

Gendered Migrations: The Migratory Experience in Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home*

By Jill Toliver Richardson

In her novel *Geographies of Home*, Loida Maritza Pérez charts the journey of a Dominican family in stark contrast to the myth of the American Dream. The parents and their fourteen children are forced to struggle through extreme poverty, eviction, the threat of homelessness, racism, and the perceived threat of danger lurking in the darkest corners of New York City. Their migratory experience is portrayed as a continuation of the drudgery and hunger that characterized their lives in the Dominican Republic. In addition, the terrors committed by the former Dominican President Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's government (1930-1961)¹ haunt them in the United States and determine the arch of their lives.

While the father, Papito, rules his family with fear and strict Adventist tenets, it is the female characters that hold center stage in the narrative as the two worlds of the Dominican Republic and the United States collide. The rupture that occurs after the mother, Aurelia's, migration from her homeland does irreparable harm to herself and her family as they attempt to recreate a home in the United States. Aurelia uses migration as the means to sever herself and her daughters from a female legacy of woman-centered power passed down generationally from her female ancestors. Not willing to own this legacy, Aurelia rejects her mother's lessons and withholds this integral part of her inheritance from her daughters, which leave them ill-equipped to navigate the American landscape. Aurelia, and three of her daughters, Iliana, Marina, and Rebecca, struggle to navigate the United States and to piece together concepts of home and identity that work within the ever-shifting reality of their lives.

Pérez interrogates the effects of migration on her female characters and renders a gender specific migratory experience that manifests itself differently than that of her male characters. In *Geographies*

of *Home*, Pérez locates home on her female characters' bodies similarly to Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of carrying home on her back. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* Anzaldúa observes, "Yet in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back" (43). Like Anzaldúa, the women in *Geographies of Home* have the ability to remain connected to their homeland, culture, and past despite their geographical distance from their homeland. Aurelia and her daughters carry their histories, familial ties and their relationships to their homelands everywhere they go. Carrying their homes with them shifts the concept of home from a fixed, definable territory to one situated within a Diaspora framework that creates a home that is always fluid, unfixed and reliant on an individual's frame of reference for definition. Carrying home on their bodies allows the female characters to stay connected to their mothers and homeland, despite their geographical location, which strengthens their identities. The connection to their mothers, home and past allows them to forge new fluid identities and to create new concepts of home that work within a transnational and Diaspora framework².

In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* Carole Boyce Davies elucidates how relocating the Caribbean landscape allows Afro-Caribbean women writers to redefine their migratory experience:

While the evocation of Caribbean geography is strong, there is a re-mapping of the terms of that landscape. In many ways, it is a cultural geography and 'cognitive mapping' of one's experience and location...Significantly, many of these writers are critically engaged in an anti-hegemonic discourse with the United States. (115)

Pérez remaps the Caribbean landscape and the location of home onto her female characters' bodies allowing them to reconceptualize home to fit their particular migratory experiences.

In Pérez's search to answer the question of what constitutes home for women who are never standing on stable ground, home becomes a question of perspective. She explores home as an always shifting, unstable, and indefinable location by investigating its meaning in the lives of her female characters. In an interview, Pérez questions what constitutes home:

Western society believes that everything is logical and practical but coming from the Caribbean, we know that anything can happen, anything can occur. That is why I chose the title *Geographies of Home*, because what is home when the country you have left behind is no longer home, but then home is still not the country you've moved to? Is home a physical space, an emotional space, a psychological place? (qtd. in Pinkerton 52)

In her narrative, Pérez searches for a definition of home that reflects her female characters' sense of non-belonging in North America. She delves into varied interpretations of home and particularly the duality of home as both a safe and threatening space.

Over the years the family Pérez portrays moves from one apartment to the next until they are finally evicted. With a new fear of homelessness, the father buys a dilapidated house far into Brooklyn that becomes a haven from the reality of their non-belonging and "homelessness" as migrants in the United States. This house is their only protection from the predicament that they fear the most: homelessness and the perceived danger of New York City. Pérez depicts New York City, and more specifically the run down area of Brooklyn where they live as gloomy, threatening, and desolate. The Brooklyn setting mirrors the isolation and vulnerability characteristic of this family's migratory experience. Without the resources to return to the Dominican Republic, the family is displaced and vulnerable in the United States.

