

**Identity and displacement in Jennine Capó Crucet's
Make Your Home Among Strangers
By Lori Oxford**

It has been suggested that one of humanity's basic motivations is a desire to belong and to consider oneself socially connected (Walton and Cohen 82). The psychological need to feel like part of a group or a member of a tribe is fulfilled not only when one is physically in the presence of other people but also when one feels "at home" in the world. With this in mind, we will examine how Cuban-American writer Jennine Capó Crucet's 2015 semi-autobiographical novel *Make Your Home Among Strangers* addresses issues surrounding one's community, one's home, one's people, and one's own personal identity, all to express the difficulties in "belonging" when one is displaced, particularly when that displacement is multiple. Lizet Ramirez, the novel's protagonist and narrator, is the 18-year-old daughter of working-class Cuban immigrants in Hialeah, a predominantly Spanish-speaking Miami suburb. Lizet differentiates herself from her family not merely by attending college but by selecting an elite liberal arts institution in upstate New York, the fictitious Rawlings College, modeled after Ivy League institutions like Cornell (where Capó Crucet herself studied), which proves to be as distant culturally as it is geographically from her tropical home. *Make Your Home Among Strangers* is an academic Bildungsroman of sorts, a narrative in which the protagonist seeks an environment to which she can belong, even as her Self is in constant flux, adapting to fit in with the shifting realities around her.

Sociologist Philip Kasnitz explores ideas of belonging, of whether we all have a right to feel as though we possess and are a part of "a physical and political space for 'our' people—even if that peoplehood comes about through [...] an act of imagination," asking: "[w]hat does it mean to feel 'at home' in a family, a neighborhood, or a country?" (881). Although Lizet never articulates exactly the question posed by Kasnitz, she struggles with these issues of belonging, even before she leaves the place where she grew up. Her displacement throughout the novel is multiple, and each aspect marginalizes her further:

- Lizet belongs to the Cuban-American community in south Florida, a group of immigrants and descendants of recent immigrants who rely on a discourse of exile, given their inability to travel to the island that they call home, regardless of where they were born;
- throughout high school she was an overachiever in an institution that had earned national attention for extreme underperformance; while there, she not only earned top marks in her classes but also was involved in extracurricular activities from student government to cheerleading;
- she is a young woman from a subtropical climate and a group that celebrates its tropical culture, studying in gray, frozen upstate New York, where she witnesses snow fall from the sky for the first time;
- she is a working-class first-generation college student in a population of mostly wealthy legacy students, a newcomer who knows nothing of institutional expectations and practices such as advising, tutoring centers, work-study opportunities, or plagiarism policies;
- while at Rawlings, Lizet undergoes a series of transformations—some deliberate, others less so—that send her back to her Miami home as an Other, now viewed by her community and her family as culturally, intellectually, linguistically, and socially different.

Lizet's multiple displacements—some self-imposed, others inexorably assigned to her by her circumstances—prod her to challenge her own notions of identity, questioning the role that Home plays in them: is it a place? A feeling? Throughout the novel, Lizet seems to seek little more than the fulfillment that comes with a sensation of belonging. Social psychologist Tyler Stillman suggests that “the human strategy for survival depends on belonging” and that “social exclusion, more than uncertainty, could threaten people at such a basic level that it would impair their sense of meaningful existence” (250). With this in mind, it is unsurprising that Lizet grows more frustrated and confused when her efforts only accentuate what differentiates her from the communities in which she so desperately wants to be included.

