Words Tattooed in Their Veins: Bilingualism, Regional Vernacular, and Ethnic Identities in Angie Cruz's *Soledad* and *Let It Rain Coffee*

by Jessica Daves

> *My father died today. I remember when he used to say, Olivia, things don't always happen the way we want them to, but when they do we should be grateful. He came to my bed and talked to me for a long time. He talked to me like he did when I was a child, when his voice was clear and melodic, his hair still dark, when he only had wrinkles around his eyes. He held my hand and patted it softly with every word, as if his words could be tattooed in my veins…*
> *Soledad*, 193

In August of 2017, Simon Romero of the *New York Times* published the article, "Spanish Thrives in the U.S. Despite an English-Only Drive." In it, he states that, despite multiple states enacting English-only laws and then President Trump's campaign promise to require English before obtaining a green card, the United States "exemplifies how the movement of people throughout the Spanish-Speaking world is taking the [English] language in new directions." One of these many directions can be seen in Latino literature published in the United States by authors that identify, at least tangentially, as American. Many of these works speak to the importance of Spanish to the heritage or identity of the authors and characters, either through explicit lamentations or through use of both of the authors' languages in their text. As the epigraph and title imply, words, both ours and others', can run deep within us. They become a part of who we are, and can affirm or problematize the identities we express or desire to express.

Angie Cruz's four novels published to date have received academic attention through a variety of lenses. Perhaps most popular is to read Cruz's work through a multicultural feminist lens; for example, Arbino reads *Dominicana* as a feminist bildungsroman.[1]" Many scholars have studied the portrayal of the female body in Cruz's novels, reading it as a metaphor for the immigrant experience (see Arce Alvarez[2]), or examining the erotic nature of the female body as a means of challenging patriarchal traditions (see Sterk[3]). Her portrayal of women and race is also often compared to other female Dominican or Caribbean authors, such as Nelly Rosario (see Méndez[4], Heredia[5], and Hey-Colón[6]), or Edwidge Danticat (see West[7]). Silence and reticence of communication is also a common lens, as it relates to motherhood (see Sandlín[8] and Herrera[9]) or mental illness (see Francis[10] and Mills[11]). Indeed, Cruz herself speaks to the importance of Dominican silence in the research for her novels in an interview with Ylce Irizarry in 2019: "I have to ask a lot of questions and then translate the silences" (Irizarry 69). However, much less attention has been placed on the way in which she does translate the silences, and the language(s) that she and her characters use to tell their stories. For example, while her first two novels, *Soledad* and *Let It Rain Coffee*, have garnered generally good reviews, she has also gotten criticism about her use of Spanish in them. *Kirkus*'s review of *Soledad* states that the novel "bleeds into unnecessary Spanish," and *Publishers Weekly*'s review of *Let It Rain Coffee* contends that without "a smattering of Spanish, the events of the novel can be hard to follow." Other reviews leave out entirely this interesting and crucial element of the novel in their reviews (Scone[12], *Kirkus LIRC* review[13]). In the same interview with Irizarry, Cruz asserts her own view of her language use: "My academic language is English, and I don't write in Spanish, but Spanish subtext is underneath, everywhere. With each book, I'm negotiating how to do it better" (Irizarry 71). In this article I argue that the

use of Spanish in Cruz's novels is neither unnecessary, nor is it an element of the novels that can be overlooked. Rather, Cruz uses Dominican Spanish as a key means of character development, enhancing explicit national identities for some characters and, for others, actually contradicting their explicitly stated identifications.

In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa published *Borderlands/La frontera*, in which she spoke to her own experience with her own bilingual "wild tongue" and its relationship to her identity:

> So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity - I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. (81)

These powerful words speak to this connection between language (and language choices) and identity. However, Anzaldúa's words come directly from her lived experiences - a multiracial, university-educated, lesbian, and poet born in 1942 in Texas and living along the border between the United States and Mexico much of her life. This multidimensional identity only tangentially intersects with those represented in Cruz's novels, and thus, using *Borderlands* as a sole source of theory for this work would limit and condense the broad diversity of Latinx experiences that exists, homogenizing a group experience that is in no way singular.

It is for this reason that I turn to Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien's *Weird English* (2004), an oft-cited work on bilingualism in literature that aims to examine a much wider array of English language literature being written in what Ch'ien calls "weird English." Ch'ien defines "weird English as English that blends one or more languages in a way that is often and purposefully unintelligible except to specific minority in-groups, and in her book, she examines multiple in-groups and multiple ways in which "weird English" can appear, widening, rather than homogenizing, the study of bilingualism in literature. One of her aims in studying these multilingual works and their language(s) is to emphasize and show how the "use of weird English is a calculated effort . . . a conscious appropriation of hybridity" (5). This conscious and calculated effort is important to show that part of the aesthetic of a multilingual work is its "weird English," and therefore this inclusion of other languages is worthy of further academic study. In addition to the aesthetic value of weird English, she asserts, "varieties of English are codes for communities – the less orthodox and more subversive, the stronger the impact" (5). The use of weird English marks a book and its author as part of a group of outsiders, but it is a political and social choice to subvert the status quo of monolingualism; by using weird English, the monolingual English-dominant reader is actually the one outside of the community of readers. Indeed, Ch'ien states that this inaccessibility is purposeful: "The best uses of weird English are terrible in their intelligibility, because they demonstrate that certain lives are linguistically disenfranchised and thus that some communities are excluded from mainstream discourse" (11). This political component to the language allows her to study "how weird-English writers become conscious of language as a practice of their ethnicity" (20). Despite the immense value of this work in multilingual literature studies, one of the limitations of her work is that she focuses almost exclusively on the authors, rather than the characters of a given text. I would argue that, in the case of Angie Cruz, the diverse dialects and multiple varieties of "Weird English" speak more to the characters than to the author, as I will show below.