Rebuilt from a dilapidated house, the structure is re-imagined as a protective shelter for the family. In the narrative it remains central to the family as the home of the old parents, their youngest children, and as the setting for family gatherings; however, the house is more an illusion of safety than an actual safe space. Upon her return home from college, the youngest daughter Iliana is surprised that the house looks cheerful due to her father's newest home improvements:

The house looked nothing like what Iliana remembered...To Iliana, who had been unaware of these changes, the effect was startling. She had expected to find the house cloaked in mourning and somehow, as she approached it, to get a sense of what waited for her inside. Yet, despite the news she had received, the house seemed festive. (27)

Iliana expects the house to reflect the chaos experienced by those living inside; however, the new bright yellow façade and white fence portray prosperity and the achievement of the American Dream despite her parents' difficult lives. Iliana's parents discarded the well made wooden furnishings brought from the Dominican Republic and replaced them with gaudy European reproductions and plastic seat covers as if to emulate their idea of a wealthy American home. Despite their family's dislocation in the United States, the house represents Aurelia and Papito's attempt to belong in America and claim it as home. The house itself is a sham, meant to convey the achievement of a dream that has continually eluded their grasps since immigrating to the United States. In actuality the house is only a shelter, not the home that they are striving for. The cheery façade and trappings of prosperity cannot conceal the truth – that the house, like their lives, is falling apart as Aurelia observes by the piles of dust that continually appear no matter how often she sweeps the floors.

Despite all of the parents' attempts to protect their children from the feared city of New York, those in the house commonly experience pain and violence. Papito rules his family with strict religious standards and instills his children with fear in a manner that mirrors the terror and brutality experienced by those living under President Trujillo's government in the Dominican Republic. Aurelia compensates for her husband's strict nature by doling out love, acceptance and understanding to her children despite her own sense of powerlessness in their surroundings. Unable to control their environment outside of the house, the home is depicted as a satellite of the Dominican Republic with Papito and Aurelia holding their family and house together by instilling cultural and religious expectations transplanted from their homeland. For the female family members, the domestic space of the house holds the comforts of their homeland while perpetuating the sexism and constraints placed on women in the Dominican Republic. At home the daughters are taught to remain chaste until marriage and that their ultimate fulfillment will come from becoming wives and mothers. However, their parents' traditional teachings clash with the lessons learned when they are outside of the home as they contend with contrasting American cultural modes.

Almost never leaving the space of the domestic realm or venturing outside of her Dominican community, Aurelia struggles with her own identity development and the impact of her decision to suppress the Afro-Dominican spiritual lineage and preternatural powers inherited from her mother. In "Subversive Sexualities: Revolutionizing Gendered Identities" Myriam J.A. Chancy recognizes that in *Geographies of Home*, "the subtext of the family's dysfunction is a discomfort with admitting its mixed racial heritage and loss of spiritual roots, a spirituality also encoded as Afro-Dominican rather than Latino/a" (65). In addition to an African heritage, Aurelia is also suppressing a female legacy of power in order to privilege the patriarchal Christian beliefs of her husband, which establish him as the head of their household. Aurelia's struggle to accept her past and acknowledge the ramifications of suppressing

a significant aspect of her Afro-Dominican identity on her children's lives fuels the family's dysfunction. After marrying Papito, who as a devout Seventh Day Adventist, rejected the Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices of the island, Aurelia hoped to cut all ties to her mother's faith and repress her magical powers. However, Aurelia realizes that migrating to the United States has left her children vulnerable in their American surroundings without a strong connection to their home or to their mother's past. They have little awareness of their Afro-Dominican lineage or an understanding of the powers shared by some of the women in the family. After dealing with multiple family crises, Aurelia is forced to confront the ramifications of her choice to repress her daughters' powerful lineage as they flail in the United States.

