financial embargo on Cuba on October 19, 1960. Referred to as "el bloqueo," or "the blockade," in Cuba, this policy has placed a stranglehold on the economy. According to Margaret Pepper's research, the Cuban government estimates that U.S. sanctions have cost the economy an estimated \$685 million annually.

³ In his chapter "Latino US Literature" in Philip Swanson's *The Companion to Latin American Studies* (2003), Luis explains this idea with his analysis of Julia Álvarez's *The Agüero Sisters* (1997).

intervention in 1898. As members of the same generation, Ferré and Rafael Sánchez attempt to reconcile class conflicts and colonial legacy with increasing U.S. influence. All of these works underscore the relationship between the past and present and how the consequences of displacement posit contemporary Spanish Caribbean fiction in the transitional space between cultures, ultimately leading to a sense of alienation.⁴

Latino Literature: A Definition

In *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States* (1997), William Luis studies Dominican American, Puerto Rican American, and Cuban American writers as part of an interconnected field, laying the groundwork for the growing field of Latino literary studies by finding common tropes in authors with shared Hispanic Caribbean ties. By including Latino Caribbean Literature as part of the Latino literary and historical continuum, Luis argues that this literature (and implicitly, Latino literature in general), traces the shifting identities of Latinos as part of both a colonial and postcolonial context.

In the preface to his study, Luis announces the innovative nature of his research by redefining the term “Latino” to emphasize the cultural tension between Hispanic and North American cultures (x). By definition, the term “Latino” connotes a “culture of resistance and a language that mediates between their parents’ identity and the culture of their present reality” (x). This definition is not merely cultural; however, implicitly, it refers to both the socio-economic pressures and the cultural referents that combine to describe a specific experience. In

⁴ In his seminal work, *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States* (1997), William Luis argues that the Spanish Caribbean is defined by exchange in terms of history, culture, and literature.

terms of his study, Luis analyzes Latino Caribbean literature within the parameters of the Latino literature he defines; positing Latino Caribbean writers as part of the group that writes “an ethnic literature that responds to concerns about their isolation within a dominant culture that has denied them an identity and access to mainstream U.S. society” (xi). According to Luis, there exists an essential difference between the term “Hispanic” writers, those born or raised in their parent’s country of origin, whose first language is Spanish, and “Latino” writers, who were “born and raised in the United States and who for the most part write in English” (xi). This difference is linguistic and thematic, based on the vernacular and also on the search for identity and origin in the United States. For Luis, this distinction is an essential component of Latino literature in general, and Latino Caribbean literature in particular, because it stresses the search for identity within a dominant culture that continues to discriminate against racial and cultural “Others.”

Moreover, Latino literature is part of the post-Boom literary movement. Not only does it share a similar commercial success to writing produced by Boom writers, it continues the political, historical, linguistic, and structural precedents of the movement. Latino literature emerges as a response to the historical, political and racial realities of Latino writers born or raised in the United States. An understanding of Latino literature must include an examination of Hispanic literature. As Luis posits in *Dance Between Two Cultures*, Hispanic literature “consists of works by writers who were raised and educated in their native countries and later emigrated or were forced to flee to the United States” (xi). This distinction differs from other scholars— notably Juan Flores, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and Ilan Stavans—who are not as precise as Luis in

their use of the term Latino. Within the post-Boom period, Latino literature becomes an organized response to oppression and a search for an identifiable voice for a generation of writers brought up in the United States who demanded the same kind of rights as Anglo-Americans (Luis 279).

The Latin American Boom

Encompassing the 1960s and early 1970s, the Latin American Boom is a literary movement that marks a period when a few works by a group of Latin American novelists gained worldwide prominence. While some critics argue that the Boom refers to five authors and five works: Carlos Fuentes and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1963), Julio Cortázar and *Rayuela* (1963), Mario Vargas Llosa and *La ciudad y los perros* (1963), Guillermo Cabrera Infante and *Tres tristes tigres* (1967) and Gabriel García Márquez and *Cien años de soledad* (1967), others support a more inclusive list that takes into account this group's antecedents and contemporaries. Even though these five authors listed above exerted wide and relatively undisputed influence, the names of other writers could be included as members of this literary movement. For example, authors including José Donoso, Juan Carlos Onetti, Manuel Puig, Juan Rulfo and Ernesto Sábato share many of the characteristics of the Boom, including critical recognition, commercial success, and political activism. In addition, writers of the previous generation, including Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier and José Lezama Lima, so-called members of the "proto-Boom," might merit inclusion in a thorough discussion of this movement. Any understanding of the Boom requires an examination of the historical, literary, and political events that mark this era in Latin America. The novels of the Boom are both experimental and escapist in terms of their

content and structure and are best understood as part of a movement that encompasses them as such.

Of course, the political climate of Latin America, and Cuba in particular, strongly influenced the dynamics of the Boom. The politics of the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution and the military authoritarian regimes in Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Brazil formed the background for the works by Boom writers. Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola cites the Cuban Revolution and the United States' attempt to dismantle it through the Bay of Pigs (Playa Girón) invasion (1961) as the start of this period of turmoil (5). The severing of ties with the United States, and joining the Soviet Union, led to the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962). In addition, throughout this period, military regimes dictated domestic and foreign policy in nearly half of all Latin American countries. To cite just one example, on September 11, 1973 General Augusto Pinochet overthrew Chile's democratic government led by Salvador Allende. In Argentina, the 1970s marked the beginning of the Dirty War and more than a decade of human rights abuses. Many of these authoritarian governments were supported by the United States, who not only supplied their militaries, but helped conceal the torture of political opponents as part of the CIA-sponsored "Operation Condor." This climate of political upheaval plays an important role in the content and activism of many of the Booms authors who are characterized in part by their politicization.

The Boom brought significant changes in the interpretation of both history and literature. Prior to the Boom, Latin American novelists were marginal players on the international literary scene, but by the mid-1970s, they became central figures, especially in the genre of the novel. Part of this success is due to the crucial role of publishing houses based in Mexico City, Buenos

Aires, Santiago de Chile, but most notably La Habana and Barcelona. In Cuba, the influence of the group *Orígenes* and the literary magazine and literary supplement *Lunes de Revolución* and publishing house Casa de las Américas marked the island as a major literary center. In Barcelona, the editorial powerhouse Seix Barral promoted Latin American authors both to the domestic market and abroad. Seix Barral published Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* (1962) and Manuel Puig's *La traición de Rita Hayworth* (1971), among others, but is perhaps more influential for its literary prize *Premio Biblioteca Breve*. During the 1960s, Latin American authors including Mario Vargas Llosa (*La ciudad y los perros*), Guillermo Cabrera Infante (*Vista del amanecer en el trópico*, which later became *Tres tristes tigres*, 1964), and Carlos Fuentes (*Cambio de piel*, 1967) were all winners of this prestigious and lucrative award. This prize, awarded for literary innovation, marks a major impetus for international exposure for Latin American novelists. Moreover, under the tutelage of literary agent Carmen Balcells, Latin American novelists became literary superstars.

In addition to the commercial success of the movement, the Boom introduces a series of aesthetic and stylistic techniques to the novel. As Randolph Pope explains in "The Spanish American Novel from 1950-1975" (1996), some of these innovations include the inclusion of colloquial language, the increased complexity and number of characters, a breaking with traditional notions of narrative chronology, and the emphasis on the reader as a participant in the creation of the text (245). As the movement progresses, novelists continue linguistic experimentation, and begin to look inward with reflections on metafiction as well as meditations

about their own writing. For Pope, the Boom is a literary trajectory that ultimately suggests a doomed postmodern society where all becomes both available and insignificant (250).⁵

In terms of its defining characteristics, the Boom is marked by experimental novels written by young, white male authors. Vargas Llosa in his essay “Carta de batalla por Tirant lo Blanc” (1969) describes the Boom as typified by the “novela total” that he describes as “fantástica, histórica, militar, social, erótica, psicológica” (11). This description encompasses the myriad factors that converge to shape Boom novels’ content, but does not give due attention to the linguistic experimentation and fragmentation of narrative structures. For example, the baroque language in novels by Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, and Severo Sarduy speak to the creation of a unique reality within many Boom works. Novels like Fuentes’s *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1963), Cabrera Infante’s *Tres tristes tigres* (1967), and Vargas Llosa’s *Conversación en la catedral* (1969) are clear examples of fragmented narrative structures. To cite a specific case, *Rayuela* has 155 chapters, the last 99 of which are designated as “expendable.” The book can either be read sequentially from chapters 1-56 or by “hopscotching” through all 155 chapters (except chapter 55) by following a table that ultimately leaves the reader trapped in a repetitious re-reading of the last two chapters of the novel. This structural openness, along with the presence of meta-author and critic Morelli, sets up its fragmented structure. Such literary experimentation is characteristic of many novels of the Boom.

Experimentation is not limited to structure, however, as many of the protagonists in Boom novels experience a sense of fragmentation and alienation. According to Stephen Boldy in

⁵ Notably, Pope does not include Cabrera Infante’s *Tres tristes tigres* in his discussion of the novels of the Boom.

The Narrative of Carlos Fuentes: Family, Text, Nation (2002), one of the salient features of Fuentes's work is its polyphony. For Boldy, Fuentes's texts are characterized by multiple voices of the same subject defined by perpetual change. In Fuentes's most noted Boom novel, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), the text opens with an accusatory second person singular (*tú*) that marks a constant displacement of pronouns. For example, as Artemio Cruz anguishes in the hospital, he reflects on his body "Soy, cuerpo. Queda. Se va... se va... se disuelve en esta fuga de nervios y escamas, de celdas y glóbulos dispersos. Mi cuerpo, en el que este médico mete sus dedos. Miedo. Siento el miedo de pensar en mi propio cuerpo" (12). Artemio Cruz is clearly a fragmented being; his story is told in an "él" that narrates the past, a "tú" that narrates the future, and a "yo" that narrates the present. He is reeling from the death of his tío Pedro and his mentor Lunero and finds himself trapped cycles of corruption and idealism as he searches for redemption. He seeks to separate himself from a past that has left him feeling alone and agonizing on his deathbed. As the novel progresses, the story unfolds as a search for the unified self, from a divided, isolated subject to one who understands past mistakes and sees the possibility for salvation.

Like *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, Gabriel García Márquez's seminal novel *Cien años de soledad* (1967) also dismantles linear notions of chronology and narration. In this novel, characters function within a spiral system of time that encompasses several worlds and periods. The novel is based on mythological, cyclical, and historical temporal referents that converge to tell the story of the foundation, history, and ultimate destruction of Macondo. While its temporal structure can be seen as fragmented, it too is ultimately a novel of unity as it suggests the possibility for future redemption. In fact, Macondo can be read as a metonymic depiction of the

history of Latin American from before the Encounter to a future Armageddon. It is a story of Aureliano Buendía and his quest to reclaim a lost paradise. Through the reconstruction of an archetypal world (Macondo), Buendía seeks to rescue himself from solitude and isolation caused both by guilt and fear.

La muerte de Artemio Cruz and *Cien años de soledad* share an intent to return to the beginning, to one's origins, as a means to correct the past. In fact, the five novels posited as quintessential Boom works can be seen as redemptive projects. Their protagonists are alienated but, ultimately, they find themselves. These novels' linguistic experimentation, perhaps with the exception of Cortázar's *Rayuela*, gives way to a cyclical structure that suggests the possibility of change if not complete redemption for their characters. In these works, characters find redemption from their alienation through created communities and reconstructed national stories that allow them to become reconstituted subjects. It is as if the experimentation, even in the most extreme cases of these works, drives the narrative to the inevitable rebirth of its protagonists. While they may be trapped in repetitious cycles, these patterns are exposed as such, suggesting the possibility of redemption for both characters and their countries of origin.

According to Rodríguez Monegal, it is impossible to conceive of the Boom without first reevaluating the novel that anticipates it, what he terms "la nueva novela" (38). Rodríguez Monegal criticizes Donoso's tendency to undervalue antecedents to the Boom arguing that this point of contention is one of the factors feeding the bitter polemic about this literary movement. (37, 38). Donoso, for his part, insists upon what he terms an "oscuridad voluntaria" among both writers and readers that causes what he calls a lack of "padres literarios" (92). These two distinct visions regarding the importance of antecedents to the Boom help to explain the debate that

surrounds this literary movement. The fact that these two authors are unable to find common ground regarding the influences of the Boom suggests the impossibility of reaching an agreement about the novels that constitute the Boom itself.

Part of the polemic surrounding the Boom is more political than literary. This debate centers on the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution and the intellectual community's response to the debate about the obligations of intellectuals to the Revolution and the now infamous "caso Padilla." A major turning point in the discourse of the Boom is the debate surrounding Oscar Collazos's "La encrucijada del lenguaje" (1970) and the responses to this article by Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa. This debate demonstrates the dispute about the role of the writer (especially one of leftist leanings) and the Cuban Revolution. According to Collazos, contemporary Latin American novels that "abordar de estructuras narrativas retomadas de la novelística europea y norteamericana" abandon their role as voices of the Revolution and their authors demonstrate what he terms "una irresponsabilidad intelectual" (7). For Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa, however, the same narrative innovations that Collazos criticizes embody, for them, the spirit of the ideology of the Revolution. Whereas Collazos laments the capitalist underpinnings of North American novelists, Vargas Llosa sees the benefit of writers' freedom that reflects his "experiencias vitales" both inside and outside of the political arena ("Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones" 83). This debate that embodies the definition of a writer of the Revolution ("un escritor revolucionario") reflects the political atmosphere at the close of the 1960s as one that underscores the polarization of Latin American intellectuals.

Given the Cuban Revolution's seminal role in the Boom, it serves as a guidepost for the movement's major works. If January 1, 1959 marks the official "Triumph" of the Cuban

Revolution, it is a natural beginning to the Boom. While the Boom's predecessors merit analysis and recognition, it is this date that truly marks the start of the Boom. This choice undermines Pope's argument, but it supports the Boom's nature as not only literary, but also historical and political. Its conclusion, then, becomes the resolution of the "caso Padilla" in 1971, a year that marks a distinct break by many writers from the Revolution. This limiting the Boom to the decade of the 1960s removes "post-Boom" novelists and transitional writers from the movement's core. By thus contracting the Boom's scope, the movement can be analyzed in terms of its most important novels.⁶

If Cuba becomes the touchstone of the movement, the Boom's major novels must in some way share the literary, historical, and political trends that characterize Cuba in the 1960s. The first two years of the Cuban Revolution coincide with the Boom's heyday in Cuba. The international impact of literary journals such as *Lunes de Revolución* (1959-61), *Nuestro Tiempo*, *Ciclón*, *Carteles*; the publishing prowess of Casa de las Américas; and the supplanting of *Lunes de Revolución* with the UNEAC coincide with the major trends of both the Revolution and the Boom. Along with the five quintessential works listed, the Boom could include Vargas Llosa's *Conversación en la catedral* (1969), Donoso's *El obscuro pájaro de la noche* (1970). But by the time of the publication of *Conversación*, Vargas Llosa could not replicate the commercial and literary success of *La ciudad y los perros*. While Donoso might wish to be included, his novel misses the heyday of Seix Barral and the Premio Biblioteca Breve. Alas, perhaps there is a reason for consensus that the Boom is comprised of five books by five authors.

⁶ See William Luis's introduction to the Volume 113 of the Dictionary of Literary Biographies' *Modern Latin American Fiction Writers, First Series*, xi-xv.

Latino Literature's Connections to the Latin American Boom

Latino Literature is part of the post-Boom literary movement. Not only does Latino literature share a similar commercial success to that of Boom writers, it continues the political, historical, linguistic, and structural precedents of the movement. Latino literature emerges as a response to the historical, political, and racial realities of Latino writers born or raised in the United States. Moreover, Latino literature also emerges within the literary context of the post-Boom. If we understand Cuba as centrally important to the Boom movement, this island comes to represent how Latino literature fits into the post-Boom period. Cuban writers belonging to this period, including Reinaldo Arenas, Miguel Barnet, Nancy Morejón, and Zoé Valdés, benefitted from the island's literary success in the first decade of the Cuban Revolution, exposing them to international audiences, affording them publishing possibilities, and bestowing upon them literary accolades.⁷ These writers, among notable others such as fellow countryman Severo Sarduy, Argentine Manuel Puig, Peruvian Isabel Allende, and Mexican Elena Poniatowska, are part of the same group of post-Boom authors. As Frederick M. Nunn argues in *Collisions with History: Latin American Fiction and Social Science from El Boom to the New World Order* (2001), all can be considered as “products of the Boom” (157).

The political climate in Cuba led two of these writers, Reinaldo Arenas and Zoé Valdés, to seek exile in the face of increased political repression. In contrast, both Miguel Barnet and Nancy Morejón have become Cuban symbols of its notion of “Revolutionary” writing, achieving

⁷ To cite a few examples, Reinaldo Arenas's *Celestino antes del alba* won first honorable mention in 1966 in the UNEAC's Cirilio Villaverde National Competition and his *El mundo alucinante* (1968) was awarded *Le Monde's* First Prize for foreign novels; Miguel Barnet won the Distinction for National Culture, La Giraldilla de la Habana, and the 1992 National Prize of Literature; Nancy Morejón won the 2002 National Literature Prize and the 2006 Golden Wreath Award.

international recognition and accolades as well as the approbation of the Cuban State. These four writers are emblematic of possible responses to the Revolution, demonstrating that there is no singular definition for what writing means in Castro's Cuba. Taking their major generic contributions, it becomes possible to understand these four Cuban authors as representative of novels of autobiography and political exile written in the United States (Arenas), novels of political exile written outside the United States (Valdés), the re-inscription of the marginalized into national literature (Morejón), and the testimonial novel (Barnet). Their legacies as post-Boom writers continue as they become models for Latino literature written in the United States.

The post-Boom

The Spanish American Boom as a literary movement can be limited to the decade of the 1960s, causing a subsequent phenomenon known as the post-Boom or "Boom junior." The Boom is generally restricted to white male writers who are members of the intellectual upper middle class, authors like Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and Julio Cortázar. In fact, many post-Boom authors wrote before the end of the Boom, though they are not generally include as part of the "Boom canon." Examples include Manuel Puig and Severo Sarduy, whose works' linguistic fragmentation and generic experimentation usually posit them as transitional writers from the Boom to post-Boom. These writers emphasize literary theory, especially the roles of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, in the development of their stylized, neo-baroque, texts.

Of course, the genre and gender constraints of the Boom eliminate other productive writers during the 1960s and beyond. The post-Boom includes female novelists like Isabel

Allende and Elena Poniatowska whose structural experimentation shares characteristics with novels such as *Rayuela* (1963). Moreover, the post-Boom incorporates the *novela testimonial*, with the notable examples of Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) and Daisy Rubiera Castillo's *Reyita, sencillamente* (1997). Tellingly, many authors included in the post-Boom write about race and suggest the need for ethnic inclusivity in literature. While some of these works were contemporaries of Boom literature, they are not studied as such. Post-Boom writers attempt inclusivity and suggest new inroads for "national" literatures that include women and people of African and Asian descent, in addition to genres other than the novel. This attempt to broaden the parameters of the literary canon, as well as to encompass themes of race and gender, has important consequences for Latino literature.

Alienation and Latino Literature

While alienation has been a dominant characteristic of literature since, at least, the nineteenth century, in the contemporary Spanish Caribbean novels that I study, it evolves from an intellectual search for belonging to a struggle to overcome the sense of being alienated from one's family or society. Examining this kind of estrangement in more recent works helps clarify the trajectory of isolation that marks Spanish American fiction during the past century. The works that I study are less about intellectual alienation than a search for inclusion as members of multiple communities. In fact, the search for belonging is more than a quest for intellectual expression; it is an examination of self from the border.

By tracing how these novels portray estrangement from family and culture of origin, I choose to focus on personal history; what I see as a result is that a national space turns out to

incorporate two distinct spaces that in turn posit a third that is neither island nor mainland but encompasses both. For instance, the Cuban Revolution created a population vacuum that touches both exiles from the island and those who have remained on it to this day, leading to a shared sense of personal loss in either case. I have this sense of loss in mind when I speak of a third space.

Tato Laviera's "nideaquinideallá"

In his collection *Mixturao and Other Poems* (2008), Tato Laviera examines the correlation of race and language with alienation and displacement. For Laviera, the isolation experienced by characters like Yunior in *Drown* and Rico in *Dark Dude* are examples of what he terms "nideaquinideallá," a feeling of "no place" that emerges as a result of not fitting in. Laviera's answer to this feeling of estrangement is embracing a third, hybrid space that celebrates rather than isolates cultural markers of difference. Laviera opposes the notion that exile must lead to disaffection; rather, he argues that cultural hybridity supports multiplicity, especially in terms of linguistic expression. As William Luis argues in his introduction to this collection, Laviera combines Spanish, English, and urban slang to forgo an allegiance with a single culture (ix). The result is a "third place" and "in-between state" that both opens a new space and prevents exclusive identification with one's country of origin or adoptive country (x).

Laviera's articulation of exile as a possibility for creation comes full-circle with the role of the alienated intellectual posited by M.H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1973). For Abrams, "the Romantic object is usually cut off from its context in the ordinary world and in common experience and assigned an isolated existence in

the self-limited and self-sufficing world of art” (418). Laviera refuses to see artistic expression as “self-limited and self-sufficing” even as he ostensibly agrees with the notion of a separation from one’s “context in the ordinary world.”

Laviera seeks to re-appropriate history to include all races in an attempt to find a voice that allows for the expressions of all. Laviera’s works, including *La Carreta Made a U-turn* (1976), *Enclave* (1981), *AmeRícan* (1985), *Mainstream Ethics* (1988), and *Mixturao and Other Poems* (2008), seek to rewrite the margin into the center. Laviera’s poems exemplify the hybrid nature and spoken voice “performativity” that characterize poems written about New York City’s Lower East Side after the 1960s. Poems like “latero story,” “criollo story,” and “jesus papote,” among others, employ poetic voices of marginalized subjects born into a poverty that precludes them from accessing the “American Dream.” His earlier poems serve as redemptions of society’s “invisible” members, granting a voice to a drug-addicted mother’s unborn child (“jesus papote”) and an enterprising can collector (“can man”) to demonstrate humanity’s universal nature.

Poems from Laviera’s collections *AmeRícan* and *Mixturao and Other Poems* continue this trend; they often employ a collective “we” in affirmation of a shared “Nuyorican” identity. These later works play on linguistic combinations of Spanish and English, as well as the evolution of the hybrid and perhaps third language—Spanglish. Specifically, the poems “lady liberty” and “Español” demonstrate the evolution of Laviera’s poetry, exemplifying both the embodiment of varied poetic voices and increasing linguistic experimentation. For example, part of the collection *Mainstream Ethics*, “lady liberty” questions the feasibility of the “American Dream” for all U.S. citizens. In this poem commemorating the Statue of Liberty’s restoration, the poem’s speaker becomes the statue itself, challenging the white, male “Founding Fathers” of an

unequal United States. As her “re model” symbolizes a collective “celebrating the international symbol of freedom,” she stands as witness to the “immigrant illusions” that provided the labor for the “American Dream” (8, 15). In the poem’s second stanza, her “palms blistered and calloused” suggest the sacrifices of those who arrived in her harbor performed as part of a capitalist society that does not always reward work equitably (25). Her “redesign” is necessary after weathering more than one hundred years of social struggle as she stands as a challenge to the generic, monotone leadership that has governed the United States. Following the stanza enumerating Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Woodrow Wilson, and Kennedy, she “reflects” on women who have also shaped the U.S. social landscape. She also represents Lillian Wald, Helen Keller, Susan B. Anthony, Mother Cabrini, and Harriet Tubman. Only after acknowledging these less-cited contributions does she “speak” for “the principles, *I* for the preamble, *I* for the bill of rights” (65 68). In short, “lady liberty” seems to suggest that there is a need to “touch all” Americans, including those not traditionally represented by mainstream accounts of social history.

If his earlier poetry embodies an individual, marginalized voice to speak for the underrepresented, Laviera’s more recent work suggests a collective, Nuyorican identity. For example, the poem “Español” from the collection *Mixturao and Other Poems* illustrates the sense of a shared community whose language spans both English and Spanish traditions. Beginning with the poem’s opening line, “entonces out of our spiritual resolve,” the poem’s speaker establishes a seamless transition between English and Spanish, using both languages in the same verse. Throughout this work, “we” is defined collectively; as “gente de sangre gorda”

who challenge the systemic hierarchies that determine “correct” use of the Spanish language. Words themselves become a means of challenging patriarchal institutions, of “*metiendole miedo a tu real academia*” (19). In fact, the mixing of English with Spanish not only undermines authority; it questions its foundations—the threat of “*enmixturadas cochinandose en asuntos / hemisfericos combinando linguisticas / en proposiciones humanas*”—defines a new “*frontera*” that mixes rather than separates (20-23). Spain’s “Castilian” tongue may have pillaged a continent, but Laviera’s turns the conquest upside down (“we discovered colon”). Laviera posits the *de facto* re-appropriation of Spanish as belonging to, rather than imposed by, occidental Europe (34). Laviera re-writes Puerto Rico’s national history to include those traditionally excluded from the “American Dream.” By embodying the marginalized figures redeemed through poetry, Laviera’s speakers define a new kind of collectivity. In fact, Laviera takes the message one step further, including linguistic freedom as well as other hybridities as a necessary part of a re-writing of the center.

Writing calls forth connections to home, and exposes underpinnings of identity, place, and culture. In the novels that I study, alienation in the text becomes violence of the text as the ties that bind language and meaning are abandoned. These novels are linguistically, chronologically, and thematically complex. They blur the margins of genre as textual disjointedness challenges the reader to follow multiple storylines. Narrative structures and discursive markers are blurred as reading becomes a visceral experience that forces the reader to sense the uneasiness of characters searching for place. Not only is the content of these novels disquieting, but their narrative structures contribute to create a sense of angst. Dialogue is

inserted without defining the speakers, narrators are intermixed, and linguistic barriers are ignored.

Displacement and Isolation

For Latino authors who write in English, displacement and isolation are exacerbated by residence in the United States. The social, racial, political, and economic conflicts prevalent in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Puerto Rico follow families who immigrate to the mainland United States, and their repercussions seem to magnify and affect characters. Iliana and Rebecca from *Geographies of Home*, Yunior from *Drown*, Rico from *Dark Dude*, and Carmelina from *The House on the Lagoon* are portrayed as victims of familial violence that leads to acute isolation; severing the ties that bind them to their homes, both on the U.S. mainland and in their islands of origin. This becomes a common coping strategy that magnifies, rather than ameliorates, feelings of displacement. For the two authors' works I study who write in Spanish, those who remain on the island are victims of both abandonment by those who leave and violence by those left behind. In the case of El Nene in *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* and Yocandra in *La nada cotidiana*, this abandonment is both physical and psychological, as those charged with their care become corrupted and compromised by politics. All authors portray isolation as a sense of nostalgic longing for a place that no longer exists but continues to haunt those who are left with memories of the past.

In all of the works that I examine, the nature of Caribbean displacement and isolation includes life in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Puerto Rico as well as in the mainland United States. In fact, part of the displacement that defines Caribbean identity is entrenched in

the patterns of migration that predate all of the authors that I analyze in this project. As Antonio Benítez Rojo eloquently argues in *La isla que se repite: El Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna* (1989, 1996), the Caribbean's history is understood by plantation systems and their historical, social, economic, and political legacies (313). For Benítez Rojo, displacement begins with Bartolomé de las Casas and continues to repeat the exploitative practices that both impoverish and enrich Caribbean cultures. Slavery, indentured servitude, and *encomienda* systems brought diverse peoples from Africa, Asia, and the Americas together in one geographic space, creating cultural cross pollinations that remain unprecedented in modern history. The plantation system's exploitative behaviors continue to inform identity, creating cyclical patterns of repression that divide populations based on skin color and access to resources. The repercussions of the largest relocation of cultures in human history help to fashion "los flujos migratorios más grandes de nuestro siglo," patterns of movement to and from the Caribbean that fragment families (xxxii).

For Benítez Rojo, the plantation's legacy is inextricably linked to concepts of race and identity that inform the Caribbean Diaspora as a whole. The isolation experienced once family members migrate to the United States can be understood in relation to the legacy of racial hierarchies in the Caribbean. He explains that "en el Caribe el color de la piel no representa ni una 'minoría' ni a una 'mayoría'; representa mucho más: el color impuesto por la violencia de la conquista y la colonización, y en particular por el régimen de la Plantación" (220).

These color divides are not autochthonous to the islands, but they determine opportunities in the United States as well. By nature, the Caribbean "meta-archipiélago" is connected to the United States mainland, producing a self-encircling and self-regenerating series of relations that

“se modifica a sí mismo a cada instante” (v). The resulting disjointed, hybrid connections are a product of the constant movement, of the incessant “modifications” that define United States, U.S.-Caribbean, and Caribbean identities. In the works that I study, displacement is a subtext that helps explain violence. Displacement becomes a coping strategy for individuals to free themselves from the patterns of exploitation and injustice that plague characters as they try to escape the legacy of what Benítez Rojo calls the Plantation. Fleeing violence leads to isolation as families are forced to adapt to missing members and abuse. No one is exempt from this repetitious cycle of mistreatment; its roots span the reaches of Plantation economies and reach the U.S. mainland.

Displacement and isolation in contemporary Spanish Caribbean literature reflects the fragmentation of families because of patterns of migration. The physical displacement of family members from their island origins to the U.S. mainland creates a conflict between longing for one’s homeland and the inability to return to the place one pines for as home. The type of displacement and the kind of isolation experienced by characters in the works that I study depends, among other factors, upon the political situation on the island, their family’s economic resources, and the age when migration occurs. For example, in Díaz’s *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Pérez’s *Geographies of Home*, families are fragmented before all members leave the Dominican Republic. As a more recent examples of Spanish Caribbean economic exile, these Dominican American novels depict the divide between skilled and unskilled immigrant labor, complementing Fernando Ortiz’s seminal study *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940). While Ortiz’s study examines the Cuban case, its reflections on economic and political realities also apply to the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, as

suggested by William Luis. Valdés's *La nada cotidiana* and Hijuelos's *Dark Dude* depict Cuban displacement on both sides of the Florida Strait. Of course, return to Cuba is politically impossible, creating a specific type of exile experience examined by critics like Gustavo Pérez Firmat. In the case of Puerto Rico, travel back and forth to the island is more manageable because of its Commonwealth status. Nevertheless, the realities of life in the United States often prevent permanent return. Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* explores the consequences of Puerto Rico's culture of corruption while Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* examines the legacy of continuing tensions between disparate racial and social classes. Both novels address the kind of inequalities that lead to displacement, often in the form of migration to the United States, that also occur in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Expressions of Caribbean displacement and isolation are part of historical, political, and social patterns that are exacerbated by migration, but they also relate back to memories of one's homeland and hybrid history.

Ortiz's *Contrapunteo cubano* helps to explain the differences between waves of immigration both in the Caribbean and to the U.S. mainland. In *Contrapunteo cubano*, Ortiz repeatedly displaces and replaces home and exile, the national and the international, centers and peripheries, and shows how they are created through constant interaction. He establishes the continuous contact of Cuba and the United States, and explains how the politics and social histories of both countries influence each other. As Fernando Coronil clarifies in his introduction to this treatise, Ortiz is "an intellectual from the periphery, developing a critical perspective from

within does not preclude, but rather is conditioned by, a view from without” (xliv).⁸ Ortiz’s vision of Cuba centers on his discussion of tobacco and sugar as metaphors for cultural development in Cuba. As Luis succinctly summarizes, “according to Ortiz, tobacco and sugar are opposites: one is native and the other foreign, one is dark and the other white, one male and the other female” (100). Ortiz’s study of Cuban cultural development explains, in part, how motivations for exile to the United States from the Caribbean became less political and more economic.

As Luis asserts in his discussion of Puerto Rican author Bernardo Vega’s *Memorias de Bernardo Vega* (1977), both Vega and Ortiz contend that the first Spanish Caribbean exiles to the United States were highly skilled tobacco rollers, educated, and politically active.⁹ In fact, as Luis posits, many tobacco workers participated in Cuba’s fight for independence from Spain. These skilled workers of the first half of the twentieth century gave way to less trained, more economically disadvantaged workers after the first wave of immigrants.¹⁰ As families migrated to cities like San Juan in search of employment promised by programs like Operation Bootstrap, they found that there were far more workers than available positions.¹¹

The case of the Dominican Republic is similar to its sister countries in the Spanish Caribbean. Faced with increasingly dire labor constraints, many families sought work on the

⁸ Coronil’s extensive introduction, titled “Introduction to the Duke University Press Edition; Transculturation and the Politics of Theory: Countering the Center, Cuban Counterpoint” is a rebuttal of Malinowski’s introduction to the 1940 classic.

⁹ See pages 98-103 of William Luis’s *Dance Between Two Cultures*. Though he began writing his *Memorias* in the 1940s, they would not be published until 1977, when César Andréu Iglesias edited and published Vega’s manuscript as *Memorias de Bernardo Vega: Una contribución a la historia de la comunidad puertorriqueña en Nueva York*.

¹⁰ Many critics, among them William Luis, have discussed Cuba’s “management vacuum” after the first years of the Cuban Revolution. As was the case in the Dominican Republic during the *trujillato*, those who were able to leave their respective countries often did, and they tended to be more economically connected than later waves of immigrants.

¹¹ See, for example, René Marqués’s *La carreta* (1951-52).

U.S. mainland. As *Drown* and *Geographies of Home* illustrate, for many families, one member was sent to the United States in order to send resources back home with the goal of ultimately reuniting as soon as economically possible. This economic strategy is a mark of differentiation for contemporary Spanish Caribbean fiction, as families are fragmented even before they reach the United States. For example, in *Drown*, fathers leave the Dominican Republic in search of steady employment in the U.S. In the case of both Yunior and Rafa, this paternal absence introduces themes of abandonment and abuse. These abusive and absent fathers in *Drown* illustrate the repercussions of divided families for male protagonists like Yunior. In *Geographies of Home*, familial fragmentation is told from a female perspective, demonstrating its destructive legacy for all members of the family. Here, it is Rebecca who represents an extreme case of the violent consequences of fragmentation. Rebecca's inability to extricate herself permanently from her abusive husband Pasi3n suggests the powerful pull of established modes of violence. Once she finally leaves him, the underlying reasons for her reluctance to do so emerge as part of learned patterns of behavior. When confronted about her cruel husband and malnourished children, Rebecca angrily vents her desperation. In retaliation to her mother Aurelia's admonishments, she retorts: "You think you did such a great job raising me? Why the hell do you think I was so desperate to get married? To get you out of my fucking hair! [...] So I took the first man who came my way! I took him to shut your mouth!" (198). While their violent argument continues, Aurelia reveals that Pasi3n is not the first lover to abuse Rebecca, chastising Rebecca for remaining with Samuel "even though he broke half your bones" (199). She continues berating her daughter, chronicling how Rebecca marries Pasi3n even though "he had already set about trying to kill you before any of your children were even born" (199).

Rebecca's volatile marriage to Pasi3n is an exacerbated version of her violent childhood. Tellingly, as the family's eldest daughter, she is the first member of the family to immigrate to the United States. As a teenager, she travels alone to New York and secures a job as a piece worker in a garment factory. She has repressed the pain of fending for herself in a city where she does not speak the language, but being torn from her family in the Dominican Republic so affects her that she chooses an abusive husband rather than live at home. In both *Drown* and *Geographies of Home*, violence has invaded the family. In fact, in these novels there is almost a double-displacement, as Yunior and Iliana move from the Dominican Republic to New York and from New York to universities away from their families. Their inability to live at home in the United States mirrors the exile experience; as soon as they leave they are unable to return to the place that they remember. As Homi Bhabba argues in *The Location of Culture* (1994), Iliana and Yunior are "unhomed" because they attempt to gain a center; an impossible task because their home has always been fragmented.

Displacement, Replacement, and Nostalgia

While P3rez and D3az articulate the violence of exile and its fragmenting effects on Dominican families, Gustavo P3rez Firmat explores the notion of exile in terms of displacement, replacement, and nostalgia. His own "recollective," *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano's Coming of Age in America* (1995), is an attempt to both recall and reweave his past in an attempt to understand his present and future (xx). From the outset of his book, P3rez Firmat announces his text's hybridity; he is writing a work that is both autobiography and memoir; a mixture of fact and ideation that he believes illustrates the Cuban exiled condition. Heavily interested in the

confluence of place and identity, Pérez Firmat's text is the story of a once-privileged Cuban family's transition from Havana to Miami. As Pérez Firmat explains, land is in a constant state of change both in Miami and in Cuba, and any attempts to reconstruct the past are intrinsically impossible (65). The result is a disjuncture due to perpetual displacement; neither Calle 8 nor La Rambla remains unchanged by time. The danger is the permanence of the exile condition, as evidenced by Pérez Firmat's relationship with his brother Carlos. Pérez Firmat explains Carlos's criminal behavior as a consequence of the exile condition; he argues that exiles attribute anything and everything to the exile condition, and that his brother's actions are an outward symptom of his inward struggle to find his place (181). His father also suffers as an exile in Miami; the once successful businessman is reduced to selling cars. Pérez Firmat suggests that his mother—and women in general—seem to adjust better to exile.¹² As is the case with his mother, they are more likely to find work and re-establish themselves as productive contributors to new homes. Of course, Pérez Firmat's mother belonged to Cuba's upper class, and had to make major lifestyle readjustments in the United States, even though she was born in this country. Nevertheless, he argues that moving from Cuba saved his parents' marriage and gave his mother a newfound role, perhaps suggesting that one's gender roles before exile impacts how well one adjusts to a new home. It is telling that his father languishes in Miami while his mother finds employment and purpose, leaving Pérez Firmat to search for his own models for what manhood means to him in the United States.

¹² Of course, Pérez Firmat's mother was born in the United States. As Pérez Firmat explains in his 2008 interview with Eduardo del Rio, "my mother was born in Norfolk, Virginia, when my grandfather was a member of the Cuban consulate there" (114).

The role of childhood is especially important in works like Oscar Hijuelos's *Dark Dude*. In this novel, Rico is the U.S.-born son of Cuban immigrants who describes himself as "lonely and scared as shit forever and ever" (46). His parents, as Cuban immigrants "who not knowing much English took whatever jobs they could find," seem to blame Rico for their hardships. However, as Rico intuits, their decision to leave the island is motivated by economic necessity. As a light skinned, blond-haired boy, he does not resemble his darker skinned parents and feels like he is "some sort of genetic mutation" (57). In fact, he becomes convinced that his outward appearance is in fact responsible for his isolation, as it physically separates him from his family and also keeps him from making friends in the barrio with children his own age.

Like other characters in the novels that I study, Rico's childhood plays a pivotal role in the creation of his sense of identity. Childhood is assigned the site of the recuperation of the individual's as well as the nation's pasts. The child's place within the family structure is to attempt to understand the complex web of relationships forming the familial unit as well as a "training ground" to comprehend society as a whole. As Richard L. Browning argues in *Childhood and the Nation in Latin American Literature* (2001), "the family is important to the author if for no other reason than its role as something against which to write, an oppressive regime which has previously stifled his or her expression" (55). By uncovering the evils committed by family members under an oppressive socio-economic and political system, childhood becomes the context where these authors experiment with violations of boundaries.

If Rico's story reflects the alienation felt by children of Cuban immigrants in the United States, Zoé Valdés *La nada cotidiana* examines the repercussions of those left behind in Cuba. In

this work, Yocandra, the novel's protagonist, experiences isolation of abandonment. Her friends, la Gusana and el Lince, flee Cuba during the "Special Period" while Yocandra remains in La Habana.¹³ For Valdés, the political is a subtext of alienation; like her parents driven to madness by the failures of the Revolution, Yocandra is a victim of her surroundings. Valdés posits that Cuba has become as much about the island as about Cubans living outside it.

Oscar Hijuelos continues these sentiments in *Beautiful María of My Soul*. In this novel, María Cifuentes y García and her three-year-old daughter Teresita migrate to the United States in 1961. Teresita grows up in María's adopted country, but is marked by her mother's memories of Cuba. María holds on to memories of her youth in Cuba while resisting adaptation to life in suburban Miami. *Beautiful María of My Soul* illustrates how the exile experience and recollections "years later" impact Cuban families in the United States (71). Teresa, like other members of the "generation 1.5," is just a child when she leaves Cuba and has few memories of the island. Yet, her mother's stories, along with letters and photographs, inform her sense of place and self. María, first hardened by life as a dancer in La Habana, is further hardened by exile. Teresa inherits this "hardness" and she steels herself against men and relationships. Instead, she buries herself in her studies, and later, in her work at the hospital. Teresa, like other children of exile, ultimately finds an identity that allows her to reconcile her relationship with her mother and the memories she inherits.

In the case of Puerto Rico, much of the island's identity is undeniably tied to the fact that it has been colonized twice—once for four hundred years by Spain, and again by the United States. Puerto Rico has never experienced independence or freedom for any significant amount

¹³ "Gusano," or worm, is the name given by Cubans to Cuban exiles, especially those who leave Castro's regime for Miami.

of time. According to Juan Flores in *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (1993), this “background of uninterrupted colonial bondage serves to crystallize the search for Puerto Rican national identity” (111). Luis Rafael Sánchez’s *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* embodies Puerto Rico’s cultural and historical realities which he finds in the structure of a popular *guaracha*. In fact, each vignette of the novel is devoted to a particular character followed by the radio transmission of a disc-jockey who celebrates Puerto Rico’s most requested track, “La guaracha del Macho Camacho.” This song determines the order of narrated events, suggesting the call and response dynamic of many types of Caribbean music, including the *son* and the *guaracha*. Moreover, each section is arranged as if it were a musical stanza as each character—from la China Hereje to Benny—provides lyrics to melody of the same song. The novel becomes an almost synchronic picture of all strata of San Juan society as the action takes place simultaneously, “a las cinco de la tarde, tarde de miércoles hoy” (137).

While *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* offers multiple voices of San Juan society, Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon* recounts history from a marginal perspective.¹⁴ Ultimately, there is an alliance between the story’s protagonist Isabel Monfort and her household’s head servant Petra Avilés. However, the main narrative is the story of Isabel’s relationship with her abusive husband, Quintín Mendizábal.¹⁵ Isabel copes with her violent marriage by compiling her family’s history and eventually discovers that the Mendizábal and

¹⁴ I use the term “marginal” here to refer to the novel’s use of a woman’s perspective. Isabel Monfort enjoys moneyed privilege, but still struggles for her voice to be heard.

¹⁵ In the first edition of *The House on the Lagoon*, there is no accent on “Mendizabal.” There is, however, an accent on “Quintín.”

Avilés families are biologically linked. It is the Mendizábal men's penchant for mistresses that creates these blood ties which only comes to light once they are too close to home to ignore.

Characters in these novels find deliverance from alienation through created communities and reconstructed national stories that allow them to become reconstituted subjects. Experimentation and fragmentation, even in the most extreme cases of these works, drives the narrative to the inevitable rebirth or salvation of its protagonists. While they may be trapped in repetitious cycles, these patterns are exposed as such, suggesting the possibility of redemption.

This dissertation is divided into an introduction (chapter one), three chapters, and a conclusion. In chapter two, I explore how the phenomenon of abandonment is portrayed in contemporary Cuban narratives. The violence of the Cuban Revolution alienates generations of Cubans, exiles as well as those who remain on the island. In this chapter, I analyze Zoé Valdés's *La nada cotidiana* and Oscar Hijuelos's *Dark Dude* and *Beautiful María of My Soul* as allegories of betrayal and longing. I examine Valdés's exploration of abandonment in what is perhaps her best-known novel, *La nada cotidiana* as a study of hereditary nostalgia. Notably, this novel deviates from her other work because it was written in France, foregrounding the theme of nostalgia as part of the narration. Though the Cuban Revolution was a direct response to U.S. economic intervention on the island, not all Cubans sought exile in the United States. Some went to live in Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries; others, like Valdés, reside in France. Given that she dedicates the novel to her daughter, Attys Luna, it is no surprise that the themes of familial legacy permeate the narrative. While this notation seems innocuous, the complete dedication reads "For my daughter, Attys Luna born in a *periodo especial*." This allusion to

Cuba's current economic and political crisis establishes the matrilineal link between the political and the personal that pervades Valdés's novel.

Like Attys Luna, the novel's protagonist Yocandra de Céspedes is a daughter born of political turmoil. In fact, Yocandra's birthday is the second of May of 1959, after her mother goes into labor while attending a political rally at the Plaza de la Revolución. The story combines her childhood as the daughter of politically active parents with her adulthood as a disgruntled state employee. As an adult, Yocandra struggles to reconcile her fragmented self: she is both her given name, Patria, and her chosen name, Yocandra. This internal struggle to find a sense of belonging contrasts with the daily ordeal of obtaining basic necessities in La Habana. Her sense of general malaise envelops her daily routine, allows her to daydream, and briefly, to escape into her own memories. Nostalgia becomes a central theme of the novel as Yocandra's friends emigrate from Cuba to the United States and Spain, and she is left to contemplate the ocean that connects and separates Cuba from both colonizing countries.

In *Dark Dude* and *Beautiful María of My Soul*, Oscar Hijuelos continues the theme of abandonment, but this time from the United States looking back to Cuba. In these novels, Hijuelos explores the absence of place experienced by children of Cuban parents.¹⁶ Rico, *Dark Dude's* protagonist, was born in New York but is constantly reminded of his parent's country of origin and his own inability to conform to his parents' expectations. As a light-skinned, blond *Latino* in a predominantly dark-skinned Puerto Rican neighborhood, Rico feels out of place with his peers. To make matters worse, he spends almost two years in a Massachusetts hospital as a young child, and as a result, loses the ability to speak his parents' language fluently. Not only is

¹⁶ Publisher Simon and Schuster markets this novel as young adult literature.

he physically different from his peers, he is linguistically isolated as well. He is teased with the moniker “dark dude,” street slang for anyone who is suspiciously other. Hijuelos appropriates the term for the novel’s title, suggesting the thematic importance of a sense of belonging for the novel’s protagonist. *Dark Dude* becomes a novel of self-discovery, but also of isolation, as Rico’s desire to belong is prevented by his inability to fit in.