Although Lizet's parents are figures on a secondary plane within the novel, they experienced their own displacement process as Cubans who fled the island for south Florida. Lizet's father was a *Marielito*, one of the 135,000 Cubans who left the island during the Mariel Boatlift in 1980, and her mother arrived in similar circumstances a few months later. Although both grew up in Cuba, they met for the first time in the US, where Lizet and her sister were born. This detail in the biography of Lizet's family is a significant one: because of birthright citizenship Lizet is born a US citizen, but she is certainly viewed as Other anywhere outside south Florida, irrespective of the nationality printed on her passport. Her parents' story, at least as they tell it, is such a common one that it evokes stereotype: two Cubans, stifled by economic conditions and a dearth of opportunities, flee for the dreamland of the north, where they make a family. However, they establish themselves in a place where virtually everyone else in their community is also Cuban or Cuban-American. They are surrounded by an almost ironic longing on the part of many to “go home” to a place that they have never seen, as well as a sometimes distorted nostalgia that romanticizes the reality they left behind. Lizet, like many others of her generation in Miami, has received stories about her family and their community while growing up, without her ever questioning the veracity of those tales. Her difficulty in belonging surfaces with her reinterpretation of these stories as she builds a life at Rawlings, with her decision to forge a future that diverges from her family's expectations, and with the social friction and sense of betrayal caused by her independence. Lizet is not Cuban and does not feel Cuban, but she was raised in a metropolis that is home to more Cubans than any other city in the world except Havana, in a place where Cubanness is next to godliness, and where exile culture and exile iconography take on a moral value.ⁱ

In *The Politics of Home*, Jan Duyvendak examines the sense of belonging and feeling at home, that can persist even in the midst of such histories. He suggests that “nostalgia is not necessarily problematic, so long as we understand that nostalgia says more about contemporary society than it does about the past” (107). For Lizet's community, the present dwells so completely on the past that the two appear virtually indistinguishable. Although the younger Lizet was never able to articulate it, she grew up feeling out of place in her society, multiply marginalized by feeling at least partly Cuban outside of Cuba, a not-quite-American living in the US, and also an overachiever in a family (and in a derelict school system) that neither celebrates academic achievements nor encourages her to pursue them. Her first few weeks at the renowned Rawlings College reveal to her the degree to which her Ivy League present clashes with her past at a squalid public school.

When Lizet unintentionally plagiarizes on an assignment at Rawlings, an academic integrity committee meets with her to determine the consequences. Although the committee members conclude that what Lizet submitted is an egregious case of plagiarism, they agree not to

apply the usual punishment—expulsion—after they inquire into her academic experiences before her arrival at the prestigious institution:

The committee said it was taking into consideration the fact that I'd gone to Hialeah Lakes High. Several times during my hearing, they'd referred to it as "an underserved high school," which I figured out was a nice way of saying a school so shitty that the people at Rawlings had read an article about it in *The New Yorker*. They'd expected me to know about this article—*You mean to tell us you aren't familiar with the national attention your former school is receiving?* [...] I'd swallowed and told the committee no, I was not aware. (11-12)

It becomes clear to the committee and to the reader that Lizet has made her way to such an illustrious school not as a result of careful grooming, as is surely the case for many of her Rawlings classmates, but on sheer personal merit. In a meeting later in the year, when they explain to her what her academic probation means, one professor reveals that, apparently, no administrator or staff member with whom they had spoken at her high school could tell them anything about the school's code of academic integrity, and derisively snorts: "one [counselor] went so far as to say that none existed" (95), while a dean explains to Lizet that they could deduce that Hialeah Lakes "didn't foster something that we're calling a culture of success" (96). Lizet is so unfamiliar with the academic jargon used by the committee that they have to rephrase their assessment in order for her to understand: "what [we're] trying to say is we believe you sincerely didn't know better. You haven't been given, at any point in your academic career prior to coming here, the *tools* to know better. So yes, you are guilty, but you are also blameless" (96). Lizet, eager to please the authority figures seated across from her, further corroborates the committee's estimation of her as an ingenuous newbie when she immediately signs the contract of her probation without so much as a glance at its contents. She regrets not reading it before signing, not because she is hesitant about the conditions of the contract but instead because of the unworldliness and naïveté that she has conveyed to the Rawlings administrators with her blind acceptance. Her desire to feel "at home" in this academic environment results instead in an inadvertent vulnerability and subsequent embarrassment that underscore her difference rather than her belonging.