In "Voices from Hispaniola: A Meridians Roundtable with Edwidge Danticat, Loida Maritza Pérez, Myriam J.A. Chancy, and Nelly Rosario" Pérez explains the significance of Aurelia's choice to hide the past from her daughters and their resulting disempowerment:

It is this selective sharing and willful withholding of certain histories which leads to many of the conflicts within *Geographies*... That Aurelia, the mother, silences her past and is ambivalent about her relationship with her own mother is what leaves her daughters at a loss. Any of them, whether it be Iliana, Rebecca, Marina, or any of the other daughters, would have fared better had they been armed with certain truths rather than shielded from them. (qtd. in Candelario 70)

Aurelia struggles with the knowledge that she is culpable for the instability characteristic in her daughters' lives. Had she chosen to embrace her mother's Afro-Dominican spiritual legacy and shared that lineage with her daughters, it might have provided an alternative strategy for coping with the

discrimination and abuse encountered in New York City. Aurelia herself acknowledges that her suppression of her identity has left her vulnerable in her new surroundings:

As she delved into the past she was conscious of something missing in the present—something her mother had possessed and passed along to her but which she had misplaced and failed to pass on to her own children...

It wasn't that she romanticized the past or believed that things had been better long ago... Yet assaulted by the unfamiliar and surrounded by hard concrete and looming buildings, she had become as vulnerable as even the Trujillo regime had failed to make her feel. (23)

Migration has proven to be an experience more traumatic for Aurelia than living within the Dominican Republic when it was terrorized by Trujillo. Aurelia is cognizant of a shift in her consciousness since migrating to the U.S. and remembers that even though she chose to reject her mother's past while in the Caribbean, she remained connected to it. However, the rupture created by leaving her homeland and the shock after her arrival in New York City created a profound sense of destabilization and fragmentation in her life. New York City brought new challenges to Aurelia, not more violent or more threatening than those experienced under Trujillo's government, yet with the break between her and her mother and motherland complete, Aurelia feels more terrified and more vulnerable than she could have anticipated.

Aurelia's shock at her own vulnerability in New York leads to a mental and physical breakdown that Iliana recounts as causing her mother's long hair to turn prematurely white. The ramifications of Aurelia's inner conflict and negotiation with her Western surroundings are experienced through her body and leave the white hair as a physical marker of her trials. In addition, the white hair marks Aurelia's body with a symbol of the power coursing through her veins that kept her alive in spite of the

doctor's predictions of her death. Even though Aurelia attempts to break away from her mother and her family's legacy, her internal strength keeps her alive and reveals the true potential of her powerful nature.

After almost dying, Aurelia recovers disgraced by the powerlessness she is forced to accept as a consequence of migration. It is not until the almost fatal suicide attempt of her daughter Marina that Aurelia is forced to confront her memories, accept the legacy inherited from her mother and use it to exercise agency in her and her children's lives. As Aurelia waits in the hospital to learn if her daughter will live or die, she remembers her brother, Virgilio's, suicide in the Dominican Republic. As a man, he is unable to control the preternatural powers that he and Aurelia inherited from their mother and that are more easily controlled by the women in the family. The preternatural powers drive Virgilio to madness and ultimately cause him to take his own life. It was his death and Aurelia's fear of the strength of her mother's powerful legacy that causes her to reject it. Faced with her own daughter's attempt at suicide and the knowledge that it may have been the same powerful inheritance that led to Marina's mental illness, Aurelia finally decides to claim her past and accept the gifts that her mother willed to her.

The complete acceptance of her identity strengthens Aurelia's connection to her Dominican homeland and allows her for the first time to feel rooted and no longer displaced in the United States. At the hospital, among strangers that she had formally feared but now realizes are as displaced and vulnerable as she has often felt, Aurelia finally comes to terms with her continual longing for home:

...Aurelia for the first time granted herself permission to sprout roots past concrete into soil. Throughout more than fifteen years of moving from apartment to apartment, she had dreamed, not of returning, but of going home. Of going home to a place not located on any map but nonetheless preventing her from settling in any other. Only now did she

understand that her soul had yearned not for a geographical site but for a frame of mind able to accommodate any place as home. (137)

No longer displaced and vulnerable in the United States, Aurelia finds agency through an acceptance of her mother and homeland. Her ability to exercise agency in the United States leads to her understanding that she can be at home wherever she chooses it to be. Once ambivalent about her connection to her mother, Aurelia's complete acceptance of her mother's gifts and their shared identity allows her to claim a heritage that will give her the new found strength to navigate the American landscape and attempt to guide her daughters.