If language is a political choice, as Ch'ien asserts, it is also an identity choice. Romaine, in her chapter titled "Identity and Multilingualism," identifies language as "an important boundary-marking function between groups" that "once lost . . . is far less easily recoverable than other

identity markers that might stand in its stead" (9-10). Language becomes the way to identify a person's in-group. However, identity is not only bestowed by *using* a language; it can also arise from *refusal* to use a minority or a stigmatized language. Abandoning a language can be a way of "distancing oneself from the negative identity" of that language, or, in more extreme cases, "an act of survival or self-defense in situations where they feel threatened" (11).

Dyer, in her chapter, "Language and Identity," expands upon this idea that language is imbued with the characteristics of its speakers with its discussion of indexicality, in which "a whole language or just one linguistic form can become an index of, or a pointer to, a speaker's social identity, as well as of typical activities of that speaker" (102). In other words, "listeners sometimes associate a particular dialect with a corresponding set of social characteristics" (103). Spanglish itself, and the stigma associated with it, is an example of this phenomenon. Stavans's *Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language* notes that Spanglish has often been associated with a lower education (3), and Morales, in *Living in Spanglish: The Search for Latino Identity in America*, notes that, "[t]o almost everyone, Spanglish is an ugly word. In its most literal sense, Spanglish refers to a bastardized language, an orphan, a hybrid, a mule" (4). This shows how indexicality can work against the speaker in that a dialect and language can be used to mark him/her as inferior. In cases such as these, Giles's Speech Accommodation Theory becomes relevant. Giles maintains that speakers can and do actively and consciously change or adapt their speech to "align themselves or distance themselves from their interlocutors" (Dyer 104). Particularly important to this research is the "**agency** of speakers in their ability to manipulate linguistic resources available to them and the ability to actively project different identities through language with various interlocutors" (105, emphasis original). That is to say, first, that the decision to adapt one's language because of one's interlocutor is – or at a minimum *can* be – a conscious one, and that this speech accommodation means that the speaker has multiple patterns of speech depending on the identity desired or needed at the moment. It is in this way that Dyer notes that language "is considered to be *constitutive* of social identity . . . and is not merely a *reflection* of one's general social position" (106, emphasis original). Romaine echoes this in addressing Latino Spanglish in particular: "For some Latinos, Spanglish is more than just a habitual strategy of speaking to other bilinguals, it embodies the linguistic and cultural hybridity of its speakers" (21). Language *creates* identity; it does not merely reflect it. It is this idea of language as both reflective and creating identity that Cruz uses in both of her novels in developing the identities and allegiances of her characters.

Soledad (2001, Simon and Schuster) tells the story of college-age Soledad and her family of Dominican immigrants who live in Washington Heights, a typically Dominican neighborhood of New York City. Each chapter of the novel is divided into shorter vignettes that focus on different members of the family: Soledad, Flaca (her younger cousin), Olivia (Soledad's mother), Gorda (Olivia's sister and Flaca's mother), Victor (Olivia and Gorda's brother), and Doña Sosa (Olivia, Gorda, and Victor's mother). While the perspective of each character is presented in their vignettes, the narration varies throughout the book and across characters. Victor and Doña Sosa, the two characters that appear the least are narrated in subjective third person, as are the vignettes about Gorda, despite her increased presence in the novel. Flaca's vignettes are far more irregular. Towards the beginning of the novel, her sections appear in first person, directed not at the reader, but at her Tía Olivia. However, later in the novel, Flaca's vignettes shift to close third person, although they retain the character of Flaca's dialect. Similarly, Soledad's vignettes are also a mixture of first and subjective third person, although it is less clear to whom Soledad directs her first-person narration. However, Soledad's narration also includes background and reminders of

what had happened in the past ("A few weeks ago I receive (*sic*) this urgent phone call from my aunt Gorda"), which would be both redundant and unnecessary if Soledad were narrating to herself (11). The best conclusion is that Soledad, alone of all of the characters, is addressing the reader.

It is with this first-person narration directed towards the reader that we first meet Soledad, on her reluctant return home from college to Washington Heights. The reason for her reluctance very quickly becomes apparent: she despises the neighborhood, which she apologetically describes as "a war zone filled with cop killers, killer cops, crack dealers, gang members and lazy welfare mothers" (12). She fervently desires escape: "I know I should turn back while I still can, before anyone in my family sees me" (13). Soledad's disgust and disdain in her return home introduce the reader to her consistent desire to distance herself from her Dominican heritage. When in college, Soledad routinely tells her friends that she is from the Upper West Side, her means of "keeping nasty stereotypes of Washington Heights out of people's minds" (12). Ever since she left for college, she has done everything she can to pull back from things that would remind her and her peers that she is Dominican.