In *Beautiful María of My Soul*, Hijuelos explores how trauma continues for Cuban American families even after exile to the United States. In this novel, María Cifuentes y García, “Beautiful María” from his Pulitzer Prize winning *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), leaves Cuba with her daughter Teresa after her husband Ignacio is imprisoned by the Castro regime. María, a talented showgirl in her youth in La Habana, must come to terms with her fading beauty and life as an exile in Miami. She is haunted by memories of her childhood in “la Cuba que fue” and her torrid love affair with Nestor Castillo, which leave her aching with nostalgia (50). Her greatest asset, her beauty, has eluded her daughter Teresa, who compensates for her lack of good looks by becoming an accomplished pediatrician in Miami. As María’s story unfolds, it becomes clear that life on the island was not always romantic and that her childhood was far from bucolic. Instead, hers is a story of an illiterate *campesina* who migrates to La Habana, emerges from its slums, and become the *de facto* wife of a petty crime boss before the Cuban Revolution forces her to leave Cuba.

In chapter three, I study the violence of dictatorship and the scars of U.S. intervention as important cultural markers in Dominican Literature. In this chapter, I examine Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* and Díaz’s works *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* illustrates the repercussions of unresolved anger. While the novel

unfolds in the United States, the violence of the present in some ways is tied to that of the one perpetrated in the Dominican Republic. Specifically, I analyze how the rape of Iliana by her sister María mirrors the legacy of Dominican dictator Trujillo. Pérez consistently links oppression with the voice of the father (by which I mean the voice of authority and the Law), as the microcosm of dysfunctional families mirrors the macrocosm of the country the protagonist's family left behind. In *Geographies of Home*, Pérez addresses the repercussions of psychological trauma left unresolved and suggests an alternative to the patriarchal order that allows women to find an inner form of strength. Iliana's story is not victorious: she has been brutally raped and abused, and must abandon home in order to save what remains of herself. *Geographies of Home* insists on the inherited nature of domestic violence, a cyclical force that follows families from the island to the United States. Escape from violence's widespread wake is impossible, but confronting its aftershocks becomes possible by finding inner strength.

By reading *Geographies of Home* as an alternative to Díaz's works *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it becomes possible to form a chronological reconstruction of these works that places the origin of the problems experienced by the characters back in the Dominican Republic, while showing that they are also continued in the United States.

Geographies of Home also provides an alternative to how female characters view their bodies and the violence that surrounds them with male characters of similar ages depicted by Díaz.

While the male protagonists in Díaz's novels repeat the models provided by male abusers, women are cast as more passive victims of violence. Thematically, Díaz's work is unified by adolescent males with the figure of Yúnior emerging as a central character. In these stories, life on the island is connected to the suburban Northeast, with the suburbs of New Jersey replacing

New York as the migration centers for economic exile. In both the Dominican Republic and the Northeast, poverty remains constant, as underemployment and fragmented families continue a cycle of economic depression that manifests itself as violence.

In contrast to Díaz's works, Pérez delves deeper into the psychology of the family unit. Her novel explores many of the same themes as Díaz, but the subtext of violence present in Díaz is brought to the forefront in *Geographies of Home*. While Díaz alludes to the abusive fathers and adolescent angst, Pérez graphically details three separate rape scenes and chronicles abuse across several generations. She moves beyond suggestion to question the very nature of sexuality and the body in order to explain female self-hatred not only in terms of race but also in terms of gender and history.

In chapter four, I study how authors reconcile their own conflicted views of their island with its racial stereotypes. In this chapter, I examine novels by two Puerto Rican novelists, Rosario Ferré and Luis Rafael Sánchez. Both works explore the consequences of Puerto Rico's tenuous political status while critiquing coping strategies for a nation that alienates its own people. For Puerto Rican authors, one option is to abandon the island for the mainland, as was the case for many Nuyorican writers. Unlike her Nuyorican counterparts, Rosario Ferré's family has benefited from, rather than been exploited by, Puerto Rican politics. *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), Ferré's first novel written in English, describes an elite family. Centering on the life of Isabel Monfort, the novel explores social conflicts reflected in this well-to-do family. Not surprisingly, the narration begins on July 4, 1917, coinciding with President Woodrow Wilson's Act granting Puerto Ricans United States citizenship, and the U.S. immersion into World War I. This novel exposes Puerto Rico's entrenched color barriers by exploring the tensions between

disparate racial and social classes. Isabel's violent husband, Quintín Mendizábal, believes in the superiority of his Spanish ancestry as well as in the possible profits of North American capitalism. He is abusive and easily enraged, prone to unprovoked attacks and angry tirades. Isabel, who copes with her abusive marriage by dedicating herself to compiling her family's history, at first appears to fit the established patterns of a submissive wife. Her husband chastises her for writing, convinced that her novel will disgrace their family and expose the sordid details of their tumultuous marriage.

The House on the Lagoon illustrates Puerto Rico's social stratification through the lens of an élite family while Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* exposes the urban margins of San Juan as well as the political conflicts caused by Puerto Rico's precarious status as an *Estado Asociado Libre*. Interspersed with the singer Macho Camacho's hit "La vida es una cosa fenomenal," the novel mirrors the extended bawdy *guaracha* metaphor that sets its tone. Music becomes a cultural marker and national identifier, allowing an outlet for the popular expression of identity. The *guaracha* is listened to and interpreted by all of San Juan which allows for a window into Puerto Rico's racial and social divisions. Sánchez's novel seems to double-back on to itself to expose the repeated nuances of the rhythms of Puerto Rico's bodies and its body politic. The novel extends a traffic-congested Wednesday afternoon into a metaphor of San Juan's political landscape. Like its highways, the government is clogged by inefficiencies, waste, and crumbling infrastructure. This connection is underscored by the incessant chatter between a well-known politician's mistress, La Madre, and her friend Doña Chon, that grounds the novel. Their juxtaposition, along with the endless litany advertisements for products imported

from the U.S. mainland, underscores the corruption that plagues Puerto Rico highlights the stagnation of the island.

In my conclusion, I explore how the intersections of race and history help read Latino literature. I contend that racism present in the Spanish Caribbean continues in the mainland United States, but that it is articulated and understood through the lens of U.S. culture. I am particularly interested in exploring how women like Teresa, Lola, Iliana, and Carmelina experience racism and how inherited notions of physical beauty impact their own senses of identity. Moreover, I suggest that those of these women who have female offspring seem to fare better than those who do not have children or those who have sons. These gender differences may be the subject of future research. Finally, through a close reading of Laviera's "nideaquinideallá," I argue that fragmentation and its resultant isolation and displacement can yield a new kind of writing.

In each of the contemporary Spanish Caribbean works that I study, the aftermath of historical violence is not contained in the Caribbean. As families migrate to the United States, they bring with them cultural legacies of abandonment and fear that are exacerbated by linguistic and cultural displacement. In each work, this fear is manifested as a fractured identity. At times, this disjuncture leads to violence, but it always perpetuates isolation and abandonment. This tendency spans more than three decades of increased migration from the Spanish Caribbean to the United States and increases in direct relation to the degree of violence experienced in one's place of origin. By exploring the permutations of fractured identities in these texts, the correlations between origin, movement, and identity reveal themselves as bound by the need to belong.

CHAPTER 2

CUBAN CHAOS: THE ISOLATION OF EXILE IN ZOÉ VALDÉS'S *LA NADA COTIDIANA* (1995) AND OSCAR HIJUELOS'S *DARK DUDE* (2008) AND *BEAUTIFUL MARÍA OF MY SOUL* (2010)

Cuba is bound by a communist system that disconnects and divides the island from Cubans living in the United States. Of course, the United States' embargo plays a central role in creating an antagonistic relationship that informs Cuban and Cuban American identities. Despite the recent restoration of diplomatic ties between Cuba and the United States, Cubans on and off the island continue to struggle with nostalgia for a pre-Castro Cuba and present realities.¹ This chapter examines how Cubans and Cuban Americans living outside Cuba remember *la Cuba que fue* and how this sense of displacement affects families, social structures, and the idea of Cuban identity. Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution, much like the *trujillato* in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico's *Estado Libre Asociado*, acts as the defining moment that conditions its people and literature.

In this chapter, I explore how the phenomena of division and abandonment are portrayed in contemporary Cuban narratives. The violence of the Cuban Revolution divides generations of Cubans, exiles as well as those who remain on the island. I examine Zoé Valdés's *La nada cotidiana* (1995) and Oscar Hijuelos's *Dark Dude* (2008) and *Beautiful María of My Soul* (2010) as allegories of familial fragmentation. These novels allow me to examine exile and displacement in terms of gender, class, and race. Of course, in the case of Cuba, politics have made the return to one's homeland impossible. In *La nada cotidiana* (1995), Valdés's first novel

¹ U.S. President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro announced the restoration of full diplomatic ties on December 17, 2014. This announcement followed the exchange of a U.S. intelligence officer for the three remaining "Cuban Five" prisoners. U.S. subcontractor Alan Gross, jailed since 2009, was also released. This prisoner exchange occurred after nearly eighteen months of secret talks between U.S. and Cuban officials that Pope Francis helped broker.

published after her exile to France, the protagonist Yocandra remain in Cuba. She is filled with memories and longing for what could have been. Likewise, in Hijuelos's *Dark Dude* (2008) and *Beautiful María of My Soul* (2010), the conflict between nostalgia for one's homeland and the inability to return to a place one pines for creates a sense of alienation that is exacerbated by life in the United States. In each case, characters like Yocandra de Céspedes in *La nada cotidiana*, Rico in *Dark Dude*, and María García y Cifuentes in *Beautiful María of My Soul* share a sense of alienation and express their estrangement in terms of place, race, and gender.

In Zoé Valdés's *La nada cotidiana* (1995), Yocandra de Céspedes is a daughter born of political turmoil. In fact, Yocandra is born on May 2, 1959, after her mother goes into labor while attending a political rally at the Plaza de la Revolución. The story combines her childhood as the daughter of politically active parents with her adulthood as a disgruntled state employee. As an adult, she struggles to reconcile her fragmented self: she is both her given name, Patria, the nation, and her chosen name, Yocandra. This internal struggle to find a sense of belonging contrasts with the daily ordeal of obtaining basic necessities in La Habana during the "Special Period." Yocandra's sense of general malaise envelops her daily routine, allows her to daydream, and briefly, to escape into her own memories. Nostalgia becomes a central theme of the novel as Yocandra's friends emigrate from Cuba to the United States and Spain, and she is left to contemplate the ocean that connects and separates Cuba from both colonizing countries.

While Valdés's Yocandra remains on the island, in Oscar Hijuelos's *Dark Dude* (2008) and *Beautiful María of My Soul* (2010), Cuban characters immigrate to the U.S. mainland soon after Fidel Castro comes to power. In the case of *Dark Dude*, sixteen year-old Rico Fuentes' family has left Cuba for Harlem. Unlike his "brown" family, Rico takes after his Irish great-grandfather and is tormented for his hazel eyes, light skin, and freckles (12). His struggle with

his own sense of place and self is informed by race, but also by his (self-acknowledged) limited Spanish. *Beautiful María of My Soul*, on the other hand, examines former La Habana showgirl María Cifuentes y García's life as a Cuban exile in Miami. María, now middle-aged, is still tormented by the death of her parents and siblings when she was a girl in Pinar del Río, Cuba. Her daughter, Teresa, is burdened by María's memories and chooses a path not available to her mother. Both of Hijuelos's novels imagine exile as an experience of alienation and loneliness which is described in terms of "not-belonging" in the United States.

The Backdrop of the Cuban Revolution and the "Special Period"

The Cuban Revolution's political legacy and its impact on Cuban and Cuban American writers sets the stage for contemporary Cuban and Cuban American fiction, firmly positing the works I study within a historical frame. While the works that I examine in this chapter coincide with Cuba's "Special Period" and its aftermath, they also evoke the first years of the Cuban Revolution in terms of how their characters remember their formative years. I contend that these two moments, the "Triumph" of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959 and the nadir of the "Special Period" in 1994, bookend how those writing from outside Cuba imagine life on the island. Of course, the Revolution's "Triumph" meant that its regime could impose its own notions of what kind and whose writing falls within desired parameters and whose stories would be excluded. The ways in which Valdés and Hijuelos to remember and re-write Cuban history can be seen as a response to these dictates.

The Cuban Revolution and the subsequent failure of Castro's state can be read as metaphors that divide Cuba and its intellectual community. Those who support the Revolution, whose chief proponent is also its leader Fidel Castro, refuse to tolerate those who question its

politics. Internally, Cuba is split between the Revolution's advocates and those who oppose its policies; externally, Cubans in exile are divided by their motivations for leaving the island. These internal and external schisms begin a kind of fragmentation that is unique to Cuba because political allegiance is viewed in absolutist terms. As sociologist Silvia Pedraza explains in "Cuba's Revolution and Exodus," those in Cuba and those who left the island experience trauma because Cubans are forced to define themselves against each other (3). She argues that "those who chose to stay in Cuba and integrate with the revolution ascended in social status but suffered the emotional loss of family, though at times they also rejected them" (3). On the other hand, "those who chose exile outside Cuba suffered the loss of property, status, memories, peers," friends, and family (3). Furthermore, exiles who felt "profoundly alienated while in Cuba, once in Miami, some again found themselves alienated, now from the oppressive conservatism of *el exilio*—victims of a double alienation, possibly, a double exile" (3). This rejection was especially acute for members of dissident movements, who "found themselves repudiated and shunned by even the most intimate family and friends" (3). Clearly, no matter Cubans' responses to the Revolution, its effects are divisive. In fact, it is the salient moment in Cuban history that forces Cubans to define and redefine themselves.

Of course, the motivations that led Cubans to leave the island are complex and reflect Cuba's changing political climate. In general terms, most historians and sociologists agree that Cuban exiles can be understood as a series of four waves that reflect differing "social classes, race, education, gender and family composition, and values" (Pedraza 1). These waves are first described by Nelson Amaro and Alejandro Portes in "Una Sociología del Exilio: Situación de los Cubanos en los Estados Unidos" (1972) and refined in "Mass and Class and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution" (1977) as evolving from "those who wait" and "those who escape," to "those

who search” (222).² Silvia Pedraza updates Amaro and Portes’s analysis by adding two more waves: “those who hope” and “those who despair.” These categories, though imperfect, prove useful in providing understanding of the primary reasons prompting Cubans to leave the island.

The first wave of Cuban exiles (1959-1962), classified as “those who wait,” left Cuba when the Revolution challenged the established social order. These exile were members of Cuba’s wealthy, well-connected, élite. Many were executives, factory owners, large merchants, and members of the professional classes. As Pedraza explains in “Cuba’s Refugees: Manifold Migrations,” their decision to leave Cuba was predicated on the belief that the United States would take up arms against a government that they viewed as illegitimate (499). They are called “those who wait” because they imagined that their exile would be temporary and that they would soon return to their lives in Cuba.³ With the failure of the attempted coup to overthrow Castro in the infamous *Playa Girón* invasion in April of 1961, this group becomes known as “those who escape.”⁴ Maligned by Castro as *gusanos*, these exiles favor U.S. intervention to depose the Cuban government.

The second wave of Cuban exiles (1965-1974) were less affluent than those who left before. As a group, they were merchants of lesser economic and social stature, owners of small businesses, and members of the *petite* bourgeoisie. This wave of “those who search” left Cuba after the government’s official transition to socialism. As Pedraza explains, as part of the

² Amaro and Portes’s first article, written and published in Spanish, appeared in the journal *Aportes* in 1972. Their second, updated piece is cited more frequently and appears in the anthology *Cuban Communism* (1984) edited by Irving Louis Horowitz.

³ In *Next Year in Cuba: A Cubano’s Coming of Age in America* (1995), Gustavo Pérez Firmat describes this phenomenon by describing how his family would toast “Next year in Cuba” (“el año que viene estamos en Cuba”) every New Year’s Eve.

⁴ *Playa Girón*, or Bay of Pigs, was a covert operation planned by the Freedom Fighters to overthrow Castro with military force. The 2506 Brigade fought the Cuban rebel army at *Playa Girón*, expecting air support as promised by the United States. This support never arrived, and the coup was unsuccessful.

“pragmatic” reforms of the era, Castro launches a “revolutionary offensive” that results in the state’s confiscation of more than 50,000 small businesses (“Cuba’s Revolution and Exodus” 2). These exiles were less economically connected than their first wave counterparts, and saw the United States as providing better possibilities for advancement than Cuba. Moreover, as Amaro and Portes note, this wave is decidedly not only more middle-class, but also more likely to be of mixed race (223). The majority of these exiles entered the United States through an air bridge, called *Vuelos de la libertad*, which operated daily flights from Varadero to Miami.⁵ Thanks to policies including a Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and Cuba that prioritized those Cubans seeking to reunite with family members and President Lyndon Johnson’s “Open Door” Policy that welcomed refugees from communist countries, more than 250,000 Cubans migrated to the United States. As Pedraza contends, this second wave makes up 41% of Cubans who immigrated to the United States after the Cuban Revolution (“Cuba’s Revolution and Exodus” 503).

The third wave of Cuban exiles, “those who hope,” are also known as the *Marielitos* (1980-81). As Pedraza explains, a “typical 1980 *émigré* was a bus driver, young, male, and Black who did not mind that nationalization. Instead, he likely believed in the revolution until successive prison terms for his participation in the black market promoted his disaffection” (3). In 1978, dialogue between the Cuban government and visits by members of the Cuban exile community to Cuba resulted in an agreement to release political prisoners and promote family reunification. Given their namesake from the flotillas departing from Cuba’s Mariel harbor

⁵ María García y Cifuentes and her daughter Teresa from *Beautiful María of My Soul* (2010) arrive in the United States on one such flight.

beginning in April of 1980, this group of exiles numbered near 125,000.⁶ Additionally, President Carter's vow to welcome these exiles with "open arms and open hearts" led many Cubans living in Miami to encourage their relatives to immigrate. This third wave was problematic, however. Along with political prisoners, the Cuban government also released "social undesirables," or what Castro terms *escoria*. Some were common criminals, others mental patients, and others homosexuals labeled as "counterrevolutionary." Moreover, Miami in 1980 was undergoing an economic recession: jobs were scarce and recent exiles faced discrimination even from those in the Cuban exile community. While previous waves of Cuban exiles were welcomed to the United States, this group's reception was not as warm.

Finally, the fourth wave (1985-1994), or "those who despair," are those seeking exile due to Cuba's failing infrastructure as a result of the collapse of communism in Europe. The crisis of Cuba's "Special Period" along with the United States' decision to tighten its trade embargo policies in 1992 led to widespread food and medicine shortages on the islands. In 1994, at the height of the privations of the "Special Period," more than 34,000 Cubans left the island in *balsas* or makeshift rafts. Many risked their lives in a perilous sea journey that claimed victims due to dehydration, exposure, drowning, or sharks. In order to prevent these desperate attempts to reach the mainland of the United States, the U.S. government directs its Coast Guard to rescue these *balseros*, bring them to its base at Guantánamo, and work to re-settle them in the United States.

While the frequency of these *balsas* has diminished, I argue that the fourth wave continues because those who seek to leave Cuba often cite the dire economic circumstances and

⁶ This wave of exile originated with those seeking political asylum from the Peruvian Embassy. Soon, it became a chaotic, disorganized exodus poorly managed by Cuban and U.S. officials.

shortages as principal reasons for exile. In September 1994 and May 1995, the United States and Cuban governments sought to normalize migration. In what is known as a “wet foot/dry foot” policy as part of the 1994-95 U.S. Cuba Migration Accords, the United States granted Cuba an annual minimum of 20,000 legal immigrant visas and, at the same time, determined that Cubans picked up at sea would be returned to Cuba. While this policy helped to curb the frequency of *balseo* attempts, it also ensured that those Cubans seeking asylum from U.S. soil would be granted political refugee status. Officially, according to the Department of State, the United States remains “committed to supporting safe, orderly, and legal migration from Cuba” (“U.S. Relations with Cuba”).

Of course, many other Cuban exiles since 1959 chose to leave Cuba for countries other than the United States. Prominent exiled Cubans include Carlos Franqui who relocated to Italy, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, who left Cuba for the United Kingdom, and Zoé Valdés, who immigrated to France. In *Cuban American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona* (1998), Isabel Álvarez Borland cites Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s presentation “The Invisible Exile” at the 1987 Wheatland Conference of Literature for an explanation of the particular difficulties faced by those who chose exile from Cuba in countries other than the United States. As Cabrera Infante explains, exiled Cubans not living in the United States feel especially alienated because their political sympathies are not always shared. While Cabrera Infante is speaking to the plight of Cuban writers living in exile in particular, the rejection he experienced from other Spanish-speaking exiles is telling (18). As he explains, “There are no exiles from Cuba. As we know, this is a model country when it comes to dissidents and malcontents, who are usually going, rather than coming” (qtd. in Álvarez Borland, 18). Cabrera Infante’s appraisal suggests the

complexities involved in understanding exile's effects, which becomes important for an understanding of other Cuban novelists living outside of the United State like Zoé Valdés.

The aftermath of these waves of Cuban exile causes one type of fragmentation felt both on and off the island. In addition, the Cuban Revolution also created divisions among its own intellectuals, forcing its educated classes to declare their affiliation to the Revolution or leave the country. For Cuban intellectuals, the aftermath of the "Triumph" of the Cuban Revolution and the intellectual community's response to the debate about the obligations of intellectuals to the Revolution is informed by the now infamous "caso Padilla."

This incident is precipitated by Fidel Castro's "Palabras a los intelectuales" (1961). Fidel Castro, in his "Palabras a los intelectuales," underscores the sovereignty of the Revolution above personal expression. He affirms that "una de las metas y uno de los propósitos fundamentales de la Revolución es desarrollar el arte y la cultura," but insists that this development must only uphold the Revolution's politics. Castro negates the value of art when the work is one of "capricho o de la voluntad" of counterrevolutionary artists (18). According to revolutionary dogma, "el pueblo es la meta principal" and the Revolution, by definition, is the people (14). This policy dictates—based upon its own rhetoric—that art that does not celebrate the Revolution does not fall within the definition of art. This is not only a negation of the value of any work of art that does not meet this rigid definition, but a condemnation; the result of counterrevolutionary works is the suspension of what Castro calls "los derechos de los enemigos" for the good of the Cuban populace (18). Being an artist in Castro's Cuba requires complete commitment to the Revolution. Castro maintains that "el punto más polémico" of "libertad formal" is "la libertad del contenido" ("Palabras a los intelectuales" 11). While he may

say that “en primer lugar la Revolución defiende la libertad,” Cuban artists, nevertheless, must sacrifice “hasta su propia vocación artística por la Revolución” (11, 12).

As William Luis demonstrates in *Lunes de Revolución: Literatura y cultura en los primeros años de la Revolución Cubana* (2003), the Cuban government becomes more ideologically restrictive out of political necessity. Luis chronicles how *Lunes de Revolución*, the widely popular literary supplement of *Revolución*, the official newspaper of the 26th of July Movement that brought Castro to power, reflects this change. Published from March 23, 1959 to November 6, 1961, *Lunes* sought to promote Cuban culture and the ideals of the Revolution. However, as Castro began to ally more closely with the Communist Party, *Lunes*'s editorial board finds itself under increased scrutiny. In “Exhuming *Lunes de Revolución*,” Luis explains “*Lunes* came eventually into disaccord with members of the Communist Party who occupied key positions” (264). This conflict is illustrated by the censorship and confiscation of Sabá Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal's short film *P.M.*, o “Pasado Meridiano.” Luis argues that “this film was not seen as appropriate expression of the Revolution at a time when the Cuban government was assuming a more defensive position with regard the United States” (265). Officials in power seek to “eliminate” a “decadent aspect of Cuban life” (272). This can be seen as “an attack on *Lunes*” and its editors for their attempt to give culture a new direction as well as an example of the Cuban Communist Party's “increasingly powerful voice”(272). Castro's “Palabras a los Intelectuales” sets the tone for how the Revolution would judge literary and artistic expression. The repercussions of *Lunes*'s closure, as Luis argues, “continue to affect writers and artists alike, in particular those who continued their loyalty to *Lunes* and the ideals for which it stood” (277). For many, this tension comes to head during the “caso Padilla,” which after all, is presided over by the Communist Party.

Responses to the “caso Padilla”

Despite initial support by the international *cognoscente*, Heberto Padilla’s detention and subsequent *mea culpa* provoked protests that sway many intellectuals’ opinions about Cuban politics. With the publication of *Fuera del juego* (1969), Padilla becomes the center of the already contested debate about the role of Cuban intellectuals during the first decade of the Revolution. On April 27, 1971, at the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (UNEAC), Padilla, in a so-called “autocrítica,” declares himself to be guilty of a series of “crímenes” of a political nature. Padilla declares himself a “counterrevolutionary” in what many believe to have been a scripted, forced confession. This act triggers the disillusionment of many intellectuals with the Cuban cause itself (Dayre Abella, 45). Moreover, the “caso Padilla” demonstrates the inherently dialectical relationship between the Revolution and artistic freedom. As Lourdes Casal contends in *El caso Padilla: Literatura y revolución en Cuba: Documentos* (1971), Padilla, by publicly rejecting his poetic work as counterrevolutionary, exemplifies the subordination of freedom of expression to state interests (78). Although the Revolution supports Cuban intellectuals in principal, this support becomes contingent upon complete devotion to the state apparatus.

Three days after the notorious “caso Padilla,” Fidel Castro justifies the Revolution’s need for vigilance against such “counterrevolutionary” activity. On April 30, 1971, Castro convenes the Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura, where he delivers his now infamous “Discurso de Educación y Cultura” at the conference’s conclusion.⁷ In this “discurso,” Castro lashes out against what he calls “escritores burgueses,” or writers living in Western capitals, who

⁷ The official title of Castro’s speech is “Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz, Primer Secretario del Comité General del Partido Comunista de Cuba y Primer Ministro del Gobierno Revolucionario en la Clausura del Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura, efectuado en el teatro de la CTC, el 30 de abril de 1971.”

dare to criticize the Revolution from afar. He argues that because they are not “en la trinchera de combate,” they are therefore unequipped to understand the Cuban cause. Moreover, he equates these “intelectuales burgueses” with “libelistas burgueses y agentes de la CIA y de las inteligencias del imperialismo.” As William Luis explains in *Culture and Customs of Cuba* (2001), Castro’s speech “carries over the issues surrounding the Padilla affair” by insisting that the Revolution rejects those writers who do not see the Revolution as their primary cause (117). Moreover, as Luis contends, Castro essentially forces writers into a binary position: “those who unconditionally supported Castro’s revolution and those who denounced the lack of free expression” (118).

Oscar Collazos firmly positions himself in the camp of unconditional proponents of the Cuban Revolution. In “La encrucijada del lenguaje” and “Contrarrespuesta para armar” (1971), Collazos insists that the creation of literature must explicitly support the Revolution. According to Collazos, writers are obligated to focus on current realities. He maintains that “la crisis de un período histórico y su pensamiento dominante” should be reflected in a language and syntax that reflects this new political reality (17). He concedes the “posibilidad de progresión y movilidad de trabajo literario” but only “siempre y cuando” political necessities have been met (18). He cites Castro’s writings as the kind of literary discourse that “podría ser la fuente de un tipo de literatura cubana dentro de la revolución” (“La encrucijada del lenguaje” 17). Collazos maintains that “en una revolución se es escritor, pero también se es revolucionario. En una revolución se es intelectual, y tiene que ser necesariamente político” (“La encrucijada del lenguaje” 37). He argues for the subordination of the profession of writer to the ideology of the Revolution and maintains that a separation between the two is unfathomable.

Like Collazos, Roberto Fernández Retamar argues that intellectuals are bound by duty to reject bourgeois values that run contrary to the Cuban Revolution. In his oft-cited essay “Calibán: Apuntes sobre la cultura de nuestra América” (1971), Retamar opposes U.S. intervention in Latin America, decrying it as both racist and imperialist. Instead, he argues for a re-reading of the symbol of Calibán in Columbus’s letters, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and José Enrique’s Rodó’s *Ariel* (1900), among others, that re-imagines the figure as emblematic of the diversity and resistance of Latin America as a whole. His essay is scathingly critical of Latin American intellectuals, including Rodó, Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Fuentes, and Emir Rodríguez Monegal, who he believes ascribe to an imposed vision of Latin American identity. He goes as far as to call Rodríguez Monegal “un servidor del imperialismo” who abandons the Revolution to serve his own interests. He likens these intellectuals to the figure of *Ariel*, who as a “criatura aérea,” has his head in the clouds and becomes a “siervo en manos de Próspero.” Instead, he argues that “Calibán es el rudo e inconquistable dueño de la isla,” whom he lauds for resisting subjugation. Though colonized and enslaved, Retamar sees in Calibán a figure of resistance against imperialism. It is this “enfrentamiento gallardo a los Estados Unidos y la defensa de nuestros valores” that should occupy intellectual endeavors. Those intellectuals who do not follow suit have misread their role in the Revolution.⁸

Guillermo Cabrera Infante, as a Cuban writer in exile, serves as an example of intellectuals’ reactions to this proscriptive rhetoric. Cabrera Infante maintains that Padilla’s “posición” represents that of “toda persona inteligente y honesta” from Cuba (qtd. in Casal, 13). He defines this position as an inescapable “exiliado interior,” with the limited options of

⁸ In “Calibán Revisited” (1986), Retamar retracts the position he espoused in 1971, attributing it to the “passions of youth.”

“contrición política, la cárcel o el exilio verdadero” (13). With his rhetorical question “¿Qué crimen ha cometido el autor o el libro?” answered with “Uno solo y lo cometieron ambos. Ser libres,” Cabrera Infante affirms the relationship between the Revolution and the role of intellectuals. After the “caso Padilla,” it becomes impossible for many writers to defend a cause that does not support freedom of expression.

Other writers including Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa also adamantly insist that the separation between writers and politics is necessary. Cortázar, in “Literatura en la Revolución y Revolución en la literatura: Algunos malentendidos a liquidar” (1971) laments Collazos’s diatribe and argues that “el aporte de una gran literatura es fundamental para que una revolución pase [a una] revolución total” (68). Cortázar maintains that there is a “laboratorio en el que un novelista opera la revolución en su propia esfera” (74). Vargas Llosa, in “Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones” (1971) not only supports Cortázar’s position, he also insists in the obligation of writers to uphold “el heterogéneo desorden” in the face of any political ideology (79). He goes as far as to allude to a “conspiración política reaccionaria” in Collazos argument that points to a “perfecto correspondencia entre acción individual y creación artística,” a goal that, for Vargas Llosa is reminiscent of Inquisitional dogma or Stalinist social realism (“Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones” 85). For Cortázar and Vargas Llosa, the Revolution is reflected in literary innovation, in the exploration of new genres, and in the search for each author’s own sense of reality. They argue that subordinating a writer’s development to the development of the Revolution, as Collazos proposes, would be equivalent to the abandonment of Revolutionary ideology.

Castro’s insistence upon privileging politics over expression has continuing repercussions. Specifically, in terms of the novels that I study in this chapter, the politics of the

Cuban Revolution have led to exile and estrangement from life on the island. For example, Hijuelos's *Beautiful María of My Soul* portrays La Habana just prior to the Revolution, but also the consequences of María's politically necessary departure from Cuba and her life as an exile in Miami. In *Dark Dude*, Rico continues the story of children of Cubans like María. As the son of Cuban immigrants, Rico struggles with an identity that leaves him without a sense of belonging in either Cuban American or what he calls "white" culture. Both of these novels depict the aftermath of life in the United States as post-Castro Cuban Americans. In Valdés's *La nada cotidiana*, on the other hand, Yocandra exemplifies what happens to those who stay in Cuba. Both Hijuelos's and Valdés's work is informed by politics because they permeate how the characters identify with and reject their senses of what it means to be Cuban.

The "Special Period"

While Hijuelos's work examines Cuba and Cuban Americans whose families arrive in the United States as Castro came to power, Valdés novel portrays a family who remains on the island. Set in Cuba's "Special Period" with flashbacks and recollections to the early years of the Revolution, politics again echoes in *La nada cotidiana*. As Ariana Hernández-Reguant contends in *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s* (2009), Cuba's "Special Period" has become "a historical convention" as well as a "defining category of experience" for all Cubans, whether living on or off the island (1). This "Special Period," alluded to in late 1989 with the demise of the Soviet Union, and increasingly referenced throughout 1990, is made

official on December 30, 1990 (4).⁹ Castro's proclamation of a "Special Period in Times of Peace" is a response to the loss of Soviet aid and subsidies, as well as market that amounted to 84% of the island's trade (4). As a result of this "Special Period," food rations in place since 1962 are further limited, energy use is curtailed, and strict rationings of "most other necessities" are implemented (4). As René Prieto explains in his article "Tropos tropicales: contrapunteo de la frutabomba y el plátano en *Te di la vida entera y Trilogia sucia de la Habana*," rationing becomes so severe that the "período especial" becomes known as the "período especialmente duro" (Prieto 373).

Since the August 1990 declaration of the "Special Period," Cuba's worsening economic crises led to widespread shortages throughout the island. In order to combat these shortages, the government implements door-to-door inspections of household appliances and mandates individualized energy-saving plans. Hernández-Reguant documents that food becomes so scarce that government-sponsored media outlets promote recipes such as "sweet potato leaf salad, mashed banana peel, and fried grapefruit peel" (4). She further explains that "bread allocations were decreased to 80 grams per person per day, gas sales to individuals were suspended altogether, and the utilities' supply was limited in any cases, to a few hours per day" (4). These drastic measures make life in Cuba increasingly difficult.

While the "Special Period" and its hardships are well documented, the summer of 1994 proves to be especially trying. As Hernández-Reguant explains, extreme food shortages lead to "people raising pigs in their bathtubs and traveling to rural areas to barter everything imaginable"

⁹ As Hernandez-Reguant documents, on December 7, 1989, Castro hints at a "Special Period" in his "Discurso pronunciado en el acto de despedida d duelo a nuestros internacionalistas caídos durante el cumplimiento de honrosas misiones militares y civiles" (4). It is not until September 28, 1990, however, that this "Special Period" becomes inevitable in a speech to the Comités de Defensa de la Revolución. In this address, Castro announces "sin duda, ya nos estamos adentrando en ese período especial en época de paz. Es casi inevitable que caigamos en ese período especial, con todo rigor, en época de paz y que tengamos que pasar esa prueba" (Castro 1990).

(5). In addition, rolling electricity blackouts and interruptions in water and gas utilities are commonplace. Domestic tasks like cooking and cleaning are luxuries; and the struggle to find food becomes “obsessive” (5). Moreover, especially in La Habana, blackouts provided opportunities for petty crime. The Cuban government responds by promoting the virtues of thrift, touting the virtues of the bicycle as a means of transportation, and reducing workday hours. As the situation becomes increasingly untenable, authorities begin turning to foreign investment and international tourism as strategies for economic recovery. Both options require that Cuba generate hard currency and reestablish trade networks. In addition, Cuba’s constitution is reformed to allow for new forms of property ownership, the regulation of foreign investment, and the divesting of state-owned businesses into privately held companies.

As these market reforms begin to improve access to goods, some Cubans benefitted more than others. Strategically-situated professionals and those well-connected in state-run enterprises are able to capitalize on their access to foreign currency. The result is an economy based on a double currency—the *peso* and the dollar—in which those who can reap the benefits improve their standard of living. Unfortunately, as Alejandro de la Fuente explains in *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (2001), the resulting economic stratification causes increased social stratification. In particular, blacks and the elderly, who have the least access to foreign currency, see their standards of living decrease. Moreover, although some economic restrictions have been eased, there has been no true reform of the socialist government. As Hernández-Reguant succinctly argues, “economic reforms were designed to overcome the dire situation of the 1990s without relinquishing political power” (7). The Cuban government has so far managed to “buy time” without sacrificing political control. While many

consider this strategy to be untenable in the long run, in the short term, the loosening of economic restrictions has not led meaningful restructuring of a failing socialist system.

Zoé Valdés's *La nada cotidiana*: Writing the "Special Period"

Valdés's literature of exile underscores the intimate aspects of Cuban life during the "Special Period" as a means to write against Cuba's misogynist culture. Born in La Habana, Valdés has lived in France since 1994 and continues her prolific writing career in exile. Her more recent novels include: *La eternidad del instante* (2004), *Te di la vida entera* (2000), *Querida primer novio* (1999), *Café nostalgia* (1998), and *La nada cotidiana* (1995). As her first novel written and published in exile, *La nada cotidiana* marks an important departure for the already productive Cuban author.

Valdés's work offers a representation of novels of political exile written outside the United States. I argue that a broader concept of Latino literature includes novels like *La nada cotidiana* written in Spanish and published outside the United States. Valdés's exploration of abandonment in what is perhaps her best-known novel, *La nada cotidiana* also studies hereditary nostalgia. Notably, this novel deviates from Valdés's other work because it was written in France, foregrounding the theme of nostalgia as part of the narration. Though the Cuban Revolution is a direct response to economic intervention by the United States on the island, not all Cubans sought exile in the United States. Some went to live in Spain and others, like Valdés, reside in France. Given that she dedicates the novel to her daughter, Attys Luna, the themes of familial legacy permeate the narrative. While this notation seems innocuous, the complete dedication reads "For my daughter, Attys Luna born in a *periodo especial*." This allusion to Cuba's current economic and political crisis establishes the matrilineal link between the political

and the personal that pervades Valdés's novel. In this work, Yocandra de Céspedes experiences the isolation of abandonment. While her friends, la Gusana and el Lince, flee Cuba during the "Special Period," Yocandra remains in La Habana. As the economic situation in Cuba deteriorates, she feels as if she is a prisoner, as much of her own thoughts as of the paucity of goods and services available in La Habana. The Revolution has not fulfilled its promises, and has abandoned Yocandra's generation. As she explains, "nos han condenado a vivir desperdigados por el mundo, al peligro constante, al dolor agudísimo en ese hondo precipicio de las conciencias, a la renuncia de nosotros mismos, de nuestros sueños" (109).

By chronicling the mundane, quotidian details of life in La Habana, *La nada cotidiana* illustrates the hardships of the "Special Period." As Catherine Davies argues in *A Place in the Sun? Women Writers in 20th Century Cuba* (1997), Valdés's "has made a reputation for herself by criticizing the Cuban government" (223). Tellingly, *La nada cotidiana* contains just two direct references to Cuba's "Special Period:" the first, as previously mentioned, is part of the novel's dedication; the second occurs at the beginning of the third chapter "Yocandra, entre el terror y el pudor." This second reference to the "Special Period" is part of an explanation of Yocandra's daily routine at work at a literary magazine, that, as she explains, can never be published "por <<los problemas materiales que enfrenta el país>>, el periodo especial y todo lo que estamos sufriendo y todo lo que nos queda por sufrir" (33). For Yocandra, this "Special Period" is not exceptional; rather, it is indicative of a daily routine demonstrating privation. From this passing mention, she continues to describe her lunchtime ritual:

Entonces abro la mochila, saco el trocito de pan del nailon, la mitad de un plátano y bebo mi pomito de agua con azúcar prieto [...] Todavía tengo café a final del mes, ¡una proeza! Pero casi nunca ocurre. Si este mes aún me queda es porque canjeé un paquetico por una pastilla de jabón. (33)

The “Special Period” and its hardships have become an accepted part of life, part of the “bobería” that defines her existence in La Habana (33). She accepts the utilities’ blackouts and incorporates them into her routine, explaining “me meto a cocinar desde las tres, pero en lo que el gas va y viene me dan las ocho y nueve de la noche” (33). Her life has become a series of tasks made increasingly time-consuming and difficult by the shortages of life in La Habana. From climbing eight flights of stairs to collect water from the rain barrel on her apartment’s roof to bartering for coffee, Yocandra, like so many other Cubans, has grown accustomed to the “Special Period.”

While the novel is replete with examples of the daily struggles that define life in Cuba, there are moments in the narration that underscore how the Cuban state responds to this privation. The most telling example is the “libreta de racionamiento” that Yocandra’s friend el Lince re-reads to remind himself of how difficult life in Cuba has become. As he explains, his life has been reduced to a running list of where he needed to go and what he needed to do to procure the meager foodstuffs available:

*El programa de suministra de productos cárnicos será como sigue:
A razón de tres cuartos de libra <<per capita>>:
-Picadillo texturizado: Boyeros, cuota del mes en curso.
-Masa cárnica: Arroyo, Mariano y Plaza, pendiente Playa.
-Fricandel: Concluir Guanabacoa.
El suministro de las dos libras adicionales de chícharos debe concluir en toda la provincia. (136)*

El Lince realizes that he spends his days “repasando en mi mente el horario de apagones a diario” and that his mind was drying up (137). For many Cubans like Yocandra and el Lince, the procurement of bare necessities becomes a daily preoccupation.

In addition to recounting daily shortages due to the “Special Period,” Yocandra chronicles the social toll that the Revolution has wrought on Cubans. Perhaps the most revelatory

is her encounter with a former classmate she dubs “la Militonta.” This nickname, a combination of “mili,” from military or militant, and “tonta,” or stupid, refers to this woman’s allegiance to the Cuban State. When they meet by chance as Yocandra heads to her job as a magazine editor, la Militonta chastises Yocandra for changing her name. Moreover, she admonishes Yocandra for not greeting her because she works for a French company controlled by the “segurosos” who are always “verificando” (36). This revelation triggers Yocandra’s violent reaction. After all, la Militonta spent her teenage years denouncing “a cualquiera que vieras hablando con un extranjero, porque según los estatutos cualquier enemigo era en potencia un enemigo” (36). Because of la Militonta, many students “perdieron su carnet y hasta la escuela” (35). And now, in an act of unforgiveable hypocrisy for Yolanda, she works for a foreign firm. Yocandra cannot believe her opportunism and that she has become a “puta” of the “segurosos” (35). This classmate, supposedly a stalwart Socialist, has used her connections for personal profit. Yocandra is enraged by this about-face and la Militonta’s self-righteous behavior.

Yocandra’s happenstance meeting with la Militonta serves as a catalyst that opens the floodgates of Yocandra’s memories. After all, Yocandra reveals the origin of her own name during this exchange. In chapter one, we learn that Yocandra’s given name is Patria. Her father, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, chooses this moniker in reference to the day her mother Aída goes into labor, May 1, 1959. Fittingly, May 1, also known as International Worker’s Day, or *el Día del Trabajo*, commemorates the solidarity of workers.¹⁰ During Castro’s celebratory speech, Yocandra’s mother’s water breaks and she is rushed to the hospital. To her father’s chagrin, Yocandra is not born May 1, but on May 2. As her doctor Elena Luz explains to her father, May

¹⁰ May Day, or International Worker’s Day, also commemorates the Haymarket Affair, a massacre that occurred in the aftermath of a bombing that took place at a labor demonstration in Chicago on May 4, 1886.

2 is not an unimportant day in terms of history; it is the date of the 1808 Spanish *Dos de mayo* Uprising famously depicted in Francisco Goya's painting. Her father, undeterred, decides to name her Patria, "un nombre muy original" (27). Yocandra has always hated the name, first because she was made fun of for it, and later because "en el fondo respeto profundamente el significado de esa palabra" (36). She changes her name so that her first love, whom she calls el Traidor, will sleep with her. Seeing la Militonta triggers these memories for Yocandra and foregrounds how she explains who she is.

In addition to explaining the origins of her name, Yocandra's encounter with la Militonta leads to her recounting her relationships with her lovers. She explains that she has been married and divorced four times, that "en el trópico uno empieza muy temprano a casarse y a divorciarse, es como tomar un vaso de agua" (36). These men are nameless embodiments of a part of whom she aspires to be. The first, el Traidor, becomes her husband (the first of three) when she is sixteen. At thirty-three years old, he is more than twice her age, an "escritor de moda" who seems well-connected and worldly (37). At the time, Yocandra "aspiraba muy en secreto a ser una escritora de renombre universal," suggesting that she thought he could help her with her own ambitions (37). After four years abroad while he is on a diplomatic assignment, she discovers that all he has written are "trescientas páginas llenas de una única frase: <<Todos me persiguen. No puedo escribir porque todos me persiguen.>>" (66). El Traidor has become convinced that he, like many Cuban writers and artists, is under state surveillance. He is consumed by fears that he too will be detained and forced to "confess" to "anti-Revolutionary" activities that will land him in jail (or even get him killed.) Yocandra's illusions are shattered, and she realizes that she has been living a lie by believing she has sacrificed so much so that her husband could complete his *obra maestra*.

Upon her return to Cuba, Yocandra is again disappointed by love. She divorces el Traidor and remarries a man she truly loves. Theirs is a love story worthy of a “libro de amor” (71). Her illusions are shattered again as her second husband is killed in an airplane crash, leaving her a widow before the age of twenty-five. She laments that their story may never be told because “el dolor sigue aún profundo y latente,” making it impossible for her to retell it (71). Though only seven lines of text describe this relationship, the lack of detail makes it even more poignant. Yocandra is left with her daydreams, or what she calls “musarañas,” of what could have been.¹¹ Theirs is a love whose time is cut short, a love brimming with hope but unfulfilled. Like the promise of the Cuban Revolution’s early days, everything seemed possible until the bottom dropped out.