Pérez depicts Aurelia's new strength and power through the physical transformation of her body. While protecting her grandchildren from their mother (her eldest daughter, Rebecca) and simultaneously trying desperately to persuade Rebecca to leave her abusive husband, Aurelia shape-shifts in front of her family and on-lookers outside of her daughter's home:

Aurelia's eyes had narrowed to mere slits and darkened to an impenetrable black that hypnotized its prey. She swooped toward her eldest daughter, her legs appearing to glide rather than to walk, stretching forward from shoulders broad with strength. Conflicting emotions tugged at her sharpening features, lending them a hawkish edge. The scratches clawed into her face faded even as her lips—thinned by years of biting down on them to force their silence—appeared to beak, then exhaled steam that evaporated in cold air suddenly smelling of rain-washed grass although there was not a speck of green anywhere in sight. (197)

Pérez conjures an image of Aurelia as birdlike as she “swoops” toward Rebecca asserting her authority as the family matriarch. The bird imagery and the scent of rain-washed grass appear in several places in the novel. The scent of rain-washed grass, now associated with Aurelia, is also the scent that most reminds her of her mother and of their rural lifestyle in the Dominican Republic. Aurelia, transformed with birdlike features, has a special affinity with the pigeons she feeds outside of the domestic space of her kitchen and was once offered the gift of an owl’s feather by her mother. Her mother explained that the gift, which Aurelia initially rejected, would “*quell [her]fear of darkness and teach [her] spirit that it can soar*” (135). Initially paralyzed with fear of the unknown in regards to her mother’s powers and life in New York City, reclaiming the gift of the owl feather allows Aurelia to soar to new heights and reach her full potential to empower herself and to finally take action in her daughters’ lives. The portrayal of Aurelia as a bird and of her aroma as rain-washed grass invokes her mother’s presence, their shared power, and Aurelia’s new *place* at the head of her family. Fearless and no longer displaced in the United States, Aurelia has come into her own power and located her own understanding of home.

Aurelia breaks the silence formed between herself and her daughters during migration, which allows the daughters the possibility to develop more complete identities. Aurelia forges a new identity after healing the rupture created by her migration and suppression of her mother’s heritage. By forging a new identity, Aurelia provides her daughters with the possibility of creating new identities for their selves that are strengthened through a reconnection to their homeland and through the potential for harnessing their own power to exercise agency in their lives.

Pérez emphasizes that the family is familiar with the instability that it experiences in the United States because of its previous experiences in the Dominican Republic. For example, Aurelia’s eldest daughter, Rebecca, holds onto the philosophy that she accepted as a part of Caribbean life: “*Anything was possible...Even the improbable could occur*” (56). As a child, Rebecca remembers witnessing

every kind of miracle occur from miracles in nature to the miraculous return of victims of Trujillo's regime who were assumed to be dead. The ideology brought from the Caribbean pervades Rebecca's life in the United States and is even used as justification to stay with her abusive husband.

Pérez charts a Caribbean landscape onto Rebecca's house as an anti-hegemonic alternative reading to the American nation. The re-mapping of Caribbean geography onto the American landscape introduces the terror of living under Trujillo's regime into Rebecca's house. The paranoia bred by constant surveillance, surprise home raids, torture, and sexual violation employed by the president and his military to suppress Dominicans pervades Rebecca's house while her husband's unmerciful brutality toward her and their children mirrors Trujillo's oppression of his people. Rebecca's husband, Pasión, forces her and their children to live in a dismal house crowded with trash and an in-house chicken coop reminiscent of those left behind in the Dominican Republic. Rebecca is forced to care for the chickens or be abused by her husband. Pérez writes that her, "resulting nausea, accompanied by an urge to slaughter the chickens, was a rebellion against her husband's embrace of a farmer's lifestyle idealized in stories told by a father who had himself abandoned it upon arriving in the United States" (53). Rebecca is compelled to live in an imagined version of the Dominican Republic created by Pasión from a fantasy handed down from his father. Rebecca's house, haunted by her Caribbean ideology and her husband's chickens, is constructed through a Diaspora framework as an alternative home to the United States.