Lizet's ingenuous approach to the workings of the academic world is further demonstrated by the fact that, even absent any sort of academic pedigree, she presumes to apply at Rawlings College, an imposing institution with a moneyed student body. Rather than receiving congratulations from her working-class family upon her acceptance, though, she is hit with accusations of betrayal, arrogance, and even selfishness. During a moment of discomfort at Rawlings, she remembers: "my dad kept saying to me, You betrayed us, this is a betrayal. He said it so much that the word stopped meaning anything—*betray betray betray betray betray betray*" (47). (Ironically, her father's accusations of betrayal come as he is in the process of leaving Lizet's mother and moving out of the family home, forcing the family to relocate from Hialeah to Little Havana, where rent is cheaper.) Despite this lack of support from her family, Lizet arrives hopeful at Rawlings, only to find that she has even less in common with the affluent community there: a homogeneous student body with collections of hundred-dollar mittens and histories of luxury vacations with their families. The differences are not solely economic, though, but cultural and linguistic, as well. At one point, she looks through her roommate's belongings and finds DVDs of *The Big Lebowski* and *The Sound of Music*, which she describes as "two other movies everyone at Rawlings but me had seen" (85). Her use of the word "other" in this description implies that these

two films are simply part of a list of cultural references to which Lizet has had no access. Again, she feels the sting of being different when the girls in her residence hall spot a picture of her boyfriend back home, making a silly gesture: “The girls on my floor would ask, Is that a *gang sign*?” (65). Her fellow Rawlings students’ assumptions about brown people include other asinine instances of ignorance, such as when one supercilious hall mate mentions to Lizet that “she’d read *The House on Mango Street* in AP English. She said she knew about *the kinds of relationships that plagued my community*” (65). The book to which Lizet’s neighbor refers, a canonical piece in Latina/o literature in the US, depicts members of the Mexican-American community around Chicago, not Cuban-Americans in Miami, and her assumption that all US Latinos are the same is a condescending one.ⁱⁱ

Capó Crucet’s descriptions of Lizet’s experience as a working-class Cuban-American in the Rawlings community exemplify the young woman’s limited access to cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu theorizes that cultural capital, as a principal determining factor in social life and social order, comes in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (Longhofer 172). If, as Bourdieu suggests, “one’s accent or dialect is an example of embodied cultural capital,” then Lizet not only arrives at Rawlings culturally powerless, but also returns home with diminished cultural capital, as her speech now reflects patterns that are from neither here nor there, leaving her in a linguistic liminal space (Longhofer 172). The idea of objectified cultural capital is even more evident, as it signals wealth and a breadth of opportunities to which such wealth can buy access, all of which is well out of the reach of Lizet and the social groups with whom she identifies. For the third, perhaps the most pernicious for Lizet, the institutionalized cultural capital represents “credentials and qualifications such as degrees or titles that symbolize cultural competence and authority” (Longhofer 169). Her utter lack of involvement in the realm of institutionalized cultural capital results in her very nearly being expelled from Rawlings College as a consequence of the unintentional plagiarism incident that serves to underline the substandard preparation that she received in her secondary schooling. Lizet is an honest, hard-working student, but she does plagiarize, even though she has no knowledge of the fact that she has done so. As outlined earlier, Lizet’s error nearly costs her the opportunity to continue her studies at Rawlings, but her sincerity and obvious innocence convince administrators to keep her in the student body—not to mention their presumed awareness of the optics of expelling an economically disadvantaged student of color—and Lizet remains at Rawlings. Her scarce cultural capital exacerbates the hardships with which she is saddled, which become so burdensome that she very nearly crumbles beneath them on more than one occasion.