These two relationships have made Yocandra cynical but not unwilling to seek male companionship. Her next lover is el Nihilista, a relatively unknown film director she describes as “más paranoico que triste” (146). After a chance meeting at “una Muestra de Cine Joven,” they have a one-night stand and el Nihilista disappears (146). During his two-year absence, she has another relationship with an actor, who, although he was “divino” and “famoso,” does not hold her interest (148). When el Nihilista re-enters her life, she quickly forgets the actor, who could have been “otra sanacá amorosa” and they begin a sexually-charged relationship (148).¹² In addition to their palpable chemistry, Yocandra and el Nihilista share an interest in film. El Nihilista is writing a screenplay that he knows will never be seen the light of day because it centers on three young Cubans, two of whom watch from the beach as their friend leaves Cuba in

¹¹ In Spanish, the word “musaraña” means “shrew,” “pensar en las musarañas” is an idiomatic expression equivalent to “daydream.”

¹² In Cuba, “sanaco” is another word for “tonto.”

a makeshift raft (146). As Yocanda explains, el Nihilista “no es bobo,” and knows that this story is impossible to film (146). El Nihilista, like so many others, has learned to self-censor, allowing himself to think about “la película que haré” without losing himself in “la película que quiero hacer” (164).

Yocandra’s social circle seems to close in around her as more and more of her friends and colleagues leave Cuba to escape the overwhelming combination of state control and material deprivation. When she first meets el Nihilista, she is with a group of close friends, all of whom have similar allegorical names. Along with her closest friends el Lince y la Gusana, she counts el Gigante, el Pianista, and el Dentista as close companions. Two years later, when el Nihilista returns to her circle, she is the only one of the group still living in Cuba. As she laments, her whole life seems to be collapsing around her and leaving her alone in a vacuum. With the painful absence of her friends, she begins to question whether it is possible to re-imagine her life and establish new ties. After all, it is not just the disappearance of her friendships, but the meaningless of her work and breakdown of her family that causes this alienation. She is left to ask herself “Cómo volver a nacer de otros padres, poseer otras amistades, otros amores, otro trabajo, otro mar o tal vez ninguno...otro país? O ninguno.” (174). Yocandra is finally able to articulate this sense of loneliness, of abandonment and isolation that has led Cubans to leave the island.

Valdés writes about these alienating effects of abandonment from both the perspective of Cubans remaining on the island and those who have left it behind. As she demonstrates with Yocandra, neither option avoids the symptomatic isolation that defines Cuba, at least since the “Special Period.” Nevertheless, Valdés seems to suggest that these themes predate the Revolution, as she cites José Martí’s exile as the beginning of a continuum of abandonment of

the island for political reasons. As el Lince explains, this present is somehow more traumatic because it turns Cubans into “exiliados de nosotros mismos, nuestras almas en destierro, el cuerpo respondiendo obediente al interrogatorio de las circunstancias” (114). For Valdés, the political is a subtext of alienation; like her parents driven to madness by the failures of the Revolution, Yocandra is a victim of her surroundings. She posits that Cuba has become as much about the island as about Cubans living outside it (115).

La Habana itself becomes an alienating city as the places Yocandra remembers have become casualties of the Revolution. She is left to reminisce about what used to be, as personal landmarks like the Rialto, Prado y Neptuno, and La Bodeguita del Medio seem to have vanished overnight (96). She feels trapped in an “asilio de la identidad” of constant rhetorical questions of “¿Te acuerdas?” (96-97). Even worse, for Yocandra, her city has become “triste. desvincijada, hecha leña” (101). She laments the poverty and scarcity around her, and admits that she has grown accustomed to seeing people eating whatever they can find in someone else’s trash (101). More than anything, she sees her city unprepared for this kind of poverty. Hers was to be the generation that sees the benefits of the Revolution. Instead, as Yocandra explains, she has become a witness to “esa verdad para la cual no fue educada nuestra generación” (101).

Part of Yocandra’s sadness is due to the exile of her two closest friends, la Gusana y el Lince. The first to leave La Habana es la Gusana, who meets a Spaniard and travels with him because “no sorportaba más libretas de racionamiento” (107). La Gusana escapes Cuba by marrying an aging, flatulent Spaniard who robs her of her youth and treats her like a prostitute. Although she admits that the food in Madrid is excellent—she has gained thirty pounds since her arrival—she is lonely and misses Yocandra. Her husband, whom she calls el Gordo, expects little from her other than that she act as a hostess for his friends’ wives. La

Gusana is essentially trapped in a loveless union; she cannot afford a divorce and resigns herself to her fate.

While la Gusana opts for a marriage of convenience to escape Cuba, el Lince leaves the island for the United States in a makeshift raft. He is the lone survivor of the dangerous journey to the Florida Strait. He has been scarred by the experience, and finds himself crying uncontrollably even though he cannot remember the details of “ese instante de la desesperación física de mis compañeros de viaje” (138). Miraculously, he has made it to Miami, where he works under the table until he is able to file for asylum. Despite his considerable talents as an artist, el Lince finds himself starting from scratch. As he explains, “intentar la ascensión profesional a los cuarenta años es un nuevo aislamiento que tomaré como broma” (140). El Lince, like other *balseros* in Miami, faces considerable challenges upon his arrival to the United States.

For those who leave Cuba, like la Gusana and el Lince, also leave their family and friends behind and begin again in new countries. But it is Yocandra, whose days are filled what she terms “la nada” who truly suffers from isolation; her world is disintegrating around her as each day she finds herself more and more alone. Yocandra’s parents, both young believers in the early days of the Revolution, have become shells of themselves, victims of promises unrealized. Her mother, Aída, known in the neighborhood as “la Ida,” has regressed to an almost infant-like state (80). She treats thirty-year-old Yocandra as if she were a child’s doll, offering her a pacifier and bottle when she visits her childhood home. Yocandra believes that her mother “empezó a <<irse>> de sí misma” in 1977, when Che Guevara was assassinated (92). According to Yocandra, upon hearing the news, her mother wrapped the Cuban flag around her head like a turban, wailed uncontrollably, and “de ahí no salía” (92). While she remembers little

of the present and has become incapable of caring for herself, Aída does recall parts of her youth. This juxtaposition is especially painful for Yocandra because her mother remembers few details, like residents of their former apartment, but “lo confunde de todo, o lo mezcla con delicia” (81). Yocandra summarizes her mother’s psychosis in few words: “mamá se ha ido y no regresará” (81).

While her mother patters about preparing bottles for imaginary infants, Yocandra’s father Carlos is equally incapacitated. Once a dedicated *microbrigadista* and unabashed supporter of the Revolution, he has become a shadow of his former self. After correctly predicting that Cuba would not meet its *Zafra de Diez Millones*, Carlos is subjected to electro-shock therapy that leaves him unable to function.¹³ He is unable to recover from his internment at the Hospital Psiquiátrico and spends his days listening to re-broadcasts of Revolutionary discourses. According to Yocandra, both of her parents “se han ido,” causing her to feel like an orphan. She blames the “enfermedad de los discursos” for her parents’ psychoses and regrets the “trauma de la ausencia paterna” as one of the greatest tragedies of her life (88).

In order to cope with this overwhelming sense of loss, Yocandra turns to el Nihilista, not just because of their sexual chemistry, but “porque estaba atravesando el peor y más solitario de los instantes a causa de tanta efímera compañía” (150). What follows is an extremely detailed, graphic, and thorough description of their sexual exploits. The relationship between Yocandra’s loneliness and her encounter with el Nihilista can be understood as her search for some kind of connection. In this novel, the Yocandra chronicles her sexual exploits with multiple partners as

¹³ The *Zafra de Diez Millones*, or “Ten Million Ton Sugar Harvest” was a government-sponsored campaign to leverage Cuba’s export potential. The idea was to make the country a sugar exporting machine and to increase productivity to meet this lofty goal. Despite mobilizing its citizenry and curtailing domestic consumption, the goal was missed by approximately three million tons.

her only relief from the endless monotony imposed by the scarcities of the “Special Period.”¹⁴ In fact, Valdés associates Yocandra’s erotic encounters with Cuban censorship, quipping that any bureaucrat who reads her novel “no entiende un comino” about what actually happens between sexual partners (133). As a nod to Lezama’s legacy, she saves her most salacious section for chapter eight, “Las noches del Nihilista,” because to her “parece que los capítulos ochos de la literatura cubana están condenados a ser pornográficos” (133).

Of course, Valdés’s chapter is not pornographic, but it is erotic, and the focus is centered on the female sex. As psychologist Leon F. Seltzer reasons, although the erotic is “evocative,” and “unlike pornography, it doesn’t appeal *exclusively* to our senses or carnal appetites. It also engages our aesthetic sense” (“What Distinguishes Erotica from Pornography?”).¹⁵ I contend that Valdés celebrates female sexuality as an affirmation of expression by women and uses the female sex as a response to the repressive regimes that control women. The body becomes a place of articulation that challenges established paradigms of power. In Valdés’s *La nada cotidiana*, erotic language is a means of defying state control; she is aware of the presence of censors and mocks their predictable responses to her work. For her, women are at the center of discourses of power, affirming the authority of literature written by women.

Valdés’s details are purposeful and direct as she establishes the female body as the site of her defiance of authority. As Luis argues in “The Caribbean Novel,” Valdés writes “in a crude and sexually explicit language, revealing the female position in sexual aggression” (139).

¹⁴ In “Tropos tropicales: contrapunteo de la frutabomba y el plátano en *Te di la vida entera* y *Trilogía sucia de la Habana*,” René Prieto examines the resurgence of erotic literature during Cuba’s “Special Period.”

¹⁵ Seltzer also makes the point that pornography is, at its essence, “sex for sale” (this is Seltzer’s phrase, not mine). While both the erotic and the pornographic may depict intimate acts, another difference is that the erotic in some ways “honors” intimacy.

This stance has important implications for Valdés's feminist perspective. Mireille Ribiere in *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature* (2006) argues that "the fact that much of the literature written by women enunciates its discourse from the body—the subject's last space of resistance—according to Foucault, could be explained as the search for a place that attempts to decontaminate itself from the canonical-patriarchal formulations of feminine sexuality" (1431). Valdés's *La nada cotidiana* is a clear example of Yocandra's search for a "space of resistance."

Notably, *La nada cotidiana* narrates the monotony of Yocandra's adulthood as part of a cycle that she inherits from her mother. The novel opens with a stream-of-consciousness recreation of a female narrator describing the water that surrounds her. Because the subsequent chapter chronicles Yocandra's birth, the water in the stream-of-consciousness sequence suggests the amniotic fluid inside her mother's womb. The darkness and lack of corporeality seem to support this conclusion. Nevertheless, read within the context of the novel, an alternative interpretation emerges. It is my contention that the novel is narrated cyclically, and that the opening chapter could also be the last of Yocandra's narrative thread. This interpretation is supported by the novel's opening and concluding line "*Ella vino de una isla que quiso construir el paraíso.*"¹⁶ In the novel's final chronological chapter, Yocandra gazes out her bay window onto the vastness of the sea that both separates and connects her to her émigré friends. Interpreting her final musings on the sea as a resolution to leave Cuba, the first chapter's description of salty water, floating, and flashes of light could be interpreted as the Caribbean

¹⁶ I have maintained the italics as published in the novel. The novel opens with "*Ella vino de una isla que quiso construir el paraíso*" as a declarative statement ending with a period. However, it closes with the same phrase, this time with an ellipsis, suggesting that the story continues.

Ocean. We know that Yocandra has attempted escape previously, and that she is now unable to cope with the monotony of life in La Habana without her friends or family.

After all, Valdés alludes to the power of the sea as a feminine force of change, the one thing that Yocandra hopes for above all else. By reading *La nada cotidiana* as a cyclical novel of nostalgia, its first chapter opens itself to new interpretations that suggest the sea as a link between the past, present, and future. This reading of the sea suggests the Yoruba-Lucumí *orisha* Yemayá, who is the mother of life and all *orishas*. Yemayá, also known as La Virgen de la Regla, owns the coastal waters and represents the sea itself.¹⁷ As Julia Cuervo Hewitt documents in *Aché, presencia Africana, tradiciones Yoruba-Lucumí en la narrativa cubana* (1988), Yemayá's multiple manifestations represent "agua, madre, fuerza telúrica devoradora, y abundancia erótica de mujer" (160). Yemayá is associated with the creative and restorative powers of the sea, as well as with the engendering of life itself.

Moreover, as Lydia Cabrera documents in *Yemayá y Ochún: Kariochas, Iyalorichas y Olorichas* (1974), Yemayá is one of the most powerful *orishas*, because she is both the giver of life and a symbol of death (24). Like other central *orishas*, Yemayá's multiple manifestations represent both positive and negative forces. As Cuervo Hewitt explains, "su esencia crucial para la vida, es también fuerza arrasadora del diluvio" (162). In Afro-Cuban religious practices, Yemayá has become the most venerated as well as the most feared *orisha* (164). This duality is not lost in Valdés work. After all, the sea is both a means for escape from Cuba and reuniting with one's friends and well as a barrier that separates the island from all else.

¹⁷ As Julia Cuervo Hewitt explains in *Voices out of Africa*, in some African versions, Yemayá is the biological mother of Changó, the *orisha* of thunder, storms, and the "ultimate impregnator of life" (373). In other versions, she is the wife of Obatalá, the "male/female creator of man," and Changó's adoptive mother (373). In all accounts, she is the "great mother of the ocean" and mother or stepmother to all of the major *orishas*.

La nada cotidiana is a cyclical novel that documents the effects of the “Special Period” on Cubans both on and off the island. Yocandra’s story can be read as an allegory of how Cubans “hemos hecho una Revolución más grande que nosotros mismos. Y de tan grande se aplastó bajo su propio peso” (183). But the novel can also be read as a means of rescuing and reconnecting generations of Cubans who are victims of different kinds of trauma. When read together, the opening and closing chapters suggest the power of the sea to engender life and provide an alternative to alienation. It is my contention that Yocandra leaves Cuba not only because she misses her friends and feels orphaned by her invalid parents. Instead, she leaves Cuba in order to break the cycle for the next generation. It becomes possible to read the fetus’s description of the outside world as Yocandra’s experiences in-utero and also to interpret these musings as those of her own unborn daughter. I argue that Yemayá’s pull is not only due to Yocandra’s longing, but also because of her desire for her own future daughter to escape from the overpowering nothingness that has held her in La Habana until the novel’s conclusion.

Oscar Hijuelos’s *Dark Dude* and *Beautiful María of My Soul*: Exile’s Aftermath

Valdés *La nada cotidiana* suggests that exile has become the only viable option for Cubans like Yocandra. In this novel, the story ends somewhere off the coast of Moncado Beach as the protagonist drifts toward Miami. For writers like Oscar Hijuelos, born and raised in the United States, the problems that characters experience originate in Cuba and continue to manifest themselves even after emigration. While they may no longer live in Cuba, his characters are still bound by familial memories of the island that inform their lives in the United States. One result of this inheritance is the seemingly antithetical notions of nostalgia for an idealized past and a sense of national betrayal. This dichotomy between longing and disillusionment illustrates the

experience of Spanish Caribbean immigrant families, who simultaneously seek to hold on to and reject life on the island. Children of immigrants, characterized numerically by Ruben Rumbaut as “generation 1.5,” and their offspring, or “generation 2.0,” experience a kind of ambiguous identity that attracts them to and repels them from their island culture. In *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban American Way* (1994), Gustavo Pérez Firmat explores a genealogy of Cuban American culture in terms of these patterns of immigration. He posits that there are three stages of Cuban immigration to the United States that help explain his generation’s sense of straddling the Cuban past embraced by their parents and their U.S. present that forces them to assimilate. Pérez Firmat emphasizes the importance of translation as a metaphor for his Cuban American experience, and uses the lexicon of the hyphen to describe his sense of belonging both to a Cuban past and a Cuban American present.

Pérez Firmat also analyzes the implications of exile for Cubans fleeing from Castro’s regime. He explores a genealogy of Cuban Culture through a discussion of what he terms the “latinization of the United States” (1). For this critic, Cuban-American culture is shaped by both “tradition and translation” (2). Using the leitmotif of the mambo and the iconic television show “I Love Lucy” as examples of this theory, he explores the acculturation (the acquisition of culture), transculturation (the passage from one culture to another), and bi-culturation (the blending of two cultures) of the Cuban-American exile experience (5). According to Pérez Firmat, it is his generation that best exemplifies this “bi-culturation” of Cuban and American

cultures. Drawing on Ruben Rumbaut's definition of "generation 1.5," Pérez Firmat stresses the benefits of this intermediate position.¹⁸

In the sixth chapter of *Life on the Hyphen* titled "No Man's Land," Pérez Firmat analyzes Hijuelos's first two novels, *Our House in the Last World* (1983) and *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989) in terms of both the Cuban tradition and its translation when adopted to the United States. Pérez Firmat characterizes Hijuelos as writing "from" Cuba but "toward" the United States.¹⁹ Notably, this characterization centers on Hijuelos's ability to evoke a memory of place without having lived there himself. Born in 1951 in New York City, Hijuelos describes himself in an interview with José Miguel Oviedo, as "a New York City writer of Cuban antecedents" (75). It is this sensibility that informs his work and explains why Pérez Firmat emphasizes Hijuelos's Cuban origins and "American" perspective.

While Pérez Firmat's analysis of Hijuelos's perspective is useful, I am interested in how both writers describe family dynamics. After all, the family trauma present in their works is not necessarily related to the Cuban Revolution. For example, in *Next Year in Cuba: A Cuban's Coming of Age in America* (1995), Pérez Firmat mixes what he terms "autobiography and memoir," fact and reflection that he believes illustrates the Cuban condition. As he retells the story of his family's life in Cuba before leaving for the United States, he also recounts problems

¹⁸ Rumbaut's definition of "generation 1.5" is cited in Pérez Firmat's text as: "Children who were born abroad but are being educated and come of age in the United States form what may be called the '1.5' generation. These refugee youth must cope with two crisis-producing and identity-defining transitions: 1) adolescence and the task of managing the transition from childhood to adulthood, and 2) acculturation and the task of managing the transition from one sociocultural environment to another. The 'first' generation of their parents, who are fully part of the 'old' world, face only the latter; the "second" generation of children now being born and reared in the United States, who as such become 'fully' part of the 'new' world, will need to confront only the former. But members of the '1.5' generation form a distinctive cohort in that in many ways they are marginal to both the old and the new worlds, and are fully part of neither of them" (qtd. Pérez Firmat, 5).

¹⁹ This characterization is couched as a contrast to the poet José Kozer, who he contends writes "to" Cuba "from" the United States. As Pérez-Firmat explains, although Kozer is "the first major poet to have emerged from the contemporary Cuban diaspora," his subject matter is La Habana and not New York City (147). Luis's study of *The Mambo Kings* also shows the importance of translation as he compares both the Spanish and English versions of "Beautiful María of My Soul."

present before Castro's government appropriated his father's business. Specifically, Pérez Firmat chronicles his father's infidelity and exploitation of black women under his employ (25). His parents' marriage is clearly under stress before the family moves to the United States, and this duress precipitates exile.

In Hijuelos's *Dark Dude* and *Beautiful María of My Soul*, familial strife also emerges as compelling reason for leaving the island. In both novels, personal reasons for exile in the United States seem to overshadow political motivations. Of course, the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution cannot be ignored, however, these novels privilege the personal over the political. In so doing, they challenge how Cubans and Cuban Americans imagine their pasts and how this past is inscribed onto their present. I contend that the alienation and abandonment experienced by the children of Cuban exiles is directly tied to how their past is presented to them. This inherited memory seems to alienate rather than connect families.

Dark Dude: Not Cuban Enough

While the trauma of exile changes the models of identity for members of "generation 1.5" like Pérez Firmat, it also impacts "second generation" children. In *Dark Dude*, Oscar Hijuelos continues themes of abandonment, but this time from the United States looking back to Cuba. In this novel, Hijuelos explores the absence of place experienced by a teenage son of Cuban parents.²⁰ Rico, the novel's protagonist, is born in New York but is constantly reminded of his parent's country of origin and his own inability to conform to his parents' expectations. As a light-skinned, blond *latino* in a predominantly dark-skinned Puerto Rican neighborhood, Rico

²⁰ Hijuelos's *Dark Dude* is marketed as young adult literature by publisher Simon and Schuster.

feels out of place with his Puerto Rican peers. Moreover, he is acutely aware that he is the lightest member of his family, a trait dismissed by his parents as the emergence of recessive genes from his grandfather's Irish ancestry. Rico's sense of not belonging is exacerbated by Rico's inability to speak Spanish and made worse by his own feelings of not being "Cuban enough" for his own family.

Dark Dude's Rico is the U.S.-born son of Cuban immigrants who describes himself as "lonely and scared as shit forever and ever" (46). His parents, as Cuban immigrants "who not knowing much English took whatever jobs they could find," struggle to provide for their family in New York (49). As Rico tells their story, it becomes clear that moving from Cuba to the United States did not solve his parents' problems. In Cuba, his parents both lived in the countryside, in what they describe to Rico as "nice little houses out on a farm" (48). While their upbringings may have seemed idyllic to Rico, neither of his parents had "much of an education" nor prospects for improving their lives in Cuba (49). They struggle to make ends meet in New York as Rico's father's dreams of the lauded "better life" in the United States are met with the harsh realities of trying to find work in a competitive job market without marketable skills.

Rico is painfully aware of his parents' economic woes. He knows that their apartment is a "dump" with a "cockroach carnival" inside its baseboards (49). Like most immigrants, his father works two jobs to make ends meet, a pace that Rico is sure led to the heart attack that almost leaves him without a father. According to Rico, his father "never made a lot of money" and things "were always tight" (49). In order to help his parents with household expenses, Rico gets a job and works before and after school, dutifully giving his mother half of his weekly wages. Despite his efforts to contribute to their household, Rico sees "a permanent look of worry" on his

father's face and disappointment in his mother's eyes (47). He feels as if he cannot please his mother because he is unable to solve their household's financial problems.

While Rico has never been to Cuba, he has heard stories and studies the photographs that his parents keep in his family's apartment. There are photos of his relatives in Cuba hanging alongside framed pictures of Jesus and his nuclear family. Rico calls them "old family photographs" that are foreign to him. After all, as he explains, Cuba "was just this crocodile-shaped island, south of Florida, that you saw on maps" (11). To Rico, this hallway gallery, along with the apartment as a whole, is a source of unease. It is always dark because his mother keeps the lights off to save on electricity. The darkness "spooked" Rico, but his unease is due to feeling like an impostor in his own family. The family photo gallery leads visitors to ask his mother if he is really her son because he does not resemble the rest of his family.

With his light skin and hair, Rico does not resemble his darker-skinned parents and feels like he is "some sort of genetic mutation" (57). In fact, blacks or dark-skinned Latinos are not the only outsiders. Rico becomes convinced that his outward appearance is in fact responsible for his isolation. After all, it not only physically separates him from his family; it also keeps him from making friends in the *barrio* with children his own age. He feels this sense of not belonging most acutely from his own mother, who "just be staring at me, like she envied my white skin" (49). He feels like his mother treats him "as if I was some rich white kid, slumming it up with the spics in our apartment" (49).

Rico traces these feelings of isolation to his childhood illness. At the age of five, he was sent to a pediatric hospital in Boston, separating him from his family and neighborhood. Tellingly, Rico associates his illness with both his genes and displacement from his family. Although he was quite young when he got sick, he remembers that "my moms went into the

bathroom one day and found blood all over the place; then she had come running into my room to find me sleeping on blood-soaked sheets, the stuff leaking out of me like crazy” (46). He blames himself for his “stupid blood” and is wracked with guilt over the medical bills that cripple his parent’s finances (47). Rico internalizes what he perceives to be “stupid blood” (a genetic disease of the kidneys), rationalizing that his illness causes rifts in his family. He explains that “Pops blamed Moms for my sickness, and my Moms blamed me for being a little pussy” (47). Kept indoors by his overprotective mother, Rico experiences childhood in isolation that he believes he has brought upon himself.

Moreover, Rico equates his prolonged absence from home—an isolated displacement—with adversely affecting his closest relationships. Rico explains that “when I was away, nobody talked to me in Spanish, and when I did get home and heard Spanish spoken again, it sounded weird to me” (47). His ability to communicate in Spanish compromises his relationship with his mother. She “started making faces because she couldn’t always understand what the freakin’ hell I was saying” when he returns home from the hospital (47). Rico associates his illness with his mother’s lack of understanding and convinces himself that he is somehow responsible.

Rico’s experiences evoke the kind of racial attitudes described in Piri Thomas’s *Down these Mean Streets* (1967). In this testimonial, Thomas depicts the duality of divergent notions of race and identity in the United States’ mainland and Puerto Rico, demonstrating through firsthand experience that race seems to take precedence over all other identity markers outside of the island. His memoir affirms the presence of a rigid, pervasive racial hierarchy that separates him from his siblings and marks him as “other” even within his *barrio*. Thomas exists

in a racial double-bind, and only comes to terms with his identity when he sees the hypocrisy of the systematic racism of both Puerto Rican and U.S. cultures.

Throughout *Down these Mean Streets*, race is articulated in two languages, illustrating two separate systems of racial definition and social hierarchy. In Puerto Rico, where racial euphemisms speak to gradations in skin color, words like “trigüefio,” “moreno,” “negrito,” and “moyeto” suggest the spectrum of racial phenotypes that result from centuries of Spanish colonial exploitation. For Thomas, Puerto Rico exemplifies this legacy of consanguinity, as indigenous Boriquen, African, and European phenotypes combined to form a spectrum of racial identities. Thomas’s family reflects this racial miscegenation, as his mother is *blanca* while his father is *moyeto*, and his siblings are “like houses-painted white outside, and blacker’n a mother inside” (145). In attempting to affirm his own identity, Thomas argues that “Poppa’s a Negro, and even if Momma’s *blanca*, Poppa’s blood carries more weight with Mr. Charlie” (144). Interestingly, Thomas resorts to the Spanish to describe his mother’s skin color, as he seems keenly aware that despite her “paddy” appearance, her accent makes her *blanca* but not totally “white.”

While the Spanish language accounts for these gradations in skin color, English seems comparably unable to articulate these variations. While Thomas’s brother James is able to explain his father’s color in Spanish, when he attempts to do the same in English, he hedges and resorts to adjectives to explain his point of view. James argues “Maybe Pappa’s a little dark, but that’s the Indian blood in him,” attempting to dissimulate his father’s obvious African “blood” as less “black” by explaining it as due to Puerto Rico’s indigenous legacy (144). James insists that their family is white, arguing that “we all came out of Momma an’ Poppa-but we ain’t Negroes. We’re Puerto Ricans, an’ we’re white” (145). When Thomas

challenges his younger brother's assertion that their family is racially "white," he touches upon the "absolutism" of racial realities in the 1940s. According to the United States's racial hierarchy, all the Thomas siblings would be considered "black." As Piri Thomas argues, "Poppa thinks that marrying a white woman made him white. He's wrong. It's just another nigger marrying a white woman and making her as black as him. That's the way the paddy looks at it. The Negro just stays black. Period" (145). Thomas's explanation exposes the distinctions between Puerto Rican and U.S. racial realities. While Puerto Rico has historically "allowed" for miscegenation as a means of social "ascension" through *blancamiento*, or whitening, the United States has resisted this trend. Thomas, through his experiences in New York, knows that he will be identified as "Negro" before Puerto Rican, realizing that racial stratification is absolute.

Thomas's *Down these Mean Streets* has racial subtexts that expose underlying prejudices that are often unarticulated. Thomas is direct; he explains the differences between skin color and social status in Puerto Rico and the United States, explicitly criticizing the hypocritical official doctrine of equality in both places. He suggests a disjuncture between political dogma and lived reality, positing the possibility of a re-examination of black identity politics.

Although he does not articulate racial divides as directly as Piri Thomas, Rico feels their effects on a daily basis. Rico, who is white, also expresses similar feelings to those of Thomas, showing that whites or white Latinos can also be outsiders. He is skeptical of his parent's explanation for his white skin, and wishes it were more like his younger sister's. Isabel, his sister, shares his mother's skin that "is somewhere between cinnamon and *café con leche*" (11). His father has "wavy dark hair and dark eyes" (11). He laments his own "hazel eyes, fair skin,

and *freckles* for God's sakes" (12). While his mother says that he should be "proud" to be so white because he will "have an easier time in life," he feels alone and out of place (12). He is plagued by this sense of isolation and "thought about that stuff a lot, even when I didn't want to" (13). Rico is left to ask himself "*Why me and no one else?*," compounding his feelings that he does not belong even in his own family (13).

To make matters worse, Rico spends almost two years in a Massachusetts hospital as a young child, and as a result, loses the ability to speak his parents' language fluently. Not only is he physically different from his peers, he is linguistically isolated as well. He is teased with the moniker "dark dude," street slang for anyone who is suspiciously other. Hijuelos appropriates the term for the novel's title, suggesting the thematic importance of a sense of belonging for the novel's protagonist. *Dark Dude* becomes a novel of self-discovery, but also of isolation, as Rico's desire to belong is prevented by his inability to fit in.

Rico is acutely aware that he is phenotypically and culturally unlike his Puerto Rican friends in the neighborhood. In fact, despite repeated attempts to "pass" for his friend Jimmy's cousin, he is chastised as a "mamma's boy" and is unable to join in neighborhood games because he is never chosen as part of a team. Moreover, his parents are Cuban rather than Puerto Rican, and are wary of allowing their son to befriend other neighborhood children. Jimmy, who is Rico's closest friend, is Puerto Rican. Jimmy's family, like many other families living in Spanish Harlem, struggles to make ends meet. His father is a superintendent and Jimmy lives in the cellar of the building where he works. Moreover, his skin is darker than Rico's, and Rico's parents are quick to claim superiority over Jimmy. His mother does not make these reservations explicit, but she disapproves of any friends other than the also lighter-skinned Gilberto. His father is more direct, warning Rico to stay away from the black kids in the projects, as they are "always up to

no good.” Rico learns that even in his own community, his skin color marks him as “other.” He is teased by his immediate Puerto Rican neighbors for his light hair and openly mocked by black kids for looking like “a snitch.” Rico’s reality demonstrates the racial hierarchy in two communities; he can neither pass for Puerto Rican nor black, and remains an outsider in both groups.

Rico becomes increasingly convinced that Spanish Harlem is an untenable place. He is isolated, plagued by an alcoholic father and an overbearing mother, and singled out by misguided teachers. Unable to cope with the barrage of insults and increasing violence, he leaves home and hitchhikes to Wisconsin to live with his lottery-winning friend Gilberto. Miles away from urban New York, it is during this self-imposed exile that Rico eventually realizes that distance provides him with the perspective he needs to understand his family. Teenage Rico needs to leave his home to discover his own sense of self. He explains that “in getting some distance from them, I could see that there was both the good and bad in my life, like there was nothing I could do about the way I looked, and nothing I could do about the creeps of the world” (392). This revelation allows him to reconcile his present with his past, and to accept his parents’ shortcomings without abandoning his roots. By embracing the culture that he feels had abandoned him, Rico finds a sense of belonging that allows for reconciliation with his family and his own identity.

Beautiful María of My Soul: Exile and Memory

Hijuelos’s *Dark Dude* can be read a redemptive novel that reconciles the teenage Rico with his parents by helping him find a sense of belonging. Though the novel explores the trauma of isolation as described by the teenage Rico who does not feel “Cuban enough,” the hopeful reunification of Rico with his family suggests that it is possible to heal the wounds of isolation

with time and distance. As in *Dark Dude*, Hijuelos's *Beautiful María of My Soul: Or the True Story of María García y Cifuentes, the Lady Behind a Famous Song* illustrates how the exile experience and recollections "years later" impact Cuban families in the United States (71). Teresa, like other members of the "generation 1.5," is just a child when she leaves Cuba and has few memories of the island. As she explains, "Cuba is like a dream" (247). Yet, her mother's stories, along with letters and photographs, inform Teresa's sense of place and self. Her mother is hardened by exile, but has already become so before leaving Cuba. As María explains, "me puso muy, muy durita" because of the demands of her life in La Habana (143). Teresa inherits this "hardness;" she steels herself against men and relationships and instead buries herself in her studies, and later, in her work at the hospital. I argue that Teresa develops her intellect as a defense mechanism against her mother's critical eye (251). After all, Teresa cannot hold a candle to her mother's beauty or skill as a dancer and does not share her sexual potency. Teresa grapples with feelings of inadequacy but ultimately finds an identity that allows her to reconcile her relationship with her mother with the memories she inherits.

María Cifuentes y García, the protagonist of *Beautiful María of My Soul*, is the "Beautiful María" from Hijuelos's acclaimed *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989). In this novel, María tells the story of her childhood in Pinar del Río, her life as a cabaret dancer in La Habana, and her experiences as member of the Cuban exile community in the suburbs of Miami. Born in rural Cuba in 1930, María is the eldest daughter of illiterate *campesinos* Manolo y Concha Cifuentes y García, who eke out a living as subsistence farmers. At the age of 17, she hitchhikes to La Habana on a truck full of pigs destined for slaughter. By the time she is 23, María is a well-known dancer at the Tropicana Club and the mistress of one of La Habana's top crime bosses. Because of this relationship, she is forced to flee Castro's Cuba and moves to Miami with her

young daughter, Teresita. Now 64, María reflects on her experiences, both in Cuba and in the United States, as her daughter, now the same age as María when they moved to Miami, attempts to piece together her family's past and reconnect with her mother.

Beautiful María of My Soul is divided into five parts that coincide with María's memories of Pinar del Río, La Habana, New York, and Miami. While the Part I "Cuba, 1947" and Part III "Songs of Despair and Love: Havana, New York, 1953-1958," have titles that include dates for reference, Part II "The Glory that Entered her Life," Part IV "Another Life," and Part V "Oh Yes, that Book," do not. In Parts II, IV, and IV, the reader must piece together a chronology based on allusions to historical events and casual mentions of María's age. For example, in Part IV, both the year 1961 and the phrases "three years later" allow the reader to deduce that María is 31, since we know that she was 17 in 1947, from the novel's first chapter. This blurred chronology, which requires careful piecing together of dates and ages, echoes María memories and Teresa's re-tracing of her mother's life in Cuba as they each sift through her "cache of keepsakes" (283). The novel alternates between the present, María's memories, Teresa's memories, and Teresa's interpretations of her mother's keepsakes. This re-assembly of the past informs how María and Teresa remember Cuba as both are re-creating the island from a distance and through artifacts.

These artifacts, mostly in the form of photographs, become *aide memoirs* for María and Teresa's reconstructed memories. As William Luis posits in "Incongruous Gender Spaces in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*, *The Latin Deli*, and *The Year of Our Revolution*" photographs are subject to interpretation and can be only partial recollections of the past (2). For María, photographs of Nestor and her in La Habana become cherished memories of her youth and beauty. Though still beautiful, María remembers "Nestor, eternally handsome with his

penetrating gaze, and beautiful María in her clinging bathing suit rising out of the sea like a goddess” (138). On the other hand, these same photos are a source of pain for Teresa. One photo in particular, taken six months before they left Cuba for Miami, haunts her. In this photo, Teresa is three years old, dressed to the nines in a satin dress with her hair tied in a bow. She is standing with her father Ignacio, whom she does not remember, but is told that she resembles. This photograph is doubly painful for Teresa because it depicts her “pock faced, heavy browed, not particularly handsome but manly looking father” as well as a Cuba that she does not remember (246). Moreover, it captures Teresa looking like “one of those rubber shrunken heads or that of a smiling troll,” capturing insecurities about her looks that plague her as an adult (246).

Because this photograph is prominently displayed in the living room, Teresa is unable to escape its effects. She is constantly reminded of her mother’s beauty and tormented by her good looks that she has not inherited. Instead, as she explains, there is “a squatness to the shape of her skull, her liquid eyes were too set apart, her arched eyebrows so pronounced and close together that she seemed perpetually apprehensive about something” (246). While her mother attempts to reassure her about her appearance, even as a child Teresa can see through her words. As she remembers, “her mother’s eyes always conveyed something else, the un-spoken ‘¡*Qué feita!*’” (247). As an adult, although she has come to see her mother’s beauty “as a source of pride,” she cannot help but compare herself to her mother and find herself coming up short (248). After all, she is “not as elegant, long limbed, voluptuous, or pretty as María” and feels the sting each time she looks at her own reflection in the mirror (250).

Though she cannot compete with her mother’s beauty, Teresa far outpaces María in terms of her education and professional achievements. As a pediatric oncologist at Miami’s Children’s Hospital, she is at the top of her field. Despite these accomplishments, her mother criticizes her

for not making more of an effort regarding her appearance and for her disinterest in the opposite sex. María's admonishments are relentless. She tells Teresa that she does not "do anything right. You don't put on the proper makeup—when you do, you look like a *payaso*! A clown" (251). Moreover, Teresa does not "care about dressing sexy at all," and instead wears practical clothing (251). María is dumbfounded by her daughter's unwillingness to do everything possible to attract a mate. She chastises Teresa for being "too picky" and warns her that she will spend the rest of her life alone (252). As if these recriminations were not enough, María lectures that "even an ugly man with one leg would be better than none" (252). María is acutely aware that she has had to fend for herself since she was seventeen. She nags her daughter that someday she will be gone and Teresa will have "no one" because "no tenemos familia" (252). María wields this final phrase as if it were a weapon, using it to put an end to any discussion in what Teresa refers to as her "coup de grâce" (252).

In the United States, beauty is not the only factor that determines a woman's self-worth. Teresa, who was raised in the United States and has adapted to the U.S. culture, places more value on her education. Although she recognizes and at times envies her mother's beauty, finding a boyfriend is not her main motivation. While she lives with her mother's memories, she is also isolated from traditional Cuban culture. As Teresa explains, she does not relish attention from the opposite sex, she is a clumsy dancer, and she feels like the *cubanas* in her neighborhood are wasting time gossiping about "tonterías" (253). Moreover, she delves into books because she knows that she does not share her mother's good looks and confidence about her appearance. Instead, she develops her mind and pursues her dream of becoming an accomplished physician.

María's constant criticism of Teresa reflects her own insecurities and experiences. María's past informs her present, and helps explain why she is so keen that her daughter finds a

mate. After all, she is the daughter of illiterate subsistence farmers who lived in very difficult circumstances. Her mother, Concha Cifuentes y García, is “a pleasant-looking woman with a broad African nose and deeply soft dark eyes” (45). She is the mother of four children, only one of whom survives into adulthood. Her sons Luis and Miguel die from typhus, and her other daughter Teresa suffers from epilepsy, though that diagnosis did not exist in 1940s Cuba. By the time she is forty-five, Concha is ravaged by cancer that leaves her blind. María cares for her the best way she can, but with no available medical treatment, her mother dies a slow, agonizing death at home in their dirt floor hut.

In addition to the death of her beloved mother, María witnesses her younger sister Teresa’s untimely death. Her sister is her constant childhood companion and best friend until she is stricken by epilepsy. Teresa’s seizures increase in frequency and severity, and María and her father fear for her life. When the visiting doctor prescribes her phenobarbital, the medicine “started to change her younger sister’s sweet nature” and Teresa is never the same (52). She begins to act out, defy María, and even sleeps with a local farmhand. As her condition worsens, Teresa takes her own life and drowns herself in the waterfall where she and María used to play as girls.

By the age of sixteen, María’s only immediate family is her father, Manolo, a travelling musician and farmer. While she has fond memories of her *papito* who took her and Teresa to visit nearby towns in an oxcart, her relationship with him has soured. At times, she is ashamed of his “*guajiro*” roughness, his preponderance for using the outhouse with the door open and his tendency to drink too much rum (34). She is wounded by his rants “that women, even young and beautiful ones like herself, were not much use to the world except as adornments, and even then

they were destined to grow old and rot” (34). She is willing to forgive these insults and drunken ramblings, however, with one condition: “as long as he didn’t hit her” (34).

Despite the fact that *papito* was all the family she has left, María finds that their relationship has become complicated. As explains, she has “other reasons for detesting and loving him at the same time” (34). After all, *papito* becomes increasingly violent after her mother’s death. On the day of Concha’s funeral, he repeatedly beats María so violently that her eyes water and her face bruises. His drink-fueled beatings are one thing, but María finds that she simply cannot tolerate life in their *bohío* once her father remarries. She describes his second wife Olivia as “the most horrible woman imaginable” who “seemed to take special delight in ordering María around and establishing herself as the new *dueña* of that household” (28). María finds nights especially unbearable, as she cannot avoid the “groans and yelps and filthy language” as Olivia and her father have sex just a few feet from her straw bed (29). Any trappings of childhood are quickly eliminated as life at home becomes a “torment” for María.

While the verbal and physical abuse María endures is painful, the “other reasons” for her complicated feelings about her father are more sinister. Years later, while recalling her visit to a married Nestor in 1955, María reveals to her daughter that her father’s abuse was both physical and sexual. María explains that the naps that she and her sister Teresa took with her father in the hammock outside their *bohío* become a source of dread and unease. After Teresa’s death and once “she started undergoing her bodily changes and began to smell different to men,” her father begins to insist that she lie with him in the hammock. *Papito* is now “pressing up against her back” and inserting his fingers into “her ‘most special and delicate flower’” (173). His advances leave her “feeling sick inside and sensing that something was wrong” (174). Finally, before “it could get worse,” María tries to avoid him altogether, especially when he has been drinking

(174). To make matters worse, *papito* acts “as if she had broken his heart,” and María’s pain becomes more acute (174). María later explains that her *papito*’s abuse leads to her indifference toward the feelings of men. The very memory of how her father “sometimes treated her” leaves María “feeling sickly inside, as if a miasma, or an infection, invaded her memories” (173).

At this point in the novel, María fully explains to Teresa the full reasons behind her decision to leave Pinar del Río. Between her sister’s suicide, her mother’s death, and her father’s increasingly violent behavior, her *bohío* had become unbearable. At seventeen, María decides that she is no longer at home in Pinar del Río. Her story is one of double migration. First, she leaves the rural countryside for La Habana, and then leaves La Habana for Miami. In both instances, family trauma and loss prompt the moves. When she leaves Pinar del Río, it is to flee an increasingly untenable home that has become unlivable due to her father’s drunken abuse. This same pattern is repeated when she leaves La Habana for Miami. Abusive Ignacio, who functions as a father-figure of sorts, is imprisoned for corruption by Castro’s government, and María leaves Cuba for Miami. Once in the United States, María briefly moves with Teresa to Las Vegas, but finds that she is not employable and soon returns to Miami. Each migration is prompted not by political or even economic necessity. Her exile is personal; María is hoping that each move will help her make new memories that will help heal old wounds.

For María, her beauty is her only marketable skill. She is poor and uneducated, and must rely on her feminine wiles to support herself. Growing up in Pinar del Río, the only school is in San Jacinto, more than two hours away. María’s *papito*, like many *guajiros*, “just didn’t think it worthwhile” and believed that his daughters were better served “learning more practical skills—like cooking, skinning animals, and sewing” (46). Completely illiterate at eighteen and alone in La Habana, María passes time in the market browsing used books. It is in one of these used book

stalls that she meets Lázaro Portillo, the unlikely catalyst who will inform the next decade of María's life.²¹ Lázaro is "a lanky old *negrito* with sunken eyes" who lives in a doorway behind the market in front of María's rented room (87). "Just a boy" in the 1880s, he is well into his sixties when they meet in 1948 (142). He observes María leafing through used books and notes that he "can tell by your eyes that you really don't know what you're looking at" (87). Lázaro puts an embarrassed María at ease by telling her that he himself did not learn to read until the age of thirty. More importantly, he offers to teach her "the basics" at no charge (88).

Lázaro, much like his biblical namesake, ignites a light in María that changes the course of her life. Though he clearly lives in poverty, he is "the sort who looked hungry but didn't act it" (88). In addition to teaching María how to read and write, he educates her about Cuban history and politics. Lázaro is well-versed on everything from Cuban independence from Spain, to the American occupation, and present-day politics. He has María read aloud from magazines like *Bohemia* and outlines the injustices of the Batista government (142).²² He believes that Cuba's future is full of possibility and that "sooner or later someone will come along who is not a crook" (142). Just five years after they begin their lessons, María can "read and write like a fourteen-year-old with certain bad habits" (145).

Lázaro is the one constant in María's life in La Habana and his presence informs her years in the city. Without his tutelage, María would have never met the love of her life, Nestor

²¹ In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Lázaro, or Lazarus, is from the Hebrew Eleazar, or whom God helps. Lazarus is the name of two men in the Bible. The first is the man who Jesus brought back from the dead. According to this story, Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days when Jesus had the stone covering his tomb rolled away. Lazarus emerges alive, convincing many of Jesus's divinity. The second is the name of a poor beggar in a parable told by Jesus. In this story, a rich man ignores the impoverished and sickly Lazarus ailing outside the gates of his home. Both men die, and angels carry Lazarus to heaven while the rich man suffers eternal damnation.

²² Founded in 1908, *Bohemia* became a principal publication in support of the Cuban Revolution. Its articles sharply criticized and Fulgencio Batista's regime and lauded the rebel cause.

Castillo, or the father of her child, Ignacio Fuentes. After all, thanks to Lázaro, María can read the note that Ignacio sends her backstage at the club. Moreover, Lázaro tries to convince María that Nestor is worthy of her love, that he has a poet's soul and that "there's more to life than money" (148). In 1955, Lázaro also counsels María against traveling to New York to re-kindle a relationship with Nestor—sage advice considering that he has married and has a family of his own. A year later, in the spring of 1956, María first hears Nestor's ballad during a tutoring session with Lázaro (193). When Nestor's song "La bella María de mi alma," rattles her, Lázaro assures her that "he wouldn't have written that song to spite you" (192). Lázaro dies in 1958, nine years after they meet. As María explains, it is as if the circle of life is complete, or, she puts it, "things are given, things are taken away;" María is finally expecting the child she yearns to have (231).