At this point in the novel, Soledad's disdain could be seen as stemming from class and status rather than heritage and ethnicity, as she describes Washington Heights rather than the island. However, as Soledad speaks to one of her Dominican-American neighbors, it becomes clear that her resistance is also to the island:

> You go home a lot? [Richie said.]
> What do you mean? [Soledad said.]
> Plátano land.
> I haven't been there in a while. But I remember it though. Sometimes I have nightmares about it, where I somehow land in Dominican Republic, and I have no papers to get out of the country, no extra clothes to wear and I need to go to the bathroom but the toilets don't flush. (137)

Her view of the island is no more favorable than her view of Washington Heights. First of all, in contrast to Richie, she does not see the Dominican Republic as home. Furthermore, her memories are mixed with nightmares, which have come to dominate her perception of the island, more important than her lived experiences of youth. For Soledad, despite a strong desire to travel the world, the island of her heritage has no appeal to her.

Although Soledad rejects her Dominican background, she does have an idea of the identity that she wants to embody. She loves to travel; indeed, part of her anger over having to return to her family is that, in doing so, she had to give up an apprenticeship in Spain. Her fantasy of Spain contrasts starkly with her nightmares of Dominican Republic:

> Finally I was offered the opportunity to travel far away to Europe, where I could taste grilled champiñones and tortillas españolas, leisurely sit at a café during siesta and drink strong espresso in front of an ancient church. (13)

When Soledad envisions herself on the island, she sees scarcity everywhere: no papers, no clothes, no working toilet. In contrast, Soledad sees herself assimilating completely to life as a European, sitting leisurely while eating local food. She belongs in Spain in a way that she cannot in Washington Heights, or in her native Dominican Republic.

Comparing Soledad's perspective of her job at a local art gallery to the perspective of her close Chicana friend, Caramel, provides a clearer idea of the world that Soledad lives in and how she identifies. Caramel is proud of her Hispanic heritage, and is highly skeptical of the lack of minority representation in the White-owned art gallery:

> Everything is white, the walls, the ceilings. She [Caramel] doesn't understand how I do it everyday. She says if she surrounded herself with work by mediocre artists all day she'd slit her wrists with frustration.
> What do you mean? I find it inspiring.
> When was the last time you saw a Latina artist in a gallery?
> I never thought about it like that. (66)

For Caramel, the lack of representation in the gallery is stifling. Caramel doesn't see herself represented in the art, but she also doesn't see herself as a patron or visitor of the gallery, leaving quickly because "God forbid they [the other patrons] see two spics in here, they might just start hiding their pocketbooks" (68). Caramel sees what Soledad is oblivious to: the gallery, in both representation and decor, is White. Because Soledad does not see herself as Latina, she has not noticed the lack of representation. Caramel also tells us why such a White institution has hired Soledad: "They hired you because you're not brown like me and you have Cooper Union as your passport" (68). Here, Caramel makes clear what Soledad has not explicitly said: Soledad looks and passes as White, not Hispanic. In her dreams of a European apprenticeship and in her job at a white/White art gallery, Soledad chooses to identify herself as White (American) rather than Hispanic, Dominican or Dominican-American.

The metaphor of a passport is also reflected in Soledad's use of both Spanish and English throughout the novel. Her English marks her as White, especially compared to her cousin, Flaca (see below). She speaks in precise, correct, even literary English: her neighborhood is a "war zone" about which she "embroiders" the truth, and when she arrives at 164th street, she is attacked and air conditioners "spit" at her (12-13). Soledad's language choices show education and a use of metaphor and personification that indicates that she has been able to read considerably, and she assimilates that reading into her way of speaking. Her elevated English style lifts and accents her White appearance. However, Soledad's use of Spanish is another example of Soledad's "passport." Much of the Spanish that appears in Soledad's vignettes appears in translation, for example with her aunt's description of her: "born con la pata caliente, feet burning to be anywhere but here" (11). Even when Soledad does not translate her words, they are still easily understandable: "Qué paso (*sic*)? I ask as I try to remember to breathe through my nose" (20). Soledad's Spanish is the most accessible in the novel for monolingual English speakers, allowing her to serve as a bridge between both the White world of her college (or her presumed readers) and the Hispanic world of her family. Furthermore, Soledad shows no shame in her use of Spanish - it is not the language but the heritage she despises.

Towards the end of the novel, Soledad's arrival in the Dominican Republic is the culminating moment of the important shift in her self-identity that had been developing over the past few weeks with her family. Upon her return home, Soledad had little desire to see the Dominican Republic, instead preferring to imagine herself in Spain. However, as she flies over the island, she is able to see the beauty of the island, which she describes as "a sequined dress" - feminine and elegant" (223). Her arrival at her family's house also proves her nightmares are not based in reality, as the house is clean, colorful, and "most comforting of all is that Cristina has a

bathroom with a working toilet" (224). There are even moments of familiarity, as she sees her own bedsheets on the beds, hand-me-downs from the family in the U.S. She still does not romanticize the island: in describing her surroundings, mango trees and plátanos (plantains) are mentioned just as much as apagones (blackouts) and strikes (229). Nevertheless, the trip allows her to see the vision her family has of the island, as "a place of rest, a place to live" (229). While she does not adore the island the way her family does, she finally understands its appeal.