For instance, the reader begins to understand Lizet’s scarce cultural capital during her first visit home after leaving several months earlier for upstate New York. As she arrives in Miami, taking advantage of her institution’s Thanksgiving break, she notes: “I was home for a holiday we didn’t really celebrate” (7). One of the myths that surrounds this stereotypically American holiday is that it serves as a holiday for everyone, regardless of ethnic background, religious beliefs, or other traditions, but for Lizet and her family Thanksgiving simply represents a longer weekend. Lizet decides to surprise her family by flying home for the holiday, knowing that they aren’t expecting her until the semester’s end nearly a month later. A snowstorm forces her to spend a night in an airport hotel, though, and she arrives on Thanksgiving evening instead of the day before, noting that her new arrival time is “a good hour after most of East Coast America would’ve finished their turkey and potatoes and apple pie and all the other all-American things all Americans eat on Thanksgiving” (8). On top of all this, despite the considerable effort and cost that Lizet has to shoulder in order to surprise her family on the holiday, she is greeted with dismay. Her mother

scolds her: “I was looking forward to getting you at the airport your first time home!” and “I was gonna bring you flowers, that first time! You stole that from me!” (26). Her reception of her daughter contradicts the picture-perfect vision of a peaceful giving of thanks and celebration of family on this most American of holidays. While it is evident that Thanksgiving is no guarantee of a peaceful festivity for any family, regardless of origin, for Lizet this simply underlines the difference between her own reality and that which she imagines for the rest of the country, especially her advantaged classmates.

The enormous differences that Lizet notes between herself and the rest of the Rawlings community serve to solidify the cultural and economic breaches that keep her marginalized. Even when the rich white women in her residence hall do treat her with interest, they regard her difference as a curious detail that defines her rather than celebrating her uniqueness among them. Lizet notices this but accepts it without complaint, as when she describes her roommate, Jillian:

her worst offense (which I wasn't even sure *counted* as an offense) was that, without fail, she introduced me to anyone she knew—the softball girls, the friends she'd brought along from high school—this way: *This is my roommate, Liz. She's Cuban.* Her doing this bothered me but I didn't know why exactly, so I kept telling myself: It's not like it isn't *true*, what would I even *want* her to say? (88)

It is important to remember that Lizet is not, in fact, Cuban, nor does she identify herself that way. Having such an important aspect of her identity imposed on her demonstrates a near-complete lack of agency on her part, or rather a denial of Lizet's agency on the part of her rich, white, English-speaking roommate. She is neither indecisive nor inactive—her stellar performance in high school attests to this—but she finds herself relegated to the margins of a highly structured society by people whose very lack of malice, intention, and self-awareness makes it all the more inimical.

It is not only other students at Rawlings who inadvertently disenfranchise Lizet; indeed, well-intentioned people of authority manage to emphasize her difference even as they intend to celebrate it. For example, Lizet describes an experience in her English class, in which she feels singled out as the only Hispanic student during a class discussion of magical realism:

the TA had made weirdly consistent eye contact with me during the two class meetings where he was in charge and where we discussed it. He held his palm out to me at the end of every point he made and kept saying, *Right?* —his assumption being, I guess, that I knew what he was talking about because pronouncing my last name required the rolling of an R. At one point he referred to magical realism as my *literary tradition* and asked me to explain that concept to my classmates. He held *both* his hands out to me then, like I was supposed to drop my genetically allotted portion of magical realism into them. (177)

To make matters worse, after the TA has made clear to the entire class that he expects Lizet to understand magical realism, a complex literary tradition, given what he assumes must be her cultural background, she finds herself cornered, with no way out but embarrassment: “I tried my best. I said, I don't know if we have any traditions like that, sir. My parents don't really ... *read*” (177). Lizet's admission of a truth like this while surrounded by legacy students, particularly in such an imposing setting, makes clear that this was the only option left open to her by the unwitting TA. Ironically, in this instance it is *his* ignorance and naive expectations, even more than Lizet's

inexperience, that result in her marginalization as an Other. She is further bruised by his reaction, “a short laugh,” and recounts: “I knew from that tight-rope smile, from the slow way he talked me through what he presumed I meant to say, that he thought I was an idiot” (177). Rather than being celebrated as a star student who has endured impossible educational odds and wound up in the Ivies, Lizet is made to feel that a paternalizing and misinformed authority figure understands her and her reality better than she herself can. The assumptions about her and her identity, made by those in positions of influence, serve to further deny her agency, despite the fact that those assumptions are patently untrue.