While living, Lázaro also helps María to see Ignacio Fuentes's shortcomings without shaming her for their relationship. María becomes involved with Ignacio Fuentes out of necessity. As she explains, "*she needed him*" as unwanted attention from men has "become a nuisance" for the increasingly recognizable María (76). After all, "he wasn't ugly, or fat, and he was clean, dapper, and smelled good," which is more than she can say for many of the patrons of the clubs where she dances (76). Ignacio chastises María for "eating like a goat," calls her "his little *mulatta* whore," and beats her (80). María, accustomed to this kind of behavior because her *papito* "had sometimes been that way," tolerates the abuse because Ignacio is a rich and powerful man (80). With time, however, she comes to learn that the material comforts and protection that he provides are not worth their price. Eventually, "she'd tend to remember him as a son of a bitch, *y como un abusador*" (82).

When his rants are directed at men like Lázaro, something in María changes and she begins to steel herself against Ignacio. This change of heart is due in no small part to his racist attitude. While María overlooks Ignacio's abusive treatment of her, she grows unable to forgive his rudeness and contempt for blacks and the poor. María remembers that "if lepers or blind men or amputees held out their hands begging for coins, a scowl of contempt exploded across his face" (77). Ignacio feels nothing but "contempt for the slop of pigs, the filth of an outhouse, and, after a while even what he called the ignorance of the *guajiros*" (79). These rants are hurtful to María who has "black blood on her mother's side" (148). But when he "accuses her of consorting with a Negro" and warns that she will "lose what few manners" he has taught her, she finds his "sentiments" insulting (148). Ignacio "has no use for such men" and considers them "the lowest of the low" (148). María finds Ignacio's racism distasteful even though many white Cubans think "that way" (148).

Upon arrival in Miami, María encounters a new kind of racism. She has grown accustomed to attention for her beauty, but learns that her appearance is not always as admired in Miami as it was in La Habana. As she explains, "despite her beauty and light *mulatta* skin," she is sometimes "regarded as good—or bad—as black" (254). She refuses to heed the "whites only" designations on water fountains and public restrooms, and tries to ignore the dirty looks she and Teresa receive (254). María finds that earning a living is next to impossible. Those businesses that are hiring post "No Cubans Please" signs and María has few prospects. She tries her luck in Las Vegas, but realizes that she "just wasn't young or tall enough to suit local tastes" (256). Defeated, she resigns herself to what she knows best; she finds a man with a stable income and marries him.

Looking back on her years in La Habana, María realizes that she should have followed Lázaro's advice. Had she been able to value "the goodness in a man's heart" as Lázaro opines, she might have ended up with her one true love (148). Instead, she wastes her youth in an abusive relationship with a man that she does not love. At the time, María justifies her decision because Nestor has "a troubled soul and a doubtful future" (149). However, had she known what she knows now, she would have made different choices. She is left with a "sea of regrets" that continue to haunt her (283).

By 1961, María has no ties to keep her in Cuba. Ignacio, though not her husband, is arrested by Castro's government and is sentenced to ten years on the notorious Isle of Pines. Their tony Vedado apartment and bank accounts are confiscated (241). Moreover, tourism to Cuba has essentially dried up and María cannot find work as a choreographer or dancer. Left with little choice, María leaves Cuba with her daughter Teresa. Arguably, María's exile is for personal reasons. Though she contends that she, "like so many others, as in a fiery romance, starting taking a second look" after the summary executions and arrests, it was "not that she hated Fidel Castro as much as some of the Cuban exiles she'd meet" living in Miami (239). Instead, much like she when she leaves Pinar del Río, she leaves La Habana to escape the painful losses of Nestor and Lázaro.

Of course, that is not to say that María's story does not coincide with Cuban history. In fact, the history of the Cuban Revolution serves as a backdrop for María's love affairs in La Habana. Many of the dates in *Beautiful María of My Soul* correspond to important moments of the Revolution. To cite a few examples, in 1953, when María is 23, she learns that Nestor has written "La bella María de mi alma" in homage to her. This revelation corresponds with the 26th of July Movement's failed attack on the Moncada Barracks, a galvanizing moment for rebel

forces. Two years later, in 1955, Fidel Castro is granted amnesty and triumphantly returns to Cuba. This same year, and against Lázaro's advice, María travels to New York to visit Nestor. While the rebel forces are gaining ground, María is despondent. Finally, in 1961, the Revolution declares its socialist nature and the "caso Padilla" and Castro's "Palabras a los intelectuales" create a line in the sand. That same year, María and Teresa leave Cuba for Miami. María, though she contends that she pays little attention to politics, is affected by them just the same. The parallels between María's memories and Cuban history illustrate unfulfilled promise. For María, and perhaps for the Cuban Revolution, things are clearer in retrospect. It is only when she is able to share her story with Teresa—after years provide necessary distance—that she wishes she has made different choices.

María's insecurities threaten her relationship with her daughter because she is unable to separate her memories of her own youth from Teresa's present. Her endless lectures "about broken hearts and the loneliness of solitude" seem to drive her daughter further from her rather than bring them closer (296). Only when Teresa looks through the artifacts of her mother's past does she begin to understand their present relationship. For more than three decades, her mother has carried with her a "cache of keepsakes" that remind her of "la Cuba que fue" (50). These artifacts include a black and white photo of María's parents, a lock of the late Teresa's hair, photos of Nestor and María laughing in the waves, María's dancer's headshot, and most importantly, María's notebooks from Lázaro's lessons (243). For María, these mementos and her memories are "all that remained" of her youth in Cuba (243). Yet, for Teresa, they are a window into her mother's past that begins to help her understand herself.

Teresa comes to terms with her strained relationship with her mother when she feels forced to defend her honor. In 1989, more than thirty years after Nestor's song first plays on the

radio, María is once again confronted by her past. She appears as a character in Oscar Hijuelos's prize-winning *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* and intimate details of her affair with Nestor are published. Even more troubling, María feels that she is portrayed unfairly and is blamed for Nestor's death. Teresa, who has already read about her mother's torrid romance in letters that María saves, feels compelled to come to her mother's aide. Teresa seems "almost indignant on María's behalf" and seeks legal counsel for a possible defamation case (309). I argue that Teresa's reaction is due in part to María having finally told her the truth about her past. It is only because María has laid bare all of her memories, not just the happy ones, that Teresa truly understands her.

Teresa forgives María for her constant badgering because she understands the root causes of her mother's actions. She recognizes María's memories for the nostalgia that they represent and is no longer bound by their dictates. After all, María's memories have attained a dream-like quality "just like the idea of Cuba itself" (247). For her part, María has finally heeded the advice given to her by older, more experienced women where she used to dance: "It's fine to have the memory of a love, but it's a fairy tale to think that one can ever go back there again" (214).

Exile: A Cuban "Sea of Regrets"

Valdés's *La nada cotidiana* and Hijuelos's *Dark Dude* and *Beautiful María of My Soul* demonstrate the powerful pull of memories and nostalgia. In *La nada cotidiana*, Yocandra revisits her relationships and Cuba's "Special Period" to will herself to leave the island. She resolves that memories are not enough to sustain her and chooses the unknown, and a dangerous sea, over continued monotony. In *Dark Dude*, Rico must also leave home in order to find himself. Luckily, he has the choice to return to his family after a self-imposed

exile. For María and her daughter Teresa in *Beautiful María of My Soul*, returning home is impossible. However, by reconstructing history, including painful memories, they are able to heal their own relationship. Both Valdés and Hijuelos demonstrate the dangerous allure of residing in “la Cuba que fue” and suggest that salvation from a painful present requires reconciliation with the past.

These novels demonstrate the loneliness and alienation that defines the exile experience. This pain is felt even by the children of those who left Cuba. In each case, exile is less a choice than a last resort, an important lesson as diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba begin to thaw. Moreover, as Rico and Teresa demonstrate, life in the United States is not free from the same racial and social pressures experienced in Cuba. In fact, it seems that expectations after exile are elevated, as if those who left the island must somehow justify their decision through the success of their children.

CHAPTER 3

ENDEMIC DOMINICAN VIOLENCE: JUNOT DÍAZ'S *DROWN* (1996) AND *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO* (2007) AND LOIDA MARITZA PÉREZ'S *GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME* (1999)

In the Dominican Republic, the aftermath of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina's dictatorship (1930-1961) left a legacy of violence and economic instability that continues to affect Dominicans and Dominican American families.¹ Patterns of cyclical, almost hereditary violence emerge as common elements in post-Trujillo works written by two Dominican authors in the United States. In this chapter, I explore the ramifications of these patterns of violence and their resultant displacement in Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao: A Novel* (2007) as well as Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (1999). Both Díaz and Pérez merge personal and national politics in their fiction, exposing not just the legacy of Dominican violence but also how Dominican culture changes once families are in the United States. While both authors' works are situated in Dominican communities in the Northeastern United States, the violence of the narrated present is tied to Dominican history and culture. In fact, I argue that the microcosm of dysfunctional families in these novels mirrors the macrocosm of the fractured country the protagonists' families left behind. Both authors expose the difficulties of coming of age in the United States as a Dominican American against the backdrop of the violence of Dominican history.

Given the Dominican Republic's violent history, the origins of violence can be traced to colonialism's legacy. In addition to the lasting racial and economic ramifications of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the Dominican Republic experienced a particularly tumultuous transition from

¹ An earlier version of this chapter appears on pages 81-94 of the Fall 2011 issue of *PALARA* as "Dominican Violence and Coming of Age in the U.S. in Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (1999)." Permission has been granted to use this material.

colony to republic. While the Dominican Republic gained its independence in 1844, it was from Haiti, rather than Spain, as in other Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands.² As William Luis contends, the nation's turbulent political history continued into the twentieth century, scarring the Dominican psyche with three debilitating events: U.S. occupation of the island from 1916 to 1924, the Trujillo dictatorship from 1930 to 1961, and the U.S. invasion in 1965 (135). Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, a notoriously ruthless dictator, controlled the island for more than three decades via a relentless campaign of psychological terror. In 1937, he ordered the massacre of thousands of Haitians living on the Dominican border, precipitating a policy of ethnic cleansing that continued during his reign. His prison camps and "coerced" confessions earned him the dubious moniker "El Jefe," a title that underscores his command over his country.

The violence of Trujillo's dictatorship and the scars of the U.S. invasion are important cultural markers in the Dominican American narratives that I analyze. It is also important to note that Dominican immigrations to the United States mainland do not follow the same patterns of immigration or reception as those of Cubans and Puerto Ricans. As Alejandro Portes and Ramón Grosfoguel posit in "Caribbean Diasporas: Migration and Ethnic Communities," a key difference in Dominican migrations to the United States as opposed to other countries in the Hispanic Caribbean is that "Dominican migration has not been singled out for restriction by U.S. authorities, but neither has it been favored with special programs" outside of the Hart-Celler Act (64).

Trujillo's political legacy sets the stage for contemporary Dominican American fiction, firmly planting the works I study within a historical frame. The wrath of the Trujillo dictatorship

² William Luis, in his chapter "The Caribbean Novel" in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin American Literature* (2005) discusses the ramifications of the Dominican Republic's unique path to independence, especially as they have been shaped by its neighbor Haiti (128). Though they share the island of Hispaniola, Luis is careful to point out that Dominicans associate African traditions with Haiti, and instead "embrace an idealized Amerindian past" (128).

is well-documented, notably in Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *La fiesta del Chivo* (2000), as well as by scholars including Monica Hanna. In his novel, Vargas Llosa examines the legacy of the Trujillo dictatorship through the eyes of Urania Cabral, whose father was once a member of Trujillo's inner circle. Urania's memories alternate with Trujillo's first-person account of his last day in office and with his assassins' perspectives. Temporally, the novel focuses on May 1961, immediately after Trujillo's assassination, as well as on 1996, after more than three decades have passed. By focusing on different narrative perspectives and looking back into the past, Vargas Llosa connects the Dominican Republic's past and present.

Notably, Trujillo's reach extends beyond the borders of the Dominican Republic, as his henchman executed orders for the assassinations of political dissidents in the United States and Latin America. For example, in response to the publication of *Cementerio sin cruces* (1949), which criticized the dictatorship, Trujillo arranged for the murder of author Andrés Francisco Requeña who was residing in New York (Luis 135). In addition, in June of 1960, Trujillo masterminded the attempted assassination of Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt. Trujillo organizes this attack as an act of retaliation against Venezuela for having asked the Organization of American States (OAS) in February of 1960 to censure the dictator for human rights violations. Members of his security forces planted a car bomb in an adjacent vehicle to the Venezuelan leader, wounding Betancourt and killing two others. Moreover, his henchmen kidnapped Jesús de Galíndez, a Spanish doctoral student at Columbia University who was completing his dissertation on Trujillo and his rule. Galíndez was last seen in New York on March 12, 1965 and is believed to have been brought back to the Dominican Republic where he

was killed.³ A textbook example of Octavio Paz's description of the violent *macho*, Trujillo is emblematic of the endemic violence that plagues Dominican society.⁴

The notoriously ruthless Trujillo controlled the Dominican Republic via a campaign of physical and psychological terror. Trujillo was notorious for using force as his preferred means of persuasion, relying on a circle of confidants and relations to intimidate any potential opponents with physical violence. His henchmen brought suspected opponents in for “questioning” that often involved torture, including electric shock, genital mutilation, and other heinous acts. In some respects, his regime is continued by Joaquín Balaguer, whose authoritarian rule lasted from 1966-1978. Balaguer was a member of Trujillo's inner circle and rises to power under the guise of democracy. Trujillo's reign informs contemporary Dominican American fiction because of its legacy of fear and violence.

The violence of dictatorship and the scars of the U.S. invasion are important cultural markers in the Dominican American narratives that I analyze. It is important to note that the U.S. invaded the Dominican Republic twice in the twentieth century, in 1916 and again in 1965. The second invasion, which prevented the restoration of the leftist leader Juan Bosch to power, coincided with the Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Celler Act. This law's emphasis on “family reunification” grants preference to immigrants who

³ Galíndez's book, *La era de Trujillo: un estudio casuístico de dictadura hispanoamericana* was published in 1965.

⁴ As explained by Octavio Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (1950, English trans. 1961), the *macho*, associated with the violence of Spanish conquistadors, “represents the masculine pole of life,” a legacy of authority and plunder that emasculates the powerless (81). Mexico's psychological father, the *macho*, is “the *gran chignón*,” power incarnate, a violent usurper of authority (80). The defining action of the *macho*—the “masculine” verb *chingar*—has become “the word that defines a great part of our life and qualifies our relationships with our friends and compatriots” (78). The *macho* as metaphorical father becomes the mythical model “that determines the images that Mexican people form of men in power, caciques, feudal lords, hacienda owners, politicians, generals, captains of industry” (81, 82). Like the Spanish conquistador, the *macho* is violent power that imposes will, claiming and retaining authority by brute force.

are relatives of existing immigrants or legal residents living in the United States.⁵ This new policy makes it possible for one member of a family to seek work in the United States, send money home, and save money with the hope of eventually reuniting with relatives after establishing some sort of stable income. Traditionally, male heads of house ventured to the U.S. mainland, as in the case in with Ramón de las Casas in *Drown*. However, as the garment industry began recruiting seamstresses, young women began to initiate a family's migration, as did Rebecca in *Geographies of Home*. While the 1965 U.S. occupation demonstrates the political violence that continues to plague the Dominican Republic, the consequences of the Hart-Celler Act speak to the psychological wounds of fragmenting families.

Scholars of the Dominican Republic including Silvio Torres-Saillant, Ramona Hernández, and Blas R. Jiménez explore the ramifications of Dominican migration to the United States and how these migratory patterns reflect historical upheaval.⁶ As Torres-Saillant and Hernández explain in *The Dominican Americans* (1998), as the post-Trujillo “migratory flow quickened, poor peasants and residents of urban ghettos far outnumbered the middle-class immigrants who had arrived earlier” (112). As a direct result of “darker and poorer” Dominican immigrants, writers like Díaz and Pérez “work against a backdrop of poverty and disempowerment brought about by the economic restructuring this country has experienced” since the fall of Trujillo (112). Moreover, these writers address migration's legacies and seek to portray how children of immigrants experience the Dominican diaspora. Characters like *Drown's*

⁵ This preference system abolished the restrictive national origins system originally passed in 1924 in favor of a quota and preference system. As Roger Daniels explains, priority was now given to “family reunification” so that U.S. citizens and permanent residents could sponsor the following types of immigrants in this order of preference: “1. unmarried children under the age of 21 of U.S. citizens; 2. spouse and unmarried children of permanent residents; 3. professionals, scientists, and artists of ‘exceptional ability’; 4. married children over the age of 21 year of age and their spouse and children of U.S. citizens; 5. Siblings and their spouse and children of U.S. citizens; 6. workers in occupations with labor shortages; 7. political refugees” (77).

⁶ See, for example, Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández's seminal work *The Dominican Americans*, published in 1998, as well as *Desde la orilla: hacia una nacionalidad sin desalojos* (2004), the collection of essays Torres-Saillant co-edited with Ramona Hernández and Blas R. Jiménez.

Yunior, *The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao*'s Oscar and Lola, and *Geography of Home*'s Iliana are challenged by what these critics call "the imperatives of family, nationality, class, gender, race, community, and sexual proclivity" (114). In short, they are forced to reconcile the discrepancies between their parents' lives in the Dominican Republic, their families' experiences in the diaspora, and their own senses of history and legacy.

As Daisy Cocco de Filippis contends in *Desde la diáspora: selección bilingüe de ensayos* (2003), Dominican and Dominican American authors have been writing about their immigration experiences since at least the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷ However, until recently, immigrant authors tended to write from the position of the elite intellectual, having been raised in a position of privilege. Their writing suggests difficulties with racism in a place that understands status through a lens of color. As a result, these writers adopt a strategy of distance as a coping mechanism to rationalize their place as a racial and ethnic other in the United States. In contrast, as Cocco de Filippis explains, Dominican narratives written since the 1990s focus on a more diasporic perspective that connects rather than distances the Dominican Republic from Dominican communities on the U.S. mainland. Both Díaz and Pérez works respond to this voluntary or involuntary immigration, for political or economic reasons, from the Dominican Republic. Moreover, they focus on how Dominican culture shapes constructs of race, class, gender, and sexuality in Dominican communities in the United States.

By reading *Geographies of Home* as an alternative to Díaz's *Drown* and *The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao*, it allows for a chronological reconstruction of these works that places the origin of the problems experienced by the characters back in the Dominican Republic while also suggesting that these extant problems are exacerbated by life in the United States.

⁷ To cite just one example, Pedro Henríquez Ureña's wrote about his experiences as an immigrant in New York in his posthumous memoir *Desde Washington*, written between 1915 and 1921 and published by Casa de las Américas in 1975.

Geographies of Home also provides an alternative perspective on how female characters view their bodies and the violence that surrounds them. While the male protagonists in Díaz's narratives repeat the models provided by male abusers, women are cast as more passive victims of violence. As I argue, the case of *Geographies of Home* is more nuanced; women are both aggressors and victims, perpetrators and preventers of violence.

In terms of perspective, *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are unified by adolescent males, with the figure of Yunió emerging as a central character in both works. For Díaz, in both the Dominican Republic and the Northeastern United States, poverty remains constant, as underemployment and fragmented families continue a cycle of economic depression that manifests in violence. In contrast to Díaz's fiction, Pérez delves deeper into the psychology of the family unit. Her novel explores many of the same themes as Díaz, but the subtext of violence is brought to the forefront in *Geographies of Home*. Both authors open spaces silenced by history, perhaps to rescue Dominican culture from its violent past.

The Dominican Republic is trapped in a society that closes onto itself; by denying its violent past, its people are condemned to repeat history. The alienating effects of sublimating national trauma become indicators of abuse and abandonment. The correlation between sexuality, textuality, and the oftentimes violent search for self are explained in terms of a universal, pervasive psychological trauma. *Drown*, *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Geographies of Home* underscore the different effects of abandonment on identity and the impact of an absent or abusive father on a narrative and national psyche. Re-reading these "coming of age" narratives as studies of fragmented identities enable understanding of how sexuality and violence become linked as pervasive markers of the Dominican immigrant experience.

For Díaz and Pérez, abuse is filtered through the lens of a patriarchal figure. If Trujillo functions as the archetypal ruthless ruler, fathers in these narratives follow a formula of abuse to assert their authority at home. Violence is not limited to outside familial spaces, but permeates the borders between public and private spaces. Brutality becomes normalized, and abusive behavior enters the home. This predominance of violence begins with childhood and continues to escalate until it becomes second-nature. Given that the Dominican Republic is a traditionally patriarchal society, casting the abuser thusly speaks to the association of masculinity with power and femininity with passivity. As Paula K. Lundberg-Love and Shelly L. Marmion argue in *“Intimate” Violence against Women: When Spouses, Partners, or Lovers Attack* (2006), sexual violence toward women and children is most common in patriarchal societies that dictate codes of behavior that reward male dominance (10). In fact, in places like Santo Domingo, Paterson, and Brooklyn, where the legacies of social stratification are exacerbated by economic exploitation, familial violence becomes even more commonplace. Interestingly, the likelihood of abuse increases regardless of class and race in these “loaded” urban environments, a phenomenon illustrated by the prevalence of abuse in both authors’ depictions of childhood abuse in the Dominican Republic as well as in the United States (23).

Geographies of Home, Drown and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* offer a comparison as to how Dominican American males and females adapt to the United States. In both authors’ works, violence is a product of culture, both in the Dominican Republic and the Dominican diaspora. Not only is violence a pattern of repeated behavior, but also a response to injustice and a means of projecting frustration. Díaz and Pérez both delve into the psychology of the family unit and the fragmentary effects of displacement. The subtext of violence is brought to the forefront; violence is pathological, intrinsic and at times disquietingly graphic. *Drown, The*

Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and *Geographies of Home* render open spaces silenced by history and rescue Dominican culture from its violent past.

***Drown*: Hereditary Patterns of Male Violence**

In his collection of short stories *Drown* and his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz documents the violence, poverty, and racial tensions that define Dominican and Dominican American experiences. He explores the evolution of violence from childhood “on the island” to adolescence in the U.S., illustrating the links between Dominican identity and patterns of abuse. Despite this bleak portrayal of Dominican American adolescence, Díaz demonstrates the universal nature of the need for belonging, the sense of loss that emerges in single parent households, and the racial tensions between Latinos and other ethnic groups. As teenage boys struggle to become men, a legacy of abandonment repeats itself as they pattern their own lives after their lived experiences.

In *Drown*, Díaz explores the trajectory of the de las Casas family from the rural Dominican countryside to the urban U.S. mainland. *Drown* is a collection of ten short stories, which, when read together and examined chronologically, demonstrate a pattern of violence that is repeated in the Dominican Republic as well as the United States.⁸ Díaz opens *Drown* with an allegorical story of a maimed boy who functions as a symbol of the harsh realities of life in the Dominican Republic. Titled after the disfigured boy, the story “Ysrael” frames the collection by introducing themes of abandonment and abuse. Ysrael, whose namesake suggests the Judeo-Christian place of origin, has been severely disfigured as an infant from an attack by a pig. Both the nature of his injury and the lack of medical attention afforded to Ysrael suggest the brutal

⁸ In his chapter “Latino US Literature” in Philip Swanson’s *Companion to Latin American Studies*, William Luis argues that “though the stories are separate, they can also be read together with a coherent and unified theme. Together, the stories propose multiple searches of temporal and spatial origins” (149).

poverty of the rural Dominican countryside. We learn that Ysrael's "left ear was a nub and you could see the thick veined slab of his tongue through a hole in his cheek. He had no lips. His head was tipped back and his eyes had gone white and the cords were out on his neck" (19). Ysrael has clearly received little to no medical attention and has no recourse but to protect his exposed flesh with a black cheesecloth mask. His appearance has alienated him from his family and from his peers. Although his mother seems to love him, his father has left home to seek work in the United States. During the course of *Drown*, Ysrael is beaten with a glass bottle by Yunior and Rafa, spat on, and almost raped by four neighborhood boys. Ysrael sleeps in his family's henhouse, but must spend his days on the streets.

In the collection's penultimate story "No Face," Ysrael is tortured by children his own age; they ambush him, steal his money, and attempt to sodomize him (156). He has learned to cope with the constant threat of abuse by imagining himself as a hero in one of his beloved comics. Ysrael, convinced that physical strength is his best defense against further attacks, imitates his masked hero Kaliman by practicing calisthenics and speed drills each morning. His reputation as a wrestling aficionado already established, Ysrael banters with the local priest about his plans to enter the ring once he travels to Canada for plastic surgery. He identifies with the wrestlers in the comics he buys, admiring their fighting skills and costumes. His favorite, Kaliman, "takes no shit and wears a turban. If his face were covered, he'd be perfect" (155). As "No Face" progresses, Ysrael's penchant for wrestling becomes clear; he is constantly subjected to attacks by his peers. Forced to defend himself, he has become a skilled fighter and an even faster runner. Shunned by his family, he is essentially homeless, relying on Father Lou's charity and coins he finds in the streets for survival. He does visit home, however, and at the story's

conclusion, the reason for his banishment is revealed. After visiting with his younger brother Pesao in the yard, his mother warns him to leave, “before your father comes out” (160).

In “No Face,” Ysrael provides additional details about the attack that underscore the violence of his injury and its aftermath as well as his connection to Yuniór. In this story, unlike in “Ysrael,” the narration is from a first-person perspective. This time, Ysrael recounts the details of his own injury, which seems to exacerbate its severity. He remembers how “blunt teeth rip a strip from under his eye and the muscle revealed is delicious, like lechosa” (157). More tellingly, these details seem to be the result of the constant retelling of the attack, alluding to the power of memory as a mechanism for repeating violence. Ysrael explains that “they tell him the story over and over again, as though afraid that he might forget” (157). This first-person validation of Yuniór’s speculations in “No Face” suggests the connections between the two displaced figures. Ysrael proffers an exaggerated version of Yuniór, a disfigured doppelgänger manifesting outwardly the Yuniór’s internal injuries.

For example, during the summer when Yuniór was nine years old, his older brother Rafa convinces him to travel to Barbacoa to pay Ysrael “a visit” (3). Once they arrive in Ysrael’s town, they pretend to befriend him in order to coerce him into removing the mask he wears to conceal his face. Their conversation turns to the United States, where both Rafa and Yuniór and Ysrael’s fathers purportedly live. When Yuniór inadvertently blurts out that their father lives in New York like Ysrael’s dad, Rafa responds to his brother’s outburst with a frown. This seemingly innocuous conversation leads to Rafael’s unexplained brutality. After sharing sodas at the local *colmado*, Rafa arbitrarily attacks Ysrael, smashing a glass bottle over his head. Rafa, who shares his first name, Rafael, with Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, exhibits the same penchant for

sadistic violence as the dictator. His unprovoked aggression is analogous to the terror tactics of the *trujillato*, establishing the connection between *Drown* and Dominican history.

Temporally, it is unclear whether the events in “No Face” occur before or after Rafa’s attack in “Ysrael,” but its placement in the collection suggests that Ysrael was lying about his father’s whereabouts to Yunior, that his father either was in New York and had returned to the island, or that he had not yet left for New York. Given the propensity of travel back and forth from the island to the States, and the presence of a much younger brother, however, the story supports my contention that Ysrael’s father has returned to his wife in Barbacoa. Notably, his mother is affectionate towards Ysrael and helps him find the mask that covers his face. Despite her maternal instincts, she insists that he leave their home, afraid of her husband’s reaction to his presence. A victim of both the violence of abandonment and the abuse he suffers from his peers, Ysrael is plagued by recurring nightmares of the pig attack. His worst episodes happen after he has been unmercifully harassed in town, and he wakes “screaming and blood braids down his neck; he’s bitten his tongue and it swells and he cannot sleep again until he tells himself to be a man” (158). For Ysrael, “being a man” is synonymous with accepting the harsh reality of his history. He is fatherless, homeless, and disfigured, metonymically serving as a marker of the brutality of Dominican existence.

Like Ysrael, Yunior and Rafa have been abandoned by their father. For example, in “Aguantando,” Yunior reveals the pain caused by his father’s prolonged absences. In this story, Yunior chronicles the hardships his mother faces as a single parent and the economic privations their family experiences. He remembers that things had gotten so bad that his mother occasionally sends him to his Tía Miranda, who was better off, in Boca Chica. There, his *tía* badmouths Yunior’s father’s desertion of his family (76). His maternal grandfather shares Tía

Miranda's opinions, and does not hide his displeasure when Ramón announces his return. During the summer Yuniór is nine years old, his father writes again to tell to his mother that he plans to return to the Dominican Republic. Yuniór is thrilled and wants to share his excitement with his friend Wilfredo. Rafa cautions that "this is a *family* affair," and warns Yuniór to keep the news to himself or he will "chop your fucking head off" (76). As Rafa reasons, this is not the first time that his father has made such a promise (82). Three years earlier, he had promised to return, and when he did not, their mother "almost lost her mind" (83). Rafa's threat is meant to avoid repeating the embarrassment, but also the disappointment, of another unfulfilled promise. The family has learned to endure, or "aguantar," by steeling themselves against another painful disillusionment.

If "Ysrael," "No Face," and "Aguantando" function as allegories of life in the Dominican Republic, the story "Fiesta, 1980," illustrates the continuation of a dysfunctional, aggressive parenting style after migration to the United States. In this story, a young Yuniór is punished for his chronic carsickness by his father. "Fiesta, 1980" combines two separate domestic scenes: one, a family party at his Aunt's house; and two, the first time that his father brought him to his *sucia*'s house under the guise of acclimating him to longer car rides. On both occasions, Papi not only physically abuses Yuniór by boxing his ears and slapping him, he verbally admonishes him in front of other adults. For example, when the food is served at his aunt's house, Papi stops Yuniór from eating, threatening that "If you eat anything, I'm going to beat you" (37). The abuse continues when he is taken to his father's mistress's apartment, when he answers a compliment about Yuniór's good looks with "Not when he's throwing up" (36). This pattern of ridicule characterizes his father's behavior, providing the de las Casas brothers with a model for masculinity that is both cruel and humiliating.

The repercussions of familial violence begin to manifest themselves as Yunior enters his teenage years. For example, in “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie,” Yunior explains the unwritten rules of adolescent dating in his neighborhood. This story, told from a first-person perspective, matter-of-factly enumerates that “dos” and “don’ts” of maximizing physical intimacy on the first date. The blunt, emotionless descriptions of intimate encounters highlight a learned disregard for women as little more than disposable entertainment. Yunior has learned through experience and hearsay that there is a racially-differentiated hierarchy that determines the probability of going “all the way” with a date the first time she is in his apartment. Because each archetype requires a different strategy for maximizing the likelihood of an intimate encounter, Yunior details his step-by-step maneuvers for “success.” Moreover, he believes that these women also know what they are doing, and that he owes them nothing after meeting them. His nonchalant attitude masks an emotional withdrawal from intimacy, a sublimation of any sort of real connection learned as a means of replicating his father’s own violent nature.

As Yunior gets older and begins to develop his own relationships with women, he repeats his father’s abusive tendencies. In “Aurora,” Yunior’s dysfunctional relationship with a drug-addicted teenage girl mirrors the models established by his father. Although he admits that he originally cares for Aurora, when she returns from a sixth-month sentence in a juvenile detention center, he dismisses her after a violent sexual encounter. He knows that their relationship is toxic and prone to violence, but he is unable to detach himself from a woman who is always sexually available, even when she is purportedly involved with another partner. Yunior is trapped in an abusive relationship, and does not have the coping strategies to exorcise himself from Aurora even though he knows that he should. Unable to verbalize his frustrations or explain why he is

upset about her plans for their future together, he “hit her and made the blood come out of her ear like a worm” (65). Yuniór repeats his father’s volatile behavior, morphing into a younger version of the man he knows hurt his mother.

Like “Aurora,” “Drown” depicts an adolescent protagonist who struggles with intimacy and relationships.⁹ In this story, the narrator skips school and shoplifts with his best friend Beto. As the summer begins, they begin a brief homosexual relationship that leaves the protagonist feeling empty and confused. Their first encounter is at Beto’s house while they are watching a pornographic film. The narrator does not articulate his feelings, but remembers that “suddenly I wanted out” (104). The next day, they meet again, and they spend the night together. The narrator reasons that “in three weeks he was leaving” and that Beto’s impending departure somehow changes the nature of their physical relationship (105). Despite what he tells himself, he has grown attached to Beto. When Beto gives him a book as leaves for college, the protagonist does not “even bother to open it and read what he’d written” (107). The intimacy of their friendship does not survive, suggesting that the protagonist is afraid to admit that he might be a “pato” (91). By sublimating his homosexual desires and rejecting intimacy, the narrator turns the violence inward, perpetuating both homophobia and self-hate.

The adolescent protagonist in “Aurora” and “Drown” has grown up in the stories “Boyfriend” and “Edison, NJ,” demonstrating that he has adjusted to life in the United States. IF we read this protagonist as Yuniór, as I do, it follows that Yuniór has matured. In “Boyfriend,” the narrator is a well-meaning neighbor who tries to comfort a scorned woman living in the apartment below him. This woman, called “Girlfriend,” is “too beautiful, too high-class” for someone like the narrator. She leans on him for support and she cries over her ex-boyfriend, and

⁹ The first-person narrator in this story is not named. I read it as if it were Yuniór’s voice. This interpretation is supported by the assertion that the collection, when read chronologically, follows Yuniór from a young boy in the Dominican Republic to a young man in the United States.

he seems to enjoy her attention. After all, he reasons that he “has gotten numb to” her crying and tries to help her overcome the rejection that she feels (112). Of course, their friendship is short-lived, and soon she stops visiting. The narrator seems to expect nothing less as he knows that she is out of his league.

The story “Edison, NJ” describes an adult narrator who has learned to be compassionate. In this story, the narrator has steady work as a pool table installer that has him traveling through the Tri-State area. While on the job, the protagonist meets a young Dominican girl who has recently arrived in the United States. While she lives in a well-appointed condo, she is clearly afraid and uncomfortable. As soon as she gets a chance, she speaks to the narrator in Spanish and explains that she wants to “get out of here” (133). It becomes clear that she is a live-in maid for a man she calls a “pendejo” (133). As the narrator investigates, he finds an open box of condoms in the owner’s dresser. Moreover, the Dominican girl’s dresser is full of “soft bright panties” and little else (134). These details suggest that she is expected to do more than just clean the owner’s house. As William Luis notes, this story describes a protagonist who “appears to be headed in an upward and mobile direction” (150). More importantly, it depicts a man who is willing to risk his own job to help a woman escape from an exploitative situation.

In the collection’s final story, “Negocios,” Díaz describes the violence of the immigrant experience, which explains in part why Yunior’s father abandons his family. In this story, an adult Yunior chronicles the departure from and eventual return to the Dominican Republic by his father, Ramón de las Casas. For the first time, Yunior reveals his given name, symbolically connecting his own story to his father’s struggles as a recent U.S. immigrant. Cheated by his roommates in Miami and beleaguered by the two menial jobs he holds to pair more than his share of the rent, Ramón ventures to New York in search of better opportunities. In an attempt to

conserve his meager savings, he hitchhikes his way up the Eastern seaboard, living in constant fear of Immigration and Naturalization Services and unscrupulous fellow travelers. Already well-versed in U.S. racism, he knows that the police “liked to beat you before they turned you over to la migra and how sometimes they just took your money and tossed you out toothless on an abandoned road” (175). Living in constant fear leaves him embittered: “He often drank too much and went home to his room, and there he’d fume, spinning, angry at the stupidity that brought him to this freezing hell of a country” (179). Left with little recourse, Ramón decides to marry, taking advantage of a widow’s citizenship to secure his papers.

Like his first relationship, Ramón’s marriage to Nilda spirals into domestic violence, as he vents his frustration at home. Working two jobs and attempting to send money to his family in Santo Domingo, he is injured while at work. This setback, along with the birth of a third son, only escalates domestic altercations. As Yuniór explains, his father “began taking it out on her,” calling her a “puta” and becoming increasingly violent (204). At this point, Nilda loses her job and gains weight, which only increases her husband’s ire. Feeling trapped by a loveless marriage and the stress of a new baby, Ramón plots his departure, once again abandoning his family because he is unable to cope. Rather than address his unhappiness, he leaves unannounced, and Nilda raises his third son alone, as his first wife has done in the Dominican Republic.

As the title *Drown* suggests, the body of water separating the Dominican Republic from the U.S. mainland is metaphorically treacherous. Perhaps it suggests the cultural axiom “sink or swim,” leaving immigrants like Yuniór in its wake. Yuniór is clearly not “swimming” as an adolescent; in fact, he is gasping for air, floundering as he tries to reconcile where he came from with who he hopes to become. Tracing Yuniór’s trajectory from fatherless child to abandoning adult, Díaz explores how spurned sons react to rejection. He creates an adolescent male

protagonist whose fragmented identity reflects the psychological trauma of neglected sons. In terms of both structure and format, Díaz's writing reflects Yuniór's divided selves; exposing how psychological suffering manifests itself as aggressive, overtly sexual posturing. His stories reflect the trauma caused by paternal abandonment and the psychological scars left behind by an absent father. Yuniór is unable to identify with his father and unwilling to emulate a victimized mother. He struggles to recuperate a childhood that renders him an orphan and seems condemned to repeat the mistakes of his father.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao: Learning from La Inca's Legacy

In his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz continues the de las Casas story, but Yuniór's role as protagonist in *Drown* shifts to that of narrator in this novel. Despite the generic discrepancies between the two works, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* shares many of the same elements as *Drown*. Themes of violence, repetition of history, and the translation of events on the island to communities in the United States figure prominently in this novel. Of course, the genre of the novel allows for a different kind of character development, yet the legacy of the *trujillato* alluded to in *Drown* plays an even more central role in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, as do themes of familial and national violence.

At the heart of Yuniór's retelling of Oscar del Cabral's story is the concept of *fukú*, a Dominican curse that dooms those it touches. As Yuniór explains:

In my parents' day the *fukú* was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in. Everybody knows someone who'd been eaten by *fukú*, just like everybody knew somebody who worked up at the Palacio. It was in the air, you could say, though, like all the most important things on the Island, not something folks really liked to talk about. But in those elder days, *fukú* had it good; it even had a hyperman of sorts, a high priest, you could say. Our then dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina." (2)

On the second page of the novel, Yunior establishes the correlation between “fukú,” family, and Trujillo, suggesting that the three are inextricably linked for the del Cabrals. Yunior’s parents, Virtudes and Ramón de las Casas, are of the same generation as Oscar’s mother, Hypatía Belicia del Cabral, establishing an important parallel that links their two families as having a common history. In addition, not only is there a universality to Dominican *fukú* (“everybody knows someone who’d been eaten by fukú”), but it is associated with and embodied in the figure of Trujillo. Yunior’s syntax supports this assertion; *fukú* is ubiquitous in the same sense as the reach of Trujillo’s government (“everybody knew somebody who worked up at the Palacio”). Yunior’s statement is more than a simile; it is the equation of *fukú* with the Palacio, the architectural, metonymic equivalent to the dictator himself.

This association of *fukú* with Trujillo is established at the novel’s outset and builds as a *leitmotif* throughout *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Trujillo becomes synonymous with *fukú*, even though “no one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master; its agent or its principle” (3). As Yunior explains, “anyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a *fukú* most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond. If you even thought a bad thing about Trujillo, *fuá*, a hurricane would sweep your family out to sea, *fuá*, a boulder would fall out of a clear sky and squash you” (3). Moreover, Yunior insists that Trujillo’s relationship with *fukú* was common knowledge, accepted by “the richest *jabao* in Mao to the poorest *güey* in El Buey, from the oldest *anciano sanmacorisano* to the littlest *carajito* in San Francisco” (3). Not only is its power indubitable, its reach extends beyond the borders of the Dominican Republic, and is capable of attaching itself to any Dominican in the Diaspora. This belief in the ubiquity of *fukú* is compounded by its persistence; “sometimes it’s slow and sometimes it’s fast. It’s doom-ish in that way, makes it harder to put a finger on, to brace yourself against” (5). Yunior insists that “no

matter what you believe, fukú believes in you,” further emphasizing that its breadth and reach are unstoppable and its pull impossible to deny (5).

This discussion of *fukú* alludes to Alejo Carpentier’s *real maravilloso* in his groundbreaking novel *El reino de este mundo* (1947). In this work, Haiti’s history is told through the eyes of Ti Noel, an enslaved African who witnesses the Haitian Revolution. At the center of the narration is the figure of Macandal, an enslaved African who is emblematic of resistance and rebellion. According to the “official” versions of history, Macandal is burned at the stake as punishment for inciting rebellion. However, according to the many slaves who witnessed this punishment, Macandal transforms himself into an insect and escapes from his captors. These disparate accounts suggest the importance of perspective as well as the centrality of Afro-Caribbean religious practices on Hispaniola. In this novel, Carpentier posits the possibility of alternative histories, cultural hybridity, and the importance of belief systems in crafting identity. Díaz seems to be following in Carpentier’s footsteps with his description of the origins and cyclicity of Dominican *fukú*.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the del Cabral family replaces the de las Casas, and Oscar replaces Yunior as the beleaguered adolescent protagonist. However, Yunior remains at the forefront of the story, becoming its principle narrator and keeper of memory. He introduces the novel, explains the historical context of Oscar’s demise, and finally suggests the possibility of reconciliation of an Americanized present with a Dominican past. In contrast to *Drown*, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yunior narrates the story as a young adult, a graduate of Rutgers University, and an aspiring author. It is this third detail that conflates the roles of author and character. Yunior’s story begins to mirror Junot Díaz’s, as the narrator’s personal history and references to the academy echo the author’s. The novel’s introduction

underscores the confusion of author and narrator with the absence of the first person, despite its conversational tone. The first person is present, but the narrator never identifies himself, which adds to a sense of confusion.

Moreover, the narrator insists that he is not only trustworthy, he also has access to knowledge that the reader does not. For example, the narrator posits that the key to the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the disastrous outcome of the Vietnam War are one and the same (4). He self-identifies as “your humble Watcher” who has access to “the God’s Honest Truth” (4). It is not until the fifth page of the introduction that the pronoun “I” is used, but it is not explicitly clear that this first-person and Yuniór are one and the same. The narrator insists that “whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point,” further suggesting a discrepancy between his beliefs and established ideas (5). On the subsequent page, the tone changes, and the act of writing is referenced: “A couple of weeks ago, while I was finishing this book, I posted ... on the DRI forum, just out of curiosity” (6). Finally, the introduction concludes with “Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t ...my very own counterspell” to counteract the *fukú*, or curse, that he believes dooms all Dominicans (7).

Notably, it is unclear whether the narrative “I” in pages 5, 6 and 7 is the same, or whether it represents the voice of Yuniór or Díaz, or perhaps a combination of the two. Moreover, a narrative gesture about the authorial preferences of Oscar, the subject of the novel, suggests that Díaz and Yuniór, and perhaps Yuniór and Oscar, have entered into an Unamuno-like pact. Echoing the relationships between Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo, Augusto Pérez, and Víctor Goti in Unamuno’s *Niebla* (1914), the trio of Díaz, Yuniór de las Casas and Oscar de León

transgresses the same boundaries between author and character.¹⁰ *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is both the writing of Oscar's story and the story of Oscar's writing, becoming a symbiotic process where the boundaries between characters and author blur. As defined in *Symbiosis: Mechanisms and Model Systems*, symbiosis is the biological term for a "broad continuum ranging from fee-living organisms that depend on others for food, to two organisms that will not survive unless they are always together such as the alga and fungus that combine to form each lichen 'species'" (Seckbach 8). This symbiotic continuum applies to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* because Oscar and Yunior need each other for the telling of their stories.

Having established the limitless power of *fukú* on all Dominicans, its particular manifestation on the descendents of the House of Cabral becomes not only plausible, but corroborated by other family members. As the novel develops, stories emerge of "two Truji-lífos in one lifetime," mounting evidence that connects Trujillo, *fukú*, and Oscar (152). At first, the Cabral's relationship with *fukú* is dismissed by Oscar, who thinks that his family's curse, which he has heard "for like the thousandth time" is no more or less remarkable than any other (32). He reasons "what Latino family doesn't think its cursed?," dismissing the stories about the decline of his once prominent grandfather as par for the course (32). His grandmother, on the other hand, insists upon the connection between Oscar and his grandfather Abelard, and implicitly Oscar and the Cabral *fukú*. The first instance of her insistence occurs when she tells Oscar that he "has the same eyes as your abuelo" (20), a comment that Oscar knows should please him but does not

¹⁰ As Unamuno's first "viviparous" novel, *Niebla* underscores the relationship between giving birth and novelistic formation. This relationship is elaborated in Unamuno's famed essay "A lo que salga" (1904) which explains the distinction between his neologisms "oviparous" and "viviparous" as they apply to the art of novelizing. The "oviparous" method of writing, Unamuno claims, has a well-planned and ordered plot, as exemplified in *Paz en la guerra* (1895). In contrast, according to the "viviparous" method, the author allows his ideas to gestate inside his mind until maturation. I would argue that both Díaz and Oscar subscribe to the "viviparous" school of writing.

since “this particular ancestor had ended his days in prison” (20). Moreover, Oscar and Abelard are both writers whose books expose secrets that some believe should remain untold.

The next time *fukú* is explicitly mentioned is in relationship to Oscar’s mother, who by sixteen has twice been a victim of the family curse. Orphaned as an infant, Hypatía Belicia del Cabral is sent to distant relatives in Outer Azua. Her adopted family, rather than embrace her as a relative, makes her their servant instead. Furthermore, she is beaten, kept in a chicken coop, and doused with burning cooking oil that permanently scars her back. When her aunt Myotís Toribio, affectionately dubbed La Inca, finds her, she was “half-dead” from years of abuse, unable to stand straight from the open wounds of the burn (257). La Inca, her father’s sister, adopts her, enrolls her in school, and puts her back on the path that her parents intended. Once again, Belicia falls victim to the curse. At sixteen, she falls in love with Dionisio, a Trujillo insider, code name Max Gómez, otherwise known as the Gangster. He seduces her, promises her a life away from her overbearing relatives in Baní, and impregnates her. Belicia, believing that she was in love, is in fact involved with the husband of Trujillo’s sister. Dionisio’s wife discovers her, and her henchmen beat her within an inch of her life. Somehow, she drags her mangled body from the cane field and La Inca nurses her back to health for a second time. Twice at the brink of death, it seems as though Belicia, like her parents and sisters, will succumb to Trujillo’s curse. After all, as Yunion explains, “there are still many, on and off the Island, who offer Beli’s near-fatal beating as irrefutable proof that the House Cabral was indeed victim of a high-level *fukú*, the local version of the House of Atreus” (152).