Soledad's Spanish may increase slightly in the final chapters while she is on the island, but English still dominates her thoughts and narration. By expressing her final thoughts on the island using English, Soledad cements herself as more American than Dominican, or even Dominican-American. However, the novel ends with Olivia (re)naming Soledad; the mother takes Soledad from the water and lovingly explains the significance of the daughter's name. The fact that Soledad's Spanish name is highlighted in the last paragraph of the novel inextricably links Soledad and her heritage, and for the first time in the novel, Soledad does not shy away from this connection. At the end of her novel, Soledad is finally able to admit that her family is Dominican and, while that may not be who she is, she is ready to accept that is where she came from.

Of strong contrast to Soledad, Flaca, Soledad's 14-year-old cousin, is unique in the novel as the only member of the family that has not been to the Dominican Republic. Perhaps for this reason, Flaca's language distinction in the novel is less one between Spanish and English, but rather between Soledad's more literary, prescriptively correct English and Flaca's more casual, African-Americanized dialectical English. Consider the following quote, from the second paragraph of Flaca's first vignette:

> I mean I'll do anything to get myself out of this neighborhood 'cause no matter where I go it's as if Mami could watch me from the back of her head. And now Soledad is around to be Mami's spy. As if anyone should listen to Soledad after she went away and she didn't visit us since Christmas. What excuse she got? Not even Mother's Day did she come. Tía, you said it yourself how ungrateful Soledad is. You remember how everybody talk about her, how she dissed la familia. But Mami don't shut up about her. She's like, Flaca why can't you be more like her. As if I want to be more like her boring-ass. (26).

Soledad's English, as we saw previously, was educated and without a discernible accent or dialect other than Standard American English. Flaca, on the other hand, uses far more colloquial and clearly oral language. In this passage, Flaca is concerned only with her interlocutor, the currently mute and catatonic Tía Olivia.

Furthermore, Flaca's dialect is less mainstream, Standard English, and better described as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), as can be seen when she drops the auxiliary in "What excuse she got?" and the use of *don't* instead of *doesn't* in "But Mami don't shut up" (26). This is not to imply, however, that Flaca necessarily identifies as Black or Black Hispanic. Pessar, in *A Visa for a Dream*, points out that while the relationship between African Americans and Dominican-Americans in Washington Heights has historically been tense, "Dominican youth borrow elements of Afro-American culture and add them to their music, *language*, and dress" (31, emphasis added). It can therefore be argued that, rather than detracting from her Dominican heritage, Flaca's language mirrors the language of other Dominican immigrants and immigrant families around her. Her English marks her as belonging in Washington Heights far more than Soledad's English does.

While Flaca does not use much Spanish, what she does use deserves to be studied. In the paragraph quoted above, Flaca uses Spanish three times, and two of them are titles for her family members. Her third use is also related to family: specifically, "la familia." Flaca's Spanish is family-related, thus creating a strong tie between her family and her thoughts of Spanish. Flaca's dialect greatly contrasts to Soledad's "blanquita" speech; Flaca's oral, dialectical English and familial Spanish marks her as Dominican-American. However, there are also moments in which Flaca shows herself to be more American than Dominican-American.

For example, although she associates Spanish with family and family with holidays, the holidays she mentions are American holidays. Furthermore, her concept of race is far more American than her Dominican mother's. Flaca never calls herself Black, but she does describe herself as strongly resembling her Haitian-American friend, Caty: they "both have skin the color of cinnamon sticks, thin eyebrows and a tiny birthmark on their cheek" (51). Strangers have mistaken the two girls as sisters, and, at one point in the novel, Flaca wants to get her hair braided to make this connection to her friend even stronger. Gorda forbids her from doing so, even for free: "I don't want you to look like a cocola, Gorda said, as if it were the most terrible thing in the world" (51). When her mother forbids the braids, Flaca simply turns her thoughts to a different hairstyle: she and Caty both get their hair straightened. This exchange makes clear both Gorda's and Flaca's perceptions of race. Gorda, despite allowing her daughter to befriend Caty and supplying headache cures for Caty's Haitian mother, holds a strong prejudice against Caty and her family. She uses the term cocola, a Caribbean, particularly Dominican term that nowadays is largely used to refer to darker-skinned people generally, and is often considered derogatory. It is certainly meant to be read as such out of Gorda's mouth, and demonstrates that Gorda's concept of race, and the language she uses to describe it, is based on her Dominican heritage, which privileges lighter skin and White characteristics (including hair straightening) over darker skin tones and natural or African hair or hairstyles. This prejudice comes from Dominican discrimination against Haitians, who are often portrayed to be darker and generally more "African" than Dominicans, even those who (likely) have African ancestors. Flaca, on the other hand, sees no difference between herself and her friend either culturally or in terms of physical appearance. Her desire to braid her hair is not meant to be a racial statement, but merely one that brings her closer to her friend. Similarly, she decides to straighten her hair not to appear to be more White, but because it is the style that she and Caty will be allowed to share. In Flaca's eyes, she and Caty share the same neighborhood and the same "cinnamon-stick" skin tone, and are therefore equal in their race, despite having come from different countries. Such a racial perspective marks her as more American than Dominican-American.