Despite the constant beatings that she and her children receive from Pasión, the uninhabitable conditions of their home and her own neglect of her children, Rebecca tries desperately to fulfill the role of wife and mother upheld as the ideal for women in the Dominican community. Her identity is so tied to these notions that she continues to return to her husband and force her children to endure living undernourished and without heat or hot water. Rebecca attempts to create a home and identity for herself by relying on her husband and children to define home and identity for her. However, her

attempts to reject agency over her life and transfer that responsibility to her family culminate in her own displacement after she is partially abandoned by her husband. Rebecca remains figuratively homeless due to an estranged relationship with her mother and their shared past. Her unwillingness to exercise agency in her own life stems from her own lack of self-worth and a lack of understanding of her own identity caused by the histories withheld by her mother. Her dislocation from her own body and home manifests as an overpowering stench emanating from her body that further alienates her from others. Pérez portrays the trauma that Rebecca endures as the consequence of her migratory experience and her estrangement from her home as severe bruises and broken bones resulting from Pasión's beatings. The resulting wounds on Rebecca's body symbolize the disrepair of her relationship to home. The outcome is that Rebecca in turn creates the same experience of displacement and alienation for her children whose filthiness and odor are noticed by their teacher.

It is Aurelia's agency that push's Rebecca towards the possibility of identity development. Although Rebecca remains stagnate until the novel's end, her mother's efforts reveal a glimmer of hope for Rebecca and her potential for change. Aurelia attempts to force Rebecca to reconnect with her family and homeland by threatening to take her children, who are Rebecca's last connection to her identity, from her permanently if she does not move out of her filthy house and into her parents' home.

After Rebecca returns to her parents' home but remains withdrawn and unmoved to leave her husband permanently, Aurelia cuts off her daughter's hair as an act of desperation. The new growth of her natural hair hints at Rebecca's potential for harnessing the family legacy of power passed down from her mother. The act invokes a symbolic return to Rebecca's Afro-Dominican roots as "the hair she had once habitually straightened with a hot comb so that prospective husbands would believe it was naturally that way" (214) was shorn to reveal her natural curls. Aurelia has given her daughter a haircut that gives her the appearance of wielding power because it symbolizes female resistance to patriarchal

and western constructs of beauty. In “Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power through Resistance and Accommodation” Rose Weitz proposes that:

some women consciously adopt hairstyles (such as short ‘butch’ cuts or dreadlocks) in part to challenge the ideology that women’s worth depends on their attractiveness to men and that women’s attractiveness depends on looking as Euro-American as possible... Thus, these everyday, apparently trivial, individual acts of resistance offer the potential to spark social change and, in the long run, to shift the balance of power between social groups. (670)

Iliana is surprised that her sister’s hair looks prettier despite its failure to emulate a Eurocentric standard of beauty subverting her own patriarchal and Eurocentric notions. The liberation of Rebecca’s hair from western and patriarchal constraints affirms her Afro-Dominican legacy and its potential for realizing a more complete identity.

Similarly to Rebecca, the youngest sister Marina, is trapped within the boundaries of female gender roles and fails at navigating the American landscape. Confined by Dominican gender expectations, Marina is incapable of imagining an identity that extends beyond one that relies on a man for definition. Furthermore, her adherence to and desire to project Anglo-American beauty standards blinds her to the potential of Afro-Dominican identity for forging a more complete identity and exercising agency in her life. Severed from her mother’s past, spiritual legacy and Afro-Dominican lineage, Marina’s personal growth and identity development are stunted. Similarly to her mother, Aurelia, and uncle, Virgilio, Marina suffers a nervous breakdown because of her inability to navigate and control her surroundings. Her nervous breakdown is spurred by the revelation that she does not

meet the racial or class-based criteria to gain acceptance in mainstream American society and because she does not have a deeper connection to her homeland through the knowledge withheld by her mother.

Relegated to live in the basement of her parents' house Marina is displaced in her family's home and is figuratively homeless as she attempts to manage an identity crisis that has left her stagnant. When Iliana descends into the basement for the first time since her year-long absence, she questions the reality of her surroundings, initially believing that a bird is in the room before realizing that it is actually Marina flapping her arms in what looks like an attempt to fly:

Thwarted by gravity, Marina's movements became discordant. Up and down flapped her arms, quickly, despairingly, so that each time they reached her sides the hands balled into fists. Her determination was alarming. It reminded Iliana of a pigeon she had once seen get run over by a car. After the vehicle sped on, the bird had furiously flapped its wings and then expired. (35-36)

Marina's attempt to fly mirrors Aurelia when she shape-shifts into a powerful bird-like force in front of Rebecca's house. However, in Marina's case, she is not able to shape-shift or to fly away from home. Her inability to exhibit a physical transformation like her mother or to leave home like her sister attests to her inability to transgress boundaries and to exercise agency in her life. Because Marina does not have a complete understanding of who she is or of her heritage, she is not centered or rooted in a concept of home. Aurelia chose not to pass on the gift of the owl feather to Marina and consequently leaves her daughter without the ability to conquer her fears or to soar to the heights needed to reach her full potential.