Having established the nature of Belicia’s misfortunes, but only hearing parts of their origin, Oscar remains unconvinced of *fukú*’s hold on his family. It is only with the revelation of his grandfather’s story that the full strength of the curse materializes. Because the novel is not

narrated in chronological order, with the exception of the first chapter, the extent of the del Cabral curse unfolds as stories overlap. Chronologically, the novel jumps from Oscar's days as a co-ed at Rutgers University from 1988-1992, to his grandfather's story from 1944-1946, punctuated by six pages of Lola's first-person account of her last few weeks in Santo Domingo. This anachronistic leap is telling; not only does it suggest a connection between Oscar and his grandfather, but it links Oscar's search for self with knowledge of the past. Learning the details of Abelard Luis del Cabral's downfall allows Oscar to understand both the pull of *fukú* and how he might be able to prevent its legacy.

As Yunior explains, Abelard's miscalculation about the ubiquity of the Trujillo curse led to the del Cabral's demise. How Oscar's family retells the story is as important as the story itself, for "when the family talks about it at all—which is like never—they always begin in the same place: with Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo" (212). It is as if they are searching for an origin before the proverbial fall, a time before *fukú* had invaded their lives. For Yunior, the order of events is less important than their consequences, which perhaps explains why his chronicle unfolds like layers of an onion, one ring at a time. The novel's fifth chapter details Abelard's downfall; but, because Yunior is operating on hearsay about which event precipitated which, opinions are called into question.

According to Yunior, one common belief of residents of La Vega is that the del Cabral's were an educated, affluent, and respected family whose only crime was their attempt to protect their daughter from Trujillo's notorious eye for young women. Following this version of events, Abelard was above suspicion until he stopped bringing his daughter Jacquelyn to official functions in an attempt to protect her from "Trujillo's notorious rapacity" (216). In another version, in addition to the suspicious absence of his daughter from official receptions, Abelard

made the fatal mistake of confiding his fears about his daughter to his neighbor, Marcus Applegate Román (220). In a third variation, not only did Jacquelyn not attend an event to which she was specifically summoned, but Abelard made an unflattering remark about bodies in the trunk of his Packard while re-positioning a bureau purchased in Santo Domingo. In his “confession” to the Secret Police, he contends that he said “Nope, no bodies here,” but “witnesses” accused him of adding “Trujillo must have cleaned them out for me” (235). A fourth theory centers around a possible book that Abelard was writing, purportedly “an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime” based upon common tales about the president (245). As a result of at least one of these miscalculations, or perhaps a combination of them, Abelard is arrested by the Secret Police for “Slander and gross calumny against the Person of the President” (233). In 1945, any of these “offenses” were sufficient to convict Abelard, but “most of the folks you speak to prefer the story with a supernatural twist. They believe that not only did Trujillo want Abelard’s daughter, but when he could not snatch her, out of spite he put a *fukú* on the family’s ass” (243). The narrator concurs with popular opinion, concluding that this *fukú* is “why all the terrible shit that happened happened” (243).

Part of *fukú*’s pull is its relationship to the past and its continuation into the present. While Yuniór understands the historical implications of *fukú* and its effect on families like the del Cabrals, he cannot seem to avoid making mistakes of his own. Oscar finds salvation in writing, and as the protagonist of the story, it seems as though he is the sole model for Yuniór’s redemption. In fact, it is Oscar’s sister Lola who paves the way for both her brother and Yuniór. At first glance, Lola appears to be a secondary character in the novel; she is Oscar’s attractive older sister and Yuniór’s on-again, off-again girlfriend. In the novel’s introduction, eight chapters, and “Final Letter,” Lola’s story appears in the third person three times. Nevertheless,

other than Yuniór, the novel's principle narrator, only Lola speaks at length in the first person. Her voice and her version of events appear two times: in Part I, Chapter II "Wildwood 1982-1985," and in the untitled section opening Part II between Chapters IV and V. In these two sections, Lola demonstrates her capacity to not only understand the past and its manifestations in the present and also acts to change the future course of events.

Lola, like her adoptive maternal grandmother La Inca, possesses an uncanny sense of intuition. At first, this intuitive power allows her to pick winning lottery numbers, but later, it intensifies and becomes a sense of premonition for life-changing events. Lola insists to herself that "for as long as you've been alive you've had bruja ways," a trait that is corroborated by her mother and aunt who both called her "Hija de Liborio" (53). The first evidence of Lola's intuitive acumen occurs at the beginning of Chapter II, as she recounts how at twelve years old she discovers a lump in her mother's breast. Sensing that something is wrong, Lola's mother orders her to feel a suspicious knot under the skin of her breast. Not only does Lola confirm the presence of the tumor, she is "overcome by the feeling, the premonition" that life is about to change (53).

While the discovery her mother's advanced breast cancer startles Lola, her premonition is less about an impending illness than an opportunity in her own life. In fact, rather than remaining the "perfect Dominican daughter" that she had been until her mother's diagnosis, Lola admits that she "saw my chance and eventually I took it" (54-55). At fourteen, Lola seizes the opportunity to explore "the life that existed beyond Paterson, beyond my family, beyond Spanish" (55). She runs away from Paterson with a carnival ride operator named Aldo, heading to the Jersey Shore town of Wildwood, where she wills herself to be happy despite the miserable circumstances that surround her. For the second time, she is besieged by premonitions. These are

of Oscar alone and once again she acts on her intuition. Lola places a fateful phone call home, and within days she is sent to the Dominican Republic to live with La Inca.

Rather than resent her forced trip to Santo Domingo, Lola resigns herself to the island and adapts to life as a “Dominican York” in the Dominican Republic (71). She attends a private school, joins the track team, and abandons her punk aspirations as she begins to feel as though she belongs. By leaving Paterson and her contentious relationship with her domineering mother behind, Lola discovers herself. After spending six months in Santo Domingo, she realizes that “so much has changed these last months, in my head, my heart” (71). An integral part of Lola’s self-discovery is the bond that she forges with La Inca, an affinity that she feels from the first time that they see each other at the airport in Santo Domingo (74). Not only do they “have the same jagged lightning-bolt part,” but Lola immediately senses that “things were going to be OK between us” (74). Being with La Inca in Santo Domingo, allows Lola to understand herself and her maternal relationships. It is this understanding becomes the catalyst that allows her to find a sense of self.

While Lola is in the Dominican Republic, she taps into what she refers to as her “bruja ways.” I interpret her premonitions as a reference to Afro Dominican religious practices, known as *vodú* or “La Veintiuna División.”¹¹ As Martha Ellen Davis, in “Vodú of the Dominican Republic: Devotion to ‘La Veintiuna División,’” explains, the function of *vodú*, that is devotion to the *misterios*, is divination and healing” (78). Dominican *vodú* centers such as altars or temples form in accord with the development of an individual as a medium or *servidor*.¹² In a

¹¹ Issue number 26.1 (Spring 2007) of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* explores the presence of African religions, including Vodú or Vodou practiced in the Dominican Republic as in Dominican and Haitian communities in the United States.

¹² Davis further elaborates on the *servidor/servidora*: “the ontology is characteristically as follows: Illness, or revelation in a dream, is a sign of one’s calling and gift (*don*) of mediumship (“bearing deities” or *portar misterios*). If the case is illness, after going to ‘all the doctors,’ the family resorts to healers of spiritual ills...the Dominican “initiation” process can be simplified to “baptism” (training) in a dream, that is, directly by God, or even self-baptism” (79).

consultation with a *servidor*, “physical, mental, and everyday problems are addressed,” and it is determined if they are of a “spiritual” cause (85). To make this determination, the *servidor* uses means including water, candles, and cowry shells to read and focus upon a patient’s spiritual essence (85). If a “spiritual” cause is suspected, it is “attributed to an encumbrance due the adherence of a spirit of the dead, either inherited, acquired, or ‘sent’” through witchcraft (85). In order to treat this encumbrance, the *servidor* relies on a combination of clairvoyance, possession or “incorporation,” and ritual procedures. Lola exhibits this kind of clairvoyance, suggesting her ties to *vodú*.

Lola’s “bruja ways” are not merely premonitions or an impulse for action, but a catalyst that allows for revelation. As she explains, “the bruja feeling that comes seizing out of my bones, that takes hold of me the way blood seizes cotton. The feeling that tells me everything in my life is about to change” (72). Moreover, the feeling pulses inside her, and she imagines that “this is what it is like to have a child in you” (72). Her premonitions are now maternally motivated, she equates them with motherhood, and this realization increases their frequency and strength. In addition, the power of her intuition intensifies in Santo Domingo, especially in the presence of La Inca. As she explains, “every time I looked around our house, every time I saw my abuela, the feeling got stronger” (72). Lola’s third premonition is a series rather than a specific event. She feels it in her dreams, at home, with her boyfriend Max, but especially when she is with La Inca. This series of premonitions, what she calls her “bruja feeling,” proves to be the most important. Not only are they more intense, but somehow she knows this feeling “was something different” (72).

At this moment, after six months on the island, having re-mastered Spanish and rekindled a maternal relationship, Lola’s intuition manifests itself. This revelation occurs as she and La

Inca are looking through old photographs of Lola's mother, just as La Inca begins to explain how she met Lola's father. The revelation "hit with the force of a hurricane," leaving Lola out of breath and "sure that I was going to explode" (75). The years of premonitions, of feelings, culminate with this moment, as La Inca "was about to say something and I was waiting for whatever she was going to tell me. I was waiting to begin" (75). Lola's ability to find pause, to embrace her premonition's power for the first time, opens a dialogue with La Inca that paves the way for reconciliation with her mother. Lola learns of her mother's history and begins to understand how it is connected to her own.

By learning about her mother's life in Baní before she moves to the United States, Lola begins to understand how their relationship is shaped by the past. In the Dominican Republic, Belicia survives the loss of her parents, abuse as a domestic servant, and a brutal beating by Trujillo's henchmen. Belicia's relationship with the husband of one of Trujillo's sisters precipitates a disfiguring beating, and subsequent miscarriage, eventually forcing her exile to the United States. Lola hears these stories for the first time as a teenager herself, and begins to process that her mother's behavior is less about Lola's shortcomings than her own.

As Lola realizes, Santo Domingo provides an opportunity for her to understand that her mother wants her to avoid the same mistakes that she made. After all, Belicia del Cabral was sixteen when she left the Dominican Republic for New York, the same age as when Lola leaves Patterson for Santo Domingo. Like Lola, she has been betrayed by men who made promises they could not keep, but in her case, the consequences almost cost her life. Rather than follow her mother's path of three heartbreaks that remain unhealed, Lola refuses to dwell on loves lost and resolutely faces the future armed with the knowledge that she is not condemned to repeat her mother's mistakes.

More importantly, Lola's stay in Santo Domingo shows her that she cannot force others to bend to her will, a lesson that her mother never learns. Perhaps it is because her relationship with La Inca is less charged than with her mother; she absorbs the lessons of La Inca's proverbs and applies them to her own life. For example, La Inca's saying "plátano maduro no se vuelve verde" helps her realize that her mother is never going to change (208). Rather than blame her mother for her lack of affection, Lola realizes that "she could not have been any different" (208). This ability to dissociate, and to forgive, sets Lola apart from her family and Yuniór; she has found a way to forgive without forgetting. Her intuition leads her to understand that "it's never the changes we want that change everything," a philosophy that allows Lola to reconcile her mother's distance without blame (51). Lola learns that "the only way out is in" (209) and that avoiding the past insures its repetition.

In addition to learning to trust her instincts, perhaps the greatest lessons Lola learns in Santo Domingo are from La Inca. Lola's grandmother, the only surviving member of the del Cabral family, never forgives herself for her inaction during the disintegration of Casa Hatüey. While her cousin Abelard is imprisoned, his wife Socorro commits suicide and his daughters are separated. La Inca, while mourning the loss of her husband, "to her undying shame" does nothing to prevent "the Fall" (254). "Lost in the wilderness of her grief," and rather than take the del Cabral daughters in herself, she allows them to be shipped off to other relatives (254). Once she hears that Belicia is still alive, she works to restore the del Cabral name. More importantly, she vows to never again be paralyzed by inaction.

When Belicia becomes a target of Trujillo's henchmen after her affair with the Gangster, La Inca makes decisions that save her adopted daughter from death. Having found herself "in practically the same predicament Beli's father had found himself in sixteen years earlier, back

when the House of Cabral had first come up against the might of the Trujillos,” she makes decisive, immediate moves to ferry Belicia to New York (158). As Yuniór explains, “papers were assembled, palms were greased, and permissions secured” in order to get Beli out of the country as quickly as possible (161). In addition to arranging for Beli’s escape, La Inca fends off visits from the notorious SIM “Elvises” who demand to speak with Beli, brandishing a machete that she carries with her everywhere (161). Rather than wait for circumstances to improve, La Inca seizes the opportunity created by Trujillo’s death to “make fucking moves;” she is determined that action, rather than patience, will secure her adopted daughter’s safety.

La Inca’s calculated moves are in direct contrast to Abelard who does not act to protect his daughter. Moreover, unlike her cousin, La Inca refuses to remain silent about her daughter’s predicament, and calls upon all resources available to her to ensure Beli’s safe passage. Immediately after Beli’s near-fatal beating, she summons two of the best doctors in Baní to provide medical care and members of her bible group to offer spiritual support. Yuniór maintains that “through the luminous power of prayer La Inca saved the girl’s life, laid an A-plus zafa on the Cabral family fukú” that would not have been possible without her decisive action. Once Beli seems to be recovering, she once again calls upon others for advice. She “called upon her ancestors and upon Jesú Cristo,” fasts, discusses possibilities with her friends and consults a priest (157). Unlike Abelard, who internalizes his fears for his daughter’s safety, La Inca allows her fears to spur her to act; it is this resolve that she knows will ultimately save Beli.

Lola learns of La Inca’s intervention and her daring moves to save her mother from certain death, breaking the code of silence that surrounds the del Cabral family. Until her visit to the Dominican Republic, she knows next to nothing about the aftermath of her grandfather’s imprisonment and her mother’s childhood in the Dominican Republic. By beginning a

conversation about her mother with La Inca, Lola begins to discover the truth that her family has buried beneath a veil of silence. This lack of communication is due in part to necessity; after all, in an era when rumors were enough to lead to incarceration and agents of the government reported hearsay as evidence, association with a “fallen” family like the del Cabrals warrants a gag order. This silence is imposed as soon as Abelard is accused, when the rest of the del Cabrals made themselves “Trujillo scarce” and tight-lipped regarding any family business (248). More than fifty years after his imprisonment, “on all matters relating to Abelard’s imprisonment and to the subsequent destruction of the clan there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narration. A whisper here and there but nothing more” (243). This unwillingness to discuss the past, to revisit the family narrative, stifles any chance at reconciliation. Lola begins to chip away at this “monumental” silence by listening to La Inca and weaving together the story of her family.

Moreover, as Yunió explains, this code of omission is integral to Dominican life and is characteristic of Trujillo’s regime. After all, the Dominican Republic under Trujillo “was a country, a society, that had been designed to be virtually escape-proof,” a “Plátano Curtain” that controlled every inch of its population. While some families managed to escape, like author Julia Álvarez’s family, they were the exception and not the norm. Trujillo’s repressive regime was not only omni-present, it was also so thorough that it removed any trace of its own actions. As Yunió contends, “we are trawling in silences here. Trujillo and Company didn’t leave a paper trail—they didn’t share their German contemporaries’ lust for documentation. And it’s not like the fukú itself would leave a memoir or anything” (243). After all, silence is a form of protection, a defense mechanism that allows for forgetting. The del Cabrals become “embraced in the

amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination” (258).

Abelard’s persecution as a suspicious author echoes the real life fates of Trujillo dissenters Andrés Requeña and Jesús de Galíndez. Requeña, the author of the anti-Trujillo novel *Cementerio sin cruces* (1949), is ambushed by Trujillo’s henchmen in upper Manhattan in a plot endorsed by Dominican consul Felix W. Bernardino.¹³ Galíndez, perhaps the most public victim of Trujillo’s reach into the diaspora, is assassinated for the content of his dissertation titled “The Era of Trujillo” (*The Dominican Americans*, 110). As a former consultant in Trujillo’s Ministry of Labor and Foreign Affairs, Galíndez’s insider knowledge of the corruption and depravity of the *trujillato* led to his abduction by Trujillo’s agents and subsequent murder in Santo Domingo (111). Given the fates of these two authors, the decades-long silence of Abelard’s relatives with regard to his authorial ambitions seems justified. In fact, these two well-known cases serve to underscore the price of publicly critiquing El Jefe.

The family’s resistance to speak about the aftermath of Abelard’s imprisonment is matched only by Beli’s silence about her days as an abused *criada* in Outer Azua. She never speaks to La Inca about her nine years of abuse; “that entire chapter of her life got slopped into those containers in which governments store nuclear waste, triple-sealed by industrial lasers and deposited in the dark, uncharted trenches of her soul” (258). Belicia represses all memories of her life before moving to Baní with La Inca, refusing to acknowledge the emotional scars that are as prominent as the scar that covers the entirety of her back. For a time, La Inca has replicated this silence, “rarely saying anything more than *Casi la acabaron*” about Belicia’s servant life (258).

¹³ As Torres-Saillant and Hernández document in *The Dominican Americans*, Bernardino “has previously threatened to shoot him ‘under any lamp-post in New York’” (110).

Lola, after more than a year living with La Inca, manages to begin to uncover these memories buried for more than four decades. Having learned the truth about her mother's life, she can start to heal her own wounds so that she can begin again.

Unlike Oscar and Yunior, Lola is the first to realize that she must care for herself before she can care for others. Oscar shares her need to know their family's history, but rather than learn from the lessons of the past, he seems to repeat mistakes. He becomes obsessed with Ybón Pimentel, a "semiretired" prostitute who also happens to be the girlfriend of a captain in the Dominican army. Like Belicia, Oscar is beaten within an inch of his life by the captain's henchmen. However, unlike his mother, he refuses to believe that he will be beaten again, that the henchmen will return if their captain feels threatened. Rather than heed La Inca's advice, Oscar returns to Santo Domingo, to Ybón, and is murdered in a cane field.¹⁴ For Oscar, returning to the Dominican Republic can be seen as an acceptance of his destiny. Lola, on the other hand, learns to avoid dysfunctional relationships. She distances herself from Yunior, who admits that he "could not keep my rabo in my pants" (311). She leaves him because he "was too much of a mess," opting instead to remove herself from a relationship that is making her unhappy (324). She nurses her mother through hospice care and moves to Miami, where she falls in love and marries Rubén, a Cuban American. Together, they have a daughter, Isis, who seems to be shielded from the del Cabral family *fukú*.

Lola arms her daughter with the tools that she did not have. Isis wears three *azabaches*, one that Oscar wore as an infant, one that she wore, and one that La Inca gave Beli when she took her to Baní. Moreover, she makes La Inca and Yunior's mother her *madrinas*, using their wisdom to help prevent the repetition of her mistakes. Yunior hopes that someday Isis will "take

¹⁴ Oscar's murder in the cane fields recalls the November 25, 1960 deaths of the Mirabal sisters as chronicled in Julia Álvarez's novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994).

all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and put an end to it" (331). What he does not realize is that although he takes him more than a decade after Oscar's death to find his own *zafa*, Lola found hers in Santo Domingo as a sixteen-year-old because she decides to return to her origin to begin again. She learns that she must free herself from men like Yuniór, and chooses a path that breaks her family's *fukú*.

Geographies of Home: Inverting the Inheritance

While Díaz's *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* speak to the importance of knowing one's own history, Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* emphasizes the strength in charting one's future. In this novel, Pérez explores the physical and psychological manifestations of the trauma of one Dominican family's immigration to the United States. This novel explores the familial dynamics of a couple and their fourteen children and three grandchildren and focuses on women in particular, especially in terms of the lasting legacy of domestic violence. *Geographies of Home* illustrates how traditional Dominican cultural patterns insist that women subordinate themselves to men. Attempting to conform to social and religious expectations, female characters struggle to please their father, and in doing so, lose themselves. A domineering patriarch, Papito is portrayed as distant, verbally abusive, and emotionally volatile. It is as if Papito's family is doomed to repeat the cycle of violence, perpetually emulating the models of domesticity that subjugate women and neglect children. Condemned to repeat the past, women sublimate childhood trauma in order to cope with the violent present, a strategy with severe psychological repercussions.

Papito's eldest daughter, Rebecca, exemplifies the classic effects of an abusive father-figure. Desperate to leave the stifling environment of her overcrowded childhood home, she

finds herself in an abusive relationship as an adult. Her marriage to Pasi3n is portrayed as maniacally violent, characterized by both emotional and physical abuse. From the outset of their marriage, she is subjected to the sadistic actions of her husband. After one particularly aggressive encounter, she recalls how Pasi3n “strapped her into a chair so that she’d be present as he had his way with a girl no older than her teens” (169). Papito’s abuse accelerates after the birth of Rebecca’s three children and he punishes her mercilessly. For example, upon returning home after a long absence after their latest fight, he wakes Rebecca and his sleeping children by dousing them with cold water. Justifying his actions because she had fallen asleep with the television on, Pasi3n beats her until he shatters the bones in her hand and splits her lower lip. Rather than protect her children from their abusive father, Rebecca blames them for his behavior. When her parents come to rescue their grandchildren, she beats her daughter Esperanza for “talking about what goes on inside our house” (195). She is trapped in a cycle of violence from which there is no escape, unable to pull herself from a toxic marriage, even for the welfare of her children.

Rebecca’s inability to extricate herself permanently from Pasi3n suggests the powerful pull of established modes of violence. Once she finally leaves her husband, the underlying reasons for her reluctance to leave emerge as part of learned patterns of behavior. When confronted about her abusive husband and malnourished children, Rebecca angrily vents her desperation. In retaliation to her mother Aurelia’s admonishments, she retorts: “You think you did such a great job raising me? Why the hell do you think I was so desperate to get married? To get you out of my fucking hair! [...] So I took the first man who came my way! I took him to shut your mouth!” (198).¹⁵ While their violent argument continues, Aurelia reveals that Pasi3n is

¹⁵ While Rebecca may exaggerate her mother’s abuse, it does speak to violence of women on women, which later we see with Marina.

not the first lover to abuse Rebecca, chastising her for remaining with Samuel “even though he broke half your bones” (199). She continues berating her daughter, chronicling how Rebecca marries Pasi3n even though “he had already set about trying to kill you before any of your children were even born” (199).

Rebecca’s volatile marriage to Pasi3n is an exacerbated version of her violent childhood. As Iliana, the family’s youngest daughter, explains, her parents were not the only aggressors in their household. She remembers that “her siblings had radar for what made others feel bad and that their favorite form of entertainment was merciless teasing. They wielded language like a weapon, employing it to alienate and assault” (190). As the argument between Aurelia and Rebecca illustrates, verbal violence is as rampant as physical abuse in their home, ingraining aggression as normative. In contrast to the tradition images of a loving, protective home, their household is characterized by abuse. As Tico, the youngest son explains, “all his family ever seemed to do was argue and accuse, preach and pray,” becoming a “sorry excuse for a family” who behave like strangers at best and mortal enemies at worst (176).

While her eldest sister Rebecca succumbs to the predicted patterns of abuse, Iliana attempts to ameliorate her own situation by leaving for college. Despite her attempt to leave home, she is pulled back into the vortex of violence as soon as she returns. She accepts a scholarship to Cornell University in upstate New York that means she would need to leave home instead of getting married directly after high school like her older sisters. However, Iliana’s experience at Cornell is miserable. She leaves school, perhaps for good, because of the racial prejudice she encounters. Rather than “India” as she would prefer to consider herself, she is identified as black by other students, which triggers an emotional response. She is uncomfortable

in her own skin and disgusted by her appearance, and returns home feeling defeated and vulnerable.

After returning for holiday break, Iliana re-enters a turbulent homelife that wreaks havoc on her emotional and physical health. As an unmarried daughter in a strict Seventh Day Adventist household, Iliana is expected to conform to her father's rules defined by his religious zealotry. Her brothers are allowed to come and go as they please while Iliana is expected to be home before sunset each night and to provide a detailed account of her plans. Papito, an ardent practitioner of his faith, rules his family with brute force, meting out physical punishments that seem overly harsh for the purported offense. For example, when Iliana stays out twenty minutes past her curfew, her father greets her at the door by slapping her in the face and calling her a "shameless hussy" and a "whore" (312). He chastises her for "making me look like I cannot control my own house," screaming that "I don't care what you did while away at school! But as long as you live under this roof you will abide by my rules and by God's!" (313). Iliana is expected to act like "gente decente," follow her father's arbitrary rules, and refrain from committing the "unpardonable sin" of disrespecting her parents (312).

Iliana has learned that questioning her father's authority leads to physical reprisal. In fact, the novel's opening scene at Cornell includes a flashback of "one of the few times she stood up to Papito" (7). When she dares to challenge the scent of a set of soap her father has purchased for her mother, she is beaten for her behavior. Insisting that the soap is cinnamon scented, rather than strawberry scented as the wrapper indicated, she defiantly contradicts her father. Unable to impose his will, Papito "unhooked his belt and drew it from the loops around his pants. 'Sinvergüenza! I'll teach you to disrespect me!'" (8). Iliana recalls that she was not only beaten with a belt until welts rose on her legs, but that her lip bled from "slaps from the back of her

father's hand" (8). This early display of strength foreshadows her willingness to resist her family's expectations.

As the story progresses, Iliana reveals that abuse has been a permanent part of her life—even as a child in the Dominican Republic. She remembers being beaten for throwing twigs into a river when she was three because she had ventured to the water's edge alone. Her father, terrified that she could have drowned, lifted her dress "right then and there and whacked" her (317). Though she was scarcely three years old, Iliana remained impassive while being punished, refusing to cry. Instead, she shut her eyes until a vein formed on her forehead, staunchly resisting a punishment she felt she did not deserve. Years later, when she again attempts to explain her feelings to her father, she is rebuked for being "headstrong" (318). Papito justifies his actions as a preemptive strike, reasoning that "I had to teach you a lesson so that you'd learn to be afraid. Without fear, anything could have happened to you" (318). I argue that her father's fear reflects the legacy of the *trujillato*. He inherits the need to "learn to be afraid" as a coping mechanism to guard against retribution. Iliana is unable to help her father understand that she is in no real danger, and he is unwilling to relinquish control out of fear for his daughters' safety.

While memories of unwarranted whippings have taught Iliana to avoid conflict, withdraw from her family, and escape into the world of books, they also illustrate possible sources of Papito's rage. When he was seven, Papito's mother dies in the Dominican Republic, leaving him no recourse but to join his father during his nightshift at a sugar mill on the coast. He hears the verbal abuse of the factory foreman who chastises his father for being weak and spends nights watching his father haul heavy bags of sugar. His father, who is unable to defend himself from his boss's ridicule, likewise becomes abusive and threatens to whip his son for making him "look bad" in front of the other workers (150). When Papito was nineteen, his father died, leaving him

a small plot of land outside Barahona. Despite this seeming good fortune, a hurricane destroys his home, his possessions, and leaves him penniless. Papito resigns himself to the unpredictability of island existence and falls in love with a village girl, Annabelle. He is devastated to learn that she is a victim of incest and is pregnant with her abusive father's child. Annabelle throws herself in the path of another hurricane and commits suicide. Papito is disheartened and convinces himself that the United States is his only option. He marries another woman and moves to Brooklyn as soon as he can. There seems to be no salvation for Papito in the Dominican Republic, so moving to the United States is a final act of desperation after two devastating losses.

For Papito, the United States, though a symbol of progress, exacerbates his feelings of impotence and frustration, leading him to commit increasingly severe acts of violence. As Lyn Di Iorio Sandín argues in *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/a Identity* (2004), Papito's rage emerges as a result of his traumatic youth in the Dominican Republic (76). The disturbing scene of Annabelle's death becomes emblematic of Papito's perceived impotence, not only because he is unable to prevent her suicide, but because no other family members know that he is haunted by his past. This sublimated memory is repressed, eventually manifesting itself as irrational anger misconstrued as a means of protecting his family. His secret becomes a "pain that had proliferated like cancerous cells to infect every aspect of his being; a pain that conjured up his other imperfections to make him believe he was far less than he ever was; a pain that induced him to live penitently in order to redeem himself before God" (162). Driven by guilt, Papito spirals downward, becoming maniacally vigilant of his family.

Papito's unresolved, painful past is coupled with the frustration of not being able to provide for his family. In addition to his job as a pieceworker at a luggage factory, he is forced to

sell religious products door-to-door in order to support his household. Neither job is secure; he is subjected to abuse from his boss as well as rejection from those uninterested in his wares. For example, the Dominican foreman at the factory admonishes his sewing, threatens to fire him, and yells that “You’re lucky you have a job. You know how many people need one? If I fired you, there’d be a line around the block” (231). Defeated by a menial job with no prospect of advancement, Papito vents his frustration on his family, becoming a ruthless tyrant who rules by fear. His wife and daughters literally cower in his presence, and walk on eggshells in an effort to avoid his rancor.

As Papito becomes an abusive patriarch whose reign of terror eats away at his children, his wife Aurelia attempts to attenuate his stifling discipline. Though initially she verbally abuses her children much like her husband, she emerges as their possible salvation by reconsidering her role in the family. After decades of shunning her mother’s legacy, Aurelia reclaims her lost “gift” to attempt to save her children from themselves. Finding an inner strength yet untapped, Aurelia vows that even if Rebecca returns to Pasión, she will retain custody of her grandchildren, even if she has to report her own daughter to Child Protection Services. Once she insures their safety, slowly earning their trust by providing them with nourishing meals, Aurelia sets her sights on larger goals. Convinced that Rebecca is bound to return to her abusive husband as long as he is alive, Aurelia invokes her mother’s powers in a ritualized sacrifice of a hen.

Aurelia’s ritual is an allusion to Dominican *vodú* and her reclaiming her inherited powers as a *servidora*. The description of her *enviación*, or spell, follows the basics tenets of La Veintiuna División. By sacrificing a live chicken, she focuses upon the recipient’s spiritual essence. In this tradition, animal sacrifice is designed to placate the *Loa*, or pantheon of deities. By concentrating on Pasión as she plucks the chicken, she sets forth a curse on Pasión that

overcomes him. As she chants, her *enviación* reaches Pasión and he finally succumbs to an asthma attack that leaves him lifeless on the floor. When Rebecca returns home, she finds her dead husband. Though she mourns for him, one cycle of violence has been mitigated as Aurelia's sacrifice effectively ends their relationship.

Having rescued Rebecca, Aurelia turns her attention to Marina, her mentally unstable daughter whose violence surpasses Papito's rage. Despite her best efforts, Marina has retreated into herself, and becomes capable of acts that Aurelia cannot anticipate. Marina is plagued by an acute animal phobia, sees visions of a dark figure that conjures fits of aggression, and has attempted suicide twice. She sets the kitchen on fire convinced that it is being overrun by "large, black spiders," and complains of the presence of evil as she sees as a dark figure that forces itself on her at night (13). A victim of a brutal rape by a male astrologer, she is haunted by the attack and becomes convinced that she has been chosen by God as able to divine good and evil. This trauma forces her to re-create scenes of sexual violence as the aggressor. Her inner trauma manifests itself in the form of an acute phobia, which in turn is expressed through physical aggression.

In arguably the most jarring scene in the novel, Marina's psychosis results in a brutal sexual attack on Iliana. Convinced that her sister's body is possessed by evil, Marina rapes her with her hand as "her fist crashed into her womb" (284). Despite being pulled off of Iliana by Tico, she resumes her attack, fueled by a hatred that paralyzes Iliana with fear. Iliana senses the source of her sister's anger, recalling "the hatred that paralyzed her as the blankets were again stripped from her body, her legs violently pried apart. This hatred pierced her infinitely deeper than the hand thrust between her thighs" (289). Marina's disturbing attack is the cumulative moment of her madness, an unthinkable act that breaks the family open. Symbolically, she

exposes the wounds that have been bound shut, revealing an acute trauma that cannot be silenced.¹⁶

When her parents discover Iliana lying naked after the second rape, their first instinct is to deny the atrocity that Marina commits.¹⁷ Papito, true to form, responds with violence and sprints to Iliana's bedside, striking Marina in the face. Aurelia, rather than allow an escalation of an already horrific event, places her own body between Marina and Papito, challenging him to "strike at her too" (289). Rather than retaliate physically, Papito succumbs to his emotions, and leaves the scene of the attack in tears. The family's silence has been violently shattered, ripped from the very center and exposed by Marina. In the aftermath of the attack, Aurelia, Papito, Iliana, and Tico will have to reconcile their own roles in precipitating violence, perhaps realizing that abuse played a part in driving Marina to madness.

In *Geographies of Home*, childhood trauma manifests itself in the form of acute animal phobia. As Jonathan Lear explains in *Freud* (2005), animal phobia is characterized by an irrational fear of an attack by multiple numbers of a feared species (37). In this work, Marina and Aurelia are plagued by recurrent images of nocturnal rodents, namely rats. They display classic symptoms of displaced trauma, a psychological coping mechanism first studied as an extreme fear of rats and spiders in response to acute childhood trauma. According to Freud's theory, his patient Lazner's fear that he or his loved ones would be eaten by rats or spiders was a manifestation of early trauma displaced as animal phobia. He theorizes that these thoughts are produced by conflicts consisting of the combination of loving and aggressive

¹⁶ In a chillingly similar scene in *La fiesta del chivo*, Trujillo rapes Urania Cabral with his hand vowing "pese a sus setenta años, pese a sus problemas de próstata, pese a los dolores de cabeza que le daban las curas, los yanquis, los venezolanos, los conspiradores, un macho cabal, un chivo con un güevo todavía capaz de ponerse tieso y de romper los coñitos de los vírgenes que le pusieran delante" (515). But while the rape of Urania seems to be about proving his prowess, Marina's similar act seems to be about excising "evil" from her sister.

¹⁷ Given the legacy of the *trujillato* and its informant culture, insisting upon silence can be seen as a means of safeguarding the family unit.

impulses relating to Lazner's immediate family. For Freud, this phobia begins with sexual experiences of infancy, in particular harsh punishment for childhood masturbation, and the vicissitudes of sexual curiosity. Due to repeated, excessive punishment as a child, as an adult Lazner exhibited violent streaks of physical aggression coupled with suicidal fantasies (40).

In order to cope with her husband's volatile temper, Aurelia begins to manifest similar phobic tendencies. For example, Aurelia becomes convinced that her Brooklyn home is infested with rats that feed on the insulation and dry wall, threatening the structural integrity of their house. As the sole daughter of a practitioner of *vodú*, Aurelia is aware of her "gift of sight" but attempts to remove herself from it. Rather than embrace her mother's legacy, she wills herself to forget her mother's lessons, withdrawing into her husband's faith in an attempt to distance herself from abuse. This willful negation manifests itself as a paralyzing fear of rats, an animal phobia that haunts her in middle age. As she explains, "the distinct and unforgettable sound of rats scurrying" elicits a fear of "impenetrable darkness" that keeps her awake nights (134). Aurelia's fear of rats indicates an animal phobia because she substitutes an external perceptual danger (the rats) for an internal, perceptual one—namely, her husband's violence (134). According to Freud, "such a process has the advantage that from an external danger protection may be gained through the flight and the avoidance of the perception of it, whereas against a danger from within, flight is to no avail" (quoted in *Body of Writing*, 40).

Interestingly, both of Aurelia's daughters are plagued by similar animal phobias. Marina's inner trauma is so great that she becomes convinced to re-create scenes of sexual violence as the aggressor. Like Lazner, Marina exhibits violent streaks of physical aggression coupled with suicidal fantasies. Given Marina's sexual trauma, her mental illness seems to

coincide with the same kind of symptoms of displacement and rationalization posited by Freud. While Marina's psychosis is overt, Iliana's displacement strategies are less obvious but no less harmful. She has become adept at fostering coping mechanisms to conceal her own trauma, retreating to books as means of temporary escape. While Iliana seems well-adjusted, the more time she spends at home, and the more she reconnects with her ability to perceive the invisible, the less she is able to conceal her pain. Uncomfortable in her own skin, and unable to articulate her conflicted feelings about being home, she lapses into repressed memories of childhood which she prides herself upon containing below a calm exterior. For example, after witnessing her father's violent encounter with her sister Marina, she remembers her traumatic sixth birthday. Humiliated that her mother would not arrive at her new "American" school with cupcakes for her class, Iliana flies into a fit of rage at the breakfast table, and is severely whipped by her father (89). Thirteen years later, this memory returns, and Iliana has to fight the "sudden rage that invaded her. She reached out and flung the bowl across the table" (89). The sublimated pain of her past re-surfaces as Iliana struggles to cope with violence that has become ingrained.

Like her mother and Marina, Iliana is frustrated by the established order's inability to prevent injustice. This order, symbolized by the Adventist church, is challenged by the maternal order, represented by her maternal grandmother Bienvenida's legacy of the gift of spiritual "sight." After being brutally raped by Marina, Iliana finds the strength to challenge her father's absolute authority. The horror of this scene of primal attack provides the catalyst for Iliana to escape her father's stifling psychological grip. No longer paralyzed by fear, she "stood ever so still in front of the father whom she suddenly despised. Her blood coursed through her veins. Her soul reclaimed every inch of her body as her thoughts coalesced into a stream of silent vows"

(313). This revelation of her deep-seeded emotions leads to an epiphany, but not a reconciliation.

She promises herself:

I will not fall or flinch. I will not let you or anyone else ever knock me down again. I may have been molded from your flesh but this body is mine and mine alone. You will not make me ashamed of it as my sister did. You will not make me recoil from it or renounce my life as I thought I would do. I will survive all this. I will walk out of this house erect. I will amount to more than you can ever hope to be and you will rue the day you saw me leave. (313)

By tapping into her grandmother's gift, Iliana is able to face her abusive father as a woman, rather than a child, and finds the strength to leave her home without abandoning her family.

Despite this revelation, Iliana cannot rid herself of the resentment and anger that “gnaw at her like rats” (319). She cannot rest in her own home, and is riddled with guilt over both her sister's madness and her confrontation with her father. While she acknowledges that her father's feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness help explain his violent outbursts at home, she is unwilling to forgive him for his actions. Rather than continue to fear him, she wills him to diminish. Shrinking him before her eyes, she finally sees her father as the aging, pathetic man that he has become. She is surprised by her newfound strength and marvels at “the deeply etched wrinkles on his brow, at his corneas yellow as the yolks of eggs, his sagging cheeks and lips,” that replace the masculine features she feared as a young girl (319). Convinced of her own strength, she watches as Papito “had also gradually shrunk so that it now became apparent to her that she was in fact taller than the man she had held in awe for the greater part of her life” (319). It is almost as if she has conjured a spell like those that made her grandmother famous, challenging the physical presence of her once omnipotent father by drawing from her own strength.

In *Geographies of Home*, Pérez addresses the repercussions of psychological trauma left unresolved, and suggests an alternative to the patriarchal order that allows women to find an

inner form of strength. Iliana's realization that she must take responsibility for her own life comes with the sacrifice of her sister's sanity. Concluding that "she can neither depend on him to save her nor blame him for her existence," Papito becomes analogous to a fallen Father (320). Her story is not victorious, she has been brutally raped and abused, and must abandon home in order to save what remains of herself. *Geographies of Home* insists on the inherited nature of domestic violence, a cyclical, potent force that follows families from the Dominican Republic to the United States. Escape from violence's widespread wake is impossible, but confronting its aftershocks becomes possible by finding inner strength.

The Dominican Legacy of Violence

Both Díaz and Pérez chronicle the legacy of violence that follows families from the Dominican Republic to the United States. Immigration only exacerbates the extant cyclical violence, as the pressures of moving to the United States add fuel to an already explosive family environment. In both narratives, authors explore the double-edged legacy of patriarchal authority in Dominican culture. Fathers are either absent abandoners or authoritarian abusers: two variations of the same continuum of trauma that marks Dominican identity. In order to reconcile a brutal past, Dominican Americans must break the code of silence that sublimates pain. By confronting the source of endemic violence, it becomes possible to begin to heal traumatic wounds. Conversely, continued denial of the past magnifies abuse, manifesting the power of fear as a tool for oppression.

CHAPTER 4

UNCOMMON COMMONWEALTH: PUERTO RICO'S PARTICULAR CULTURE OF DISPLACEMENT IN *THE HOUSE ON THE LAGOON* (ROSARIO FERRÉ, 1995) AND *LA GUARACHA DEL MACHO CAMACHO* (LUIS RAFAEL SÁNCHEZ, 1976)

Puerto Rico's constant debate over its political status as a Commonwealth or *Estado Libre Asociado* of the United States is representative of the island's identity crisis. Puerto Rico remains, in some form, a marginalized political entity since 1898. Despite more than a century of attempted policies, the island continues to be trapped in a cycle of inconclusive referenda that uphold its Commonwealth status and erode its economy. Specifically, this chapter examines what happens when the United States claims Puerto Rico as a Commonwealth and what impact this liminal political status has on families, social structures, and the idea of Puerto Rican identity.

In Rosario Ferré's novel *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), Puerto Rico's status debate is at the forefront Isabel Monfort Mendizábal's retelling of her family's history. In this work, the Mendizábal family is the lens through which Puerto Rican national and familial politics are reflected. I argue that the politics of Puerto Rican independence are embedded in the character of the novel's narrator Isabel, wife of the powerful Quintín Mendizábal and matriarch of the house on the lagoon. Moreover, it is her voice—a feminine voice—that explores politics in gendered language. Her story interrogates the patriarchal version of events, a female dissenting voice that offers an alternative to the masculinizing impositions of her husband Quintín Mendizábal and his politics. The second novel that I examine, Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (1976), is an even more radical re-imagining of Puerto Rican politics. Its polyphonic re-telling of a Wednesday afternoon traffic jam explodes the established hierarchy, rendering

ridiculous the repetitive cycle of status referenda and economic and political stagnation that dominate Puerto Rico as a Commonwealth.

Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* suggests that the nation's foundations be reconsidered to include women and Afro Puerto Ricans. Ferré, as the daughter of one of Puerto Rico's most privileged families, wrote from the unique position of a cultural insider.¹ She was affluent, bilingual, and able to move freely between the island and the mainland. Although Ferré was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, she completed her secondary education at the tony Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts. She attended Manhattanville College as an undergraduate, where she majored in English and French. Later, she earned a Master's Degree from the University of Puerto Rico and a doctorate in Latin American Literature from the University of Maryland. On an island where 60% of students in public secondary schools do not graduate and 95% of those who do finish high school graduate at a "sub-basic" level, Ferré's access to education reflects her family's privilege.²

Ferré writes about Puerto Rican women—in both English and Spanish—and explores the implications of race and lineage in Puerto Rico.³ Of course, by choosing to write in both English and Spanish, she complicates the distinction between what Lawrence Venuti in *The Scandals of Translation* (1998) calls "foreign" and "domestic" texts. For Venuti, the "fundamentally ethnocentric" nature of translation derives from translation's work of the "domestication" of text

¹ Rosario Ferré was a member of one of Puerto Rico's most prominent families. In fact, her father, Luis Ferré, was a pro-statehood governor of the Commonwealth from 1968 to 1972.

² According to the "Puerto Rico Five Year Plan 2013-2017," published September 9, 2012 by Puerto Rico's Department of Education, Library and Information Services Program, only 39% of public school students perform at a basic level (average performance) or above in Spanish on the Puerto Rican Tests of Academic Achievement.

³ Ferré published *Papeles de Pandora*, her first work of fiction, in 1976. She began writing English versions of her work in 1989 with *Sweet Diamond Dust* (*Maldito Amor*, 1985). *The House on the Lagoon* is the first book that she wrote on English before Spanish. She published the Spanish version, *La casa de la laguna*, in 1996. *Eccentric Neighborhoods/Vecindarios excéntricos* was published in English in 1998 and in Spanish in 1999. The first Spanish edition bears the note "traducido por la escritora" and the 1999 edition's copyright page includes "este libro ha sido publicado en inglés." For further discussions of Ferré's language choices, see Charles Hanley, Cristina Garrigós, and Irma López.

(4). In a process of assimilation, “foreign” texts are translated into “domestic” cultures (11). For Ferré, language and politics are intrinsically linked, as pro-statehood political positions also privilege English while pro-independence backers insist upon the preeminence of Spanish. As Keja L. Valens explains, by choosing to write *The House on the Lagoon* in English, Ferré is making a political choice. She argues that writing in English is “connected to statehood, to making English a domestic language of Puerto Rico and rendering Puerto Rican literature domestic in the United States” (135).⁴ While Valens has a point, Ferré insists that she does not translate her own work, but rather that she writes “versions” of it (Kevane 64).⁵

The House on the Lagoon tells the story of three generations of the increasingly affluent Mendizábal family. The novel chronicles how the Quintín Mendizábal and Isabel Monfort meet, how their families’ pasts influence their own politics, and how their marriage becomes a symbol for Puerto Rico’s politics. The novel concludes with a catharsis, with the destruction of the edifice of the Mendizábal home. Ferré’s novel acts as a rendering of the deconstruction of the edifice. She suggests that the order that Quintín clings to is not only doomed, but also based on a misinterpretation of history that privileges the patriarchy to which he fervently clings. Sánchez’s *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* can be read as a response to the destruction of Quintín’s version of Puerto Rico. This novel, though published prior to *The House on the Lagoon*, examines San Juan society after the failure of the first round of statehood referenda in 1967. Where Ferré’s house leaves off, Sánchez’s *guaracha* begins, once again examining how Puerto Rico, and San Juan in particular, seems destined to replay and repeat its political history.