If we consider the life that Lizet led before beginning college, or what Bourdieu would identify as her *habitus*, her “ways of being, seeing, acting, and thinking,” then it becomes clear that her difficulties do not originate in her not having mastered the game, metaphorically speaking, but in the fact that the rules were never explained to her (Friedman). This evokes Bourdieu’s elaboration of *cleft habitus*, which Friedman explains as “when [a person]’s ‘conditions of existence’ change so dramatically [...] that they feel their dispositions losing coherency and experience a sense of self torn by dislocation and internal division.” Lizet’s time at Rawlings results in an internal culture clash through which she does not know how to maneuver. On each of her visits home to Hialeah, she notes successively greater differences in how she sees her community, her family, her life there, and even herself. When she arrives for winter break, her mother picks her up at the Miami airport, and Lizet notices her mother’s ostentatious costume jewelry, ill-fitting clothes, and blustering manner. She confesses, acutely and unexpectedly self-aware:

I was shocked to find that it did not feel good to be home [...]. I’d seen my mother in that moment as not my mother; I saw her as a tacky-looking woman, as the Cuban lady the girls on my floor would’ve seen, alone in an airport. And I did not like that I suddenly had this ability to see her that way, isolated from our shared history. [...] If she looked that way to me, what did I look like to her? (139-140)

Lizet, conflicted, finds herself saddled with the “double vision” to which Capó Crucet refers in a 2015 interview: “you leave home and you come back having a kind of perspective that you didn’t have before, that in some way problematizes your relationship with your family, [...] a sort of double vision about them, of who you are and how you grew up, that can be very painful” (Capó Crucet interview). Lizet grapples with this reality of multiple displacement causing her to stand out as an Other, despite her having earned her place at the university and grown up around her family and Miami community. After the airport incident with her mother, she finds herself becoming anxious over a sudden angry rant from her cousin, wondering what her own reaction implied: “[Did it] mean that I’d already been gone too long, that I was already used to nice, mostly quiet people like Jillian, who showed they were mad by folding their laundry extra sharply and clearing their throats while they did it?” (150). She recognizes her dual reality and struggles with how it problematizes her existence, particularly in one realization that she makes after a Miami neighbor’s hateful comments highlight the vast gulf that now exists between herself and the community where she had lived: “Victor has stuck in my memory like a splinter [because] he was the last person to talk to me before this double vision became the *only* way through which I saw anything” (345). Lizet knows—or is learning—how to navigate the duality. The problem is not a total lack of familiarity with the spheres in which she exists; rather, it is a feeling that she does not belong in any of them.

In addition to detecting changes in her interactions with others, Lizet notes that her time at Rawlings has led to her inadvertently acquiring new tendencies of language usage, which leads to malicious mocking from her sister back in Little Havana. In one case, Lizet reacts to some news by saying it's awesome, which results in her sister's surprise: "Awesome! she parroted back, her voice high and in her nose. [...] *Awe-some, awe-some!* What other stupid words are you picking up at that school?" (31). Later, Lizet recounts to her sister a chance encounter in Miami with a former schoolmate:

I told Leidy that seeing that girl there was depressing. I think my exact words were, *It just really bummed me out.* She'd said, What the fuck is *bum you out?* Jesus, you sound *so fucking white.* I'd said, What does that even mean, stop saying that, and she'd said, Then shut the fuck up already, before storming from the living room [...]. I'd hurt her feelings without realizing it, which, based on my time at Rawlings, felt to me more *white* than anything else I'd done since being back. (147)

In Lizet's reflection, being white is a reference to the people who surround her at Rawlings College and is not actually descriptive of a skin color, or not *only* of a skin color. "Whiteness" here is simply a summary of all the aspects of privilege that Lizet has seen in action, that have insulted her and underlined her status as an Other, and that have worked to deny her approaching society's center of power.