Marina is forcefully jolted out of the denial of her difference and lack of acceptance into mainstream society by her alleged rape by a black male fortune-teller. Because of her mental state, her family members are unsure if they should believe her claim that she was raped by a black psychic after he read her fortune. However, for Marina, the experience was real and represents a violation of her body and tainting of her identity. After the assault, this violation persists in a rancid stench that Marina believes emanates from her body:

Each time she inhaled, nostrils flaring to detect its source, the odor wafted toward her from all directions—her hair, her skin, the roof of her mouth when she raised her tongue to scratch it—confirming that something putrid had been implanted deep inside her and emitted its stench through all her pores.

The longer she watched herself the more repulsed she became. Before, she had been able to manipulate her reflection so as to see only her pale skin shades lighter than any of her sisters' and only slightly darker than Gabriel's wife. That skin color had blinded her to her kinky, dirt-red hair, her sprawling nose, her wide, long lips. Now those features appeared magnified, conveying to her eyes that she was not who she'd believed. (18)

This passage interchanges two of the characteristics Marina believes mark her as unworthy of acceptance into mainstream American society: her stench and her blackness. In Marina's mind the two are interchangeable as she becomes aware of the reality of her own black skin and features simultaneously as she recognizes the smell. Marina is so convinced that the rapist has marked her with a stench, a rotting smell evident to everyone in her vicinity, that she scours herself with brillo pads and then rinses with Lysol. For Marina, the stench not only marks her as ruined, the chastity so revered in their Christian home is taken from her, but she is also tainted with her violator's blackness. Chancy

observes that because of Marina's "inability to embrace her own Africanness, the rape remembrance can be read in two ways—as a reaction to a brutal invasion and as a reaction to a perceived contamination that has itself always been present" (66). Marina is forced to recognize the contaminant, her Afro-Dominican heritage, and to acknowledge that it has always been a part of her, despite her efforts to suppress it. Marina was blind to her own African features, her wide nose, kinky hair and wide lips only to see them clearly after being raped by one of the same black men that she abhors.

In *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/Identity* Lyn Di Iorio Sandín illuminates the connection between the rapist and Marina's suppressed thoughts about her own racial identity:

This 'flat-nosed, wide-lipped nigger' clearly represents Marina's own black self, which she refuses to consciously acknowledge. While penetrating her body, the man shouts at her, 'Look at me!' as if her split off black self is begging for recognition. This libidinal aspect of herself, from which she successfully disassociates while working at the law firm, or in conversation with Iliana, overpowers her in the darkness of the house's basement, symbolizing an aspect of both her own unconscious and that of her extended family who suffer from the same complexes but to a milder extent. (73)

Marina's realization that she is unable to assimilate into mainstream society because of her Afro-Dominican heritage spurs her nervous breakdown. Her rejection of a black identity and its relationship to her mental illness reveal the extremity of her identity crisis as she realizes that she is viewed as a black woman in the United States. By the novel's end, there is still no glimmer of hope for Marina whose desperation to claim agency over her life and body manifests in an attempt to commit suicide. Marina remains stagnant having succumbed to her unstable mental state and not having reclaimed the missing pieces of her past needed to forge a more complete identity and exercise agency in her life.

Pérez further complicates the relationship between race, home and identity development in her portrayal of Iliana. Iliana is one of the darkest of her siblings and the most disillusioned with the racism she finds as a college student in Ithaca, New York. As the only daughter to go to college, Iliana experiences isolation and racism so extreme that she eventually decides to take a leave of absence from school:

For a year and a half she had lived in a town whose pristine appearance had deceived her into believing, because she had wanted desperately to believe, that, having entered into the company of the elite, she would never again suffer hunger or abuse. She had clung to this belief despite hearing the word ‘NIGGER’ erupt from the lips of strangers... (71)

Iliana hoped that by entering into an upper-class environment she would be able to avoid the dangers associated with life on the margins of American society. However, Iliana learns that although she has been admitted through the gates of an elite institution and allowed access to an education that would ultimately help to free her from poverty, classism and racism deny her access to her peers’ social circle.