Soledad and Flaca represent the ways in which language use in *Soledad*, far from "bleeding into unnecessary Spanish," forms a key component of character development. It is through language that we can see Soledad's distance from her heritage, and how she identifies as far more White than Latina. Furthermore, it is Flaca's AAVE dialect, and general lack of Spanish, especially compared to her mother, that identifies her as Dominican-American.

Let It Rain Coffee (2005, Simon and Schuster), Cruz's second novel doubles down on the use of language to confirm or belie a character's stated national identity. This second novel also focuses on a family of Dominican immigrants living in Washington Heights, and also begins with one of its characters reluctantly traveling to live with the family in New York. As in *Soledad*, the Colón family takes a trip to the island at the end of the novel, in this case so that the patriarch Don Chan can die in his homeland. However, whereas the return home for Soledad's family is regenerative, the Colón family's reactions are far more mixed. This mixed, complex reaction can

be seen almost universally in the language(s) used by the characters, but is most notable with Dallas, Esperanza, and Bobby.

Readers are introduced to Dallas at the same time as Don Chan meets her. In this introduction, he considers her "his all-American granddaughter, born in Puerto Rico" (12). Dallas presents an interesting linguistic case, in that readers are not sure of the extent to which Dallas speaks and understands Spanish. For example, Don Chan assumes she will not understand him at all, but she surprises him by using a traditional Dominican greeting for elders: "Bendición, Abuelo" (12). However, upon giving him a kiss, she follows with "Hit me again," an unmistakably American phrase that Don Chan is unlikely to understand. To further complicate matters, however, Don Chan *does* seem to understand her, despite the very casual, colloquial American phrasing, in that he responds by bending to receive the second kiss Dallas offers. Nothing later in the novel clearly resolves Dallas's linguistic situation. She listens to and sings along with Spanish-language music, notably Celia Cruz's version of *"*Guantanamera," but, if the popularity of English monolingual Justin Beiber's rendition of "Despacito" is any indication, one does not need to understand a language to enjoy music in that language (195). Furthermore, in vignettes that focus solely on Dallas, Spanish is used sparingly if at all. In one six-page long vignette, Spanish is only used twice: one use of quinceañera, and a second quoting a boy on the street who calls her "mami" (186-191). In the end, this linguistic ambiguity paints Dallas as the most ambivalent of her family, less marked by her Dominican heritage, all while leaving open the logical possibility that she does understand and speak some Spanish.

Despite this ambiguity, her linguistic and affective development make clear that she considers herself to be very much American. As previously mentioned, she relies almost exclusively on English except with her (Spanish-speaking) family. Her growth throughout the years of the novel also shows further hints that she is growing up American, not Dominican. Although she sings along with Celia Cruz, her bedroom is decorated with Madonna and Back Street Boy posters (114). Even her family notes that her development has been American, not Dominican: Esperanza laments that "[i]n D.R., Dallas would've been ripe for training to have her own home, a husband, some children, but in Nueva York, Dallas was a child with breasts" (143). When confronted about helping out around the house, she objects to the freedom her parolee brother is given while she is being asked to do his laundry and cook for him. In response to her mom's argument that "He's a man. You know a man can only use one burner at a time or else they burn the entire house down," Dallas argues, "It's the nineties...feminism...have you heard of the concept?," thus showing her gender politics are far more American than her Dominican mother's (213). From the beginning of the novel, when Don Chan sees his "All-American granddaughter," little evidence from either Dallas or her family leads the readers to see her differently.

This becomes particularly evident in various scenes that pit Dallas and her mother against each other. When Esperanza confronts Dallas about her truancy, Dallas proposes an alternative her mother cannot understand:

> --I'm gonna get myself a GED.
> --El GED? Esperanza pronounced it 'head,' and said it as if Dallas had announced that she wanted to join a cult and shave her head.
> --Sí Mami, a head.
> --I did not sacrifice my life so you could get a GED. She wanted a real, certified diploma from her, one that she could frame in the hallway among all the other accomplishments she hoped they would achieve. (183-4).

This argument shows Esperanza's linguistic difficulties, as well as reiterates her one-dimensional view of American life and success. Esperanza's objection to the GED plan is not the very real fact that Dallas is unlikely to complete it (Dallas consistently shows little interest in school or in furthering her education after graduation), but in that a GED is not the path she sees for her daughter. Dallas, despite how unlikely it is that she will follow through, understands the more complex and multifaceted paths towards success available in the United States.

In a later argument, Dallas and her mother actually use their languages as weapons against each other. Dallas notes the shrillness of her mother's Spanish:

> Dallas wanted to put a plug in her mother's mouth. The pitch of her voice went up high when she went off in Spanish. At least in English, she stumbled over words and couldn't keep up with her thoughts. In Spanish, Esperanza's voice was a drill. (212).

Not to be outdone, Dallas uses her English in a similar way:

> -- You want me to end up like you, working for some stupid jerk who makes you stay up all night cleaning his ass? For what? Dallas said under her breath, quick enough in English so that her mother couldn't decipher what she was saying. (212)

Esperanza's Spanish is a drill, but Dallas also weaponizes her English. She expresses her anger towards her mother, all while speaking quickly so her mother cannot know exactly what she is saying. Dallas, knowing her mother's obsession with the United States, takes advantage of her own Americanness to get back at her mother.