⁴ What Valens neglects to mention, however, is that *The House on the Lagoon* was published in 1995, three years before Ferré’s famous “about face” *New York Times* op-ed piece “Puerto Rico, U.S.A.” (1998), in which she supports statehood and reverses her pro-independence stance of more than three decades. I contend that *The House on the Lagoon* advocates against statehood and supports independence as the best way forward for Puerto Rico.

⁵ In *Latina Self-portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers* (2001), in an interview with Bridget Kevane, Ferré states “I don’t translate my work; I write versions of it” (64).

In the case of Puerto Rico, travel back and forth to the island is less complicated than in other Spanish Caribbean countries because of its Commonwealth status. While Puerto Rico's definition as an *Estado Libre Asociado* removes the documentation barrier from travel to the U.S. mainland, economic realities of life in the contiguous United States often prevent permanent return. In fact, many Puerto Ricans who emigrate to the U.S. mainland plan only a brief stay to save enough money to improve their economic station, finding instead that they have difficulty making ends meet and making a return to the island unfeasible. As William Luis explains in his seminal *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Literature Written in the United States* (1997), Puerto Rican migration patterns occurred in waves (106). The first wave of immigrants—those who left the island in the 19th and early 20th centuries—were skilled cigar makers and earned a good living. In his analysis of *Memorias de Bernardo Vega* (1977) Luis argues that Vega contrasts this “first wave” of Puerto Rican immigrants with the more recent, larger, and less educated wave (107). This “second wave” not only flooded the unskilled labor market in cities like New York, but led to growing concern about Puerto Rican immigration in general (119). As Luis documents, “the Puerto Rican population in the United States grew from 301,375, in 1950, to 1,548,000, in 1974,” with most residing in New York (119). As the supply of unskilled labor far surpassed the demand, the unemployment rate among Puerto Ricans skyrocketed, and some Puerto Ricans returned to the island.⁶ The economic realities of life in urban centers were not easy. According to Virginia Sánchez Korrol, this growing unemployment and a rise in female-headed households attested to the difficult conditions of life on the U.S. mainland.⁷ As a result of this chronic under- and unemployment, families living in poverty

⁶ As Luis demonstrates, between 1972 and 1973 there was “negative migration to the United States, -34,015 and -20,938, respectively” (119).

⁷ Sánchez Korrol's “The Story of U.S. Puerto Ricans,” as part of Hunter College's Center for Puerto Rican studies, provides an in-depth analysis of these trends.

frequently became dependent upon public assistance, triggering “downward socio-economic spirals” that continue to plague many Puerto Rican families (Sánchez Korrol).

Puerto Ricans, whether living abroad or at home, have had to adjust to the U.S.-dominant politics and culture. Of course, prior to 1898, Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony with a Spanish language and culture. After Christopher Columbus’s arrival on the island on November 19, 1493, Puerto Rico becomes a key strategic stronghold of the Spanish Empire. Beginning with the island’s first governor Juan Ponce de León, one of Columbus’s lieutenants, Puerto Rico was quickly colonized and its inhabitants became Spanish subjects. The island was also a regular port of the West Indies Fleet and an important trading port for Spain. For more than four centuries, Puerto Rico remained under Spanish control despite attempts to capture the island by the British, French, and Dutch. While Spain did grant the Province of Puerto Rico more sovereignty through the Autonomic Charter on November 25, 1897, the island never fully realized its autonomy. Under the terms of the 1898 Treaty of Paris, Spain ceded the island to the United States. Since the 1898 invasion of Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War, politics and identity have been shaped by the island’s status as a territory of the United States. This debate, lasting more than a century, exemplifies the problematic nature of identity for Puerto Ricans.

Even the first postage stamps issued for Puerto Rico by the United States in 1899 were inscribed with *Porto Rico*, underscoring both the mispronunciation and ignorance of the American colonizers. In fact, Puerto Rico’s relationship with the United States is a subject of ongoing discussion, both on and off the U.S. mainland. From the Foraker Act of 1900 to the May 15, 2013 introduction of H.R. 2000, The Puerto Rico Status Resolution Act, to Congress, the

political status of Puerto Rico, and the rights and identity of its citizens, has been inextricably linked to the United States.⁸

At the conclusion of the Spanish-American War, the United States occupied and governed Puerto Rico. Tellingly, the first four governors appointed by the United States were also military officials. This decision set an imperialistic tone for the U.S.-Puerto Rican relations and subjected the island to de-fact martial law. Beginning with Commanding General Nelson A. Miles (1898), who served as the first head of the military government established on the island, governors acted as both heads of the U.S. army of occupation and administrators of civil affairs. After General Miles's promotion to Lieutenant General, Major General John R. Brooke was appointed the second governor of Puerto Rico, but only served from October 1 to December 6, 1898. Major General Brooke became governor of Cuba on December 13, and was replaced as governor of Puerto Rico by General Guy Vernon Henry, who governed from late 1898 to 1899. Major General George Whitefield Davis replaced General Henry, and again held the post for only one year, until 1901. Charles Herbert Allen, Puerto Rico's first civilian governor, was appointed to office by President McKinley as part of the Foraker Act's attempt to normalize U.S. relations with Puerto Rico.

The ramifications of the Foraker Act illustrate the complicated ties of Puerto Rico and the United States and set the stage for the ongoing debate regarding statehood, independence, and identity. The Foraker Act, also known as the Organic Act of 1900, was sponsored by United States Senator Joseph B. Foraker. This Act established an insular government including a governor appointed by the president of the United States, an executive council (much like a senate), and a legislature. Notably, the executive council was comprised of five Puerto Rican

⁸ This resolution, led by Resident Commissioner Pedro Pierluisi, requested a process for voting to admit Puerto Rico as a State to be approved and a vote to ratify Puerto Rico as a State.

members and six U.S. members, effectively insuring that mainland interests would be protected. Although Spanish and English were designated as official languages on the island, the Act also stipulated that education on the island would be conducted entirely in English, with Spanish as a special subject. Additionally, the Act established a Supreme Court of Puerto Rico and allowed the island to send a Resident Commissioner as a non-voting representative to Congress. The Foraker Act was amended in 1909 by the Olmsted Amendment and posited the supervision of Puerto Rico in the jurisdiction of an executive department designated by the president.

More than fifteen years later, the Jones Act established limited U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans.⁹ Enacted on March 2, 1917, the Jones-Shafroth Act created Puerto Rico's Senate, established a Bill of Rights, and authorized the election of a Resident Commissioner to a four-year term (a position previously appointed by the President of the United States).¹⁰ The legislature was elected by Puerto Rican white males. Puerto Rico's governor held the power to veto Acts of the Legislature, but his veto could be overridden by a two-thirds vote, in which case the President of the United States held ultimate decision-making power. The governor, the attorney-general, and the Commissioner of Education were appointed by the President with the approval of the U.S. Senate; the heads of the departments of Finance, Interior, Agriculture, Labor, and Health were named by the governor of Puerto Rico and subject to the approval of the Puerto Rican Senate. Additionally, all cabinet officials had to be approved by the U.S. Senate and Congress had the power to veto any law passed by the Puerto Rican Legislature. Washington maintained control over fiscal and economic matters and exercised authority over mail services, immigration, education, and defense.

⁹ According to the Government Printing Office, the Act titled "An Act to provide a civil government for Porto Rico, and for other purposes, approved March 2, 1917, as amended, is hereby continued in force and effect and may hereafter be cited as the 'Puerto Rican Federal Relations Act'."

¹⁰ This Act also exempted Puerto Rican bonds from federal, state, and local taxes regardless of where the bond holder resides.

Perhaps most importantly, the Jones Act foreshadowed the passage of the Selective Service Act of 1917. This legislation, passed just two months after the Jones Act, extended conscription to residents of Puerto Rico and resulted in more than 20,000 Puerto Rican soldiers sent to the front during World War I. José Carbanes argues that the Selective Service Act led to disproportionately more Puerto Rican soldiers in combat missions in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.¹¹ To date, an estimated 400,000 Puerto Ricans have served in the U.S. military. Even before the middle of the twentieth century, many Puerto Rican households counted more than one male family member as a combat veteran (Carbanes 20). The repercussions of this conscription reverberate on the island today, from protests about bomb testing at Vieques before the land transfer in 2003 to a lack of Veteran’s Services for returning soldiers from conflicts in the Middle East.

Puerto Rican politics are firmly entrenched in the debate about the island’s Commonwealth Status. As a matter of definition, the term “Commonwealth” is first used in Puerto Rico in 1952 for its formal name in English (“Commonwealth of Puerto Rico”).

According to the U.S. State Department’s Foreign Affairs Manual:

The term “Commonwealth” does not describe or provide for any specific political status or relationship. It has, for example, been applied to both states and territories. When used in connection with areas under U.S. sovereignty that are not states, the term broadly describes an area that is self-governing under a constitution of its adoption and whose right of self-government will not be unilaterally withdrawn by Congress.¹²

The term *Estado Libre Asociado*, the Spanish equivalent for Commonwealth, emerges in Puerto Rico in 1938 as part of the arguments in favor of the “naturaleza de un pacto” between Puerto

¹¹ As Carbanes explains, before the Act was signed, Puerto Rican residents of the island (who were not citizens of the United States) were considered to be aliens. Without citizenship, Puerto Ricans were ineligible for the draft. Prior to this Act, Puerto Ricans in the mainland United States who were permanent residents were required to register with the Selective Service System (17-19).

¹² This definition is from the *U.S. Department of State Foreign Affairs Manual Volume 7- Consular Affairs*.

Rico and the United States. The term is first used by Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) founder Luis Muñoz Marín as an explanation for his party's historic platform change from pro-independence to *estadolibrismo*, or in favor of an *Estado Libre Asociado*. In 1950, the United States Congress enacted legislation (P.L. 81-600) authorizing Puerto Rico to hold a constitutional convention. Puerto Rico ratified a constitution in 1951, approved by the U.S. Congress in 1952, that established a republican form of government for the island. Despite this constitution, Puerto Rico's political relationship with the U.S. has been a constant source of debate on the island, in the U.S. Congress, and even at the United Nations. At the center of the debate is whether Puerto Rico should remain a U.S. territory, become a U.S. state, or become an independent country. Since 1952, this debate has spawned several referenda, presidential executive orders, and bills in the U.S. Congress.¹³

While the island's debate about self-determination and government predates its official designation as an *Estado Libre Asociado* as a result of the ratification of the 1952 Constitution, I contend that the debate between *independentistas* and *estadistas* comes to the forefront after 1948, the first time Puerto Ricans elect their own governor. In general terms, *independentistas* advocate for Puerto Rico's autonomy as a sovereign nation. In contrast, *estadistas* are in favor of Puerto Rico's annexation to the United States as federated state. While the *independentista* cause is initially spearheaded by Luis Muñoz Marín and the PPD, its primary advocate since the late 1940s has been the *Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño* (PIP).¹⁴ The PPD, as part of its efforts to gain control of the island, changed its course from promoting independence and

¹³ Tellingly, the U.S. Congress is the only body empowered to decide the political status of Puerto Rico, as stated under the Territorial Clause.

¹⁴ The PIP was founded by Gilberto Concepción de Gracia on October 20, 1946. After the PPD, under the leadership of Luis Muñoz Marín, abandoned its independence platform in order to win the governorship, the PIP becomes the primary promoter of independence through civil disobedience.

advocated instead for an *Estado Libre Asociado*. As part of this move, on May 21, 1948, as part of the Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico, the PPD approved a series of three laws that prohibited any actions that were perceived to be against the government of the island. On June 10, 1948, these laws would become “Ley 53 de Puerto Rico,” also known as “La Ley de Mordaza” (Gag Rule), designed to persecute *independentistas*.

As this debate rages between *independentistas* and *estadistas*, the U.S. government continues to implement policies without the consent of the Puerto Rican people. Tellingly, Puerto Rico is the only territory in the New World that is not free. In fact, the island has never experienced independence as it was transferred from Spanish to United States control at the turn of the twentieth century. By the 1950s, Puerto Rico officially becomes an *Estado Libre Asociado*, known in English as the “Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.” Public Act 600, signed into law by Harry S. Truman on July 4, 1950, allowed Puerto Ricans to draft their own constitution and establish their own internal government structures. Although the Puerto Rican constitution was approved in 1952, the island remains an unincorporated organized territory of the United States.

By the middle of the twentieth century, Puerto Rico was one of the poorest nations in the Caribbean. Its citizens suffered from malnutrition, illiteracy, and preventable communicable diseases. In an effort to spur economic development, in 1948, the U.S. federal government and the Administration of Economic Development (now known as the Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company) partnered to develop projects that would help Puerto Rico transition from a coffee- and sugarcane-based agricultural economy to a modern, industrial nation. Known as “Operation Bootstrap” or “Operación manos a la obra,” these policies were designed to inject millions in investment dollars in the establishment of factories in urban centers.

As a cornerstone of this policy, Puerto Rico provided incentives to U.S. companies to move or expand factories from the mainland. These enticements, often channeled through U.S. government offices acting on the island, included holding labor costs to below those on the mainland, granting access to contiguous U.S. markets without import duties, and allowing the tax-free transfer of corporate profits back to the mainland. The Administration of Economic Development courted investment of external capital, imported raw materials at reduced rates, and exported the finished products to the mainland duty-free. In order to encourage participation, tax exemptions and differential rental rates were offered for industrial facilities. This resulted in Puerto Rico's economy experiencing a shift in labor from agriculture to manufacturing as well as population shift toward urban centers. The manufacturing sector shifted from labor-intensive industries, such as the manufacturing of food, tobacco, leather, and apparel products, to more capital-intensive industries including pharmaceuticals, chemicals, machinery, and electronics.¹⁵ When families migrated to cities like San Juan from rural areas like Santurce and Humacao in search of employment promised by programs like Operation Bootstrap, they found that there were far more workers than available positions.¹⁶ By the 1960s, Operation Bootstrap's relative (and debatable) benefits were outweighed by growing unemployment, urban overcrowding, and increased international competition. The program and its policies were ultimately unsuccessful and precipitated the flight of investment capital.

The debate between *independentistas* and *estadistas* continues as the island economic woes worsen. Puerto Rico has recently seen its credit rating downgraded and its unemployment rate hovers near 15%. As of February of 2014, Puerto Rico faces \$70 billion in debt and has been

¹⁵ As explained in “Operación ‘Manos a la Obra’ (1947): Industrialización y crecimiento” from the Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades website, there was a marked transformation of the Puerto Rican economy both in terms of job composition and exported goods.

¹⁶ See, for example, René Marqués's *La carreta* (1951-52).

teetering on the edge of default in recent months.¹⁷ Major credit rating agencies have put the island on notice for further downgrades as the interest rate on the government's municipal bonds is over 10% and more sources of financing are unavailable. Moreover, Puerto Rico has become an attractive vacation home market for wealthy mainland investors who are able to take advantage of investment incentives and tax breaks purportedly designed to stimulate the construction of quality housing. Instead of creating more infrastructure and housing for Puerto Ricans, these incentives have inflated housing prices and effectively "priced out" many would-be home buyers in the local market. As a result of this influx of tax-averse second home owners, the island's luxury home inventory has created a shortage of moderate-to-low income options for many.¹⁸

Coupled with a strained economy and tight housing market, the question of Puerto Rico's status is divisive. While the official status of Puerto Rico as a Commonwealth has remained unchanged since 1952, the debate about the island's future has escalated. Puerto Rico has held five plebiscites or referenda: 1967, 1991, 1993, 1998, and 2012. On each of these occasions, a majority of voters did not choose a clear change in Puerto Rico's status. Though worded differently, the status quo, whether in the form of a "Commonwealth" option or as a question about whether to revisit status, has received the most votes in plebiscites or referenda prior to 2012, with one exception. In the 1998 plebiscite, 50.3% of voters chose "none of the above" from five status options.¹⁹ R. Sam Garrett explains that this 2012 referendum is potentially

¹⁷ According to the Standard and Poor's credit rating agency, Puerto Rico's credit rating is "BB+," or one notch above junk bond status.

¹⁸ According to National Public Radio's report "Global Recession Hits Puerto Rico Hard" on January 9, 2014, Puerto Rico has effectively been in a recession since 2006. Moreover, as the corporate and high net worth tax rates decrease, that tax burden disproportionately increases for the island's inhabitants.

¹⁹ According to the Congressional Research Service's report by R. Sam Garrett, "Puerto Rico's Political Status and the 2012 Plebiscite: Background and Key Questions," "statehood" has been the second most popular option each time it appeared on the ballot. In 1993 and 1998, 46.4% of voters chose statehood. In 1967, 38.9% of voters chose statehood.

significant because, for the first time, a small majority of voters did not choose to uphold the status quo and opted instead for statehood.²⁰ Anti-statehood supporters question the results of the 2012 referendum and many have questioned the validity of the ballot itself.²¹ In January of 2014, the U.S. government has earmarked \$2.5 million for another referendum to decide Puerto Rico's future status. Puerto Rico seems locked into a cycle of inconclusive plebiscites, repeated referenda that lead to nowhere but more continued instability, exploitation, and charges of corruption.

The House on the Lagoon: An Alternative to the Established Order

In *The House on the Lagoon*, Rosario Ferré refers to Puerto Rico's political situation and presents an alternative to the established order while examining the island's political history through the trope of the house on the lagoon. As the novel's namesake, the physical structure of the house of *The House on the Lagoon* provides the foundation for Isabel to chronicle her family's—and by extension Puerto Rico's—history. Kelli Lyons Johnson contends that Ferré figures the house as both a symbol of Puerto Rico and of feminine space (247). The novel is framed, literally, by the physical structure of the house which mirrors the construction of Puerto

²⁰ As Garret explains “Voters were asked to answer two questions: (1) whether they wished to maintain Puerto Rico's current political status; and (2) regardless of the choice in the first question, whether they preferred statehood, independence, or to be a ‘sovereign free associated state.’ According to results certified by the Puerto Rico State Elections Commission, approximately 54.0% of those who cast ballots answered ‘no’ to the first question. In the second question, approximately 61.2% of voters chose statehood. Puerto Rico's new governor and territorial legislature contend that the results were ‘inconclusive’” (5).

²¹ In an op-ed submitted to *The Hill* on January 15, 2014, the PDP's Secretary of Federal Affairs, José A. Hernández-Mayoral insists that the referendum was worded “To discourage some Commonwealth voters, the ballot did not use the Spanish term for Commonwealth, ‘Estado Libre Asociado,’ to identify that option in the first question.... Commonwealth supporters have always advocated for amendments to the compact and ‘Estado Libre Asociado Soberano’ is a term that some have used as a reference to that aspiration. They do not seek a change of status, only improvements to the current one in ways that do not alter its nature. With malice aforethought, the use of the terms ‘the current status’ in the first question and ‘Estado Libre Asociado Soberano’ in the second was designed to bewilder the Commonwealth voter.”

Rico. The house on the lagoon is metonymical in nature, as it comes to represent the essence of the architecture of the Puerto Rican nation-state.

The political status of the island is an undercurrent of the novel as the history of Puerto Rico's status coincides with key events in Mendizábal family history. Notably, the novel opens and closes with major milestones marking U.S. and Puerto Rican relations. Beginning with the arrival to San Juan of Buenaventura Mendizábal, the novel's events parallel the island's politics. Buenaventura arrives in San Juan from Cádiz on July 4, 1917, the same day that President Woodrow Wilson signs the Jones Act into law. Soon after his arrival, Buenaventura builds a small cottage at the edge of a freshwater spring at the far edge of Alamares Lagoon on "a forgotten stretch of land that had only been partially cleared of wild vines and thickets" (9). Because this is land that "no one walked in the direction of" after dusk due to its proximity to the mangrove swamp of Morass Lagoon, Buenaventura's squatting eventually became a permanent residence (10). When the freshwater spring's elderly caretaker dies, Buenaventura takes the land illegally and moves into the caretaker's stone house, permanently establishing himself on the property.

Buenaventura effectively steals land and resources for his own wartime profit. His appropriation of the caretaker's house is not innocent, as the caretaker is found dead from a "mysterious blow to the head," a seemingly inconsequential detail that suggests some malfeasance on the part of Buenaventura (11). Moreover, Buenaventura profits from a once-public freshwater spring. He packages the water in barrels and smuggles it past San Juan's embargoed port. In fact, Buenaventura benefits from the caretaker's death not only because he takes over his stone house, but because he also secures private access for the illegal "freshwater for luxury goods" trade he conducts with Spanish ships.

During the First World War, Buenaventura takes advantage of his once illicit commerce with Europe, uses his connections to become the island's consul to Spain, and begins importing directly through San Juan's port. Buenaventura's trade is booming and he profits while other island businesses are flagging. By 1918, when Puerto Ricans are "literally dying of hunger," Buenaventura's business grows exponentially because he is able to use his favorable position to eschew wartime embargos. Buenaventura "somehow managed to get through the blockade" while other merchants could not (33). He reaps extraordinary profits and business is so profitable that he is able to buy his wife Rebecca a white Packard and a *paso fino* horse. The fact that Buenaventura capitalizes on wartime privations is telling. He decides that it is the "right moment to expand his business" even though the rest of the country is suffering (33). He manages to avoid allegations of "foul play" and a cloud of rumors that subside when the war was over (34).

Clearly, Buenaventura's fortune is not earned above board; his business acumen underscores both his exploitation of wartime demand and his willingness to circumvent the law. It also speaks to island elites' continued profits from U.S. intervention. Buenaventura's first home, the appropriated caretaker's stone house, coincides with the Jones Act and its ramifications for Puerto Rico. Its location allows Buenaventura to capitalize on the blockade, catapulting his business and his family into San Juan's elite merchant class. After the war, he relocates his warehouse to La Puntilla where "the rest of the city's commercial entrepreneurs had their storehouses and business offices" (35). In sum, Buenaventura has leveraged the war for his own gain.

Moreover, Buenaventura and Rebecca are direct beneficiaries of Puerto Rico's Commonwealth status. Eight years after his windfall of wartime trade, Buenaventura builds mansion on the same sight as his appropriated spring. This second house on the lagoon once

again reflects the politics of Puerto Rico. With the success of their import company, Buenaventura and Rebecca are in a position to transform their “bungalow” into a home “keeping up with their new prosperity” (34, 37). Milan Pavel, their choice of architect, is a Czech apprentice to Frank Lloyd Wright.²² After accusations of plagiarism cause him to flee the U.S. mainland, he woos San Juan’s elite and begins constructing mansions that were “beautiful copies of the master’s houses” (42). Pavel’s move to Puerto Rico is calculated. He has read the U.S. newspapers reporting that Puerto Rico was “mired in poverty” (42) and that “this situation more than justified the United States taking over the island after the Spanish-American War” (42). But he has also observed “the well-heeled, elegantly dressed travelers who got off from the boats” in Jacksonville with “silver fox draped over their shoulders and expensive Stetson hats on their heads” (42, 43). As Isabel explains “he surmised that there must be two Puerto Ricos—one in serious need, and one which was booming” (42). Pavel quickly capitalizes on the wealth of the Association of Sugar Producers and takes advantage of their limitless budgets and lavish tastes. Buenaventura, though not a sugar baron, aspires to the same trappings of wealth and insists that Pavel build him “a mansion more suited to our social standing” (43). Their relationship is mutually beneficial; Pavel builds a home based on Wright’s Wasmuth Portfolio but “keeping with life in the tropics” (48) and Buenaventura has a home that allows him to entertain important clients. By the house on the lagoon’s completion in 1926, Buenaventura has established himself among the most powerful members of San Juan society and is appointed Spanish consul for the island (50).

²² It is possible that Milan Pavel is loosely based on German architect and Frank Lloyd Wright apprentice Henry Klumb. Lloyd Wright’s influence in Puerto Rican architecture is well-established, as both Klumb and his collaborator Louis Kahn are responsible for several well-known projects, including parts of the University of Puerto Rico-Río Piedras. Perhaps Ferré is alluding to Klumb in her description of Pavel, who seems to be an exaggeration of San Juan elite’s tendencies to look to mainland models as arbiters of taste.

A decade later, Buenaventura once again reconstructs the house on the lagoon. By this time, the import business has decreased due to heightening tensions in Europe. Spain is on the cusp of civil war and Buenaventura can no longer count on a reliable supply chain. Rather than adapt to these new realities, Buenaventura becomes almost fanatical about his Spanish heritage. He begins insisting on a diet of traditionally Castilian food and decides that the house on the lagoon is full of “bric-a-brac” and must be gutted (67). Isabel recounts that “in twenty-four hours the Tiffany-glass windows and pearl-shell skylights were shattered to pieces” and in their place Buenaventura built “a Spanish Revival mansion with granite turrets” (67). Underscoring his renewed Spanish pride, “a spiked wooden wheel that had been used to torture the Moors during the Spanish Conquest, which he ordered made into a lamp” hung in the home’s entryway (67). Buenaventura continues to colonize the spring beneath his home, the Spanish products that he imports to the island, and even attempts to control Rebecca. His power is expressed in terms of gender control as he announces that he wants more children and that “they must grow up strong and healthy” (66). The house has become an extension of his imports empire and Buenaventura sees his role as its ruler. Unfortunately, the offspring that Buenaventura sires do not all share his commercial acumen. By the time that Quintín and Isabel move into the house on the lagoon, Buenaventura’s import business is in ruins and the other Mendizábal siblings have frivolously spent their fortunes. Painstakingly, Quintín rebuilds his father’s empire, renewing connections with Spanish suppliers in order to provide for his life with Isabel.

Similar to Rebecca and Buenaventura’s marriage, Quintín and Isabel are happy newlyweds. Married in June of 1955, the young couple begins life together in a small, ocean-view apartment in up-and-coming Alamares. Of course, as in the rest of the novel, the timing of their wedding coincides with an important period in Puerto Rican history. On March 1, 1954, the

year before their marriage, Puerto Rican nationalists Lolita Lebrón, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irvin Flores, and Andrés Figueroa opened fire on the U.S. House of Representatives as an immigration bill was debated. Under the leadership of Lebrón, they chose the date of March 1, 1954, to coincide with the opening of the *Conferencia Interamericana* in Caracas, Venezuela in order to call attention to the *independentista* cause. Five Congressmen were wounded and the members of the group were sentenced to life in prison on June 16, 1954.²³ Isabel explains that she and Quintín “were married in June 1955;” she does not give an exact date, which suggests that she privileges the month and year rather than the date (205). By reading their wedding as part of Puerto Rico’s history, their union took place just as the sentencing portion of the trial of these nationalists happens.

The year following Quintín and Isabel’s marriage, 1956, also echoes in Puerto Rican history. On August 12, 1956, Hurricane Betsy (known in Puerto Rico as Hurricane Santa Clara) ravaged the island. Despite the first televised hurricane warnings thanks to the advent of the San Juan radar system, the island was ill-prepared for the storm. The hurricane caused eighteen deaths and more than \$40 million in damages, including the loss of more than fifteen thousand homes. Hurricane Betsy was the first hurricane to make landfall in Puerto Rico in twenty four years, the same age as Isabel when she marries Quintín. That same year, on November 6, *estadolibrista* Luis Muñoz Marín is re-elected to his third four-year term as governor, with 62.5% of the vote. Both of these events, the destructive Hurricane Betsy and the re-election of Muñoz Marín, set the course for the entrenchment of U.S. intervention in Puerto Rico. The

²³ Lebrón, Cancel Miranda, and the other defendants were charged in United States federal court with attempted murder and other crimes. The trial began on June 4, 1954, with federal Judge Alexander Holtzoff presiding over the case, under strict security measures. On June 16, 1954, the jury declared the four guilty and sentenced to 70 years’ imprisonment. On October 26, 1954, Judge Walsh found all of the defendants guilty of conspiracy, and sentenced them to six additional years in prison, for a total of 76 years each. Cancel Miranda, considered to be the primary shooter, received a prison sentence of 85 years.

federal disaster relief funds increased the debt burden of the island as Muñoz Marín pursues policies that fortify the legality of Commonwealth status. Much like the union of Isabel and Quintín, this period marks an “official” bond between the United States and Puerto Rico.

From the beginning of her relationship with Quintín, Isabel equates Puerto Rico’s status with her own. As she explains

The way I see it, our island is like a betrothed, always on the verge of marriage. If one day Puerto Rico becomes a state, it will have to accept English—the language of her future husband—as its official language, not just because it’s the language of modernity and of progress but also because it’s the language of authority. (184)

Isabel links her own personal history to that of the island. By marrying Quintín, who is an ardent supporter of statehood, she suggests that Puerto Rico will follow course. However, unlike Quintín, Isabel’s political convictions are not set in stone (or Spanish granite). Her mother was an avid supporter of independence for “morals reasons,” but Isabel admits she “did not know what to believe” (183). She reasons:

maybe my indecision is rooted in the Sears catalogue; it goes back to the times I sat as a child in the living room of our house in Ponce with the catalogue on my lap, wishing for independence and at the same time dreaming about our island being part of the modern world. (184)

She struggles with her political leanings just as she struggles with her marriage to Quintín. Theirs is a volatile relationship. She feels stifled by his recriminations and dismissiveness, but loves the son Manuel that they have together and at times feels at peace with her life at home. She vacillates between agreeing that “there’s no question in anyone’s mind that independence would set our island back at least a century” but admits that she does not “like to take a stand” (184).

Isabel’s indecision comes to an end with the construction of a fourth house on the lagoon. This incarnation of the house on the lagoon is imagined by her husband as a monument to his success and as a means to ensuring his legacy. Quintín rebuilds the house using Pavel’s original

plans, believing that this new house is a masterpiece and a “landmark on the island” (326). He hopes to turn the home into the Mendizábal Museum, filled with his personal collection of art so that that “he will always be remembered” (326). Quintín seems obsessed with creating a lasting legacy. This drive to be remembered is telling because Quintín is the father of two sons, Manuel and Willie, and should feel that he has secure heirs to his Gourmet Imports business. His mania grows as his sons become increasingly active in *independentista* causes, foreshadowing the rift that will form as familial politics and generational differences mirror those of the island.

Unlike her husband, Isabel wants no part of this legacy. She concludes that “things change, the world goes around, marriages and love affairs are made and unmade” and sees her husband’s accumulations as unnecessary (311). Isabel is increasingly unmoored by the politics of the island as they come to affect her children. For example, a year after Willie’s birth, Puerto Rico holds its first plebiscite on July 23, 1967. By the time Willie is sixteen, the island is on the brink of another status election.²⁴ Her son Manuel becomes an *independentista* activist through the militant group AK 47, ostensibly named for the *Avtomat Kalashnikova*, the weapons-grade assault rifle developed in the post-World War II Soviet Union. Her adopted son Willie follows suit and the violence hits close to home.²⁵ Willie participates in a strike with Manuel and is severely wounded and left partially blind (369). Quintín’s response is immediate and absolute. He immediately decides to draft a new will that disinherits both Manuel and Willie. For Quintín, politics is personal, as he is sure that upon his death “Gourmet Imports and even our art

²⁴ At this point in the novel, dates become less clear. We know that Willie was born in 1966 and that Isabel resumes writing her manuscript on June 15, 1982. She takes a hiatus after her son is gravely injured at a rally turned political riot, and begins to write again in 1985. This second date can be ascertained by Petra’s reference to Buenaventura’s would-be birthday, on September 18, 1894. She remarks that he “would have been eighty-eight years old today” (371).

²⁵ The AK 47 is an imagined militant *independentista* group. This could be a possible allusion to the Los Macheteros, also known as the Puerto Rican Popular Army. In his book *Nacionalismo Revolucionario Puertorriqueño* (2006), Michael González Cruz explains that the group consists of approximately 5,700 members with an additional unknown number of supporters. This group claimed responsibility for the 1978 bombing of a small power station in the San Juan area, the 1979 retaliation attacks against U.S. Air Force personnel, the 1981 attacks on a Puerto Rico Air National Guard aircraft, and a 1983 bank robbery.

collection will go to subsidize the Independentistas and the Nationalists, those fanatics who have been our family's proverbial enemies for over half a century" (370). Unable to separate his wounded pride from his sons' health and safety, Quintín disowns them and foreshadows his own demise.

By disowning his heirs, Quintín dissolves the Mendizábal family business and precipitates the destruction of the house on the lagoon. As his family spirals into chaos, so too, does the political situation in Puerto Rico. As Isabel explains, the rift in the Mendizábal family coincides with a status plebiscite on November 7 of an unnamed year.²⁶ In the novel, statehood proponent Governor Rodrigo Escalante decries "Independentistas and their Commonwealth sympathizers" for declaring war on the Puerto Rican way of life (397).²⁷ Quintín agrees with the governor and is "stunned" that statehood is lost "because of fear" (396). His response to the plebiscite is revealing; Quintín internalizes Puerto Rico's political conflicts and prepares for "a full-fledged conflict on the island" (397). For Quintín, the war is personal; it becomes about his sons, his legacy, and ultimately, his home. Isabel explains how he "set aside a room in the house and turned it into an arsenal of firearms" and "stood guard" at his home and his warehouse (396-97).

Not only is Puerto Rico's political conflict about his sons, but for Quintín it is couched in domestic terms. When he sees as caricature of "a little mustachioed Latin lover in bed with a huge Statue of Liberty" with the "caption: 'Why get married when we can continue to live together?'" Quintín is "furious" (397). According to Isabel, Quintín believes that "we were

²⁶ In "Writing Home: Mapping Puerto Rican Collective Memory in *The House on the Lagoon*," Kelli Lyon Johnson states that the plebiscite referred to in the novel occurred in 1982 (245). While this may make sense based on the timeframe of Isabel's story, it is historically inaccurate. No such plebiscite occurred in 1982, and no plebiscite whatsoever occurred on November 7. It is my contention that this date is intentionally ambiguous in order to underscore the unresolved question on Puerto Rican political status.

²⁷ Once again, Ferré is taking liberties as the governor of Puerto Rico from 1980 to 1984 was Carlos Romero Barceló.

living in adultery with the United States, and Commonwealthers were abetting our illicit status” (397). That Quintín bristles at the suggestion of Puerto Rico as a mistress of the United States is particularly revelatory because he himself is an adulterer. His anger is in proportion to his own marital infidelity and seems to be related to his own feelings about class and race.

In fact, in *The House on the Lagoon*, Ferré configures race as the central factor for its protagonists’ identities. In this novel, social expectations influence Isabel’s understanding of the black servants that share her family’s home. I argue that gender is somehow tied to race and feelings about one’s skin color effect intimacy with the opposite sex. These color divides are not autochthonous to the islands, but determine opportunities on the U.S. mainland as well as in Puerto Rico. By nature, as Benítez Rojo argues, the Caribbean “meta-archipiélago” is connected to the U.S. mainland, producing a self-encircling and self-regenerating series of relations that “se modifican a sí mismo a cada instante” (v).

Isabel, as the novel’s central narrator, describes her tumultuous marriage to Quintín Mendizábal as well as the genealogical legacies of their two families. Isabel grows tired of her expected duties as socialite and head of household and begins to unravel her family’s complex history in an attempt to better understand her relationship with her husband. In addition, her novel becomes a platform for her musings about race and politics in Puerto Rico and a forum for her to establish divergent views from those of her conservative husband. Isabel’s first foray into the political arena occurs at the outset of the novel, when she establishes the link between U.S. intervention in Puerto Rico and the resurgence of long standing racial prejudices. According to Isabel, the 1917 Jones Act coincided with affluent Puerto Ricans increasingly visiting the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. Upon arrival to the mainland, Puerto Ricans soon discovered the color barriers on the mainland were more rigid than on the island:

When they boarded the trains at Jacksonville, for example, they learned that black passengers could not travel in the same Pullman coaches as whites. As long as they were in the South, Negroes had to use a different bathroom and go to a different restaurant car. (24-25)

Upon witnessing these Jim Crow laws, Isabel explains that “well-to-do” Puerto Rican families became even more aware of their own lineages and arranged marriages to insure the integrity of their “bloodline” (26).

This increased racial “scrutiny” is a direct result of the differences between U.S. mainland and Puerto Rican attitudes about race. Isabel contends that marriages between well-to-do Puerto Rican women and American men “were a tricky business” because “when, arriving from the mainland for the wedding, a suitor’s family might find the bride’s hair to be suspiciously curly or her skin to have a slight cinnamon hue” (26). These “American” prejudices differed from those of Spanish immigrants, who were more “lenient” about “olive skin or curly jet hair” (26). According to Isabel, these norms about race are rooted in historical precedents. As she contends, for Spaniards and their descendants, seven centuries of “Moorish” rule and patterns of colonization that were militaristic rather than settlement-based meant that they were more tolerant of racial mixing. Of course, this perceived tolerance is only partially accurate. Isabel goes on to explain that “Bloodline books” were kept by Spanish clergy to document marriages as “a clean lineage was worth a family’s weight in gold” (22). For “Anglo-Saxons” on the other hand, the “one drop” rules informed by the slaveholding American South led to more rigid notions of race. When Puerto Rico became a Commonwealth, “Bloodline Books” and their written records were not sufficient, as they “could be altered or false,” and phenotypes supplanted marriage records as more reliable (26). For San Juan’s elite, being part of the United States also means adopting “American” notions of race.

In the case of the Mendizábal family, race and “racial purity” become touchstones affecting three generations. As members of Puerto Rico’s moneyed elite, Quintín and his relatives’ views of race are self-serving and based on circumstance. Nowhere is this more salient than in male members of San Juan’s upper classes and their penchant for “mulatto” mistresses.²⁸ This “custom” is well documented throughout the Spanish Caribbean, as famously chronicled in Cirilo Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés: O la Loma del Ángel* (1839, 1882).²⁹ In *Cecilia Valdés*, the archetype of the beautiful and sensual mulatto woman not only exposes Cuban racial hierarchies, but also relations of power in general. This novel centers upon the intersections of La Habana’s *mulatos libres* and its moneyed elite from 1812 to 1832.³⁰ Cecilia Valdés, the novel’s protagonist, is exploited by the wealthy and powerful Gamboa men, and ultimately pays the price for their sexual advances towards her. Much like in *Cecilia Valdés*, money and power seem to give men “free reign” over the women they desire with rippling consequences that expose race and class divisions that allow for such impunity.

In *The House on the Lagoon*, this tendency is first established with Arístides Arrigoitia’s affair with Tosca, a “beautiful mulatto girl” and soothsayer (134). Arrigoitia is Buenaventura’s father-in-law, Rebecca’s father, and Quintín’s maternal grandfather. After his fall from grace as Ponce’s Chief of Police and his wife Madeleine’s return to the United States with her father’s

²⁸ While the novel does not expand upon the historical exploitation of black women by white men, there is an obvious historical precedent that is linked to both the Atlantic Slave Trade and Spanish colonization. I am interested in the idea that the custom of “taking” a black or *mulata* mistress is well established and accepted by the turn of the nineteenth century in the Spanish Caribbean.

²⁹ As William Luis argues in *Literary Bondage*, A first version of Villaverde’s novel was published in 1839, but the definitive version was not published until 1882, after Villaverde had been in exile in New York. As Jean Lamore corroborates, the major difference between the two versions is that the second is an anti-slavery treatise. Specifically, chapters III and IV of the 1839 version deal with the Feria de San Rafael rather than the evils of slavery (16).

³⁰ This decade marks the period just before the infamous “Conspiración de la Escalera” (1844), a planned slave revolt unearthed before it took place. In retaliation for this planning uprising, many Cubans of African descent, both freemen and slaves, were beaten, imprisoned, and/or forced into exile. The year 1844 is also known as “El Año del Cuero,” so named for the “questioning” of alleged conspirators by Cuban authorities in the form of torture. Those accused were tied to ladders and whipped with leather lashes as they were interrogated.

remains, Arrigoitia moves to San Juan and begins an affair with Tosca. He is “inexplicably drawn” to her as she seems to understand him (136). As Isabel recounts, though Tosca seduces him, “he didn’t offer any resistance as she took off his clothes and lay naked alongside him” (136). Arrigoitia begins to make regular visits to Tosca and “was truly happy for the first time in his life” (136). It is as if he has found a sense of spiritual (and sexual) fulfillment.

Although Rebecca is horrified by the affair and refuses to speak with her father, Buenaventura is entirely sympathetic. He not only condones Arrigoitia’s relationship with Tosca, he “thought the affair with the soothsayer was picturesque, and healthy besides” (136). He approves of Arrigoitia’s romance, viewing it as a sign of virility and strength. Buenaventura argues that “if a man is still alive in bed, it means he’ll be around for a while” (137). Of course, Buenaventura’s laissez faire attitude toward this “arrangement” underscores his own racial prejudices. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that part of the reason that Buenaventura approves of Arrigoitia and Tosca’s romance is that he also has extra-marital affairs with black women. On a picnic outing to Lucumí Beach³¹, Isabel discovers Buenaventura’s infidelity as she notices that the children leaving a school bearing the Mendizábal name “had gray-blue eyes like Buenaventura” (213). When she confronts Quintín about her observations, he admits that Buenaventura “sometimes liked taking the black women of Lucumí to the beach, where he made love to them on the sand for a few dollars” (213). Quintín’s casual account of this de-facto prostitution demonstrates his racism as well as the women’s desperation. Not only does he condone his father’s “dalliances,” he also brushes them aside as if this were “normal” behavior,

³¹ The beach’s name “Lucumí” is telling: it is one name for the religious practices of the Yoruba people, who brought their traditions to the “New World” as enslaved Africans. Also called the Yoruba-Lucumí Religion, the Yoruba-Lucumí-Santería Religion, La Regla Lucumí and La Regla de Ochá, this syncretic religion is based on complex relationships between the natural and spiritual worlds as well as the use of mediums to transmit messages between *orishas*, or deities, and their followers. For a more complete analysis of these practices in the Spanish Caribbean and its diaspora, see Lydia Cabrera’s *El monte* (1976), Julia Cuervo Hewitt’s *Aché, presencia Africana* (1988) and issue 26.1 (Spring 2007) of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*.

something that all men do. He does not, however, connect these “encounters” to the needs of the Lucumí community, who have few alternatives to earn money. Later in the novel, it becomes clear that some of the children attending the Mendizábal Elementary School are in fact Quintín’s offspring and that the donations he makes to the Lucumí community are part of an arrangement that allows him continued sexual access to its women.

The custom of white men of privilege having affairs with dark-skinned women is not limited to the Mendizábals. In fact, Esmeralda Márquez, Isabel’s best friend from her childhood in Ponce, is the daughter of a “light-skinned mulatto” and Don Bolívar Márquez, “a well-known lawyer who often mediated in sugarcane labor disputes” (217). As Isabel explains, the relationship between Don Bolívar and his mistress Doña Ermelinda is “not at all surprising, since in Ponce gentlemen with a certain social position often had official paramours” (218). In the case of this arrangement, Don Bolívar spent three days per week with Doña Ermelinda and two with his wife Doña Carmela at his “official residence” (221). While Don Bolívar has no children with Carmela, he has three daughters with Ermelinda and “gave them everything they asked for: the best education, travel to Europe, exquisite clothes, membership in the best clubs in town” (223). Despite these advantages, Don Bolívar never marries Ermelinda. Nevertheless, two of the daughters are advantageously married to “two prosperous merchants from Ponce,” and the other was to be equally matched in San Juan.

According to Isabel’s account, Ermelinda has achieved the kind of status to which all Puerto Ricans aspire. In fact, it becomes possible to read Don Bolívar and Ermelinda’s relationship as a metaphor for the kind of “arrangement” that exists between the U.S. mainland and Puerto Rico. After all, like Ermelinda, Puerto Rico is much like a publicly acknowledged mistress of the United States. As a Commonwealth, its citizens receive many of the benefits of

those on the mainland, but, as in the case with Ermelinda, there is a difference. Like Ermelinda, and by extension her daughters, Puerto Rico pays a hefty price for its liminal status. Just like Ermelinda, it has no legal claims to all of the benefits afforded to “rightful” members of a union. Its redresses can be (and oftentimes are) ignored and the terms of the arrangement are subject to change. One look at the Acts and Referenda proposed and ratified in the last century speak to the precariousness of entering into a non-binding agreement, whether between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, or between Don Bolívar and Ermelinda.

Moreover, while Buenaventura’s attitude is entirely indulgent when it comes to mistresses, he and his wife Rebecca clearly adopt “American” racial biases when it comes to their children’s future spouses. When Esmeralda Márquez, the third of Ermelinda’s daughters, appears on the San Juan social scene, the Mendizábal family vehemently opposes a match with their son Ignacio. Rebecca schemes to expose their “undesirable” family lineage when Esmeralda and her mother attend a family party. As Isabel explains, Rebecca saw that although Ermelinda “was elegantly dressed, but there was something that did not ring true” and plots to publicly uncover this “something” (231). Rebecca deliberately knocks Ermelinda’s turban from her head and “several people began to laugh, pointing to the thick mat of hair that rose from her head, and some began to make unkind comments” (231). Once again, the similarities to Cecilia Valdés are striking. Like Ermelinda, Cecilia’s “mixed” origins are exposed at a public dance. Both women, known for their striking good looks, are humiliated in order to prevent their unions with the sons of moneyed families.³² In addition, both women are the daughters of black mothers who were mistresses of powerful white men. And, both women are prevented from marrying their true loves because of their own mixed origins. Much like Rosa and D. Cándido Gamboa,

³² Of course, unlike Ermelinda, Cecilia Valdés is not fully aware of her origins and did not know who her father was (though there were clues) before the *baile de etiqueta*.