However, as one of the darkest members of her family, Iliana’s ultimate disillusionment with white Americans is not the same sentiment felt by the rest of her family. In a discussion that begins with Marina asking her sister if she had found a blue-eyed boyfriend yet, both sisters reveal their attitudes on black Americans and how they identify their selves racially:

‘You know how black men are.’

‘No, Marina. Tell me.’

‘They’re lazy as shit and undependable.’

‘You’ve been watching too much TV,’ Iliana snapped.

‘TV, my ass. Look at all your brothers.’

‘Look at yourself. You’re suffering from the same thing they are, thinking anything lighter must be better.’

‘Give me a break, Iliana. How many black people are at your school?’

Iliana whirled around to face her sister. ‘What are you saying? That blacks are inferior? Is that what you think about yourself?’

‘I’m Hispanic, not black.’

‘What color is your skin?’

‘I’m Hispanic!’ (38)

The two sisters each choose separate racial identities partly based on the experiences they have had in the United States. While Iliana feels connected to black Americans because she has experienced the same racism affecting them, Marina rejects any association with a black identity and opts for a Hispanic identification.³

In his article “Triple Consciousness?: Afro-Latinos on the Color Line” Juan Flores’ concept of triple-consciousness illuminates the challenges of Afro-Latinos like Iliana and Marina who must negotiate a multifaceted identity encompassing the separate identifications of Americans and the often-conflicting identities of blacks and Latinos:

In seeking to find a place in US culture and society, there is at work in the experience of many Afro-Latinos, a pull in two directions at once – that of the nationality or Latino pan-ethnicity, and that of blackness and the realities of US African American life. Might we view this, again in reference to Dubois’s indelible image, as an experience of ‘triple-consciousness,’ a dual striving which compounds and further complicates that of US black folk? (3)

Iliana is more grounded in the reality of her surroundings, which comes through in her racial consciousness and her self-identification with African-Americans. Her choice to pursue higher education despite the remonstrations of her parents who were unaccustomed to women attending college also proves her ability to navigate the American landscape more successfully than her mother and sisters.

The traits that Iliana shares with her mother are in part what will eventually help her to succeed in the United States. Iliana inherits Aurelia's preternatural powers and although she doesn't understand them, they help to keep her connected to the Dominican Republic, her past, and her family. While away at school, Iliana begins hearing her mother's voice during the night. By using her powers, Aurelia is able to communicate with Iliana despite their distance and keeps her informed of family events and recounts memories of the Dominican Republic:

There, in the attic room of the university whose hilltop location contrived to make her forget the rest of the world and whose courses disclaimed life as she had known it, making her feel invisible, the voice reassured Iliana of her own existence and kept her rooted. (4)

Isolated at an elite university with no connection to the reality of her life experiences, Iliana's only solace is the voice of her mother, which affirms her identity. Because of the preternatural gifts inherited from Aurelia, Iliana retains a stronger connection to her mother's past than her other siblings, which keeps her grounded in New York. Although many of her family members have a difficult time surviving in New York, Iliana will not only survive but thrive in the United States.

The difference between Iliana and her family is repeatedly noted throughout the story. In addition to her family members remarking on the intellectually curious nature that drove her to pursue

academic interests despite being female, her uncommon character is marked onto her body as a male and female gender duality. This is first noticed when Iliana is mistaken for a transvestite by two gay men who watch her stride down a street in Manhattan. At a later point in the novel, her brother Gabriel remarks that if she wasn't his sister, he "wouldn't know if [she] were a man trying to look like a woman or a woman trying to be a man" (107). Because of the reactions that Iliana receives from strangers and family members alike, she begins to question her femininity. Chancy interjects that, "Iliana's doubts are a reflection of her family (and culture's) inability to accept that women can construct their identities beyond male, heterosexual economies of desire. Though Iliana may be lesbian or bisexual (or neither), she is made to doubt herself, but this is also her opportunity to create for herself an identity of her own making rather than one imposed" (Chancy 70). An unfixed gender and sexual identity manifests itself onto Iliana's body as proof of her ability to cross the boundaries of prescribed gender roles, transgress borders existing for other migrants and challenge the notion that she cannot travel freely within American public space⁴. This ability to travel outside of these borders allows Iliana the space to further her identity development and forge a new identity distinctly different from her mother and sisters.