Dallas's opinion of the island changes little upon her arrival for the first time in the Dominican Republic. While they drive to her aunt's house, she indifferently observes the town around her while listening to her American CD player, almost bored. Although she speaks to and is understood by her Dominican family, she is never directly portrayed as speaking Spanish – all of her dialogue is written in English, further cementing in the reader's mind her identity as American rather than Dominican. She has no personal point of reference for the island, no connection other than the assumed, but not portrayed, ability to speak to her family, so the island seems completely foreign to her, leaving her feeling out of place and overly large. She cannot see herself in this space comfortably, cannot see herself as Dominican. At the end of the novel, Dallas's trip to the Dominican Republic has only cemented what we as readers already knew: Dallas is American far more than she will ever be Dominican-American.

In many ways, Dallas's mother, Esperanza, is the teen's direct foil. Esperanza is one of the most completely developed characters of the novel and also represents, as her name suggests, the most initially hopeful of all the first-generation immigrants of the novel. It is she who, while pregnant, immigrated to the United States first, traveling illegally from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico on a small raft, then from Puerto Rico to the United States, using Puerto-Rico-born Dallas, as her entry to the U.S. Esperanza epitomizes the most classic and ideal of American dreams: "To Esperanza, New York City had always been Nueva York – an oasis of opportunity" (9). Nevertheless, her vision of the United States comes from repeated viewings of American television shows, most notably *Dallas,* for which Esperanza names her daughter. While her obsession is not entirely unique among those in her small Dominican village, the intensity of Esperanza's adoration, for both the television show and the rich, luxurious American life portrayed

by the show, far exceeds the rest of her neighbors, and ultimately drives her to save money for an illegal and dangerous trip in a raft to Puerto Rico.

However, Esperanza's love of the United States, particularly as portrayed by the affluent family in the *Dallas* show, and her disdain for her own poor living situation back in the Dominican Republic completely blind her to the reality and complexities of both. She is unable to see that the lifestyle and living situation portrayed in *Dallas* is far from her reality, just as out of reach in the United States as it was in the Dominican Republic. Because of this blind adoration, Esperanza consistently sees New York City idealistically rather than realistically. She chooses not to "think twice about the threat of nuclear war, the stock market crashing, the lack of trees, or the fact that streets had the smell of an impossible dream," choosing instead to view the city as a place of hope that had sidewalks that "had given her a bounce that lifted her up above everyone else's head" (9). As Moreno points out in her article "Dominican Dreams: Diasporic Identity in Angie Cruz's *Let It Rain Coffee*", "she [Esperanza] fiercely defends her decision to migrate – even though it almost destroyed her family – and overstates the comforts that they are now able to enjoy" (108). This overstatement is clear in her conversation with Don Chan when the latter first sees his new home in New York. Don Chan sees the entryway to the apartment as dark and asks whether they too experience blackouts, like he was used to in the Dominican Republic. Esperanza's bright and happy response reinforces her stubborn desire to belong in New York: "—Never, Esperanza chirped with pride. –We always have lights" (11). She can speak with pride, even though she "hurrie[s] Don Chan along to escape the smell of pot and piss in the elevator" (11). She may be frustrated that she and the rest of her family have not improved their social station as much as she might have wanted ("they still couldn't afford to move into a nicer building"), but she scoffs at any of Don Chan's concerns at her home ("He went from pissing in the dirt, with a house with no roof and he's complaining") (11). Nevertheless, as Al Shalabi points out, Don Chan's home in the Dominican Republic was described in the beginning of the novel as immaculately clean, worthy of pride: "While Don Chan finds pride in the home he inherited from his family, Esperanza feels ashamed of her flat and wants to move to the Jewish neighbourhood. When confronted by Don Chan's criticism she becomes defensive and lies to herself" (4). Esperanza can only see her two homes – past and present – through the eyes that watched and devoured *Dallas.* For her, any home in the Dominican Republic is worthy of ridicule, whereas any home in the United States is an improvement.

Esperanza's desire to be American is undermined not only by her unrealistic expectations, but also by her language use throughout the novel, which marks her as unable to fully integrate into American society. We have already studied some of the ways in which Esperanza and her daughter spar with their respective languages, and the fact that Esperanza cannot meet her daughter on the English-language playing field is telling. Also telling is Esperanza's name. In contrast to her children, Bobby (born Roberto) and Dallas, who both have English names, Esperanza keeps her name throughout the novel, even though Hope is a perfectly acceptable English-language name. Indeed, later in the novel, she imagines that her name is Hope Saint or Saint Hope, but only sees this name as a possibility if she had been born in the United States. In moments of stress or extreme emotion, Esperanza reverts entirely back into Spanish, whether or not it is contextually appropriate; the night her husband died, while in the emergency room, "Esperanza only screamed in Spanish, because that night, she didn't have the energy to translate herself" (80). The use of the word translate here also implies that when Esperanza does use English, it is in translation, that her thoughts and communications come to her first in Spanish and must be translated into English. Although she desires to be American, her inability to see the reality of American life combined

with the fact that over the years she has not assimilated linguistically, show that she does not truly belong as American, especially not in the way that her daughter does.