Buenaventura and Rebecca are complicit in these “unkind comments” and insist that Ignacio stop seeing Esmeralda. They go as far as to threaten that “they would cut off his monthly allowance and refuse to pay for his airplane tickets to fly home from school on vacations” (232).

To Isabel’s dismay, Quintín sides with his parents and insists that Ignacio break off his relationship with Esmeralda. Quintín underscores his racial prejudices by couching them in terms of parental expectations, arguing that Ignacio “can’t go out with Esmeralda Márquez because she is part black. Father and Mother will never stand for it” (232). Isabel, on the other hand, is critical of this renewed retrenching of Puerto Rico’s elite and is clearly sympathetic to her best friend’s cause. She “didn’t see anything wrong with Ignacio’s falling in love with Esmeralda. I would have welcomed her as my sister-in-law. That way she would move from Ponce to San Juan, and we could live near each other” (227). Buenaventura and Rebecca are unyielding and successfully prevent Ignacio from marrying Esmeralda. The repercussions of their intervention become “one of the strands in the skein of resentment” that unravel the house on the lagoon, foreshadowing another generation’s prohibited engagement that leads to an un-reparable family rift (227).

Buenaventura and Rebecca’s attitudes regarding race are indicative of the kind endemic racism that plagues Puerto Rico. In his groundbreaking *Narciso descubre su trasero: el negro en la cultura puertorriqueña* (1974), Isabel Zenón Cruz explores how Puerto Rican culture constantly subjugates its blackness in covert and overt ways. According to Zenón Cruz, Puerto Rico’s racial hierarchy results from denying racial realities while at the same time privileging whiteness. In *Narciso descubre su trasero*, Zenón Cruz outlines the “dolorosa realidad: la constante y sistemática marginación de la puertorriqueñidad sufrida por el hombre negro desde los albores mismos de nuestra conciencia nacional” (23). He brings to light the racist legacy that

persists from Spanish colonial occupation as well as how colonization by the United States in the twentieth century continues the myths that underpin racist attitudes on the island. This imagining of Puerto Rico's racial composition, not as a "Caucasian" as the establishment has led its citizens to believe, but as racially mixed, effectively challenges the pervasive attitudes that disparage blackness. Fundamentally, Zenón Cruz argues that Puerto Rico denies its true identity through the language it uses to describe its own people. He explains that "la imagen que tenemos del puertorriqueño es blanca, de ahí que para identificar al blanco se escuche llana y simplemente 'puertorriqueño' y para identificar al negro, 'negro puertorriqueño'" (24). For Zenón Cruz, "negro" is a misplaced modifier indicative of the racial divides that he seeks to bring to light.

Clearly, the Mendizábal family shares the kinds of prejudices that Zenón Cruz brings to light in *Narciso descubre su trasero*. Twenty years after the Esmeralda Márquez incident, Isabel is once again at odds with the Mendizábal family's racial biases. She is horrified when her own husband opposes her firstborn Manuel's marriage to Coral Ustariz, Esmeralda Márquez's daughter. She believes that Quintín and Rebecca share the same racist tendencies and refuses to forbid her sons from marrying whom they choose. Isabel seems determined to right the wrongs of the past and sees Coral's relationship with Manuel as a way to make amends for the Mendizábal family's treatment of Esmeralda. When Quintín learns of Manuel's plans to marry Coral, he repeats his father's racist rants as he pricks his finger to emphasize the Mendizábal bloodline:

[This blood] doesn't have a drop of Arab, Jewish, or black blood in it. Thousands of people have died for it to stay that way. We fought the Moors, and in 1492 we expelled them from Spain, together with the Jews. When our ancestors came to this island, special books were set up called the Bloodline Books and were jealously guarded by the Church. Esmeralda's marriage to Ernesto Ustariz doesn't appear in any of them, because she's part black. That's what Isabel shouldn't have taken you to Esmeralda's house when you were a child. And *that's* why you can't marry Coral. (346)

Unlike Ignacio, Manuel does not give into his father's objections to Coral's lineage. Instead, Ignacio leaves the Mendizábal family home and moves in with Coral in a house in Las Minas that belongs to Petra's relative Alwida. Symbolically, Manuel's break from his father is also a break from the established paternal order, and foreshadows the final thread that unravels the fabric of the house on the lagoon and the Mendizábal family.

I contend that the fabric at the center of *The House on the Lagoon* is woven by race and informs the evolution of Isabel's relationship with Quintín. Her struggle to write her family's story exposes a corrupt patriarchal order built upon an outdated and dehumanizing racial hierarchy. Isabel copes with her unfulfilling marriage by writing her family's history, discovers that the Mendizábal and Avilés families are biologically linked, and comes to embrace the Avilés branches of the family tree. Isabel documents Arístedes Arrigoitia, Don Bolívar Márquez, and Buenaventura Mendizábal's affairs with black and *mulata* women, but Buenaventura seems to dismiss them as typical behavior of men of a "certain social position" (218). Such relationships cannot be so easily indulged, however, when they move from "paramours" to legally-bound status. Quintín makes the distinction in a fit of rage, exclaiming "I'd rather be dead than have mulatto grandchildren and be related to Esmeralda Márquez" (347). This invective causes his eldest son to abandon the household and exposes the Mendizábal family's racial hypocrisy.

Quintín's virulent racism ultimately leads to his ruin, but not before he is forced to confront the consequences of his own extra-marital encounter. Unlike his father, the object of Quintín's desire does not live near Lucumí Beach. Rather, she is Petra's niece Carmelina, who had been brought to the house on the lagoon as a baby. In an effort to position her in Isabel's good graces, Petra dresses up baby Carmelina and presents her to Quintín's sisters Patria and

Libertad who consider her their personal plaything.³³ After Patria and Libertad tire of the color of Carmelina's skin, they decide to paint her white, and Carmelina nearly dies from lead poisoning. Perhaps out of guilt, Isabel permits Carmelina to remain at the house on the lagoon, where she becomes a member of the domestic staff.

By the time she is a teenager, Carmelina is stunningly beautiful, resourceful, and has an "independent spirit" (307). She does not want to follow in the Avilés path as a domestic servant and plans to immigrate to New York when she graduates from high school (308). Her model good looks do not bring her to the pages of *Jet* or *Ebony* as she hopes. Instead, her "sensuous body" would become a target of Quintín's affection. He describes her "with rounded hips that moved like cauldrons on the stove" and compares her to a Nubian fertility goddess (306, 316). Isabel shares his opinion, describing her "beautiful body" and her skin that gleamed "like dark mahogany" (316). Their descriptions of her teenage body objectify her and emphasize her physicality and sensuality.

This emphasis on Carmelina's "sensuality" supports Quintín's account of Carmelina's rape and subsequent pregnancy. When confronted by Isabel about Petra's claim that he is Carmelina's son Willie's father, Quintín admits that he had sex with Carmelina, but maintains his innocence:

The devil put Carmelina before me. She asked me to swim out to the mangroves and I couldn't resist the temptation. It started out as a game, and it was over before I realized what I'd done. I know I have no right to ask you to forgive me, but I'll do what I can to bring the child up as my own. (321)

Quintín's defends his actions by claiming that he is the victim. Carmelina tempted him and he "couldn't resist." Moreover, the "devil" is responsible for their being alone together. Even after

³³ The names "Patria" and "Libertad" are ironic. That Buenaventura, as a U.S. statehood sympathizer, should name his daughters "fatherland" and "liberty" underscores his complete disregard for the ties that bind the island to U.S. interests.

seventeen years, Quintín admits that “the affair with Carmelina Avilés had happened; there was no way to deny it” (354). Note however, his use of the passive voice to claim that he is not the aggressor. Of course, the “affair” is a rape; he is the perpetrator, and it is much more than something that “had happened.”

While reading Isabel’s manuscript, Quintín writes his own version of events, once again deflecting blame and making excuses. In this account, he adds to his initial story, but refuses to admit his guilt. First, he blames Isabel because she “didn’t make the least effort to lift the family’s spirits” after Margarita’s death (356). Instead, she is “resentful and distant” and pushed him away (356). Then, he blames the food and the wine, and finally, God’s will:

Crab is an aphrodisiac—anyone who has had it knows that—and that day at the beach I had washed down half a dozen with a bottle of cold Riesling. All of a sudden, the combination of the crab’s strong taste and the wine’s delicate bouquet made me inextricably happy. For the first time since Margarita’s death, I managed to dispel the ominous cloud I had been living under. I got up from the sand dune where I was sitting and looked over at Carmelina, who was swimming at that moment toward the mangroves. What took place between us was something that no one, not even God Almighty, could have prevented. (356)

In this later account, Quintín no longer claims that Carmelina had asked him to go for a swim. She was in the water when “all of a sudden” he was overcome with happiness.³⁴ Even almost two decades later, Quintín refuses to take any responsibility for his actions.

From a contemporary perspective, Quintín’s encounter with Carmelina at Lucumí Beach is clearly an act of rape. Petra comes closest to this interpretation when she whispers to Isabel that Carmelina “was raped the day of the picnic at Lucumí Beach” (319). However, she also describes her niece as having “the god of fire smoldering in her cunt” and assures Isabel that Carmelina has left the island for good (321). Like Petra, Isabel berates Quintín for taking

³⁴ Apparently, Quintín’s feeling of well-being serves as a justification for rape.

“advantage” of Carmelina (320). To her credit, Isabel accuses him of rape, but she admits that she is even more upset because Quintín encouraged her to get sterilized and now has fathered another child (323). Their contradictory responses are indicative of how the rape is portrayed in the novel and how different interpretations of the afternoon emerge.

Carmelina serves as a contradiction. She is clearly a victim by some accounts, but even her great-grandmother finds her partially at fault. For me, Carmelina’s story is emblematic of Puerto Rico’s political situation. Like the island, she is a victim of exploitation and yet is somehow found guilty because she is resigned to her own fate. Petra and Quintín concur that she was “asking for it,” that she invited Quintín’s advances by provoking him through her wanton sexuality.³⁵ The same kind of case has been made by those who oppose Puerto Rican independence by arguing that the island has become too dependent on the United States. Of course, the United States created this system of dependency. Nevertheless, opponents of independence fail to see the hypocrisy of their “dependence” argument and blame their own people for an economic welfare state that their policies helped to create.

In addition to a metaphor for the exploitation of Puerto Rican people, Carmelina’s story emphasizes the fragmentation of many Puerto Rican families. After all, her decision to move to Spanish Harlem recalls the displacement of Puerto Ricans as the result of Operation Bootstrap. Carmelina is a rape victim and her trauma results in the birth of Quintín’s son. She is also a mother at only nineteen who decides to abandon her immediate family and move to New York where she hopes to find employment. Her childhood dreams of modeling have been replaced by the reality of securing her own future and finding work. Carmelina opts to live with distant relatives in Spanish Harlem and carries the child to term, returning to Puerto Rico only to give

³⁵ While this is one interpretation of the novel, please note that rape is never the victim’s fault.

birth. After having her son, Carmelina lives with her cousins in Las Minas until she is well enough to fly back to New York, where she will again stay with Petra's relatives. That her extended family has roots not only in Alamares and Las Minas, but also in Spanish Harlem, is indicative of the repercussions of policies like Operation Bootstrap. Carmelina leaves the island for economic motives and for the chance to "start over," opportunities that are not possible were she to stay in San Juan.

That Carmelina chooses life in the United States without her son rather than to stay in Puerto Rico underscores both economic and racial motives. As Eulodia explains, Carmelina does not want the baby because "its skin is too light" (319). Moreover, the child is the result of a rape, which for Petra is the true reason Carmelina abandons her son. In this particular instance, from the perspective of the narration, gender concerns are more important than racial whitening. Yet, Puerto Rico's color barrier has repercussions on the island as well as the mainland, as Carmelina's story demonstrates. Carmelina knows that her son will not fit in with her relatives in Las Minas because of the color of his skin.

Willie is "too light" to blend in with Carmelina's immediate family, and yet his mixed ancestry makes his "adoption" by Isabel and Quintín problematic. As Isabel explains "none of our friends would have dared do what we did, to adopt a mulatto child as our own and give him our last name" (324). To adopt Willie as their son is scandalous; "people would turn around and stare" whenever they were out as a family. Isabel is in a position of privilege that makes it possible for her to feign that she "didn't care" that she "gave San Juan Society more to talk about than all the love scandals of the past decade put together" (324). Not only can she dress Willie like her biological son, but she can afford to send him to Alamares' best private schools. Unlike

Carmelina, who does not have the economic resources to help her son fit in, Isabel can buy Willie's place in San Juan's elite circles.

Willie is an outward manifestation of the Avilés and Mendizábals' shared history which in turn can be tied to the U.S. presence, control, and dominance over Puerto Rico. By extending this metaphor, Carmelina is emblematic of Puerto Rico: she is victimized by a wealthy, light-skinned, unscrupulous power who is blind to his role as the aggressor. Much like the U.S., Quintín does not view his actions as unsavory or exploitative, but rather normalizes and explains them away. His blatant disregard for the facts, and for the consequences of his actions, echoes policies adopted by the U.S. government towards Puerto Rico. From the Foraker Act to recent reformations in federal assistance, the United States, like Quintín, fails to see the correlation between exploitation, racism, and migration.

Once Willie is born, Isabel begins to see the connections between racism and U.S. intervention, though she does not articulate them in terms of Carmelina and Willie. Instead, she couches her explanation of the racial realities in Puerto Rico in terms of her friend Esmeralda and her husband Ernesto. Ironically, Ernesto and Esmeralda return to the island because Ernesto is offered a position in a legal firm charged with investigating racial discrimination in San Juan. This irony is not lost on Ernesto, who feels compelled to make "things better" on the island in light of having witnessed how his wife was treated by Rebecca and Buenaventura (338). After all, as Isabel notes, "San Juan's bourgeoisie were among the most prejudiced in the world; they concealed their racism with polished good manners, but there were very few blacks on the corporate ladders in San Juan or in high posts in the local government" (338). Of course, the Mendizábals are members of the elites that she decries as racist, and her husband harbors the same racist sentiments as his father.

After all, it is Willie who serves as the catalyst that encourages Isabel to complete her manuscript of *The House on the Lagoon*. Before Willie's birth, Isabel's writing was "a handful of notes which would never take a definite form" (330). Sixteen years later, after Willie's increasingly insistent prompting, Isabel finally begins to write with a sense of direction. As she explains, Willie "had been after me for months to stop scribbling aimless pages and write a novel, and I told myself that now was the moment to begin" (330). Isabel's book begins as a way to realize her nascent dream of becoming a novelist but it also causes her to discover the racial ambiguities that tie the Mendizábal family to their servants.

Willie, the embodiment of exploitation and racial division, is also the touchstone that connects the Mendizábal and Avilés' stories. Because of Willie, Isabel unwinds the island's racially-charged social customs and her family's part in the continued exploitation of Puerto Rico's black population. Isabel knows that Quintín's father Buenaventura had black mistresses from Lucumí Beach, but it is only as the novel develops that we learn that many of these women are relatives of Petra Avilés, head servant of the house on the lagoon (247). A descendent of Angolese chieftains, Petra functions as the true authority of the house: before servants complete any task, they "always checked with Petra," who advises them about every aspect of their lives (239). Along with her husband Brambón and a cadre of household servants (many of whom are relatives of Petra), she lives underneath the main house in a massive dirt cellar originally intended for storage. Petra converts this storage cellar into her domain, complete with a *boticario*

and shrine to the *orisha* Eleggúa.³⁶ A follower of Santería, she is respected by the black servants who seek her advice and turn to her to mediate their disputes (236). Moreover, she has resided as the *de facto* head of the house on the lagoon since Buenaventura's youth, and is the living memory both the Mendizábal and Avilés families.

Together, Petra and Isabel form an alliance that allows Isabel to tell the true story of the Mendizábal family. Isabel finds an ally in Petra after Quintín impregnates her niece Carmelina, the birthmother of William Alexander Mendizábal Monfort, who is adopted as the Mendizábal family's son. These alliances are repetitions of the same cycle, permutations of the same patterns of behavior that mark the Mendizábal family's interactions with Petra's clan. Isabel learns that Quintín is the baby's biological father because Petra tells her that Carmelina was raped the day the family went to a picnic at Lucumí Beach (319). Carmelina's disappearance, the baby's green eyes (a Mendizábal family trait), and his birth nine months after the picnic confirm Petra's story, which is corroborated by Quintín when Isabel confronts him. Willie serves as the tie that binds these two women together, as Isabel becomes increasingly convinced of Petra's ability to protect Isabel's adopted son. In fact, after witnessing the power of Eleggúa in saving her son's life, Isabel gives her manuscript to Petra for safekeeping. She has been secretly writing her family's history, as well as the Mendizábal's history, and grows fearful that Quintín will destroy her work. Her family becomes tied to Petra's as she conjectures "if I put the manuscript in Eleggúa's

³⁶ The chapter "Petra's Kingdom" explains Petra's association with the *orisha* Oshún and the shrine to Eleggúa. Petra's actions, along with her healing powers, suggest an affinity to this divinity. She favors white and yellow, the colors associated with Oshún, but is buried in a red satin skirt, associated with Eleggúa. Petra wears "brightly colored bead necklaces and bracelets," is an adept midwife, and seems to control the house on the lagoon. As Isabel explains "events weren't always what they seemed but could have unexpected echoes and repercussions" (235). In general terms, Eleggúa (also Elegúa, Elewa, Elegba or Legba) is one of the most important of the *orishas* in Yoruba-Lucumí practices. As Julia Cuervo Hewitt explains in *Aché*, he was the first *orisha* created by Olodumare and existed prior to and witnessed creation unfold. Eleggúa facilitates all forms of divination by communicating to and for the other *orishas*, and to Olodumare herself. Eleggúa is the owner of all roads, crossroads, and doors (43).

care maybe peace would come once more to our house” (379). Upon Petra’s death, Isabel realizes that Petra “had been the rock on which the house on the lagoon had stood” (384).

Granted, the bond that links Petra and Isabel is Willie, Quintín’s illegitimate son who shares characteristics of both the Avilés and Mendizábal families. As mentioned, he has his father’s green eyes, but he also has Petra’s gift of spiritual sight, and is ultimately entrusted as the keeper of Eleggúa’s shrine. Specifically, he suffers from epileptic seizures, an indicator of divination powers in Yoruba-Lucumí religions such as La Regla de Ochá (Santería). In *Epilepsy: A New Approach* (1990), Adrienne Richard and Joel Reiter document that followers Yoruba-Lucumí religious systems believe that a person with epilepsy has “been called by the gods to become a trace-medium” (114). In their “altered state of consciousness,” these mediums are able to answer questions brought to them by people suffering from physical or emotional maladies. Rather than an illness, epilepsy is rather a mark of a gift, or *don*, for the role of spiritual mediumship. Petra’s reaction to Willie’s “mild epileptic fit” at the age of three corresponds with a Yoruba-Lucumí interpretation of the episode (331). As Isabel rushes Willie to Alamares Hospital and begs Petra to “cure him;” Petra’s response is to consider the episode evidence of Willie’s gifts. She explains to Isabel that “In Africa, what Willie has is not sickness. It means there are great things in store for him” (331). Ultimately, Isabel comes to see Willie’s “illness” as a gift as well. She describes him as “intuitive by nature,” drawn to painting and art and “sensitive to everything” (330).

Interestingly, their markedly maternal reactions to Willie bind Isabel and Petra. Firstly, Petra and Isabel work together to insure that Willie is written into Quintín’s will and receives the same privileges, schooling, and gifts as his half-brother Manuel. Petra explains her Yoruba-Lucumí religious practices to Willie and entrusts him with the care of her shrine to Eleggúa.

While Petra sees to his spiritual education, Isabel insists that Willie attend the same private schools as Manuel and encourages his choice to further his studies at the prestigious Pratt Institute (328). Moreover, both Isabel and Petra are Willie's caretakers and foster his artistic talents and sensitivity despite Quintín's protests of their "unmanliness." For Quintín, it is unfathomable that his son not share his love of business and sports. Nevertheless, under Petra's watchful eye and Isabel's encouragement, Willie finds his own talents as an artist and musician. As Isabel recounts, Willie "was truly inspired and lived for his art" and is an accomplished pianist and painter by the age of ten, thus confirming Petra's interpretation of his talented state (332). Moreover, Willie is able to intuitively read people and empathizes with their emotions. As Isabel explains, "If I was worried or sad about the slightest thing, he would perceive it immediately and kiss me on the cheek" (330). By the time he is in his teens, Willie has learned to use his intuition to keep the peace at the house on the lagoon. By this time, "he had a sixth sense which told him when it was better to be silent and toe the line" to avoid confrontation (332). His father, who now "scoffed good-naturedly at his avant-garde paintings" also "let him do as he pleased" and no longer criticizes his artistic talents (332). Willie, with the help of Petra and Isabel, learns to use his once perceived weaknesses to his advantage.

The "pact" established between Petra and Isabel regarding Willie ultimately supplants Isabel's marriage vows to Quintín. During September of 1982, Petra and Isabel grow closer than ever. At this point in the novel, Willie is sixteen and Manuel is twenty-one. Manuel has resigned from his position at Gourmet Imports, left the house on the lagoon to move in with Coral in Las Minas, and has fully dedicated himself to the *independentista* cause. Willie remains at the house on the lagoon and refuses to affiliate himself with the AK-47 who he believes is "brainwashing" Manuel (360). When a violent uprising at Gourmet Imports leads to protests outside the house on

the lagoon, the police are called. During the chaos, the police mistake Willie for one of the protesters and beat him severely.³⁷ Willie collapses in an epileptic fit, and Petra and Isabel manage to get him back into the house. Together, they nursed him all night, until he finally regains consciousness (369). Petra and Isabel band together to prevent Willie's mistaken arrest and openly defy Quintín's orders that they return inside.

In order to help Willie heal from the beating, both women use their resources to restore his health. Isabel brings in San Juan's best medical doctors and Petra applies home remedies and makes sacrifices to Eleggúa. While Isabel hopes that traditional western medicine will prevent blood clots in the case of internal hemorrhaging, Petra relies on Eleggúa's *figa*, or protective amulet, that she placed around Willie's neck at birth (369). At first, one might read these as "feminine" responses to Willie's health crisis. But a closer reading suggests that Petra and Isabel have taken control of the house on the lagoon and are united against Quintín's threats. When Quintín rewrites his will to disinherit both Manuel and Willie, Petra confronts him and threatens that she will reveal Willie's true ancestry and that the entire Avilés clan will oppose him (372). Petra invokes Eleggúa and vows that Quintín will "be sorry" for renegeing on his promise to treat Willie as his legitimate son. Quintín responds that Petra must leave the house on the lagoon and return to her relatives. But before he can dismiss Petra, she dies at the house on the lagoon, proving that she retains the upper hand, even in death.

Isabel knows that Petra is right, and comes to see the value in the faith she places in Eleggúa. Although Isabel initially protests Willie's wearing of a protective amulet, now she sees

³⁷ As Isabel explains, "I wanted to tell the officers it was a mistake, Willie wasn't one of the strikers. But I was too late. They were beating him mercilessly. I screamed at them to stop, but they didn't hear. They were lined up like a blue wall of muscle, oblivious to anyone or anything else" (368). As we know, Willie is of mixed racial descent; he has curly black hair, darker skin, and is shorter in stature than Manuel. That the police mistook him for a protester seems to confirm a case of racial profiling. Earlier in the chapter, Isabel explains that "people from the working quarters of San Juan—from Barrio Obrero or Las Minas, for example—rarely dared set foot in Alamares, where a police officer was usually very efficient in getting non-residents to move out of the neighborhood" (366-67).

its value. In fact, after this night, she defers to Petra's judgment and even adopts some of her religious beliefs. Isabel admits that "*I had grown so used to hearing her pray to Eleggúa that I had begun to believe a little in him myself, especially after seeing how Eleggúa's Figa had protected Willie*" (379). Isabel goes a step further when Quintín threatens to destroy her manuscript. She not only entrusts it to Petra's care, but believes that by doing so, she is entrusting it to Eleggúa so that "peace would come once more to our house" (379).

While Isabel comes to respect Petra's powers, she remains a member of Puerto Rico's elite, and uses both her society connections and Eleggúa's protection to plot her escape from Quintín. Her relationship with San Juan art dealer Mauricio Bolelaus affords her the means to imagine a life outside of Puerto Rico. She plans to sell the house on the lagoon's art collection while Quintín is on a business trip and use the funds to take Willie to the U.S. mainland where he can receive needed medical treatment (400). Even on her deathbed, Isabel is surprised to hear Willie call Petra "grandmother," suggesting that she underestimated Willie's connection to his maternal great-grandmother (383). Isabel is ultimately unable to reconcile the Avilés side with the Mendizábal family, and so the house on the lagoon is sacrificed to save Willie. Her husband Quintín, perhaps because he cannot understand Willie's bond and Isabel's alliance with Petra, cannot escape the house on the lagoon's past. After all, Isabel saves Willie above all else, leaving her house and its history to burn.

Although Isabel conspires to leave the island with Willie, she does not plan for Manuel and the AK 47 to destroy the house on the lagoon. Isabel plots her escape from Quintín while he is away at a wine convention. When he returns home early, she alters her plan so that she and Willie can leave after Mauricio Boleslaus safeguards artwork to fund their trip. However, Isabel's escape is thwarted when the house is besieged by members of the AK 47, including

Manuel. After starting a brushfire near the walls of the house, “at least a dozen” men pillage the house’s artwork and take control of its armory (404). Manuel knows the house and its valuables, and has clearly orchestrated the robbery. Nevertheless, because Manuel does not kill his father and instead lets Quintín escape with Isabel, it seems he still harbors some sense of family. Quintín shares no such sentiment and blames Isabel, accusing her of being part of a “conspiracy” (406). In turn, Isabel blames Quintín for the destruction of the house and the alienation of her son.

The novel’s ending suggests the impossibility of coexistence without equality as the house on the lagoon metaphorically dies with Petra. The past must be erased to make any future possible. Isabel must leave the house on the lagoon behind in order to save Willie, and she admits that her new life in Florida brings her “enormous relief” (380). The burden of hiding her beliefs from Quintín, worrying about Manuel, and caring what her neighbors thought are alleviated once she left Alamares. Isabel has come to believe that “Petra had been right after all” and she is proud of Willie’s artistic success (380). Moreover, after a year away from Puerto Rico, Isabel finds the strength to finish her manuscript and tell the story of her family’s final days at the house on the lagoon.

In terms of its stance on race, *The House on the Lagoon* offers history but no future for Puerto Rico’s privileged class. Instead, those who survive must embrace all of Puerto Rico, and recognize the value in people like Petra and in their religious faiths. After all, Isabel’s salvation lies in Willie, the keeper of Eleggúa’s shrine. Willie represents the value of Puerto Rico’s alternative history and of the wisdom of those whose work makes fortunes like the Mendizábal’s possible. One interpretation of this legacy is that Willie represents Puerto Rico’s complexities; he is both the son of “white” privilege and of slavery’s legacy. Another interpretation suggests

that so long as Puerto Rico's political status remains in limbo, the island is doomed to fail. I argue that the novel's ending can be read as a catharsis, suggesting that Puerto Rico must start from scratch for any hope of a tenable future.

Isabel Monfort Mendizábal serves as an allegory for a different kind of writing and a different interpretation of Puerto Rico's legacy. Her desire and struggle to create her own narrative mirrors the island's political struggles between independence and statehood, but also the island's struggles to reconcile its racial hierarchies. This novel seems to propose that salvation rests not with the island's elite but with its mixed heritage. Ultimately, as a novel it links maternal interests with women across race and class lines, but fails to offer a working solution to inequality on the island. Suzanne Bost in *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000* (2005) contends that Ferré's novel "exposes the complicity within the margins" of Puerto Rico, a posture touted as "especially radical since it comes from a writer who inhabits that very center" (195). This position seems to assert that gender inspires equality, yet this equality does not exist, a postulation that is supported by *The House on the Lagoon*. Isabel's writing provides the answer, and by documenting the history, the manuscript acts as a lifeboat that saves both Willie and Isabel.

La guaracha del Macho Camacho: History on Repeat

The House on the Lagoon concludes with a catharsis and the destruction of the edifice of the Mendizábal home. Ferré's novel suggests that the order that Quintín ascribes to is not only doomed, but based on a misinterpretation of history that privileges the patriarchy to which he clings. Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (1976) can be read as a response to the destruction of Quintín's version of Puerto Rico. This novel, though published

prior to *The House on the Lagoon*, examines San Juan society after the failure of the first round of statehood referenda in 1967. Where Ferré's house leaves off, Sánchez's *guaracha* begins, once again examining how Puerto Rico, and San Juan in particular, seems destined to replay and repeat its political history.

The majority of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* takes place in the span of a Wednesday afternoon rush hour and its action is fairly limited. The narrative space itself shifts among six spaces including: two separate automobiles in the same traffic jam occupied by Senador Vicente Reinoso and his son Benny, the senator's mistress La China Hereje's apartment complex, the bus La China Hereje rides to rendezvous with the senator, and the senator's wife Graciela's therapist's office. The action takes place in less than an hour's time, between ten minutes to five and approximately five-thirty. Despite these constraints, the novel explores race and class, privilege and poverty, and how social stratification leads to corruption and inequality.

As Carlos J. Alonso asserts, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* represents a "radical departure from the preceding conception of literary discourse as a vehicle for self-definition," and instead posits mass communication and textual hybridity as a more authentic voice for Puerto Rico (350). In what Alonso terms the "disembodied nature" of names like El Nene, La Madre, and China Hereje that creates the novel's allegorical structure (351). All of the novel's characters are representative types of San Juan's social structure—Senator Vicente Reinoso, a wealthy, pro-U.S. politician; Benny Reinoso, his reckless, spoiled son; Graciela Alcántara del López y Montefrío, the senator's neurotic wife; La Madre (also called La China Hereje), Vicente's *mulata* mistress and mother of the mentally-challenged El Nene; Doña Chon, the busybody neighbor. Together, they create the novel's fragmented structure and disparate

linguistic registers. More importantly, their lives are interconnected and their interactions expose San Juan's web of corruption and exploitation that prevents progress.

The *tapón*, or traffic jam, that becomes a standstill serves as a metaphor for San Juan's endemic corruption, both from the mainland and on the island. The traffic's lack of progress evokes a sense of San Juan being frozen in time by the Commonwealth, of stagnation and political inaction that seems to characterize Puerto Rico. The *tapón* not only frustrates the drivers, it effectively suspends their progress. As Raphael Dalleo explains, the traffic jam "stops the action and ensures that virtually nothing happens in the novel; even the suggestion of change or mobility in this world seems unthinkable" (307). While Dalleo's analysis centers on reading this novel as a counterbalance to *salseros* Rubén Blades and Willie Colón, his comments apply to a more political reading of the novel as well.

As the intertwined narratives develop, Puerto Rico is inundated by the radio broadcast of a *guaracha* by Macho Camacho, titled "La vida es una cosa fenomenal." This *guaracha* is the backdrop for the novel, the constant rhythm that pulsates through Puerto Rico and at times seems to drown out the real lives and events of its citizens. According to Puerto Rico's preeminent radio station, it has topped the charts for eight solid weeks and its broadcast has been constant. For La China Hereje, the *guaracha* is an expression of her desire to dance and to achieve her dream of becoming the next Iris Chacón. As she explains to her friend and neighbor Doña Chon, when she hear the *guaracha*'s refrain, "que la vida es una cosa fenomenal es que más me come el cerebro" (195). Doña Chon does not share her enthusiasm, she wishes the *guaracha* were not a "huésped permanente de su casa," especially when there are strikers to feed and her daughter is in jail (196). Likewise, for Puerto Rico's elite, as Graciela Alcántara y López de Montefrío opines, the *guaracha* "se ha convertido en himno, orillero, repulsivo, populachero" (291). Even

her husband Senador Vicente Reinoso, much to his horror, succumbs to its allure. While sitting in his Mercedes Benz in the traffic jam, he finds himself humming the *guaracha* “que se ha quedado con el país, bebido el país, chupado el país” (227). No matter their musical preferences, Macho Camacho’s *guaracha* is omnipresent.

After all, as the disc jockey on “radio antillana” insists, the very lyrics of “La vida es una cosa fenomenal” are themselves universal. The disc jockey describes the *guaracha*’s lyrics as “religiosa inspiración, esa letra que habla verdades, esa letra que habla realidades, esa letra que habla las cosas como son y no como tú quieras” (193). Its refrain, “la vida es una cosa fenomenal,” which is also its title, is malleable and obtuse enough to apply to the Puerto Rican collective, regardless of race or class. However, at the novel’s conclusion, the “texto íntegro” of the *guaracha*’s full text is revelatory:

La vida es una cosa fenomenal
La vida es una cosa fenomenal
lo mismo pal de adelante que pal de atrás.
Pero la vida también es una calle cheverona,
arrecuérdate que desayunas café con pan.
Ay sí, la vida es una nena bien guasona
que se mima en un fabuloso Cadillac.
La trompeta a romper su guasimilla,
las maracas que no cejen pa tras,
y los cueros que suenan a la milla,
que la cosa no puede reposar,
que la negra quiere sudar,
que la negra se va a alborotar. (313)

Apart from its title and refrain, “La vida es una cosa fenomenal” is racially and sexually charged. The song depicts “una nena bien guasona” who turns tricks in the back seat of a Cadillac, a luxury import. Her body, described as “bien guasona,” or “thick,” is much like the bodies of *mulata* women like La China Hereje and black women like Doña Chon. Moreover, this woman is a willing participant of the sexual acts she performs; she “wants to sweat” (“quiere sudar”) and is

“getting hot” (“se va a alborotar”). Moreover, this “nena” is “negra,” she is a black woman who, like the rhythm of the maracas and the “cueros”, seems to be insatiable. It is my contention that reading *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* through the lens of this *guaracha* and *guarachas* in general challenges Puerto Rico’s established hierarchies.

La guaracha del Macho Camacho embodies Puerto Rico’s cultural realities by imitating the structure of a popular *guaracha*. In fact, each vignette of the novel is devoted to a particular character followed by the radio transmission of a disc-jockey who celebrates Puerto Rico’s most requested track, “La vida es una cosa fenomenal.” It is as if this song determines the order of narrated events, evoking the call and response dynamic of many types of Caribbean music, including the *son* and the *guaracha*. Moreover, each section is arranged as if it were a musical stanza as each character— from La China Hereje to Benny—provides lyrics to a melody of the same song. The novel becomes an almost synchronic picture of all strata of San Juan society as the action takes place simultaneously, “a las cinco de la tarde, tarde de miércoles hoy” (137).

Structurally, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* draws from the musical references of its title, as the *guaracha* serves as a centering point for the narrative. By definition, *guaracha* is a genre of Cuban popular music, consisting of rapid tempo and lyrics. As Cristóbal Díaz Ayala explains in *Cuando salí de La Habana : 1898-1997: cien años de música cubana por el mundo* (1998), though the word may be historically of Spanish origin, its use in this context is of indigenous Cuban origin. The *guaracha* as a musical genre dates from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³⁸ As a genre, the *guaracha* is a popular song that describes life from a popular perspective. The repetition of its refrain, the use of call-and-response, and its

³⁸ Alternatively, in Giro Radamés’s *Diccionario enciclopédico de la música en Cuba* the term is cited as “of Spanish (Andalusian) origin, and the dance was a kind of zapateo” (179), while the *Diccionario de la música Labor* posits that “we don’t know when it originated; [the word] is supposed to have been used originally for a dance of Spanish origin.”

improvisational nature firmly place it within the context of Afro-Caribbean music. In his seminal *La música en Cuba: Temas de la lira y el bongó* (1946), Alejo Carpentier cites the cronista Buenaventura Pascual Ferrer as documenting these attributes in 1798 in his descriptions of La Habana's *bailes públicos* (104). At this time, *guarachas*, along with *zapateos*, *congós*, and *boleros*, formed part of the *contradanzas* that capped off the night (105). By definition, these songs were defined by puns and “alusiones libertinas” that delighted dancers (105). As Carpentier explains, the sons of Cuba's elite often attended these dances, and soon their most popular songs were brought back to the “residencias señoriales” and played at the more exclusive *bailes de etiqueta* (105).

During the later nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the *guaracha* was a favorite musical form in the brothels of La Habana. Esteban Pichardo defines *guaracha* in his 1836 *Diccionario Provincial de Vozes Cubanas*, as “baile de la gentualla” (122). In the mid-twentieth century, the style was taken up by the *conjuntos* and big bands as a type of up-tempo music. The lyrics are sung by a soloist or duo accompanied by a chorus in a dialogue. As John Storm Roberts explains in *The Latin Tinge* (1979), instrumentation included the *güiro*, a cylinder fork or small trident, which plays the rhythm, while a guitar and a Puerto Rican *cuatro* provide the accompaniment, in addition to other instruments similar to those of a Cuban *conjunto* (8). Many early *trovadores* such as Manuel Corona and Nico Saquito composed and sung *guarachas* as a balance for slower *boleros*. The satirical lyrical content fit well with the *son*, and many bands played both genres (199). Singers who could handle the fast lyrics and were good improvisers were called *guaracheros* or *guaracheras*. Celia Cruz is an example, though she, like Miguelito Valdés and Benny Moré, also sang other types of Cuban music. A better example is Cascarita (Orlando Guerra) who was distinctly less comfortable with *boleros* yet adept at fast numbers

(Flores 87). In modern Cuban music, traditional genres are interwoven and adapted to new styles which retain echoes of the past.

As Juan Flores explains in *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, perhaps in the lyrics of Los Van Van, the “topicality and sauciness” of the old *guarachas* found new life (84). Later, in the 1980s, Pedro Luis Ferrer and Virulo (Alejandro García Villalón) sought to renovate the *guaracha*, devising modern takes on the old themes (Flores 85). During the nineteenth century, performing groups arrived in Puerto Rico from Cuba, bringing with them Cuban styles such as the *son* and the *guaracha*. By the 1950s, the *guaracha* took on a style of its own in Puerto Rico and became part of other Puerto Rican customs, such as the sung rosaries, the *baquiné*, Christmas music, and children’s songs (Flores 87). Its modern, jazzy, salsa style was typified by Cortijo y su Combo, Ismael Rivera, and Myrta Silva. These acts (known as “La Reina de la Guaracha”) incorporated elements of Latin boogaloo that predominated in the heyday of “Latin” music’s popularity in the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1970s, the *guaracha* became a sub-genre in the growing *salsa* scene, made famous by Willie Colón and Rubén Blades, among others. In fact, in the novel, Macho Camacho’s “salsa” is considered superior to his predecessors Cortijo y su Combo, Sandro y Raphael, Chucho Avellanet, Lucecita Benítez, and Nydia Caro (183, 193).

The *guaracha* is clearly a cultural touchstone that reflects the masses, even if those masses are not themselves self-reflecting. In *Nación y ritmo: “descargos desde el Caribe”* (2000), Juan Otero Garabís maintains that “El plano de la lectura de una novela de alta cultura es el espacio que posibilita la reflexión social de la que carecen los personajes. Al vacilón intrascendente de ‘La guaracha’, se propone el placer trascendente de la escritura y la lectura de *La guaracha*: el placer de la comunidad letrada” (74). Otero Garabís also notes that in his novel Sánchez seems to follow the Frankfurt school of critics (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse) to represent the culture of

the masses that begins to emerge in Puerto Rico during the second half of the nineteenth century (81-83). Above all, Otero Garabís insists that the *guaracha* that is transmitted via radio, much like in Manuel Zeno Gandía's *La Charca* (1894) functions as a "pest" or "epidemic" from which no one can escape (80).³⁹ In this novel, however, the *charca* is re-imagined as urban San Juan, a sound-filled world dominated by incessant broadcasts and mass culture. Now, Puerto Rico is plagued by another kind of disease, the non-stop hum of mass communication that almost erases the individual as subject.

This constant "noise" relates to a sense of Puerto Rican displacement, even while in San Juan. As Luis Felipe Díaz explains in his "*La guaracha del Macho Camacho* de Luis Rafael Sánchez y la cultura tardomoderna de la pseudocomunicación" el lenguaje mismo de la novela en su guaracheo (si el lector lo desea) opaque el aplastamiento del infante nacional. Es decir: el ruido mediático no deja ver la caída del signo de lo nacional" (98). The incessant hum of the *guaracha* drowns out Puerto Rico's sense of its own identity. It becomes a national distraction that allows its citizens to lose themselves in music rather than challenge the prevailing social order. At the outset of the novel, as La China Hereje rides a bus to rendezvous with Senador Vicente Reinoso, another passenger on the bus becomes fed up with what he views as a broken Puerto Rico. He repeatedly laments "el país no funciona" as the bus screeches to a halt at a broken stoplight in the middle of a horrific traffic jam (113). As others begin to agree with him, their voices are drowned out by "otro mayoritario vociferante que procedió a entonar, con brío reservado a los himnos nacionales, la irreprimible guaracha de Macho Camacho" (113). For the bus driver, a bus full of *guaracha* singers is preferable to a bus full of protesters. In this case, the

³⁹ *La Charca* is part of Manuel Zeno Gandía's *Crónicas de un mundo enfermo: La Charca, El Negocio, Garduña y Redentores*, first published in 1894.

guaracha is an antidote to unrest and prevents the passengers from rallying against a “broken” Puerto Rico.

Through vignettes like this bus ride, *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* manages to serve as a commentary on Puerto Rican politics, U.S. imperialism, race, and class. In fact, the novel serves to document policy failures as interpreted by its characters. After all, the narrative covers the spectrum of San Juan’s social classes, from residents of Martín Peña to those living in San Juan most sought-after gated communities. As José Luis González documents in his *País de cuatro pisos* (1980), Puerto Rican society is highly stratified in terms of race and class.⁴⁰ Using the metaphor of Puerto Rico as an apartment building whose social divisions are essentially separate floors, González chronicles how cultural divisions have become entrenched on the island. As he explains, the “primer piso” is comprised of popular culture that is essentially Afro-Antillean, mestizo, and Caribbean. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a second “story,” the “segundo piso,” is erected on top of the first. This “second floor” is constructed by waves of European immigrants—first from Ireland, England, France, and Holland, and later from Cataluña, Mallorca, and Corsica. According to González, this second wave displaced *jíbaros* from Puerto Rico’s mountainous interior, resulting in a sort of petite landed gentry. With the U.S. invasion in 1898, a “third story” was built upon the poorly-furnished second. Finally, the “fourth story” represents the modernizing impulses of the 1940s that coincide with Puerto Rico’s growing colonial dependence on the U.S. For González, Puerto Rico must rebuild itself by rediscovering and rescuing its “caribeñidad esencial” (40). By embracing its “identidad colectiva,” Puerto Rico can find its rightful place within the rest of the Caribbean and in Latin America as a whole (41).

⁴⁰ González’s 1980 publication is a compilation of four essays previously published from 1976 and 1979 as well as his *Literatura y sociedad en Puerto Rico* (1976) and *Conversación... con Arcadio Díaz Quiñones* (1976).

Reading *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* with González's "cuatro pisos" in mind, it becomes possible to understand the representative types portrayed by each of the characters in the novel. For example, Senador Vicente Reinoso embodies the consummate corrupt career politician and could be interpreted as a member of González "cuarto piso." Senador Vicente Reinoso, always referred to by his full name and title as well as rhyming variations of his political slogan "Vicente es decente y buena gente" (119). The use of variations of his political slogans as epithets underscores his mythic character. They evoke a parody of the ancient epic conceit while highlighting that the slogans are in fact based on lies. Senador Vicente Reinoso is neither "decente" nor "buena gente." He is corrupt, racist, and has a voracious appetite for sex with any woman but his wife (who is frigid, as her name, Montefrío, indicates).

Senador Vicente Reinoso imagines himself as an aspirational public figure who represents virility and influence. After all, he has been twice elected "Hombre del año" and is invited as keynote speaker for the Lions' Club, The Rotary Club, and the Comité de Defensa de la Libre Empresa (121). However, he also uses his discretionary accounts in the Senate to keep his sixteen mistresses on the public payroll at taxpayers' expense and gladly accepts kickbacks and favors from the island's business community. Moreover, he has a "weakness" for black women, or as he explains it, "las hembras de color me acaloran" (177). While he imagines himself as a sort of "latin lover," he acts more like a pimp (120). His infamous behavior has led some of his fellow politicians to dub him "Vicente el Negrero," demonstrating his penchant for exploiting black women for sexual pleasure (233).

Like his taste for "las hembras de color," Senador Vicente Reinoso's fondness for the *guaracha* is something he attempts to conceal. As he waits in traffic, he eyes a fifteen-year-old-girl and his advances are not returned. Fuming and wounded, he begins to whistle a song that

strikingly resembles the *guaracha* that has taken control of Puerto Rico. He has found that he cannot help himself. Immediately, he equates this “desliz” with other “pecados” as he invokes “Truenos, relámpagos, centellas, euras, cáspitas, recórholis, canastos, coñus, carajum, puñetum” to absolve himself (227). Horrified by his slip, he reasons that since no one heard or saw him sin, he is spared. Of course, as he reasons, his position as a senator affords him “cinco ángeles de la guarda” and he is also aided by the fact that other would-be witnesses have left their vehicles to try to get a better look at what is blocking traffic (227). Once again, he has managed to save face by covering his tracks and feigning disinterest in what should be “below” him.

Clearly, Senador Vicente Reinoso exemplifies the corrupt politician. Gregory Rabassa, in the introduction to his translation of Luis Rafael Sánchez’s novel, describes him as “venal, selfish, and shallow, but holding power all the same” (v). His surname Reinoso connotes his penchant for governing. The combination of the verb *reinar* (to rule), and the suffix *-osa* (in the manner of), suggests that politics are an embedded part of his identity. He is a social climber, having moved up the ladder by marrying well and making the right kind of connections, both economic and political, in San Juan. He also represents those Puerto Ricans who are willing to sell out to the Americans. After all, he earned his two “Hombre del año” titles for his pro-American policies. As he explains, the first time was for the introduction of a legislative resolution that “endosaba la presencia mesiánica de las tropas americanas en Vietnam;” the second was in honor of his campaign “*Yankees, this is home*” in response to the “antisocial” and “ingrato” campaign “*Yankees, go home*” (121). His pro-statehood, pro-business, and pro-U.S. intervention stance suggests that he is willing to betray Puerto Rico in order to line his own pockets.