Due to her own failure at successfully navigating the American landscape and fulfilling Dominican expectations for women, Marina is keenly aware of a marked difference between Iliana and her other female family members. She suspects that Iliana has a dual-gendered sexuality, and her mental illness exacerbates her suspicion and develops it into the belief that Iliana's difference is marked onto her body by the existence of both female and male genitalia. Marina's suspicion of her sister's dual sexuality is fuelled by the characteristics that she believes give Iliana more in common with her brothers than her sisters:

She was as self-seeking as a man and, like Vicente, had abandoned home when she'd been needed most. Since her return, she had rarely concerned herself with the problems

of her siblings. She was as indifferent as Tico, as confident about her opinions as Gabriel, as volatile as Caleb. Overall, she behaved more like her brothers and shared few of the personality traits of her sisters. (277)

Marina's precarious mental state intensifies her initial misgivings and turns them into full-fledged paranoia that leads her to sexually assault Iliana in an effort to discover what Marina perceives as an internal phallic power that marks Iliana as different from herself. However, it is ironically not a masculine power, the only type of power that Marina is capable of imagining within a patriarchal construct, but a legacy of female power that provides Iliana with the resources to navigate the American landscape and transgress the boundaries that continue to trap her sisters.

Unlike her sisters, Iliana successfully carries home on her back and remains centered despite her marginalization within the United States. Marina sexually assaults her in an attempt to forcefully displace Iliana from her body and home. It is Marina's desire to render Iliana homeless in the same way that she and Rebecca are, disconnected and lacking control over their bodies. Initially after she rapes her sister, Marina's goals begin to come to fruition as Iliana starts to question reality and feel dislocated from her family's home. The feelings of ambivalence and displacement from home overcome her as she becomes sick in the kitchen, "Her primary thought was that she wanted to go home. Every spasm of her body, every tremor and heave only reminded her that she was already there" (291). The trauma of her violation causes her to disassociate herself from her body. Now viewing her body as an unfixed and unstable entity, Iliana perceives herself to be invisible to her family, "Not once had any of them focused eyes on her. Their failure to have done so convinced her that her sister had effectively thrust her to the extremes of their peripheral sight where she was glimpsed, if at all, as no more than an abstraction" (290). Her dislocation from her body creates an ambivalent relationship to the home that she was once centered in.

In a final confrontation, fittingly with her father, at the novel's end, Iliana is able to harness the strength that she will need to prevail over the atrocities committed against her at home. After returning late at night on the day after she was assaulted, Papito unmercifully beats Iliana for breaking his curfew and consequently implicating herself to be a promiscuous woman. Assaulted first by a woman and then by a man for the crime of being a woman who does not stay in her prescribed *place* but instead crosses boundaries into unknown territory, Iliana immediately despises her father and inwardly reclaims her body and the right to control it, "*I may have been molded from your flesh but this body is mine and mine alone*" (313).

Iliana begins to accept home for all of the good and bad that it encompasses after she recognizes that her father has terrorized his family with fear over the years in order to hide his own. This new acceptance allows her to feel centered by enabling her to carry home on her back when she leaves, "She would leave no memories behind. All of them were her self. All of them were home" (321). She forges a new identity based on a concept of home that allows her to carry her memories, homeland, and legacy everywhere she goes.

Iliana decides to return to college; however, she now understands that her decision to leave does not mean that she is abandoning her family, but instead that she is able to stay connected to her home despite the physical distance. The trauma inflicted by her own sister, leads to Iliana's revelation that all of her memories, no matter how horrific, are a part of her identity and inseparable from her definition of home. Iliana's departure from her family and home signifies that she will continue to forge a new identity that will give her the ability to thrive within the United States.

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¹ See Turits for a comprehensive exploration of the history of the Dominican Republic as it evolved from the first European colony in the Americas into a modern nation under the rule of Rafael Trujillo.

² For theoretical discussions on the construction of Diaspora and transnational frameworks, see Appadurai, Hall, Gilroy and Davies.

³ See Duany for an analysis of the complexities of Dominican-American racial identity.

⁴ For another reading on dual gender and ambiguous sexual identity as symbolic of boundary crossing in Latina literature, see Bost's interpretation of Judith Ortiz Cofer's short story "Marina" 204.