Despite this lack of assimilation into American language and society, Esperanza's disdain of her home island is the most explicit when they travel there as a family:

> And when she was accosted by a strange bug or flying leaf, debating if she should use the latrine, or piss in the wild shrubbery, thirsty but afraid of the water in the well, Esperanza was sure that Los Llanos was never a place she could call home. (286)

The house of her husband and her husband's family is entirely strange to her, too low to be considered as an adequate place to live, much less call home, with foul water and fouler toilets. Indeed, she considers the land, knowing Don Chan is close to death and thus she is close to inheriting it, and her only thought is to sell it "and pay all her debt so she could be free. Maybe even start saving for a house to retire in" (286). Her return to the Dominican Republic did nothing more than cement her love of the United States. She may never completely integrate – linguistically or economically – into the United States or achieve the impossible dream of a *Dallas*-inspired luxurious house, but for her the United States will always be home far more than the Dominican Republic.

Esperanza's love and desire to fit in despite incomplete assimilation, is mirrored in her son, Bobby, who undergoes the most profound change and is most impacted by the family's final trip to the island at the end of the novel, possibly because he found himself so out of place in the United States. After being imprisoned due to a series of unfortunate events and misunderstandings, he thinks: "My being here [in the detention center] is a mistake . . . I don't belong here" (140). Bobby only finds relief and comfort in the meditation classes offered once a week. In the breathwork that the class uses, the instructor encourages the students to find comfort in a place outside of the four walls, and Bobby consistently goes back to small, comforting moments with his father in their apartment before Santo died.

He gains no sense of belonging after being released from prison:

> Everyone could see him: **EX-CON**. They assumed he was dangerous. That he had messed up his life in some irreparable way. There were no *backspace* or *insert* options to fix what had happened three years before. He needed an *escape* button to start over. (185, emphasis original)

Although Bobby finds some comfort in computers, which he began to learn about in prison and continues to learn after his release, he never feels at home when he returns to his family. He wants to escape from the life that he is living in Washington Heights. At one point, he sees this escape in Dallas's friend Hush and her baby, imagining marrying her and moving out of the neighborhood into a small house somewhere. However, this escape does not happen: Hush dies during her C-section, leaving Bobby heartbroken, with a child that is not biologically his but that he has decided to care for, and feeling more lost than ever.

Because of this feeling of displacement in the United States, Bobby is particularly taken with the island when he travels back to it with his family. While his mother and sister stay with the family, Bobby goes with his grandfather to his village, Los Llanos, where he meets and instantly falls in love with Miraluz, a woman who had known – and been loved by – both his father and grandfather. It is with her and in his conversations with her that Bobby starts to find purpose.

Miraluz, unsatisfied with the working conditions in her previous job, had started an underwear company whose goal was to create better working conditions for its female employees. It is Bobby who encourages her not to settle on simply selling to Dominican Yorks and hoping that word of mouth will keep her company alive, but rather suggests that she moves to the Internet to sell her wares. He even offers to show her how and to help with setting up the online store. It is also while making love to Miraluz that Bobby finds himself at home for the first time since before his father died:

> Perhaps Bobby licked every inch of Miraluz. And his body was reawakened and reminded that he was still alive. He never did get to make love to Hush. He wanted to seal the agreement of his arrival, to enter home. And being careful not to break her, he entered Miraluz and made love to her. Made love to Hush. Made love to San Pedro de Macorís. Made love to Dominican Republic. And after he climaxed, he didn't want to leave that small room, or Miraluz, who looked so beautiful once her hair curled up from the sweat and the makeup was gone. He didn't want to stop making love to the soft-spoken –Ay, Santo, which inspired every lick and touch . . . He dug deep inside her as she screamed, --Ay, Santo, que (*sic*) maravilla Santo, ven conmigo, Santo.
> --Yes, he crooned along with her. –Yes, he said as he collapsed into her and fell into a long-awaited sleep. (283)

The scene is beautiful, not least because it is the most genuinely happy that we see Bobby throughout the novel. The lovemaking reminds him that he is Dominican in a way that returning to the island alone could not accomplish. For Bobby, in this moment, the Dominican Republic becomes home to him, giving comfort and safety and allowing him to leave behind the hurt that was the United States. Even upon his climax, his contentment remains and he has no desire to leave.

Nonetheless, the moment is complicated in ways that Bobby does not seem to realize. Despite Miraluz's age and lack of virginity, he enters her gently, afraid to break not the sexually aroused woman, but the illusion she represents, the perfection Bobby sees in both woman and island. Furthermore, while Bobby happily makes love to Miraluz, Miraluz is making love to memories, to Santo, rather than to Bobby himself. She makes no attempt to hide this fact, encouraging – in Spanish – Bobby over and over again using his father's name. The encouragement, even the use of the name, only spurs Bobby on, as he must take on the image of his father in this moment to fully live it. His answer to Miraluz's Spanish is in English, despite the simplicity of his *yes*. The lovemaking allows Bobby to open himself up to the Dominican Republic, but his father, and Bobby's Americanness will always haunt him. Bobby is indeed content in this moment, but his English response, mixed with Miraluz's Spanish and reference to his father, indicates that Bobby's opening to and acceptance of the Dominican Republic is not without its adversities. The Dominican Republic becomes his partner and fulfills him, but does not love him back equally, and does not replace his American identity; he will always be less than his father in the island's eyes.