Although Rawlings College is fictitious, as it is presented in the novel it is an evident representation of any of a number of real-life elite (or even elitist) institutions, which lends plausibility to the narrative. Capó Crucet adds another element of realism by weaving this period in Lizet's life around an actual historical event, which appears in the novel with names only slightly altered. On Lizet's first day back in Miami, Thanksgiving Day in 1999, she finds her arrival completely overshadowed by the discovery of a six-year-old Cuban boy clinging to an inner tube just off Florida's coast. This event, an unmistakable reference to the 1999 Elián González affair, galvanizes and polarizes the Cuban-American community, prompting Lizet to take sides merely to still feel that she belongs somewhere. In the novel, the boy is named not Elián González but Ariel Hernández. Just like his real-life counterpart, Ariel is housed temporarily in Miami with a great-uncle and a cousin whom he'd never met but whose vehemence in insisting that he be allowed to remain there seems to rely more on political anti-Castro animosities than any genuine interest in the child's wellbeing. When Lizet returns a few weeks later for Christmas, anxious because of her sense of not belonging in her own community, she is relieved to see "signs down the whole block, saying WELCOME and YOU ARE HOME," and she says: "I blinked and breathed through the rush in my chest, then remembered who the signs were really for"—not for her, but for Ariel (140). The ironies here are double: Lizet was born and grew up around Miami but feels unwelcome and unwanted, while the boy, who had never before left Cuba, spoke no English, and arrived with no documentation, is received by her neighbors with open arms. The parallels and perpendicularities between Lizet's anonymous struggles of self and the orphaned boy's very public predicament weave together a narrative of homecoming and home-leaving, a tale of intersectional displacements that establish identity from within and without. The story is marked by Lizet's learning to exercise agency in defining herself, even as her community mourns having the boy forcibly removed to be taken "home" to Cuba now that the community has assigned south Florida as a home to young Ariel/Elián. In their study of Miami, Alejandro Portes and Ariel C. Armony assert that "[a]s a city of immigrants, the questions, 'Where do I belong?' and 'Where

is my home?’ are ingrained in [Miami’s] culture” (44), indicating that the dilemma shared by Lizet and Ariel is not unique to them. One crucial difference between Lizet’s and Ariel’s struggles with the issue of belonging is that Ariel’s circumstances must all be determined for him by others, while Lizet is burdened with the responsibility and consequences of working toward belonging, even if she does that work alone. Exercising agency in making such a decision necessarily means accepting the blame when the community that is not chosen feels rejected by the decision. Although it is clear that Ariel will “belong” whether he remains in Miami or returns to Cuba, Lizet’s multiple displacements—social, geographical, and interpersonal-- combine to make belonging seem out of reach for her, despite her efforts.

Let’s return to Philip Kasinitz’s question about what it means to feel ‘at home.’ Capó Crucet’s novel does not provide an answer to that question. Instead, it elicits others: *where* and *what* is home? Lizet Ramirez never encounters her own answers, either, although she gradually learns to be comfortable with her uncertainties and moves on to be a successful scientist whose research calls for a nomadic existence. Jennine Capó Crucet’s multiply displaced protagonist, as well as the Elián González figure stranded in Miami, are both forced to explore these notions of home as they both follow the urging of the novel’s title, making their homes among strangers, whether or not those strangers share their language, their aspirations, or their blood.

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ⁱ Geographer and urban planner Jan Nijman describes the moral value assigned by Miami Cubans to *cubanidad* / “Cubanness:” “While Cubans are not a monolithic community, the exile mindset seems pervasive. It

implies a continued focus on Cuba as homeland: an imagined future where Cuba's liberation and the possibility of return figure prominently; and a conviction that to realize this future involves a struggle. Some would argue that this struggle, *la lucha*, has been nothing less than a "holy war" (202).

ⁱⁱ This incident is not the first time that such an assumption rears its head in Capó Crucet's fiction. In her 2009 short story, "How to Leave Hialeah," the narrator describes her experience after moving from Florida to the northern USA—not unlike Lizet's path in *Make Your Home Among Strangers*—and recounts, apostrophizing her tale: "You have never felt more Cuban in your life, mainly because for the first time, you are consistently being identified as *Mexican or something*" (160).