The publication of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* coincides with the transition between the gubernatorial administrations of Luis Hernández Colón and Carlos Romero Barceló. Hernández Colón, as a leader of the *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD), served as the fourth governor of the Commonwealth from 1973-1977. His term as governor is marked by his opposition to Gerald Ford's push to make Puerto Rico the 51st state and by the island's growing debt burden after the 1973 recession.⁴¹ In terms of his platform, Hernández Colón also advocated for international investment on the island and for the easing of business regulations and taxes. In November of 1976, Hernández Colón is defeated by Carlos Romero Barceló, Puerto Rico's first publicly elected pro-statehood governor.⁴² Unlike Hernández Colón, Barceló's *Partido Nuevo Progresista* (PNP) not only favored statehood, but saw tourism, not industry, as Puerto Rico's best economic investment. The political about-face from Hernández Colón to Barceló should have had immediate ramifications for Puerto Rico. Instead, the island remains "stuck" in its own political traffic jam, where little changes in revolving-door administrations.

For career politicians like Senador Vicente Reinoso, changes in the ruling party seem to have little effect. In order to secure his constant re-election, Senador Vicente Reinoso keeps himself in the public eye by attending as many functions as possible and by outspending his opponents. The last election, which cost him "un cojón completo y la mitad del otro," was won because he was able to mobilize a "cómulo de voluntades" to support his campaign (284). Moreover, he intentionally serves on as many committees as possible; in his words he is

⁴¹ This recession was brought on, in large part, by the 1973 oil crisis because many Puerto Rican businesses affiliated with the Commonwealth Oil Refining Company (CORCO) had also financed bonds for public works projects. When their credit dried up, it affected not only the island's petro industry but also the viability of the Puerto Rico Government Development Bank.

⁴² Though it occurred after the publication of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, Barceló's governorship is marred by the "Cerro Maravilla Incident" of 1978 in which two pro-independence activists were killed by members of the island's police force. After the U.S. Department of Justice and FBI investigated, ten police officers were found guilty of obstruction of justice, destruction of evidence, and perjury. In 1984, four of those ten officers were convicted of second-degree murder.

“miembro de treintitrés comisiones asesoras de lo legislativo y veinte comités asesores de lo ejecutivo” (291). These connections allow him to reap the benefits of influence and in turn, make it easier for him to be re-elected.

Aside from his endless speeches and appearances, it appears that little is known about Senador Vicente Reinoso’s work as a senator. Of course, there are references to his support of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam, to his pro-business leanings, and to his use of his connections for personal gain. However, when a bomb explodes in the Facultad de Ciencias Sociales in the University of Puerto Rico, the senator’s true “work” as a politician comes to light. Clearly, he believes that “los fupistas” in favor of Puerto Rican Independence are to blame for the bomb (279).⁴³ In fact, the news of the bomb evokes a diatribe in which he enumerates the exclusive venues in which he has pressured to Consejo de Educación to handle the matter: “en los vestíbulos de los Bancos que presiden, en los cócteles de las Industrias que manejan, en las poas de los yates que adueñan, en el ocio entumecedor de las islas estivales de Saint John y Caneel Bay” (280). Rather than demonstrate his persuasive prowess, this litany serves to underscore the corrupt nature of Puerto Rican politics. The members of the Consejo de Educación are also heads of banks, captains of industry, and yacht owners. Senador Vicente Reinoso’s call to “botar a los fupistas: ojos de pescado frito, hocico de puercoespín, lomo de rinocerante; descabezarlos,” demonstrates his right-wing, pro-business and pro-U.S. stance (280). It also reveals that he is willing to deploy the National Guard and that any bloodshed is more than worth the price, “si corre la sangre que se seque y que se limpie” (280). After all, members of the press are in his pocket; as he reasons, “*El Mundo* está con nosotros. *El Nuevo Día*, ni hablar, Viglucci está con nosotros, A. W. Maldonado está con nosotros, los cañones están con nosotros” (280). He is

⁴³ FUPI is the acronym for Federación Universitaria Pro-Independencia, a non-profit student organization that advocates for Puerto Rican independence.

confident that a raid on the University is justifiable and that he can also spin it in the press for his own political gain.

Meanwhile, as Senador Vicente Reinosa spews hate speech on the way to visit his mistress, his wife Graciela Alcántara y López de Montefrío waits in the lobby for an appointment with her psychiatrist Dr. Severo Severino.⁴⁴ Graciela is frigid, concerned with social mobility, appearances, fashion, and her circle of well-connected friends. Physically, she is “bien puesta,” well-heeled, well-kempt, well-coifed, and manicured (240). She is extremely thin and suffers from what she calls “nervios.” Having attended finishing school in Switzerland, Graciela is extremely aware of the Puerto Rican social mores she considers inferior. She notes that Puerto Ricans of all social spheres tend to spit, a “costumbre declassada de un país declassado” (243). She turns her nose up at all things “tropical,” preferring instead to dwell on the “pure” mountain air of the Alps.

In addition to her disdain of Puerto Rican customs, Graciela is crippled by her sense of entitlement. As she leafs through the latest issue of *Time* imported from the mainland, she glosses over politics, international news, and book reviews and jumps to the society pages. Graciela is mesmerized by a pictorial of Liz and Richard’s beach house in Puerto Vallarta, coveting their imitation Aztec décor while lamenting that she has been relegated to a country without culture (237). As she grows bored in the waiting room, she feigns a nervous attack and fainting spell in order to be seen by the doctor sooner. After all, she reasons that she is a senator’s wife and should not be expected to wait until her appointment time.

Graciela is the prototypical icy, spendthrift wife with the right social connections and a penchant for judging others. Her exaggerated surname represents Puerto Ricans who flaunt

⁴⁴ The psychiatrist’s playful name can be interpreted as a nod to Sévero Sarduy and his Freudian school of literature.

ancestry tracing back to the first Spanish conquistadors, often with certain liberties taken in terms of the accuracy of their genealogy. Ironically, her surname “Montefrío” not only forms part of an exaggerated ancestry, but also refers to her sexual frigidity, as *monte* also means pubis. Moreover, her nickname, Ciela, is phonetically similar to the Spanish “hielo,” or “ice.” Notably, when describing intimacy, Graciela refuses to name the act, referring to it instead as “eso,” maintaining that to her “me pareció siempre barato. Barato no. Bajo. Bajo no. Rebajado. Rebajado no. Arrastrado. Arrastrado e infernales las voces que orientan la sangre desvestida, pecado *eso*, uyyy: como si tuviera mierda en el zapato, ganas de escupir por tanto asco” (243). Sex, rather than a source of pleasure, is a source of disgust. The act so repulses her that she almost spits at the thought of it, a custom that she has already railed against as “declorada” (243).

Graciela is controlled by traditional images of sex that prevent her from physical intimacy. She is imprinted by the values of patriarchy that dictate that how she should act in bed. Just before she is married, her mother explains what traditionally happens on a wedding night, and Graciela is horrified. Her mother advises her: “cierras los ojos y con voz inaudible para el hombre pero potente y llamativa para los serafines de la guardia, comienzas a rezar el Dios Te Salve Reina y Madre” (187). Graciela ought to be “muerta como un cadáver” and deaf to her husband’s moans of pleasure (187). Moreover, it is her duty to submit to the “bestia que dormita en cada hombre,” but under no circumstances should she think of herself (187). Graciela is so horrified by the thought of sex on her honeymoon that her cries of protest brought the hotelier and the police chiefs from three nearby towns. When she finally succumbs to “el fresco acto copulativo” a month after her wedding night, she is literally made sick by the memory (188).

Graciela views, about sex and Puerto Rico, are vestiges of the past. She conflates the two, reviling the island while at the same time insisting that she is too much of a lady to enjoy

sex. As she explains: “el país opera en mi si que un efecto inoperante, el trauma de mi inconsciente porque mi consciente del país produce un no sé qué” (188). As Graciela recounts the lack of sex in her marriage and her complete disinterest in physical pleasure, she is overcome by what Doctor Severo Severino calls “un ataquito de cólera” as she wails about the baseness of the *guaracha*. For Graciela, the *guaracha* embodies everything she detests about Puerto Rico, its grit, sweat, sensuality and what she considers classlessness. She laments that her domestic staff have adopted it as their anthem and that she cannot escape its awfulness. For Graciela, the *guaracha* “ha convertido en himno, orillero, repulsivo, populachero” (291).

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Senador Vicente Reinoso and Graciela did consummate their marriage, because they have a son, Benny. Pale and flabby, Benny is the prototypical privileged only child of well-to-do parents. Like his friends “Billy, Bonny, Willy y Billy,” Benny has an American nickname that speaks to his upper class, private school upbringing as well as a sort of Americanization of the Puerto Rican elite. Rabassa calls this evidence of “creeping Yankeeification” of Puerto Rican culture that is a direct result of its Commonwealth status (vi). Benny’s friends are much like him, lavished with expensive gifts by absentee parents who would rather give in to their children’s whims than actually raise their offspring. They are described as “los hijos de los padres cuyos padres fundaron los beneméritos” who spend their lives challenging each other to increasingly irresponsible feats that demonstrate the “reciura de su carácter y su voluntad” (261). Moreover, like Benny, they have dropped out of university, claiming that their “left-wing” professors are unfair and that their course loads are too tedious. They are wealthy, idle, and without moral compasses, demonstrating a sense of entitlement learned from their parents.

Benny, in particular, is the spoiled and coddled son of parents who indulge his laziness. Described as “unidimensional,” Benny’s laziness is explained away by his parents. Instead of encouraging their son to engage in some sort of productive endeavor, they manage to shift the blame from their son to external causes including “conflictos propios de a edad conflictiva, a tropiezos en el proceso de adaptación, a la hostilidad del ambiente, al surgimiento de un igualitarismo repugnante, cosas de un muchacho travieso” (260). After all, they reason, they belong to a “juntilla” of the country’s most prominent families, those “portadores de un apellido de primera” (261). Benny has been brought up to expect this kind of privilege, told by his father that “por la rama Reinosa llegas al tronco de La Betraneja, por la rama Alcánatara llegas al tronco de Guzmán el Bueno” (261). His parents have always explained away his bad behavior and poor grades, and Benny has come to expect that they will continue to do so.

Most alarmingly, Benny’s appalling behavior is not only dismissed and justified by his parents—it is rewarded. He is spoiled rotten and “paid off” with inappropriate gifts. The most egregious of these gifts is his Ferrari, which is bestowed upon him as payment for the dismantling of the “fraternidad” responsible for disfiguring a San Juan woman (261). Benny and his friends, after a night spent plotting the bombing of the Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, cap off their success by accosting a well-known San Juan prostitute known as La Metafísica. Renowned for her corpulence, “muslos de jamónica contudencia” tattooed with scenes of a shipwreck, and sexual proclivities, La Metafísica does not suffer fools and runs her business with an iron fist (262).⁴⁵ After taking turns “mounting” La Metafísica, Benny signals to his friend to “dismount” and inserts a stick of dynamite into “el lugar consternado” (263). While the four friends think

⁴⁵ La Metafísica’s considerable size evokes La Estrella in Guillermo Cabrera Infantes *Tres triste tigres* (1965). She is described as “una fuerza de naturaleza,” a “fenómeno cósmico” known as much for her talent as for her physical size (96). La Estrella es “La Ballena Negra,” “una mulata enorme,” who has “brazos como muslos que parecían dos troncos sosteniendo el tanque de agua que era su cuerpo” (73).

their “prank” is hilarious, La Metafísica is permanently disfigured and in terrible pain. She appeals to judges and sheriffs, many of whom are her customers, and seeks damages for her lost wages. Thanks to their fathers’ connections, the four boys are not brought to justice. Instead, in an act of complete negligence, their parents decide to separate them and give them each a car “para acompañarlos en su pena” (263). Benny’s father buys him a Ferrari, the only car of its kind in Puerto Rico.

Benny is in love with his Ferrari and dotes on it as if it were his girlfriend. His obsession is inappropriate. He insists upon eating in view of the carport, washing and polishing the car daily, and whispering goodnight to it before bed (257). Benny goes as far as to pray to his car: “Ferrari nuestro que estás en la marquesina, santificado sea Tu Nombre, o sea que venga a nos el reino de tu motor y tu carrocería” (257). According to Rabassa, his Ferrari is a material object and “extension of his very being, making him a sort of narcissist if not simply a hedonist, although the two are difficult to separate” (v). He whines to his “Papi Papikins” that he “needs” a racetrack to fully enjoy his new toy, and his father, of course, bends to his wishes and uses his political connections to finance and build the track. Having been taught that he is “above” the rules, Benny speeds through San Juan in his new Ferrari, eventually running over the “nene hidrocéfalo,” La China Hereje’s son. Even before this final tragedy, Benny is clearly out of control. He has dropped out of school, maimed La Metafísica, and along with his “ultraderechista” friends, bombed the University. Benny is emblematic of the dangerous consequences of privilege without responsibility that plagues Puerto Rico’s elite.

If Benny, Graciela, and Senador Vicente Reinoso represent Puerto Rican privilege, La China Hereje, Doña Chon, and El Nene represent González’s lower-tier “pisos.” *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* opens with the scene of a woman, identified later as La China Hereje, who

waits for her lover Senador Vicente Reinoso, whom she calls El Viejo, at an apartment he keeps for such meetings. La China Hereje is a marginalized character because of her profession, her race, and her class. Nevertheless, hers is the first voice that we hear in the novel, though the streets of San Juan at five in the afternoon on a Wednesday are bustling with activity, she is the “I” (*yo*) that emerges from the cacophony. La China Hereje is frustrated and exasperated that she has been made to wait for her lover, muttering to herself that “yo soy la que tengo que treparme en la guagua que no es él. Como yo soy la que me tengo que llegar a mi casa a las tantas y no es él” (109). Yet, she waits because she needs the money—“él me pasa pesos”—but also because she likes knowing that she is in control “me los pasa quien yo quiera que me los pase” (110).

Physically, La China Hereje is sensual, voluptuous, and irresistible to the opposite sex. She is described in stark contrast to Graciela, who is thin, pale, and uninterested in physical pleasure. In her own words, La China Hereje is “buena como la India” and able to “sacar a los hombres de sus casillas” (111). She dresses to attract attention from the opposite sex by wearing form-fitting clothing and low cut tops. As she walks down the street, she exaggerates the movement of her hips to garner catcalls from male admirers. Her name, La China Hereje, is in homage to a *bolero* sung by Felipe Rodríguez, *China hereje*, which extolls the sensuality of women like her (150). La China Hereje describes herself as “mulata lavadita,” a light-skinned woman of mixed race (114). She revels in her appearance and believes that she could be a star like Iris Chacón were she given the opportunity.

Sexually, La China Hereje is open, adventurous, and willing to please her partners. Again, her openness and enjoyment of her physical body as well as her partner’s is portrayed in stark contrast to Graciela. Three times a week, she meets Senador Vicente Reinoso completely nude “porque el Viejo gusta de encontrarla en serenísima pelota” (168). Meanwhile, his wife

Graciela, often refuses to make love, and when she does acquiesce, insists that the lights be off and that her nightgown remain on. La China Hereje is also willing to entertain the senator's less pedestrian tastes. She paints herself with honey and does not shave her armpits "porque al Viejo le gusta sobetearme el sobaco barbudo" (172). She relishes the opportunity to dance naked, drink cubalibres, and pleasure herself in the senator's apartment. After all, as she reasons, she might as well get paid for something that she does well. She is a "natural," who was manually stimulating three cousins at a time by the age of six. La China Hereje, now an adult, delights in re-acquainting herself with one of her early conquests, teasing him by rubbing herself against him in a supermarket. She aims to please her lovers, not only because she believes they will give her something in return, but because she believes that her "talents" far surpass other "leading ladies" like Linda Lovelace (269).

While La China Hereje may be an accomplished "professional," she is still getting compensated for sex. Although it may appear that she enjoys her encounters with men like Senador Vicente Reinoso as much as they do, it becomes clear that while she enjoys the attention, her "performances" are for paying customers only. As she grows frustrated waiting for the senator, she contemplates ending their arrangement, but not before she can pay off the linoleum floor in her kitchen and her new dining set (270). She reveals that El Viejo, as she calls Senador Vicente Reinoso, "le produce náuseas," but that she is willing to suffer because "le remite el chequecito verde de las esperanzas" (270). If she were to end their arrangement of more than six months, she would have to find gainful employment cooking or cleaning, which she reasons would be both more work and less lucrative.

As the novel unfolds, La China Hereje's "choice" to make her living by sleeping with men seems more and more like one of few options available to her. As a child in the small

eastern city of Humacao, La China Hereje did not attend school and was left to entertain herself as her mother took in other families' wash. She marries young, and her husband leave for the mainland soon after she has their son, El Nene. Though she claims that the whispers that her husband is now living with a *chicana* do not bother her, it is clear that they do. As she contemplates the watch inlaid with imitation rubies that he sent her from "el norte," she reveals that she has learned that appearance is what matters most. La China Hereje's "slogan vital es la apariencia;" "apariencia, fingimiento y pasemos a otra cosa" (269). For her, "fingimiento" has become a way of life and a way to make a living. Her skills at "fingimiento" should be awarded with an Oscar, as she is so adept at "faking it" that she puts renowned actors' award-winning performances to shame.

If La China Hereje is emblematic of Puerto Rico's obsession with appearances, Doña Chon represents the island's obsession with gossip. Along with her friend and neighbor La China Hereje, Doña Chon spends her afternoons cooking and eating while discussing showbiz personalities, other neighbors, and the relative merits of folk remedies. Unlike La China Hereje, however, Doña Chon is not enraptured by the *guaracha* craze and disputes its supremacy as the best song recorded on the island. Instead, she prefers artists like Ruth Fernández, whom she describes as an "artista negra pero decente" (149). She does not approve of the flashy way that La China Hereje dresses nor her choice in profession. She advises that her friend find another way to pay her bills and that she wear more appropriate clothing.

More importantly, Doña Chon questions La China Hereje's practice of leaving her invalid son in public parks for supposedly beneficial "baños del sol" (145). She correctly ascertains that these "baños del sol" are not La China Hereje's idea—they were conveniently suggested by Senador Vicente Reinoso as a way for him to see more of his mistress without her

worrying about her son El Nene (200). Doña Chon is incredulous as to their purported benefits and decries them as “monería” on par with others like “purgante en bombones” and “inyecciones: para engordar el trasero” (197). She is convinced that La China Hereje is inviting trouble, and believes that her friend is too obsessed with money. She cautions “por los chavos baila el mono,” alluding that her friend is willing to sacrifice too much to pay for things that she does not need (304).

Of the novel’s female characters, Doña Chon clearly belongs to the lowest social strata. Not coincidentally, she is also the darkest of the women in *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*; she is described as “mucho más que gorda” and “más que negra” (145). In terms of her physical appearance, she is an enormous woman whose sole pleasures in life are her pampered cat Mimoso and food. Her house is perched above a mangrove swamp in Puerto Rico’s slums and she is a single mother of an incarcerated daughter. Doña Chon makes her living by selling homemade food to neighbors and workers participating in the endless stream of strikes on the island. In order to earn a little extra money, she watches El Nene in order to pay a crooked attorney to try to get her daughter’s sentence reduced.

Doña Chon has witnessed firsthand that inequity of Puerto Rican society and is convinced that wealth and power determine one’s fate. She disputes that life is “una cosa fenomenal” and instead insists that life is more like “un lío de ropa sucia” (253). In the case of her daughter Tutú, who has been sentenced to six years in prison for selling marijuana, Doña Chon knows that her socioeconomic status is the main determinant in sentencing. As she explains, “a los ricos si te vi ya no me acuerdo. Los ricos vendiendo la yerba en la cara del gobierno, ofreciendo la manteca a Villega y to el que llega,” while “a los pobres siete años en la sombra” (301-2). Doña Chon has resigned herself to the reality of her life; she has little patience for the “monerías” that occupy

her friend. Moreover, she is experienced enough to know that money alone will not solve problems; the well-connected and wealthy truly hold power.

Doña Chon's seemingly inane conversations with La China Hereje echo the Cuban *choteo* in terms of their bawdiness and jocularity. As Jorge Mañach suggests in his essay *Indagación del choteo* (1928), these neighbors' easy banter implies a superficial confrontation of social issues. This "Cuban *carpe diem*" allows residence in farce, in the vacuity that makes surviving the political and social turmoil possible. For example, as La China Hereje recounts the death of her brother Regino as a soldier in the Korean War and her mother's subsequent suicide, she couches her story in between puns and musings about Iris Chacón's costumes (150). As a result of this escapism, La China Hereje has convinced herself that de-facto prostitution is harmless and that sunbaths will cure her son. According to Mañach, this "jocular tendency" hides the "intimate sadness" of reality (87). At times, Doña Chon seems to have the antidote to this banality but she continues to participate in idle gossip. Expressing her distaste for the bawdiness of the *guaracha*, she maintains "no me gustan los números de doble sentido," and in the next breath engages in wordplay herself (149). Doña Chon appears to know better and yet she indirectly causes El Nene's death by not retrieving him from the *solar* as she has promised.

El Nene, La China Hereje's son, best represents the consequences of Puerto Rico's corrupt system. In fact, El Nene can be read as analogous to an island himself, he is "compuesto y aislado en un islote de baba" (301). Unable to speak and developmentally still a child, El Nene is sent to play with children half his age in the *solar* so his mother can "entertain" Senador Vicente Reinoso. Despite his mother's claims to the contrary, Doña Chon is correct when she accuses La China Hereje of abandoning her son. El Nene is left to the mercy of the neighborhood children, who harass him until he is reduced to a sobbing mass in a heap on the ground. Unable

to defend himself, the children poke and prod at El Nene until they leave him as “bracetes toninos y deshuesados” (176). They abuse him until “el empeño de romperlo se rompe y se frustra,” and only then do they leave him to the stray dogs (176). That La China Hereje is willing to jeopardize the safety of her son so that she can afford what she considers to be the finer things demonstrates the misalignment of her priorities. Rather than concern herself with her child’s well-being, she abandons him so that she can buy a nicer dining room set and a new outfit. El Nene is the victim of her obsession with seeming better off than she is, with “appearing” as more.

El Nene embodies the patterns of abuse that plague Puerto Rico’s population. He is taunted, put on a leash like an animal, and spat upon as if he were a prisoner. Much like the land itself that is picked dry by unscrupulous developers, El Nene is exploited until he no longer serves the purpose of his persecutors. In their article “Land development, land use, and urban sprawl in Puerto Rico,” Sebastian Martinuzzi, William A. Gould, and Olga M. Ramos González contend that “ineffective land use planning” has led to significant problems related to urban sprawl, or the uncontrolled expansion of urban areas. This urban sprawl results from unregulated development and mismanagement of resources, often by developers able to gain lucrative terms from local governments.⁴⁶ In the novel, this “urban sprawl” leads to traffic congestion, densely populated substandard housing, and ultimately, El Nene’s death.

In addition to serving as a symbol of Puerto Rico’s mismanagement, El Nene is a metaphor for the fragmentation of Puerto Rican families. His father, La China Hereje’s legal husband, lives in the United States and does not have a relationship with his son. At first, La

⁴⁶ Sebastian Martinuzzi, William A. Gould, and Olga M. Ramos González argue that “Uncontrolled development has led to a high degree of sprawl in 40% of Puerto Rico, with cities and towns poorly populated and surrounded by large sprawl areas. Nearly half of the total development is occurring outside of the solid urban centers, covering one-quarter of the best lands for agriculture, impacting watersheds and reducing open spaces” (296).

China Hereje blames her son's "monguera" on a "salamiento," or curse, placed on her by the scorned girlfriend of one of her cousins in La Cantera (147). She believes that the curse was meant for her, but that it instead was passed to her son. However, as she continues her conversation with Doña Chon, her story changes. She now contends that El Nene's maladies can be traced back to his father's departure to the United States. As La China Hereje explains, when her husband left Puerto Rico for Chicago to work as a "tomatero," or seasonal agricultural worker, "El Nene se veía normal" (149). However, soon after her husband leaves, El Nene becomes afflicted by "calenturones que le deban por la cabeza creciente" (149). These fevers caused seizures, and El Nene begins to beat his head against the walls like a "gallina rematada en casa" (149). While she does not blame her husband for seeking employment as "la cosa está mal pal aquí," La China Hereje does resent that he abandons his family (149). She reasons that if he sent back money like as he promised, she would not have to leave El Nene to see the senator.

El Nene is the final and perhaps collective victim of all the circumstances, or phenomena, of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*. Even though El Nene survives the children's attacks, he cannot survive Benny's carelessness and entitlement. Careening through the neighborhood in an attempt to avoid traffic, Benny runs over El Nene, reducing him to "sesos reventados en la puerta del Ferrari y a unos ojos estrellados por la cuneta como huevos mal fritos" (206). El Nene is a casualty of Puerto Rico's most privileged son, who literally tears his body to pieces to serve his own agenda. His death is also precipitated by Senador Vicente Reinoso, who convinces La China Hereje that leaving him alone outside is beneficial to his health. Of course, the senator's reasoning is not only spurious but also negligent. Ultimately, El Nene is abandoned by his mother, tortured by the neighborhood children, and finally sacrificed for the convenience of the upper class.

El Nene's death is the result of the myriad problems that plague Puerto Rico, from poverty and familial fragmentation to corruption and privilege. El Nene's is killed by Benny's Ferrari, a de-facto murder weapon that is an outrageously inappropriate gift for San Juan's most spoiled and entitled son. In the novel, automobiles, and especially Benny's Ferrari, become markers of Puerto Rican greed, consumption, and obsession with appearance. Moreover, Benny's Ferrari is imported from the U.S. mainland, again demonstrating how echoes of the diaspora effect Puerto Rico. While the Ferrari might be the most ostentatious example, it is just one of many cultural products that have essentially invaded Puerto Rico. From Graciela's French cosmetics to the Corn Flakes that Doña Chon and La China Hereje's neighbors feed their children, imported consumer goods have supplanted Puerto Rican products. These imports are more desirable than their Puerto Rican products, their brand names garner a higher price and are therefore considered superior. Granted, this influx of imports demonstrates that Puerto Rico has not only become a "colonia sucesiva de dos imperios," but that its population has bought into product marketing (105).

The novel's most marketed product is of course "La guaracha del Macho Camacho." The disc jockey introduces this *guaracha* nineteen times throughout the course of the novel, but these introductions can also be read as one continuous advertisement for the song. Notably, each time the disc jockey "interrupts" the novel's action, it is with the conjunction "y" or "porque," suggesting that the both the song and the hype that surrounds it are unending. This repetition underscores that the island is almost suspended in time, doomed to repeat the same song interspersed with incessant advertisement.

If the ever-present *guaracha* conceals Puerto Rico's underlying problems of economic underdevelopment and persistent corruption, it also underscores its diasporic identity. For Juan

Flores, Puerto Rican identity also integrates those who no longer live on the island. As he argues in *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, the Puerto Rican experience is “paradigmatic rather than exceptional” of what he terms the “Latino process of propelled movement and the challenge of resettlement” (9). The failure of Operation Bootstrap and the influx of unskilled Puerto Rican laborers into cities like New York, Newark, and Chicago anticipate the same sort of present phenomenon of other migratory groups, including Dominican immigration. Of course, Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, an important distinction that helps explain specific patterns of migration to and from the island.⁴⁷ For Flores, the consequences of the ebb and flow of Puerto Rican migration are best analyzed in terms of musical expression. He argues that music becomes a cultural marker as much as a national identifier that links debates about nationhood, race and social justice to this form of popular expression. Moreover, music becomes one of the most portable connections to home for immigrants by establishing communities of listeners who share similar socio-linguistic and socio-economic experiences.

Puerto Rico’s Commonwealth status places the island and its residents in dialogue with the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States. As Arnaldo Cruz argues, “*La guaracha* is essentially a novel about Puerto Rico’s mass culture and its complex relationship with American colonialism” (35). While Cruz’s interpretation is valid, I think he misses an important component of how this “mass culture” evolves. For instance, as demonstrated by William Luis, 1972 and 1973 marked the first substantial “negative migrations” of Puerto Ricans returning to the United States. This “return” migration, which happens in the background of the novel, speaks not only to salsa’s growing popularity on the island, but also the “Americanization” of its residents whether or not they have travelled to the U.S. mainland. For example, *La China Hereje*

⁴⁷ For an excellent discussion of this phenomenon in literature, see Luis Rafael Sánchez’s *La guagua aérea* (1983).

contemplates “Thanksgiving en el horizonte” (267) as she waits for Senador Vicente Reinoso to arrive. She has never been to the U.S. mainland, yet this “imported” holiday has her thinking that she needs to buy a turkey and pay off the dining set she bought on installments. In fact, supermarkets themselves demonstrate the growing mainland influence. They are stocked with “jamón de Virginia, papas de Idaho, uvas de California, arroz de Louisiana, manzanas de Pennsylvania, chinas de Florida,” all imported and advertised as superior to their Puerto Rican options (273).

If the *guaracha* is the modern-day version of a *charca*, it is due both to the stagnant body of water (or that of cars trapped in a traffic jam), and because its constant, pulsating beat repeats, seemingly going nowhere. As Luis Felipe Díaz contends in. “*La guaracha del Macho Camacho de Luis Rafael Sánchez y la cultura tardomoderna de la pseudocomunicación*” (2003), “la analogía es contraria a la división que se establece entre charca y río en la novela de Zeno: cuando la guaracha del Macho Camacho ‘La vida es una cosa fenomenal’ se metió en su casa con la fuerza de un río desbordado” (6). While the force of the incessant beat is central to this work, I am not sure that I agree with Díaz’s analogy. The *guaracha*, rather than a “río desbordado,” is more like a stagnant body of water, though the pressure builds, there is no way out, it is a *charca* “sin salida,” an exit-less *tapón* that keeps repeating. This re-imagination of the *charca* becomes clear when the narrator relates how Graciela wants to fire her domestic staff because they listen hypnotically to “La vida es una cosa fenomenal.” Her populist-minded husband stops her by reminding her that it was the “populacho guarachero” who elected him to the Senate (291). The *guaracha* becomes the undercurrent, or background, that keeps Puerto Rico on auto-play (repeat).

Is Puerto Rico an Island *Sin Salida*?

Both *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* and *The House on the Lagoon* challenge and expose the corruption of Puerto Rico's elite and their ties to mainland interests. In *The House on the Lagoon*, Quintín Mendizábal's inability to face his own destructive demons causes his death. His home is set ablaze by his alienated son who cannot understand how his own father can place his own economic interests over those of Puerto Rican citizens. In *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, Senador Vicente Reinoso's son Benny causes the death of El Nene, a helpless, innocent victim of Puerto Rican poverty. That both novels conclude with violent deaths at the hands of the sons of its most privileged class speaks to the endemic, destructive nature of a system so broken that corruption has become commonplace.

Each novel attests to the consequences of colonial legacies that cripple Puerto Rico. As a result, the island's most vulnerable populations remain marginalized, unable to reap the illusory benefits of a Commonwealth that binds them to U.S. dependency while preventing them from political agency. Meanwhile, those privileged few with the capital and connections to exploit their status continue to enrich themselves at the expense of those they consider "beneath" them socially. What remains is an island trapped by its dependence on the United States and a citizenry that facilitates a system that is adverse to change. The Commonwealth has so entangled Puerto Rico that it has paralyzed the island and converted its liminal status into its status quo.

CONCLUSION

The works that I study offer a telling or retelling of history from another perspective. Cuban authors Zoé Valdés and Oscar Hijuelos, Dominican authors Junot Díaz and Loida Maritza Pérez, and Puerto Rican authors Rosario Ferré and Luis Rafael Sánchez read their countries from this alternative place in terms of language, culture, race, and geography. Their writing exposes the historical misalignments that shape the contemporary Spanish Caribbean and the pervasive displacement of its people. Each author offers alternate versions of accepted political and racial histories of families and of official histories of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, as well as their diasporas in the United States' mainland. These works from the Spanish Caribbean and its diaspora demonstrate the repercussions of exile from long-term dictatorial rule and U.S. neo-colonial policies.¹ In each case, a definitive historical trauma exposes and is exposed by family trauma, demonstrating how the political becomes personal and vice versa. I contend that these works problematize themes of isolation and displacement to help us read Latino literature. They blend different geographic, linguistic, racial, and cultural spaces into the same text. I argue that this approach provides an expanded definition of Latino literature that includes works published in English and Spanish, both in the United States and elsewhere.

By writing as outsiders, these authors' works begin to strain identity labels to reflect the relationships between Latino and Hispanic literature. As William Luis contends in "Latino Identity and the Desiring-Machine," Latinos and Latino literature "are linked to, but also interrupted by, Hispanic writers" (145). The terms Latino and Hispanic are not synonymous, but

¹ In *The Diaspora Strikes Back* (2009), Flores alludes to this idea, arguing that the Latino Community in New York in the 1950s shared experiences of economic or political exile. As he explains, Cuban and Dominican exiles found themselves in a "situation that was further complicated by the overt and covert complicity of U.S. imperial power, including direct military occupation" (63).

they are related; “like desiring-machines, they are linked in a linear manner to each other” (144). Luis grounds this theory in a discussion of Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring-machines that “create flows of desire that are also interrupted, producing other currents that flow, each with its own interruption” (144).² Using this concept, it becomes possible to understand Latino literature in conversation with, and connected to, Hispanic works. For me, this has been a revelation. I argue that the works that I study not only read history and culture from a place of exile, but that they also read history and memories of the Spanish Caribbean as they relate to life in the United States. The resultant isolation and displacement, manifested as fragmentation, leads to new traditions.

In the works that I study, this fragmentation is a direct result of United States’ neo-colonial policies in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. This legacy is present in the culture, language, and structure of Latino works from the Spanish Caribbean and its diaspora. Moreover, this fragmentation allows for the setting apart and forming of new individuals or traditions. Returning to the definition I outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, it becomes clear that fragmentation permeates both culture and politics. Families reflect this fragmentation, both literally and metaphorically, which in turn creates new trauma superimposed over old. These works manifest historical and social scars and suggest that reconciling memory is one step toward healing these wounds. However, as parents attempt to heal their own scars, their children are doubly marked by inherited memories as well as their own sense of alienation. Those who emerge from this inherited trauma are able to reconcile memories with the realization that the place that they once imagined as home must remain in the past.

² Luis discusses this theory, as outlined in *Anti-Oedipus*, at length in his afterword to *The Other Latin@* (2011).

Isolation and alienation inform Latino literature because of exile in all of its permutations. In fact, isolation emerges as a sense of being “set apart” from and “not belonging” in one’s own family. Characters like Yocandra, Rico, Teresa, Yuniior, Lola, Oscar, Iliana, and Isabel, though they experience isolation differently, react to its painful sting and attempt to understand its origins. For many of them, the process of uncovering family trauma attenuates some of their feelings of “not belonging.” For others, recovering the untold, inherited histories that follow their families from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico to the mainland United States allows for the mending of relationships or the severing of unhealthy ties. These narratives emerge as a means for understanding how migration and exile exacerbate extant problems while simultaneously creating new challenges as families attempt to navigate the waters of their new homes.

In *The Diaspora Strikes Back* (2009), Juan Flores maintains that Spanish Caribbean diasporic experiences of exile and migration provide new opportunities for understanding places of origin. Moreover, these works “write back” to their Spanish Caribbean roots and challenge the established order.³ Flores argues “this combination of being ‘from elsewhere’ and being socially disadvantaged in the new setting conspire to challenge the hegemonies engendered by [...] asymmetries, and to devise alternative lines of communication and community as forms of conscious or unconscious resistance” (19). I contend that this resistance is seen through how characters in the works that I study remember, interpret, and inherit their families’ histories. By reconciling personal pasts with the present, these works suggest that national histories can also

³ Juan Flores points out that “surprisingly little has been accorded the impact of return, going home, the role of cultural values and orientation accrued in the diaspora as they land in the site of origin” (31).

be reconciled to include those who are not members of the political, social, or economic elite.

While uncovering alternative histories helps to attenuate historical trauma, the present political and economic situations in the Spanish Caribbean suggest that their diasporic communities will only continue to increase. In the case of Cuba, there does seem to be some thawing of relations between the Cuban government and the United States. Time will tell whether or not the renewal of diplomatic ties leads to real change. After all, as Hernández-Reguant has shown, after Fidel Castro's resignation in February 2008, many hoped for a transition that would bring real change to Cuba. Instead, as she succinctly posits, "it became apparent that Raúl Castro's government was one of continuity. There was no official end to the Special Period" (17). Nevertheless, there have been some recent changes in policy that suggest a loosening of restrictions. For the first time in five decades, the U.S. has issued licenses for ferry service between the two countries as National Public Radio reported on May 6, 2015. However, so long as the embargo remains in place, Cuba remains cut off from real progress.

In the Dominican Republic, economic exile to the United States has become an accepted reality. In her article "Junot Díaz," Jacqueline Loss contends that it is almost impossible to live "in the Dominican Republic without also living in the United States. Through a network of social, political, personal, and economic relations, the United States figures prominently, not only in everyday life, but also in the imaginary of an entire island" (804). In many cities in the Northeastern United States, Dominicans are one the fastest growing Spanish-speaking immigrant groups. For example, as reported by the Migration Policy Institute, "since 1990 the immigrant population from the Dominican Republic residing in the United States has been larger than other immigrant populations from the Caribbean, with the exception of immigrants from Cuba."

Puerto Rico continues to be a de-facto colony of the United States, which paralyzes the island both politically and economically. Puerto Rico's liminal status exposes it to fluctuations in United States policy without giving the island's people or elected officials a real opportunity for self-determination. Moreover, once Puerto Ricans find themselves on the U.S. mainland, they are again placed in a paralyzing double-bind. As Juan Flores explains, "all other Latino groups, even the other *antillanos*, have their diplomatic representation, and their home countries are there to stand up for them, however feebly and selectively at times, in the U.S. context" (65). This is, of course, not the case for Puerto Ricans. So long as the *Estado Libre Asociado* remains intact, Puerto Rico is left with little recourse.

These pervasive political and economic reasons for exile explain Spanish Caribbean patterns of migration that lead to familial fragmentation. However, as I have demonstrated, life in the mainland United States often exacerbates problems that already exist in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. The most salient of these is tied to the theme of race and racial identity. After all, as Flores and others document, Caribbean Latinos, and "*afroantillanos* in particular, are the Latinos who most directly encountered anti-black racism in the U.S. setting, including from other Latinos" (64).⁴ In the works that I study, characters including Rico, María, Teresa, Yuniór, Lola, Oscar, Iliana, and Isabel are keenly aware of the difference between racism in their countries of origin and racism in the United States.⁵

Along with experiencing new forms of racism, life in the United States can alienate and isolate. Of course, the economic and political pressures that fuel exile do not disappear once

⁴ These themes are more widely explored in the Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores's anthology *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (2010).

⁵ In her essay "Black Behind the Ears" published in February 1993 in *Essence* magazine, Julia Álvarez explains that while Dominicans learn the ideas of "*us*" and "*them*" in the United States, all Dominicans, whether in the Dominican republic or the U.S. mainland, aspire "to be on the lighter side of the spectrum" (129).

families arrive on the U.S. mainland. Instead, as I have shown, these traumas manifest themselves in new, often violent ways. Sublimated fear and the need for silence imposed by violent dictatorships wreak havoc when exposed to new cultural pressures and expectations. This legacy permeates familial structures as patterns of violence are repeated.

The results of political and social violence lead to the stifling of memory and history. This repression, in turn, only exacerbates isolation and alienation. Interestingly, women seem to fare better in their adoptive countries. For example, male characters including El Lince, Rico, Yunior, and Oscar flounder on the U.S. mainland. Those who remain in the Spanish Caribbean, including el Nihilista, el Traidor, Manuel, Benny, and El Nene are equally lost. In fact, with the exception of Willie, who is of mixed race and embraces his Afro-Puerto Rican identity, male characters seem unequipped to cope with family trauma. On the other hand, female characters including Yocandra, Teresa, Lola, Iliana, Isabel and Doña Chon seem to adapt and respond to crises. The works that I study suggest that this might be due to better coping strategies as well as an ability to tap into alternative remedies.⁶ In *La nada cotidiana*, *The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao*, *Geographies of Home*, *The House on the Lagoon* and *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, “La Veintiuna División” or *vodú* and *Santería* or Yoruba-Lucumí practices are harnessed to help families prevent the disastrous repetition of history.

Tellingly, practitioners of these Afro Caribbean religious practices are traditionally female. While Petra from *The House on the Lagoon* may be the most obvious example of the power of Yoruba Lucumí religion, these practices are not limited to the Spanish Caribbean. For example, Aurelia, Lola, and Iliana all access their spiritual gifts after exile to the United States.

⁶ See issue 26.1 (Spring 2007) of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*.

These works point to the idea of a generational female gift that empowers women with tools to circumvent the established patriarchal order. Again, Willie from *The House on the Lagoon* is the exception to this gendered rule; I would argue, however, that his gift is inherited from his maternal side and that he chooses to express his *don* because of Petra's encouragement and tutelage. Perhaps female characters fare better than men in comparable circumstances because they are willing to harness history and access intuitive power.

Reconciling memory and history emerges as a means for repairing and re-establishing fragmented families. However, this does not necessarily mean that sense of belonging "no place" is fully ameliorated. Instead, this "not belonging" is celebrated rather than lamented. Once again, I turn to Nuyorican poet Tato Laviera's "nideaquinideallá" from *Mixturao and Other Poems*. As he explains in the second stanza, "nidequinideallá" articulates the "yet-to-be-defined / evolucionario hybrid" experience of Latinos who live in the United States and identify with their parents' countries of origin and the U.S. (8-9). This is an identity that resists classification and which can cause confusion for those who seek representative categories or definitions.

Writers like Laviera offer a different kind of answer that allows for a third, hybrid space. With "nideaquinideallá," Laviera suggests a term that reflects the "backnforth" (10) of "immigrant/migrantes" and that also recognizes individual and collective experiences (21). He does not shy away from the ramifications of this "in between schizophrenia" (45). Instead, he embraces it as part of the uniqueness that helps to explain these "migrational displacements" (60). In so doing, "nidequinideallá" emerges as a new way to understand how this "in-between state" reflects experiences of alienation and displacement while simultaneously embracing a new space. In the seventh stanza of this poem, Laviera articulates these intersections of race, trauma, and history:

I'm in the usa of america
and in us of a, you suffer
insignias of apathy
prejuicio subtle racism
minority status
us of a, you suffer
watching our nation invading other nations without an invitation (67-73)

Through its use of pronouns and articles, this stanza blends the singular and plural, family and history. The speaker, through the first person singular “I,” invites the reader to identify with them. Additionally, because we refer to ourselves as “I,” this pronoun facilitates the reader imagining themselves in the poem. Moreover, the pronoun “you” in English holds both the singular and plural, because it expresses both the second person singular and plural. In this poem, the line “and in us of a, you suffer” suggests a second person singular reading (68). However, when this phrase repeats in the second to last line, “us of a, you suffer,” it seems to reflect a collective “you” (72). In the first case, the “you” is “*in us*” and also “*of a*” (my emphasis). This “you” suffers “apathy,” “prejuicio,” “subtle racism” and “minority status” (69-71). When the phrase is repeated as “us of a, you suffer, the “you” is “*of us*,” meaning that it is part of a collective (72, my emphasis). This “you” suffers “watching *our* nation invading other nations without an invitation” (73, my emphasis). The pronoun “our,” as a form of the possessive case *we* used as an attributive adjective, supports reading this “you” as analogous to the collective.

Furthermore, reading “usa” as “us of a,” adds to the simultaneity of “us” and “a.” There is an ambiguity of meaning suggested by “us” or “we” and “u” as “you.” Of course, in English, “you” and “u” are homophones, which supports this interpretation. The effect is to create a sense of the plural within the singular that supports Laviera’s articulation of hybridity. In so doing, “nideaquinideallá” offers a blurring of the lines between individual suffering, or trauma, and

collective suffering, or the trauma of history. It is this “in between” space, or a place of ambiguity and simultaneity, that helps to explain the works that I study.

As I look forward, the field of Latino literature offers exciting avenues for further investigation. While this dissertation concentrates on six authors from the Spanish Caribbean, there are more works that merit consideration. For example, I would like to examine the intersections of Chicano and Latino poetry and how racial and sexual identities reflect the kind of fragmentation that foregrounds the creation of new traditions. Poets including Ricardo Pau-Llosa, Martín Espada, Willy Perdomo, and Nancy Mercado, among others, deserve to be studied. Additionally, I would like to continue to explore Tato Laviera’s important contributions to the Latino Canon. I can think of no other poet who deserves recognition more than he.

Tato Laviera holds a special place in my heart. As assistant editor for the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, I picked him up at the airport so that he could deliver a talk at Vanderbilt University in the fall of 2007. By that time, Laviera was totally blind and relied on informal guides like myself to navigate to and from his various engagements. On the way to campus, he asked me to stop at a flower shop so that he could purchase a small bouquet to thank the administrative assistant at the Center for Latin American Studies for her help arranging his travel. As we drove to campus, he asked me about my upbringing and my research. He was kind and generous and a bit of a flirt. But what I remember most is that he told me that I, a third-year graduate student about to take her qualifying exams, had understood his poetry. I will never forget that afternoon’s drive to campus because it set my course of study. I wish he were still here so that I could ask him about my next projects.

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