Once in Los Llanos, Bobby alone seems to be able to appreciate his grandfather's love of the place. As the tiny Consuelo (Hush's child, who the Colón family has adopted) reaches up for an orange from a nearby tree, Bobby "clapped with joy" and asked "—Look at this. Where in New York City can you do this?" and is not deterred by his sister's curt reply of "The supermarket"

(286). Consider as well, Bobby's imaginings, and the way he contemplates staying, first for a few days to let Miraluz get to know Consuelo, and later more permanently:

> He feasted on the sun and imagined Sunday-afternoon barbecues with music blaring out of his surround-sound stereo system. He couldn't imagine a cloudy day in D.R. He could live in such a climate. As long as he could plug in, he would be happy to stay. (286)

As before, however, Bobby's vision of himself in the Dominican Republic is flawed. He imagines barbecues and surround-sound stereos – more descriptive of Washington Heights than what has been described of the Dominican Republic, particularly the rural Los Llanos. He loves the climate, but cannot imagine the most basic inconveniences such as clouds, much less consider rain, drought, or hurricanes. Even he considers his love of the island to be conditional – earlier he describes his need to plug into the internet, not only to help Miraluz, but also to continue his job in the United States, but this need is never tempered by the very real fact of frequent blackouts on the island. He is not a farmer like his grandfather, and will continue to remain linked to the United States, his true home, because he cannot help but idealize the island and ignore his unavoidable ties to the U.S. Perhaps most indicative of this inherent tie to the United States is his name: at no point, either in narration or in thought, does Bobby revert to his Dominican name, Roberto María. This suggests that, while he is happy in the Dominican Republic and with Miraluz, this happiness will be transient, and he will end up belonging no more on the island than he did in the States.

While in many ways the arc of *Let It Rain Coffee* mirrors that of *Soledad*, the final return to the Dominican Republic is far more ambivalent and problematic than in *Soledad*. There is no eye-opening epiphany on the part of any of the characters. Dallas and Esperanza remain neutral or negative towards the island, whereas Bobby's superficial hopes for a new life are shown to be no more likely than Esperanza's dreams of imitating the Ewing family from *Dallas*. Perhaps what is most interesting about this particular novel is that the opinions about the island are not split along generational lines, but rather lines of experience. Bobby and Esperanza, marked by disappointment with the place where they grew up, seek out and search for a new home, a better place to live, although neither can either affectively or linguistically leave behind their childhood perspectives and heritage. Dallas, however, is alone in not feeling out of place in the place where she grew up: she feels she belongs and is American, and feels the most able to take advantage of the various systems in place, a privilege granted to her by her American citizenship. Throughout the novel, the language of each of these characters emphasizes these prejudices and hopes. Esperanza yearns to be American, but her thoughts and her speech consistently revert back to Spanish. Bobby, although born in the Dominican Republic, largely grew up in the United States, as marked by the language he himself uses: English. However, outsiders such as other inmates consistently mark him as Dominican, or as his father, and as Miraluz do. Stuck between two worlds, he leans into the Dominican identity, but cannot embrace the linguistic and mental shift necessary for complete success. Dallas alone is comfortable with her identity, as she embraces her English and her American passport without conflict or internal strife.

Both of Cruz's first novels, *Soledad* and *Let It Rain Coffee*, focus on the struggles of an immigrant family to find their own level of acceptance of their Dominican homeland. These characters' opinions of the island vary considerably, and their language largely reflects those ideas. While monolingual English readers may not be always comfortable in understanding the minimal Spanish presented in either novel, they are not excluded. Indeed, the English is so prevalent that at times, particularly in *Let It Rain Coffee*, the language actually being used is ambiguous because

the situation portrayed makes the English of the novel doubtful. However, a careful examination – as well as an ability to read both languages – reveals that, far from being random or to merely used to heighten the Dominican flavor, the mix of Spanish and English serves a key role in developing the national identities and affiliations of various characters. This is seen largely in the fact that each character has his or her own unique blend of Spanish and English, which underlines those affiliations. For example, Flaca's use of AAVE shows both her American side yet her pride in her background, while Dallas's use of rapid English to intentionally confuse and hurt her Spanish-speaking mother, combined with consistent ambiguities as to Dallas's Spanish abilities, prove her to be the most American of all of the characters in the novels described in this article. Language also serves a pivotal role in showing the change in Soledad's feelings throughout the novel: at the beginning Soledad's Spanish allows her opportunities such as an apprenticeship in Spain, but she blatantly rejects any connection to the Dominican Republic itself, a perspective that softens and morphs into cautious acceptance, shown through Soledad's increasing use of conversational Spanish towards the end of the novel. Esperanza and Bobby's use of language too is key in that their explicit affiliations are undermined by their inherent and unavoidable affiliations: both explicitly state the desire to more wholly belong to a country and a community in which their language and their cultural perspectives prevent them from being accepted. However, most important in these novels is that even monolingual English readers are exposed to the complex identity tensions that immigrants face, regardless of generation. The result of both novels is therefore education rather than exclusion: readers are exposed to two immigrant families in all of their complexities. To varying degrees, each character lives, as Soledad's abuela, with their head in one country and heart in love with the other, thus showing the difficult, yet diverse, experiences of both first and second-generation Dominican immigrants, as well as their complex relationships both among themselves, and with their two cultures and countries.

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